Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23

Eiichi Tosaki

Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm

Phenomenology, Wittgenstein, and Eastern thought

Springer

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures

Volume 23

The Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures focuses on the broader aspects of philosophy and traditional intellectual patterns of religion and cultures. The series encompasses global traditions, and critical treatments that draw from cognate disciplines, inclusive of feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial approaches. By global traditions we mean religions and cultures that go from Asia to the Middle East to Africa and the Americas, including indigenous traditions in places such as Oceania. Of course this does not leave out good and suitable work in Western traditions where the analytical or conceptual treatment engages Continental (European) or Cross-cultural traditions in addition to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The book series invites innovative scholarship that takes up newer challenges and makes original contributions to the field of knowledge in areas that have hitherto not received such dedicated treatment. For example, rather than rehearsing the same old Ontological Argument in the conventional way, the series would be interested in innovative ways of conceiving the erstwhile concerns while also bringing new sets of questions and responses, methodologically also from more imaginative and critical sources of thinking. Work going on in the forefront of the frontiers of science and religion beaconing a well-nuanced philosophical response that may even extend its boundaries beyond the confines of this debate in the West – e.g. from the perspective of the 'Third World' and the impact of this interface (or clash) on other cultures, their economy, sociality, and ecological challenges facing them – will be highly valued by readers of this series. All books to be published in this Series will be fully peer-reviewed before final acceptance.

More information about this series at http://www.springer.com/series/8880

Eiichi Tosaki

Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm

Phenomenology, Wittgenstein, and Eastern thought

Springer

Eiichi Tosaki
Coburg, Victoria, Australia

ISSN 2211-1107 ISSN 2211-1115 (electronic)
Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures
ISBN 978-94-024-1196-6 ISBN 978-94-024-1198-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017950070

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer Science+Business Media B.V.
The registered company address is: Van Godewijckstraat 30, 3311 GX Dordrecht, The Netherlands

For Rose.

Foreword

The contemporary art world more or less demands that visual artists are able to wax eloquent on their work. Museums not uncommonly preface exhibitions with verbiage describing artists' accounts of what they were up to. Our current expectation is that artists have the best insight into what their artwork means, and the slogans they use to describe their work will give us the key to interpret it. As viewers we don't mind the occasional opacity in artists' self-interpretations, so long as we consider it hype.

We are far from this situation when we confront the theory of Piet Mondrian. His simultaneous emphasis on the static and the rhythmic is hardly fodder for a publicist. It doesn't have the ring of self-promotion or deference to popular taste. Mondrian presents serious theorizing, aimed at dispelling misunderstandings of his work. But how do his ideas, particularly his theme of static, non-repetitive rhythm, help us? What does rhythm even mean when applied to what is static? We notice rhythm in connection with sound, and we recognize it also in pulsating movement accessed through our sense of touch and our kinesthetic sense. But how can a painting be even metaphorically rhythmic? Rhythm seems to require temporal passage, while a painting's presentation is all at once. True, our eyes take in a painting only gradually, and painters often direct the eye to notice first this and then that. But Mondrian eschews such strategies to the extent that he aims at the static. Worse yet, he wrote forty essays on rhythm over many years, and his ideas on the subject kept changing.

Eiichi Tosaki has taken on the challenge of elucidating Mondrian's theories of rhythm, and particularly his conception of "static" rhythm. Drawing on its Greek origins, Tosaki points out that the term "rhythm," primarily used in connection with poetry and music, meant both schema and kinesis. He finds both of these meanings in Mondrian's application of the term to painting, but he emphasizes the importance of the schema notion for making sense of Mondrian's enterprise. Tosaki notes that new approaches to musical composition in the twentieth century had brought the "schema" notion of rhythm to the fore, a development that had a widespread impact on understanding of the arts more broadly. In emphasizing schema, Mondrian was not opposing his "static" conception of rhythm to a musical understanding, as might be thought, but instead was embracing a view of musical rhythm that had intellectual currency.

Tosaki uses the duality of schema and kinesis to indicate a basic distinction between Mondrian's earlier and later neo-plastic works. The early works involve "covert," static rhythm, while the later works involve more overt, dynamic rhythm. Tosaki sees the earlier work as having more depth than the later work, taking issue with the common judgment that Mondrian's late neoplastic paintings present the artistic climax of neoplasticism. Tosaki sees the restrained rhythm evident in the early work, not the more obvious "kinetic" rhythm of the later works, as Mondrian's great achievement.

The idea of rhythm as schema sounds purely conceptual, but Mondrian was not seeking merely to illustrate theoretical possibilities. He intended his paintings to engender the experience of rhythm, Tosaki tells us, but they require the viewer's participation. Although the painting itself provides static, non-repetitive rhythm "in repose," it is not experiential, or "activated," until the viewer gets involved. The viewer does this by inwardly generating a pulse, or meter. The rhythm of the painting is felt only in relation to the regularity of this meter, from which it subtly deviates. Once we have a firm, background pattern that we "trust" (one that we have voluntarily produced internally), the non-rigid and thus more life-like rhythm embedded in Mondrian's painted surfaces becomes accessible to us.

According to Tosaki, the non-representational character of Mondrian's neoplastic works is important in enabling the activation of rhythm. By avoiding, imagistic subject-matter, Mondrian seeks to impede subjective interpretations of what is depicted, the viewer's imposition of "meanings," in order to free our attention for perceptive consciousness of the rhythmic life of the painting's surface. This is not to say, however, that Mondrian resists the subjective, for the activation of rhythm that he seeks is dependent upon subjective engagement with the painting. The subject willingly provides a result meter, and in the interaction between the meter and the rhythm of the painting, a spontaneous unfolding of rhythmic aspects occurs.

Mondrian's notion of static rhythm is ultimately a matter of vision and spiritual experience. Rhythm keeps opening up as the viewer's meter interacts with the rhythmic aspects of the painting. The task of explaining Mondrian's idea requires someone who has grasped the vision and discovered how to activate the paintings' covert rhythms. Fortunately, Tosaki's understanding is grounded in the requisite experiential knowledge and reflects his combined philosophical and artistic sensitivity. He takes pains to lead the reader to recognitions of the sort that Mondrian aims to provoke with his work. Tosaki's book itself induces a series of experientially grounded recognitions, providing cases in point for the type of impact Mondrian sought. Tosaki's subtlety as an author is equal to his subject matter. The result is a tour de force that will forever alter the reader's encounter with the works of Mondrian.

The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX, USA

Kathleen M. Higgins

Genesis and Acknowledgements

My scholarly investigation of Piet Mondrian and *De Stijl* started during a period of graduate research at Osaka University. Toward that end, in 1990, I travelled to the Netherlands, Paris (France) and the United States of America. My aim was to trace first-hand the artistic activities of Mondrian, van Doesburg and other members of the *De Stijl* movement. The highlight of the trip was photographing the interior of van Doesburg's house in Meudon, France, and the renovation of the Café Aubette in Strasbourg. Here, I wish to thank the residents of the Moudon house at that time, and the chief renovator of the Café Aubette. My thanks also to Marijke Küper, former curator of the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, who gave me important suggestions regarding *De Stijl* and Gerrit Rietveld.

Then in 1998 I travelled to continue the research in the United States and, again, the Netherlands, thanks to the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Arts Travel Grant, and to a Getty Institute Research Support Grant. There, I met several eminent Mondrian scholars, including Professors Carel Blotkamp, Joop Joosten, Nancy J Troy, and Dr. Harry Cooper – I thank them all for the spirited conversations we enjoyed. I also recollect an intensive two-day exchange of ideas on rhythm and, especially, Mondrian's theory of rhythm with Dr. Victor Grauer in Pittsburgh (USA). His knowledge of musicology and his observations about Mondrian's painting stimulated me to pursue my interest further. Professor Jonathan Kramer gave me the confidence to use his ideas about musical time and rhythm when I met him at his Colombia University office in New York. I also thank Professor Paul Op de Coul, a musicologist of Dutch music at Utrecht University, for sharing his knowledge of Jacob van Domselaer and Nelly van Doesburg during our conversation in his office. Thanks also to the many others at museums and archival institutions who assisted me in my research, especially at the Tate gallery, London, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, Stedelijk Museum at Amsterdam, Haags Gemeentemuseum, MoMA, New York, and the Getty Institute, Los Angeles.

In the process of completing and writing up my research, I have been much obliged to many persons. Professor Chris McAuliffe, Director of Ian Potter Gallery, the University of Melbourne, who served as principal advisor during the initial

period of my doctoral candidature. Professor McAuliffe's enthusiasm for my larger project, and practical advice as an astute theorist of modern and contemporary art, was of great benefit to my research. Professor Roger Benjamin (affiliated with the University of Melbourne), presently at the University of Sydney, supported me greatly with his conscientious reading of the early stages of the manuscript. My heartfelt gratitude goes to (alas, since late) Associate Professor Graeme Marshall, the Philosophy Department, University of Melbourne, who advised my research during the last two years of the project. Graeme supported me greatly, and I have benefited enormously from his sharp philosophical mind, his commitment to debating issues, and his readiness to share with me his remarkable knowledge of earlier and later Wittgenstein. I am also deeply obliged to the late Dr. Naomi Cumming, whose premature passing has been a great loss. A talented theorist in music and philosophy, Dr. Cumming provided much support to me in the early stage of my project: her musicological advice has proved to be invaluable. Emeritus Professor Masabumi Tsuji, of Osaka University, has taken an active interest for a long time in my project on Mondrian, and encouraged me to pursue my research to the end. I am much obliged to Mr. Glenn Taylor, who translated the Dutch texts for me. My thanks also to Peter Beijersbergen van Henegouwen, who willingly agreed to my using his recording of Jakob van Domselaer's composition as an important reference, and to Matt Holden, who took up his own valuable time to check the early phase of the manuscript. Thanks also to Keren T. Rubinstein for her careful editing toward the end of the project. Thanks also to Thoa and Mark Kusec in San Francisco, California, who shared their knowledge of Theosophy and Art with me.

I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor Purushottama Bilimoria and Dr. Peter Wong, of the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, the University of Melbourne, and *Sophia Journal* book series Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures (Springer). Both Purushottama and Peter urged me to publish this material, and without their encouragement, this publication would not have been possible. Very special thanks to Dr. Patrick Hutchings, who supported my project and dedicated his time to the final edit. Professor Kathleen Higgins of the Department of Philosophy, University of Austin, Texas, lent me invaluable support through the stages of revision of the manuscript, and she has kindly written the touching Foreword to this book. I am also obliged to Associate Professor Robert Nelson (who has served as advisor to my second PhD studies at Monash University in Victoria, Australia).

Enormous thanks to editors Anita van der Linden-Rachmat and Cristina Alves dos Santos of Springer publications, who kindly solicited anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, which greatly improved the final book.

I want also to express deep gratitude to all those who have inspired and supported me in various ways, both practically and intellectually, over the long process of completing this book. I extend my deepest thanks especially to my dearest friend Mr. Garret Sokoloff, in New York, whose friendship has been a spiritual force for me that has garnered my enthusiasm for this project over a long period of time. Deep gratitude is due also to my parents, Yasuyo and Ryukichi Tosaki, who have supported me and my immediate family at some distance from Japan. A special

thanks to my parents-in-law, Ken and Margaret Woodcock, who on many occasions have lent our household a generous hand.

To my son Mori and my daughter Sae, I will always be grateful for their patience and understanding while I worked on completing this book. Last but not least, my special thanks go to my wife, Dr. Rose Woodcock, of Deakin University, Victoria, Australia. She afforded me great depth of support with the ongoing necessity of checking and correcting my non-native English. As my de facto editor, I owe her a great deal for sharing her ideas and insights, and for her taking over much of the housework and parenting of our two (then) young children.

Contents

List of Figures[1]

[1] The number with A or B is the number given in Mondrian, Raisonné I & II

Credits: Piet Mondrian, *Composition B, with Double Line and Yellow and Gray*, 1932 (B231)

Introduction

> *Painting can be shown to be philosophy because it deals with the motion of bodies in the promptitude of their actions, and philosophy too deals with motion.* (Leonardo da Vinci (da Vinci 1957, 277))

> *Painting can be shown to be philosophy because it deals with the motion of bodies in the promptitude of their actions, and philosophy too deals with motion.* (Leonardo da Vinci (da Vinci 1957, 277))

I have titled this book *Philosophy of Visual Rhythms* with the intention of evoking the tension in Mondrian's neoplastic painting between overt and covert expressions of rhythm: a sense which emerges in his painting when one traces its development from the early mature neoplastic canvases of 1921 to 1932 to the last *Boogie Woogie* canvases of 1942 to 1944. Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm becomes overt in these later paintings, where straight lines are destroyed by the introduction of tiny primary coloured squares across the surface of the canvas. These works are widely regarded as the climax of Mondrian's painting career. Consequently, the overt expression of visual rhythm in these works tends to be interpreted as exemplary of Mondrian's successful treatment of visual rhythm.

This book is a study of Mondrian's visual rhythm, with a particular focus on his early mature neoplastic canvases (1921–1932) and an emphasis on his theory of rhythm as stasis: that is, rhythm as a non-kinetic *schema* in the visual field. The sources of Mondrian's 'odd' ideas concerning rhythm (i.e. that it is based on non-repetition and is non-sequential) show a confluence of diverse influences: Hegelian philosophy, Theosophy,[1] and musicology, as well as Mondrian's own empirical

[1] Theosophy can be defined as an esoteric spiritualism, founded and developed by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Madame Blavatsky) in the mid-1800s. In her search for a doctrine which could replace the existing divisions between the world's religions with one single 'truth', she took various elements from Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism among others, replacing her original Christian faith with a far more 'transcendentalist' notion of spirituality, which emphasised the different phases in the ascension of the human spirit towards an enlightened state of existence and which offered a fusion of the Judeo-Christian tradition with the belief systems and mysticism of ancient Greece, Egypt, and India.

experiences as painter, amateur dancer, and avid spectator of diverse experimental music and performances.

Methodologically speaking, the most challenging part of this book is the establishment of evidence of a visual rhythm based on the static geometrical image in painting. Typically, this is seen in Mondrian's 1920s and 1930s mature neoplastic canvases. But a theory of visual rhythm based on non-repetition and non-sequentiality is almost completely lacking in mainstream art historical writing.[2] A philologi-

[2] As far I know, no art historians have attempted to elucidate the meaning of rhythm in Mondrian's work, especially with regard to the 1920s and 1930s early neoplastic canvases. For example, Serge Lemoine writes on *Composition with Blue, Yellow, Red, and Gray*, 1922 (B. 134), and talks about rhythm but offers no explanation of what rhythm is:

> The [pictorial] elements are coordinated in a dissymmetrical composition. They counterbalance each other, and their interplay creates a 'balanced equilibrium' that generates a rhythm. (Lemoine 1987, 40)

Victor Ieronim Stoichita notes Mondrian's 'exquisite rhythmical sensitiveness', but offers no further elaboration, although rightly suggests its roots derive from the Greek *paideia*, the maker of universal man through music, and Hölderlin's Hellenic mind. (Stoichita 1979, 18)

A major Mondrian scholar, Hans L. C. Jaffé, uses the term 'rhythm' to summarise Mondrian's art after 1917, but does not define the term: 'It was only after 1917, after the turning point in his work, that the rhythm of his art escapes from all boundaries: the rhythm of universal harmony knows no limits, is never confined to a little canvas; it radiates out from the canvas over the wall, into space, always further.' (Jaffé 1969, 41)

Tim Threlfall's analysis is notable for being one of the earliest comprehensive philosophical (and Theosophical) analyses of Mondrian's development of a theory of art, but Threlfall's writing on Mondrian is also notable for mentioning nothing about visual rhythm in Mondrian's works, although he uses the term 'rhythm' to describe his art: 'As a consequence of becoming conscious of the law of determinate relationships in art Mondrian found he had, as a sequel, becomes cognizant that the law of proportion, rhythm and asymmetry could be deduced from the knowledge of the law of relationships and relativity.' (Threlfall 1988, 315)

L. J. F. Wijsenbeek does not mention 'rhythm' in Mondrian's works at all, except with respect to Mondrian's affection for music, jazz, and dance (Wijsenbeek 1968) as does Alberto Busignani, in (Busignani 1968).

Yve-Alain Bois, a thorough data-based Mondrian scholar, traces the transition of Mondrian's theories of rhythm through its developmental stages but dismisses Mondrian's theory of rhythm as 'a kind of theoretical hocus-pocus' (Bois 1990, 161).

Carel Blotkamp, an accredited Dutch Mondrian scholar, obviously knows the importance of Mondrian's theory of rhythm but has not dealt with rhythm extensively, writing only descriptively about rhythm in Mondrian's Boogie Woogie canvases (Blotkamp 1994), but not in the 1920s and 1930s mature neoplastic canvases (although he does write on Mondrian's affiliation with contemporary music, jazz, and dance), as does Sussanne Deicher (Deicher 1994).

John Milner insightfully touches Mondrian's unique ideas of rhythm in terms of the variety of relationships, but his frequent use of the term 'rhythm' is without any attempt of definition (Milner 1992).

Carsten-Peter Warncke nominates the key concepts of *De Stijl* theory ('the universal, the general, the absolute, the individual, balance, harmony, dualism, unity, reality, purity, Zeitgeist, evolution, etc.'), but the term 'rhythm' is not included in the list (Warncke 1998).

There are a few exceptional analytical works on Mondrian's theory of rhythm and its derivatives. One of them is Els Hoek's insightful essay 'Piet Mondrian' (Blotkamp 1986), where he rightly grasps the importance of rhythm and its non-repetitional trait (although not in great detail).

Harry Cooper touches upon a crucial concept of Mondrian's theory of rhythm in his essay

cal investigation of the origin of the term 'rhythm' is therefore required, as well as a genealogical study of the transitions in the concept of rhythm over time. Similarly, theories of rhythm in contemporary music, which Mondrian associated himself with, are also requisite. Thus, different methodologies and approaches to the topic of Mondrian's visual rhythm are used: art historical, musicological, philosophical, classical, and analytic linguistic approaches. These different methods are dealt with in each chapter respectively but are of use to my analyses only in the sense that they contribute to the elucidation of idiosyncrasies specific to Mondrian's rhythm in his early mature neoplastic canvases, to the legitimisation of his ideas about rhythm in visual art, and to the description of what the actual reading of the canvases entails from the viewer's point of view. Moreover, the arguments that unfold in this book rely on the reader developing, along the way, new views relating to the concept of rhythm itself. In emphasising the establishment of a 'new' view of rhythm, this book is comprised mainly of theoretical investigations. I will refer to Mondrian's own writings in these investigations, with the idea that as art historical documents they contribute to an understanding of 'different' (i.e. 'static') rhythm. For reasons of limited space in this book, I will not provide full descriptions of individual paintings in terms of how each reveals various traits of 'different' rhythm in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic works. Likewise, an investigation of similar traits among the works of other artists in various periods of art history will be left for a future occasion. This book is an elementary investigation of 'static' rhythm, with Mondrian's 1920s and 1930s mature neoplastic canvases discussed as typical examples. The book is in that sense more correctly a 'prelude' to 'Visualised Rhythm'.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter 1 begins by tracing Mondrian's conception of 'rhythm' and its importance for him in his painting. This chapter focuses on the direct and indirect influences on Mondrian as an artist and upon his spirituality. In Chap. 2 I will analyse Mondrian's shifting concept of rhythm as it emerges in his writing, from which I will elicit the core issues which converge on Mondrian's theory of (visual) rhythm. This is followed in Chap. 3 by a discussion of the specific traits which constitute Mondrian's visual rhythm and elaborated by a comparative study of other artists' works and theoretical interpretations of rhythm. Chapter 4 will investigate the musicological

'Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie' (Cooper 1998), where he elucidates Mondrian's use of Hegelian dialectics. But while Cooper emphasises syncopated rhythm, drawing upon Mondrian's encounter with Boogie-Woogie rhythm, he takes Mondrian's comment 'Now I realised the rhythm becomes ostensive' too literally. Later, Cooper (with Ron Spronk) in *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings* (Cooper and Spronk 2001) also touched upon this issue, mentioning the importance of rhythm and composition in Mondrian's neoplastic canvases, but neglecting to theorise visual rhythm in the mature neoplastic canvases (which Cooper calls the 'trans-Atlantic canvases'). And yet it is the earlier work in which Mondrian explores 'composition' and stasis that yields the most crucial conception of Mondrian's understanding of rhythm.

connections that can be made in relation to these rhythmic traits in Mondrian's work, particularly those conceptions which enable a deeper understanding of the nature of rhythm. The etymological meaning of rhythm and transformations in meanings of the term 'rhythm' will be traced philologically, in which context the concept of 'composition' is introduced to provide grounds for the philosophical understanding of rhythm which is elaborated in Chap. 5. Chapters 6 and 7 are in a sense the core of the book, in that their arguments advance my view that Mondrian's 'unusual' notion of static rhythm warrants close philosophical inspection, to which end the ideas of Wittgenstein and Husserl are explored. In a sense, Mondrian's rhythm represents a challenge to those philosophies which seek to account for ways in which a phenomenon, such as the painted image, can be perceived and experienced. Chapters 6 and 7 are important in that they not only elaborate but also advocate what I regard as the important philosophical understanding of rhythm in the context of visual art.

The Design of Each Chapter

Chapter 1 sets out the motivation behind Mondrian's concern with rhythm. His rather unusual understanding of rhythm and his seriousness concerning the issue of 'rhythm' has various, eclectic, origins: philosophy, religion, science, music, and dance. Mondrian's understanding of philosophy is deep (he described himself as 'philosopher artist'), and his dedication to Mme Blavatsky reflects his individual interpretation of and engagement with Theosophy. Mondrian was enormously interested in music (especially contemporary music) and dance, and this is a significant aspect of how he composed his unique understandings of 'rhythm' through personal experiences and beliefs, rather than from mysticism or mere intuition alone. Mondrian's initial interest in Eastern philosophy, especially Taoism, is also discussed here. This chapter is therefore an investigation of Mondrian's initial ideas about rhythm from the point of view of these influences and in this way sets up the background for further investigation of Mondrian's approach to rhythm, both theoretically and empirically: this theme is considered in the subsequent chapters of this book.

Chapter 2 examines the fundamentals for understanding Mondrian's complex theory of neoplasticism, and his somewhat idiosyncratic idea of 'static' rhythm—rhythm, that is, which operates against or outside of sequential time and repetition. My analysis charts the development of Mondrian's understandings about rhythm but projects them beyond the point reached in his own philosophical thinking (influenced as it was by Hegel and Schoenmaekers among others and various conceptions he extracted from the theosophical writings of Blavatsky, Steiner, and others). By way of this important genealogical treatment of Mondrian's conception of static rhythm (and rhythm per se), Chap. 2 sets the groundwork to facilitate the reader's understanding of Mondrian's use of dialectical argument and the complex philosophical content which inhabits specific terminologies relating to Mondrian's dialectic of opposition.

For this purpose, Chap. 2 traces Mondrian's earliest theory of rhythm through his early *De Stijl* period, beginning in 1917, when we began to formulate what can be regarded as the core of his theory of rhythm: written over a lifetime, Mondrian's theory of rhythm is dense and scattered throughout 40 essays. Chapter 2 examines an important transition in Mondrian's theory, to explore the way rhythm is realised over that particular period of time. From the early *De Stijl* period to his late neoplastic works (including the New York period), we see that rhythm evolves: static rhythm becomes dynamic rhythm. Certain key conceptions in Mondrian's thinking, such as 'rest' and the 'dynamic' are given due attention, since Mondrian's understanding of 'inward rhythm' is closely related to the concept of 'rest' or 'repose'. The changing role of rhythm in his theory is worth examining in detail because initially rhythm is the property of subjectivity but thereafter transforms to become an independent function of expression, against 'composition' itself. The discrepancy between major theorists of Mondrian's work (notably Yve-Alain Bois and Carel Blotkamp) and my own observations are also discussed in Chap. 2: these discussions relate the development of Mondrian's work to what I regard as its consolidation and validation as a tenable, albeit 'odd', theory of rhythm.

The meaning of 'composition' and rhythm and its implications regarding 'respiration' in Mondrian's thinking is also introduced in Chap. 2, although Mondrian's understanding of composition and respiration will be evaluated and examined in more detail in Chap. 4, in which I reference Susanne Langer's theory of 'composition'. The elements of painting that apply to Mondrian's composition are also discussed in Chap. 2, in which Mondrian's destructive disposition against 'form' is explained: even the 'rectangle' or 'square' is not considered to have a positive meaning as a shape in his painting. Using Mondrian's 'Diamond' canvas as an example, we observe Mondrian's treatment of the canvas as a physical object and, in conjunction with his studio, examine the way rhythm on canvas operates as a physical entity: that is, the painting as a physical thing constitutes, for Mondrian, a matrix, or core which animates the physical interior of the studio, constituting in turn a connection with the real world. These original views of Mondrian's require significant reworking of fundamental conceptions of 'surface' as complexity, in both the physical and metaphysical senses (Chaps. 6 and 7). Mondrian's crucial turning point, from covert or *schematic* rhythm to ostensive, or physical, *kinetic* rhythm, is marked by the introduction of the 'double line' in his paintings. The introduction of the 'double line' also marks a discrepancy in the way Mondrian theorised rhythm during the early *De Stijl* and neoplastic period and how he theorised it in late neoplasticism: theoretical rhythm becomes more empirical and thereby provides an analysis of the grounds for demonstrating that Aristoxenus' empirical principle for the theory of rhythm does ultimately work. Chapter 2 concludes by emphasising that Mondrian's understanding of rhythm, especially in his early mature neoplastic painting, does not necessarily reduce to mere 'theory' but operates empirically as well. It was the problem of how to *express* empirical rhythm that was, for Mondrian, an unrelenting struggle which ended in the climax of his New York paintings.

Chapter 3 will investigate the specificity of Mondrian's rhythm as stasis in modern art and elucidate Mondrian's rhythm as stasis or structure, making reference also to the Constructivist ideas of Gabo and Pevsner. Rhythm as structure is compared with the strobographical renditions of rhythm in the work of the Futurists and Duchamp, a comparison which contributes to the analysis by putting the emphasis on the importance of the reconsideration of schematic (static) rhythm in modernist painting. Chapter 3 attempts to consolidate the definitive properties of static, or structural, visual rhythm in abstract painting, which also helps clarify the nature of the problem of reading static rhythm in Mondrian's neoplastic canvases. The crux of the argument for Mondrian's static rhythm emerges notably in the issue of the relationship between the straight line and the concept of 'speed' and is discussed in the context of the significations which can be drawn from the varnished black line.

Chapter 4 takes on the problem of elucidating Mondrian's unusual theory of visual rhythm—as schematic or static rhythm—by reference to his associations with (then) contemporary music composers, mainly, as it turned out, with van Domselaer. The validity of Mondrian's and van Domselaer's conception of static or non-sequential rhythm in musical composition is tested through musicological understandings of time and rhythm in the contemporary music scene. Here, the meaning of 'rest' or 'repose' in Mondrian's thinking is examined in reference to various studies of contemporary music, notably that of Jacques Attali. Mondrian's interest in structure also affected his appreciation of jazz: Mondrian saw in jazz music not repetition or a series of strong pulses but *structure*. Jazz as dance music is also considered in Chap. 4, in relation to Mondrian's neoplastic style of dancing. To conclude this chapter, the manner in which Mondrian's static rhythm works to deny melody and any 'representational' mood of music is discussed.

Chapter 5 investigates the various means by which definitions of rhythm are established: musicological, philological, and philosophical. Emile Benveniste's philological analysis of the word 'rhythm', as it was used in ancient Greece, makes it apparent that two types of rhythm were considered in ancient Greek thought: earlier, rhythm as schema and, later (after Plato), rhythm as kinesis. Based on the notion of these two types of rhythm, I will investigate rhythm by describing its transition from the ancient Greek poetic empirical theory of rhythm to the Romantic mentalist conception of rhythm, to indicate how the concept of metre has developed according to quite distinctive understandings. This genealogical investigation of rhythm also shows how the theory of rhythm, drawn mainly from poetry and music, might be applied to the visual field, especially to painting. In the process by which metre became more and more mechanical and identified with rhythm itself, rhythm according to Aristoxenusian empiricism was gradually forgotten. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did the Aristoxenusian tradition re-emerge to operate in parallel with the effects of the impact of European exposure to non-European rhythms and culture.

Chapter 6 demonstrates the degree to which the Aristoxenusian understanding of rhythm is reflected in contemporary music and its theory. By explaining modern understandings of rhythm as proposed in musicological and philosophical discourses, it is possible to show how rhythm as schema has been emphasised in the

twentieth century. I mainly reference those discourses which posit rhythm against metre, and as independent of metre and in this context, briefly consider the understandings of rhythm by way of comparison between the metre-oriented theories of Ludwig Klages and Gisèle Brelet and the grouping-oriented theories of Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard B. Meyer and Jonathan Kramer. This chapter investigates the fundamental issue for contemporary understandings of rhythm in the theory of 'grouping'. As one of the fundamental models of organic rhythm, I will explain the relationship between breathing and rhythm, a conception which becomes important in Mondrian's later theory of rhythm. To conclude Chap. 6, I argue that rhythm without metre is conceptual and that in order for it to become empirical, the viewer's (or audience's) voluntary participation in the generation of metre within the viewer's mind is necessary. The aim of Chap. 6 is to indicate that Mondrian's idea of rhythm as *schema* or static rhythm can be activated in the empirical field, an issue which is taken up and elaborated in the following chapters.

In Chap. 7, I will pursue preliminary studies of 'static' visual rhythm and investigate how visual rhythm can occur in perception. I begin by considering the possibility of observing rhythm as structure or schema in a logical sense and investigating the possibility of there being a domain within which the cognition of rhythm can function outside the semantic field. These analytical observations of mental elements which give rise to the activation of rhythm lead the discussion into the phenomenological terrain of Edmund Husserl's 'image-object' arguments. Husserl's threefold analysis of image consciousness in painting, and especially his concept of the 'image-object', will contribute to the consolidation of the argument about visual rhythm, which supposedly functions outside of the representational mode (without the 'image-subject'). By applying Husserl's threefold image analysis to my analysis of visual rhythm, Mondrian's abstract image can be definitively distinguished from that of Kandinsky. In this way, Mondrian's rhythm is shown to be more structural and opposed to melody, which is allied to the 'representational' function in music. Chapter 7 will also explain how the 'image-object' is a *field*, in which the cognition of visual rhythm occurs. For this discussion I use the 'mirror' as a metaphor to make a comparison between Leonardo and Mondrian, to indicate that the 'image-object' can be identified with the concept of 'picture-screen', notable in Eastern (Chinese and Japanese) painting, but also in the painting of Mantegna, and the Cubists' *papiers collés.*

The latter part of Chap. 7 concentrates on the concept of 'image', and Husserl's 'image-object', to provide the basis from which to argue that it facilitates the non-representational terrain necessary for rhythm to be activated. For this purpose, I will introduce Richard Wollheim's 'seeing-in' arguments as a preliminary study for Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' and 'aspect-dawning' arguments. The aim of this chapter is to indicate how 'seeing-in' can operate as a bridge between Husserl's image analysis and Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' arguments. Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning' will in this context provide the developmental stage in which to construct arguments concerning static rhythm in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvases. Chapter 6 concludes by arguing that visual rhythm, especially 'static' visual rhythm, is an 'image' on the surface of the canvas and is particularly activated in non-figurative painting and notably in the 'picture-screen' surface of Mondrian's neoplastic canvas.

For the preliminary study of the appreciation of schematic rhythm (or rhythm as composition) in Chap. 7, I investigate the possibility of meaning outside of language and iconic readings of the image, using Wittgenstein's discussion of the word 'red' as a initiating argument, and investigate Wittgenstein's everyday language arguments. I suggest that, especially in the appreciation of non-figurative painting, these and Wittgenstein's other arguments, particularly his imperative 'Back to the rough ground!' argument provide the means to analyse static rhythm according to the non-representational field. I conclude that without concept or understanding, even the image 'red' does not occur in cognition nor does the appreciation of rhythm or movement in painting, especially in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic painting. This leads us to arguments that converge on the concept of 'surface', which contributes to the link between Wittgenstein's concept of 'rough ground' (i.e. non-metaphysical argument) and the fact of visual cognition on the surface of painting. A conspicuous trait in Mondrian's neoplastic painting is the complexity of the surface of the neoplastic canvas ('picture-screen'), which incorporates a broad variation of geological features that comprise the physical surface. This is exemplified by Mondrian's use of impasto coloured planes criss-crossed by shallow black belts which are below the surface established by the planes. Concerning the conflict between the image and the physical canvas, the meaning of the thickness of the surface in Mondrian's neoplasticism is examined.

The presence of 'thickness' in the real world, and at the same time of movement and rhythm in painting, elicits the description of the non-physical (transcendental) condition of the neoplastic canvas, that is, the image of the square and rectangle as *non-forms*. This brings us to the extreme tensional condition of the 'surface' of non-referential painting, where visual rhythm takes its place between image and physicality. On the basis of arguments concerning the flat surface, I contend that an observation of flatness is conceptual, that is, it is mere 'image'. Having elaborated the physical/conceptual ground of the 'flat' surface of the canvas, I conclude by explaining how the visual cognition of rhythm can occur on Mondrian's neoplastic canvas, after which I explain how one can 'appreciate' visual rhythm in the neoplastic canvas. Proposing a model for reading his neoplastic painting, I assess the validity of Mondrian's rhythm as stasis or schema (composition). Here Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning' argument provides a cogent example of seeing aspect-change in the static composition of Mondrian's mature neoplastic canvas. I argue that Wittgenstein's aspect can be construed as the equivalent of Mondrian's term 'dimension'. 'Continual' aspect-dawning runs counter to Wittgenstein's fundamental idea, in which aspect-dawning occurs in a 'flashing' moment. However, it is my contention that a voluntary reading of changing dimensions in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvas is well construed by the application of aspect-dawning to the *continually* flickering aspect-change.

Once explained, Mondrian's enigmatic comment to Alexander Calder, that is '[m]y painting is already "fast"', also contributes to the viability of Mondrian's notion of schematic rhythm, which I have sought to defend through recourse to the various forms of evidence, including historical references to Mondrian and his life and work, as well as the theories developed in this book. The model I put forward

for reading Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvas posits, as its focus, how the viewer must generate a sense of metre within the self.

Finally, an approach which takes an interest in appreciating the work and ideas of Mondrian is appropriate for assessing the merit of these conceptual and empirical observations regarding neoplastic visual rhythm. Ideally, this presupposes the possibility of reading abstract art according to the concept of schematic rhythm developed in this book.

References

Blotkamp, Carel. 1986. *De Stijl, the Formative Years, 1917–1922*. Cambridge, M: MIT Press.
Blotkamp, Carel. 1994. *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.
Bois, Yve-Alain. 1990. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Busignani, Alberto. 1968. *Mondrian*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Cooper, Harry. 1998. Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie. *October* 84 (Spring):119–142.
Cooper, Harry, and Ron Spronk. 2001. *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Panintings*. New Haven/ London: Harvard University Art Museums/Yale University Press.
da Vinci, Leonardo. 1957. How painting embraces all the surfaces of bodies and extends to these. In *A Documentary History of Art vol. 1: Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt. New York: Anchor Books.
Deicher, Sussanne. 1994. *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944: Structure in Space*. Köln: Benedikt Taschen.
Jaffé, Hans L.C. 1969. *Piet Mondrian*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Lemoine, Serge. 1987. *Mondrian and De Stijl*. Trans. C.L. Clark. New York: Universe Books.
Milner, John. 1992. *Mondrian*. New York: Abbeville Press.
Stoichita, Victor Leronim. 1979. *Mondrian*. Trans. A. Cheorghitoiu: London: Abbey Library (Bukarest: Meridiane Publishing House).
Threlfall, Tim. 1988. *Piet Mondrian: His Life's Work and Evolution 1872 to 1944*. New York/ London: Carland Publishing Inc.
Warncke, Carsten-Teter. 1998. *The Ideal as Art De Stijl 1917–1931*. Köln: Taschen.
Wijsenbeek, L.J.F. 1968. *Piet Mondrian*. London: Studio Vista.

Chapter 1
Mondrian's Theoretical Beginnings and Spiritual Background of Neoplastic Rhythm

1.1 Motivation: Mondrian's Writings on Rhythm

Mondrian wrote more than forty essays, addressed to both 'layman' and critic alike, in his attempt to enlighten them regarding his ideas about Neo-plasticism. It was his frustration with constant misunderstandings of his realization of rhythm on canvas in particular which urged him in this endeavor to 'educate' viewers. Mondrian's neoplastic canvases confront the viewer with seemingly stark geometric designs which resist interpretation according to anything but an exceptionally acute sense of the "abstract-real".[1] Without at least a degree of preparatory elucidation, these paintings give little away that might facilitate them being read in accord with Mondrian's ideas about visual rhythm.

It seems there is no longer an expectation that in the interest of understanding Mondrian's Neo-plasticism, viewers expose themselves directly to the canvas: *explanations* are sought in preference to directly experiencing what occurs across the surface of his canvases. Nonetheless, some sort of enlightenment is a prerequisite for drawing the viewer into the more subtle regions of analysis of these canvases. For Mondrian, these 'subtle regions' of visual rhythm were not only valid from the point of view of their theoretical rigor, but empirically *real*. Once equipped

[1] For example, Hans Hofmann, the doyen of the New York School painting in the 1930s and 40s, and an admirer of Mondrian, wrote in his essay 'The Search for the Real: In the Visual Arts', that it was "great injustice done to Mondrian that people who are plastically blind see only decorative design instead of the plastic perfection which characterizes his work. The whole de Stijl group from which Mondrian's art was derived must be considered a protest against such blindness." (Hofmann 1948, 47–48).

In terms of design, an interesting episode is reported by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, director of the Kestner-Gesellschaft and organizer of an exhibition in Hanover, Germany, in 1924:

> Piet Mondrian … had sent me in Switzerland, at my request, a selection of his canvases. The customs officer allowed me to export them to Germany duty-free when I told him that they were not pictures but specimen designs for needlework (Lissitzky-Küppers 1967, 52).

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_1

with the appropriate discourse and understanding by which to confront the 'new' type of image which his work presented, the viewer, in Mondrian's view, would be liberated from the strictures of his seemingly 'cold' geometric 'designs'. A 'new' understanding of Mondrian's neoplastic[2] rhythm may present an opportunity to circumvent the conventional way of seeing. However, such a claim implies a completely different approach to reading neoplastic painting.

The condition in which it is necessary for an audience to be informed about them before they can appreciate certain art forms, is similar to that in the contemporary music scene in the West. For example, in order to appreciate the music of Schoenberg, Varèse, Messiaen, Webern and Boulez in accord with the intentions and dispositions of these composers, foreknowledge is essential. It is to the audience's advantage that they know beforehand what the composer is aiming to achieve; at least to understand the prevailing generic ideas in contemporary music. Overcoming 'boredom' is a pertinent example of the kind of difficulty faced by the uninitiated when entering the contemporary music scene. To rely too much on the audience's voluntary participation may be asking too much. It presupposes that the capacity for 'metricisation' or 'grouping' (musicological terms which describe particular conceptions of rhythmic structure) is common or innate, which in turn would imply that viewers or listeners in general would respond appropriately to 'unknown' metres and elements of rhythm across a broad range of visual or auditory works.

As Maurice Blanchot expressed it, "The writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is only a book, a mute collection of sterile words, the most insignificant thing in the world" (Blanchot 1982, 23). Hegel asserts the same thing, especially in terms of painting, which prescribes a fixed place for a spectator in contrast to sculpture's 'in-the-round' viewing:

> Whereas [in comparison with sculpture] in painting the content is subjectivity, more particularly the inner life inwardly particularized, and for this very reason the separation in the work of art between its subject and the spectator must emerge and yet must immediately be dissipated because, by displaying what is subjective, the work, in its whole mode of presentation, reveals its purpose as existing not independently on its own account but for subjective apprehension, for the spectator. The spectator is as it were in it from the beginning, is

[2] From 1917, 'Neo-plasticism' was the key conception in Mondrian's abstraction, and was dominant in that of early De Stijl works by Theo van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszár, Georges Vantongerloo and others. The term 'neoplastic' is the adjectival form derived from the noun 'Neo-plasticism'. A Swiss historian, Sigfried Giedion, pointed out that Neo-plasticism can be described as the avant-garde artists' aspiration towards the 'new' (Mondrian 1986, 4); and for the 'universal', that is, a non-subjective, objective form of abstraction. Carel Blotkamp describes the principles of Neoplasticism as the art of destruction: the destruction of pictorial space, mixed colour, background-foreground dichotomy, naturalistic elements (repetition, undulating lines and volume) and form itself (Blotkamp 1994, 14–15).

Marcel van Dijk notes that "'Neoplasticism', literally meaning in Dutch 'new moulding' is actually a synonym for De Stijl. The origin of the word "moulding" is as usual with Schoenmaekers." (Van Dijk 1983, 15).

Mondrian himself chose the translated term 'neoplasticism' when he published a little book, 'Le Néoplasticisme principe général de l'équivalence plastique' in 1920. Thus, the term 'Neoplasticism' translates as the original Dutch word "Nieuwe Beelding".

> counted in with it, and the work exists only for this fixed point, i.e. for the individual apprehending it (Hegel 1826, 805–806).

The role of the author or composer concludes when the work is made public or otherwise published. What makes the artform a 'work' is its interaction with the reader, viewer or listener. But when critical terminologies associated with an artist's work such as Mondrian's oft-repeated 'rhythm' become problematic or redundant, the audience may lose the sense of its relevance. The critical process of enquiry into the work, and even an appreciation of its resolve, does not necessarily guarantee a connection to the artist's intentions, especially if the audience is unclear about the relationship between associated terminology and the work's conceptual origins. For this reason it is essential to return to the work or writing, to the source of (in this case, Mondrian's) *ideas*. Mondrian adhered to the term rhythm for want of a more appropriate term: it was not until he dispensed with 'rhythm', and replaced it with more descriptive terminology, that he was able to theorise his work in terms which could be apprehended by ordinary people. This terminological shift represents the point at which Mondrian's earlier understanding of rhythm as stasis is supplanted by the more descriptive conception of rhythm: rhythm as 'dynamic equilibrium'. The aim of this book is to put into relief the significance of this shift and examine its impact on Mondrian's painting.

My intention is to emphasise the importance of static rhythm as it is found in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvases, but which is dominated by the kinetic or 'naturalised' rhythm which characterises his later work. It is worth noting that Mondrian's work is greatly determined by the interrelationship between his theoretical writings on neoplastic rhythm, and his exploration on canvas of the principles of Neo-plasticism. Mondrian always maintained that the practice of painting should lead its theorisation, and not the other way around. Mondrian began to explore rhythm in terms of 'dynamic equilibrium' in his later painting, which developed accordingly. But it is the period prior to this shift, specifically before the introduction of the 'double line' (1934), in which Mondrian was engaged in the pursuit of static rhythm, which is the main focus of this book.

In Mondrian's early writing, from 1917 onwards, rhythm is a connoted message operating at a 'symbolic' level of interpretation. That is, in the absence of a tangible, pictorial (i.e., conventional) manifestation, rhythm is a coded, contextual, or 'covert' message. This treatment of rhythm contrasts with a more 'expressive' formulation of rhythm which appears in Mondrian's later work. On the surface, these later works appear successfully to express rhythm, or make it more accessible perceptually. On reflection, however, this amounts to a somewhat facile engagement in the work's rhythmic potential.

The fundamentals of Mondrian's theory of rhythm are fairly consistent throughout his neoplastic period, and I would posit that in Mondrian's mind Neo-plasticism was neither enigmatic nor incomprehensible: for him, the difficulty lay in how to go about explaining his ideas to 'laymen'. However, there *are* difficulties. It is difficult to fathom Mondrian's theoretical contentions, and it is difficult to appreciate what

he intended in his canvases. Moreover, it is especially difficult to *experience* dynamism in Mondrian's early neoplastic period of 'covert' rhythm.

1.2 Characteristics of Mondrian's Ideas of Rhythm

Mondrian regarded rhythm with repetition and the regular flow of time as 'naturalistic rhythm'. Alternately, he characterised 'neoplastic rhythm' in terms of non-repetition and the non-sequential flow of time: therefore, 'naturalistic rhythm' was to be 'annihilated'.[3] Mondrian's early neoplastic theory of rhythm, which is identified with the period 1917 to 1932, is characterised as 'static' rhythm. In his earlier Neo-plasticism Mondrian used adjectives such as 'universal' and 'pure', and described it as 'equilibrated movement', or 'equilibrated relationship', or as 'free rhythm' (1930). In his later Neo-plasticism (1933–44) 'naturalistic rhythm' was to be (re-)introduced and be equilibrated with 'neoplastic rhythm'.

The task of this Introduction is in part to establish what it is that made Mondrian's thinking unique, as well as to clarify the fundamental themes behind the development of his art and his thought, and to demonstrate the relationship between such themes: that is, to situate Mondrian's philosophy in an art-historical context that enables his work on the theory of *rhythm* and its realisation on canvas to be better understood.

Mondrian's neoplastic theory of art and visual rhythm was structured according to theosophical philosophy. Mondrian was strongly influenced by Hinduism through his affiliation with the theosophical doctrine. In addition to the theosophical influence, was that of close friends who were involved with contemporary music: Jakob van Domselaer, Daniël Ruyneman, Paul Sanders and Nelly van Moorsel (Doesburg) , among others. Thus, Mondrian's esoteric understanding of rhythm did not remain in the clutches of mysticism. His predisposition towards empiricism as the basis of art practice, especially painting, fortified by his own understanding of contemporary music and jazz meant that his ideas and theories were put through the mill of reasoned criticism. Once understood, Mondrian's theory of rhythm is not exceptional after all. In addition to the influences above, his insatiable passion for dancing, and love of Jazz (the 1920s and '30s jazz dance band, stride piano, and Boogie Woogie) cannot be omitted, and in fact these latter influences were gradually to manifest in his painting. In relation to these influences, Mondrian constructed his theories of Neo-plasticism and rhythm.

The core of Mondrian's theory of rhythm is the non metre-based, or 'group' oriented, rhythm, a trait which typifies his early neoplastic painting (1917–1927). This type of rhythm, however, can be understood as a 'covert' form of rhythm on canvas. Subsequently, Mondrian gradually introduced a time- and repetition-based 'naturalistic' rhythm into both his painting and into his theory of rhythm. This he later called "dynamic equilibrium", which can be defined as rhythm with *metre*. The realization of rhythm on canvas, enhanced by the tones of jazz and dance music

[3] The term 'annihilation' has special meaning in the theory of Neo-plasticism, thereby indicating its relation to Hegelian dialectic.

which he so keenly favoured, can be said gradually to come closer to the structure of Hindu music, which is schematic but accompanied by strong metres.

This book traces the transition in Mondrian's realization of rhythm in theory and on canvas through musicological and philosophical analyses, and with reference to its occult (e.g. Theosophical) influences. This entails a close examination and interpretation of the sizable mass of Mondrian's own writings on neoplastic rhythm and painting, in conjunction with which these various influences on his thinking will be referenced. Most importantly, however, my analysis of Mondrian's work will proceed by way of a close reading of his mature neoplastic canvases from the point of view of the cognitive theory of visual art.

'Rhythm', for Mondrian, is a specific term. It is not a general noun, but neither can it be separated from its generic abstract meaning. Mondrian was notable for being an independent thinker and for being acutely aware of the inadequacies of his explanations of his own theories. This was a driving force behind the rigorous preoccupation with clarification that characterizes his written work.[4] If we are to understand properly the significance of his work as both painter and thinker, then this aspect of his work must be emphasised. Carel Blotkamp rightly expresses the importance of Mondrian's own writing as an aid in understanding the philosophical depths of his painting and ideas concerning Neo-plasticism:

> Today Mondrian's art is known and accepted worldwide. The characteristic compositions he created can be seen all around us …. But the philosophy he was striving to express in his work has been largely ignored, or dismissed as an oddity. Odd as it may appear, it is at the same time utterly fascinating to see how this philosophy helped shape one of the most impressive bodies of work in twentieth-century art. (Blotkamp 1994, 17).

This apparent 'oddity' emerges in his writings on rhythm as well. While it cannot be denied that in Mondrian's own time there was ratification of his views on art, there were also indirect sources of repudiation — for example, in texts he came across from time to time, and negative comments directed at his neoplastic canvases by certain critics and advisors to collectors, mainly in his homeland and in France.[5] As sources external to his own ideas about his painting and visual rhythm, these criticisms represented a serious challenge to his intentions regarding his work. For these art critics and collectors, some of whom were significant supporters of Mondrian's earlier landscape and figurative work, Mondrian was looked upon as an excessively disciplined hermit (as Sydney Janis described him in his 1941 essay "The

[4] Other reasons can be put forward. One is that Mondrian was the type whose development as an artist evolved in parallel with his verbal or written activities, and whose inclination was to hold an objective viewpoint. Another is that his was typical of the attitude of avant-garde artists since, for example, Maurice Denis, who proclaimed their new ideas or style of art in the form of a manifesto.

[5] For example, H. P. Bremmer, who was the critic, editor and art advisor to Mrs. H. Kröller-Müller, made a negative comment against Mondrian's 1920s neoplastic canvases, which caused the suspension of a fixed monthly stipend to Mondrian. In France, positive recognition of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases remained scant during his lifetime. Collectors of his canvases outside of the Netherlands were mainly from Germany, Switzerland and the United States (Blotkamp 1994, 183).

disciplinarian disciplined" (Mondrian 1986, 6) exiled to the 'finer regions', and, consequently no longer in tune with ordinary tastes in art.

Unlike most people, Mondrian had at least in his own thinking accessed these 'finer regions' via the theosophical doctrine and the writing of Mme Blavatsky, and for Mondrian, rhythm as prescribed by the 'finer' senses was an implicit and active element in his earlier neoplastic canvases. Once activated or otherwise made manifest in the form of an artwork, however, those understandings which reside in the 'finer regions', and which thereby infuse theorisations of rhythm with an appropriately reflective tenor, can no longer be thought to reside there. Rhythm becomes merely an ordinary practice, a public rather than an esoteric object. The question, then, concerns how we 'pagans' might follow and respond to Mondrian's abstruse ideas about visual rhythm: methodologically speaking, what is required of us in order to appreciate Mondrian's neoplastic canvases, and become enlightened regarding his visual rhythm? In addressing this question, I propose that there are three ways to investigate Mondrian's concept of rhythm, and that through these different kinds of analyses, Mondrian's theories of Neo-plasticism can be appropriately criticised, and his 'odd' theory of rhythm appreciated on its own terms.

The first is to draw upon the wealth of existing well-argued definitions of rhythm (auditory, visual, and generic) that pertain to poetry, music and philosophy, and to compare the scope of these definitions with those which relate to visual rhythm in art history and visual theory. This is an important step in setting up the groundwork for an assessment of Mondrian's 'odd' theory of visual rhythm, since, the definition of a term becomes problematic only when it is used in a way that conflicts with its everyday meaning. Thus, such groundwork is crucial to the philosophical discussions of rhythm in Chap. 5 onwards.

The second is to trace the roots of Mondrian's thinking about rhythm in the context of discussion of how his method borrowed significantly from the theosophical doctrine—influenced by Hegelian dialectic. The third is to conduct a theoretical and empirical assessment of Mondrian's theory of rhythm by way of phenomenology (Husserl), analytic philosophy (Wittgenstein), and cognitive science (including Gestalt psychology). From the basis of these three kinds of analyses, I propose, it is possible to assess Mondrian's theory of rhythm in terms of how it actually manifests—that is, *visually*—on canvas. It also becomes possible to hypothesise about the cognitive process that entails in reading rhythm on the canvas of Mondrian's early neoplastic paintings.

Among the three ways of accessing Mondrian's thinking, the second (theosophical and Hegelian dialectic) provides the necessary groundwork to follow the entire line of argument as it unfolds in his 'philosophical' writings.

1.3 Direct and Indirect Influences

There were, broadly, two sources of philosophical insight for Mondrian: mysticism and empiricism. The major derivation of Mondrian's "conscious spiritual knowledge" was the theosophical doctrine, as is well-documented by Robert Welsh in

"Mondrian and Theosophy" (Welsh 1971, 35–51) and Carel Blotkamp in "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction" (Blotkamp 1986)[6] It is not known to what extent (if at all) Mondrian read from original texts of particular seminal philosophers, but it does appear that he borrowed from the thinking of Hegel,[7] Plato, Aristotle, Goethe, Spinoza, Voltaire,[8] Leibniz, Schopenhauer,[9] and Bergson[10] in the development of his own thinking.[11] It is evident

[6] There are many statements concerning the relationship between Mondrian and Theosophy, but among the more useful of these references is Robert P. Welsh's 'Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction' (Blotkamp et al. 1986, 63–87) and Herbert Henkels' 'Mondrian in his Studio' (Henkels 1987).

[7] The influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is pointed out by many art historians (Blotkamp 1994, 110, Bois 1994, Chandler 1972, Cooper 1998, Herwitz 1993, Jaffé 1969, Stoichita 1979, Threlfall 1988).

[8] Mondrian mentions Aristotle, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Voltaire (Mondrian 1986, 35, 41, 42, 60).

[9] Alongside Hegel, Schopenhauer also had a strong influence on Mondrian and Van Doesburg. Schopenhauer's notion of form in separation from matter seems to have contributed to the manner in which they approached non-representational painting. In "The Metaphysics of Fine Art", Schopenhauer wrote:

> The product of plastic and pictorial art does not present us, as reality does, with something that exists once only and then is gone forever—the connection, I mean, between *this* particular *matter* and *this* particular *form*. It is this connection which is the essence of any concrete individuality, in the strict sense of the word. This kind of art shows us the *form* alone; and this, if it were given in its whole entirety, would be the *Idea*. The picture, therefore, leads us at once form the individual to the mere form; and this separation of the form from the matter brings the form very much nearer the Idea (Doig 1986, 9–10).

There are several references to Schopenhauer in Mondrian's writings. For instance:

> Since contemplation springs from the universal (within us and outside us), and completely transcends the individual (Schopenhauer's contemplation), our individual personalities have no more merit than the telescope through which distant objects are made visible (Mondrian 1986, 42).

[10] Michel Seuphor, artist-writer and Mondrian's friend, states, "I don't believe that he ever read Bergson's *Creative Evolution*". Seuphor argues that Mondrian's idea about "evolution" in relation to Bergson came through Krishnamurti's book "Aan de Voeten van den Meester" (At the Feet of the Master), a copy of which Mondrian possessed until his death. Courtesy to Bieneke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Also see *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (Seuphor 1956, 177).

Nelly van Doesburg, the second wife of Theo van Doesburg, in "Some Memories of Mondrian" wrote about van Doesburg's voracious reading of philosophic and scientific authors such as Bergson, Nietzsche, Hegel, Henri Poincaré and Einstein (Van Doesburg 1971, 72). Mondrian may have been exposed to these authors through van Doesburg.

[11] Mondrian's own understanding of Hegelian dialectics was mainly through G. J. J. Bolland, professor of philosophy at the University in Leiden, who was perhaps the most well-read and celebrated Dutch Hegelian philosopher of his day (especially during the first decade of this century) (Blotkamp 1994, 264 n.17, Mondrian 1986, 394 n.6). Mondrian quotes Bolland three times in "The New Plastic in Painting" (Mondrian 1986, 44, 48, 51). He mentions Hegel directly (Mondrian 1986, 44). Mondrian also read about Hegel through Rudolph Steiner's published lectures in the Netherlands (1909), which was among the few books he possessed when he died in New York,

that his ideas were drawn mainly from his exposure to and subsequent adaptations of the writings of key Theosophists such as H. P. Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Mabel Collins, J. Krishnamurti, Sir Joséphin Péladan, C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant.

In the context of what influenced his thinking, there were other powerful sources of insight for Mondrian which mobilized his intuition. A major source in itself was his experience during his career as a painter. But there were also ideas developed through contact with the works and experiences of other painters, as well as sculptors, architects and musicians.

Mondrian's philosophical development, as outlined briefly above, developed through recourse to both theory and experience. Mondrian's thinking about rhythm was similarly 'philosophised' by way of theory and experience, thus echoing a general trope in Mondrian's methodology. Along with the overall development of his ideas and work, Mondrian's theory of rhythm also went through periods of alteration or amendment, manifesting in his painting in the form of an evolution. Over a particular period of his work, Mondrian's visual rhythm changed from 'introverted' to a more 'extrovert' or apparent rhythm; or, to use Mondrian's own idiomatic terms: from 'equilibrated movement'[12] ('static equilibrium') to 'dynamic equilibrium'.[13] These two terms are fundamental in illustrating, as well as understanding the important transition in Mondrian's thinking about rhythm. Thus they can be ascribed to his early works in the form of implicitly suggested rhythm ('equilibrated movement'), described as such by Mondrian from 1917 onward, and to the more explicitly stated rhythm ('dynamic equilibrium'[14]), which is associated with the later works: specifically the New York period, Mondrian's final series, considered by most to be the apogee of his career. These paintings reflected the spirit of the times—the need for more expressive forms in all the arts, particularly music (jazz). However, as some have pointed out (notably Yve-Alain Bois), the expression of rhythm in these last works is *too* expressive: that is, the visual rhythm is overt and thus markedly at odds with his earlier theories regarding the neoplastic 'doctrine' (Bois 1990, 160).

As the following discussion shows, dialectical dualism—especially with its roots in Hegelian and theosophical philosophies—is an undercurrent within Mondrian's theory of rhythm. If it is the contradictory 'logic' in Mondrian's theory, as well as perhaps the subtleness of Mondrian's argument, that creates difficulty for those attempting to interpret the work of this painter, then the approach which Mondrian

titled 'Theosophe, Goethe en Hegel' (Theosophy, Goethe and Hegel). Courtesy of Bineche Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

[12] The term first appeared in "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917–18): "Rest, the opposite of movement, is perfectly equilibrated movement" (Mondrian 1986, 46).

[13] The term first appeared in "The True Value of Oppositions in Life and Art" (1934): "Thus he falls back into the search for false ease and static equilibrium, which is inevitably opposed to the dynamic equilibrium of true life" (Mondrian 1986, 283).

[14] Here we should note that in both instances the term 'equilibrium/equilibrated' is used, since in Mondrian's thinking the operation of 'equilibrium' remains consistent throughout his Neoplasticism period (including the New York period), while the operation of rhythm went through a process of radical change.

had taken in constructing his argument is best understood as a kind of 'dialectic'[15] itself. It is only if one attends to this characteristic in Mondrian's thinking, that his arguments will be sufficiently coherent.

In his arguments, Mondrian used a paradoxical sort of 'dialectic' of Hegelian heritage.[16] One particular section of "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917) provides evidence of this:

> The universal inwardness in man moves him continually toward a new, deeper individual inwardness—born precisely of the same reciprocal interaction between spirit and nature in which each destroys the other. *Opposites in general, in their deepest sense, have no stability either in themselves or in their opposites.* On the contrary, they *are destroyed* by their mutual opposition (Hegel; Bolland, *Pure Reason*) (Mondrian 1986, 48 n.1).

It is an example of Mondrian's perception of the nature of dichotomy. In this case the interplay between 'internal-' and 'external causes' is a dichotomy—each element juxtaposed against the other—but of a dialectical complexion. In Mondrian's dialectical dichotomy, then, one element is to be understood as *transforming* the other by means of vivifying the discrimination between both elements. Elements initially in opposition and conflict are thus subsumed, in Mondrian's dialectic,[17] by a third entity—that of transformation or evolution toward resolution. Mondrian's

---

[15] Blotkamp also pointed out the dialectical trait in Mondrian's writing, especially in the article "The New Plastic in Painting", which would appear to have been influenced by Hegel (Blotkamp 1994, 110).

[16] Tim Threlfall conducts a lengthy analysis which references the relationship between Mondrian's philosophy and its Hegelian heritage (Threlfall 1988).

[17] Victor A. Grauer affirmed the similarity between Mondrian's argumentation and Adorno's "negative dialectic." (Grauer 1996, 25–26 n.65). Lambert Zuidervaart explains Adorno's "negative dialectic":

> Adorno's arguments are dialectical in the sense that they highlight unavoidable tensions between polar oppositions whose opposition constitutes their unity and generates historical change. The dialectic is negative in the sense that it refuses to affirm any underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites, even though Adorno continually points to the possibility of reconciliation. The main oppositions occur between the particular and the universal and between culture in a narrow sense and society as a whole (Zuidervaart 1991, 48).

"[Adorno's dialectical aesthetic] deals with reciprocal relations between universal and particular where the universal is not imposed on the particular … but emerges from the dynamic of particularities themselves" (Zuidervaart 1991, 50).
The similarity is quite evident when the above passage from Zuidervaart's book is compared to a statement Mondrian put forward (below) regarding the individual and the universal. He wrote that "Subjectivity remains subjective, but it diminishes in the measure that objectivity (the universal) grows in the individual" (Mondrian 1986, 41–2).

Adorno succeeded Hegelian dialectic in the sense that "dialectic is advanced or developed through negativity" (Berthold-Bond 1989, 82). Mondrian's argument about rhythm and universality shares the same propensity. Mondrian is known to have encountered Hegelian dialectic through G. J. J. Bolland at least before 1914, although Bois' remark concerning this encounter adds an important insight into Mondrian's overall handling of Hegel: "There would be a great deal to say about the way in which Mondrian digests Hegel's text as mediated by his Dutch popularizer G. J. J. Bolland, occasionally misinterpreting it, sometimes even superbly ignoring it" (Bois 1994, 338).

well-known denial of nature within his Neo-plasticism is also not straightforward within this complex dialectic.

1.4 Neo-plasticism and Nature

Yet Mondrian never abandoned his concern for the essential value of nature *per se*, even during the peak of his New York days. In terms of his expressive means on canvas, Mondrian's neo-plasticism was in conflict with *naturalism*, and Mondrian struggled carefully to eliminate this aspect throughout his neo-plastic period, including his time in New York (it is well documented that Mondrian despised the colour green). Mondrian wrote in his last completed essay "A New Realism" (1942–43):

> Intrinsic reality—dynamic movement—is established in abstract art by the exact determination of the structure of forms and space, in other terms, through the composition. In painting, structure is established through the division of the canvas by means of forms (planes) or lines. Thus structure produces the plastic means and these in turn produce structure. All art shows that through undetermined structure a work of art is less clear. The clarity of the function of the structure is in proportion to the degree of abstraction. The more structure manifests itself, the more natural expression disappears. Structure has the function of determining the equivalent expression of form and space.

In abstract art, space determination, and not space expression, is the pure plastic way to express universal reality. In this way, art develops from the domain of fantasy and accident to the solution of technical problems. Intuition discerns the plastic laws veiled in nature's aspect. Technical problems cannot be solved a priori by theory: action and experience produce the consciousness of the laws which reality imposes upon us. Abstract art is in opposition to the natural vision of nature. But it is in accordance with the plastic laws which are more or less veiled in the natural aspect. These laws determine the establishment of equilibrium, opposition, proportionate to the development of plastic art (Mondrian 1986, 50).

Michel Seuphor writes:

> Mondrian loved the sea. Doubtless it was to be close to it that he went so quickly to Domburg, and his love for it may have had something to do with his allowing himself to be convinced to stay in Holland. Toward the end of his life, his only wish was to see the ocean once more …. It was in Domburg, in 1914, that he began the long series of drawings which attempt to interpret the rhythm of the sea; while at work on these, he jotted down remarks in his notebooks that are of capital importance for the understanding of his painting (Seuphor 1956, 114).

Mondrian's nostalgia in seeing Domburg's sea is a sincere reflection of Mondrian's deep regard for the essential power of nature. Mondrian wrote in 1926: "In this way the new plastic is an 'equivalent' of nature, and the work of art no longer visually resembles natural appearance" (Mondrian 1986, 204).

The primacy of rhythm in Mondrian might have been the image of waves upon the sea. The image of water is strong in Democritus and the Atomist school: both propound the philological relation between water and rhythm: rhythm as 'flow' and

as 'wave'. However, Mondrian knew the meaning of rhythm is not just 'flow' but is composition itself, and this is a core idea in this book. Mondrian's early neoplasticism dealt with the condition of rhythm as 'flow'. Later, after the introduction of the 'double-line' he started to deal with the sense of rhythm, in a more empirical way, as 'wave'. This also resonates with the argument put forward by Benveniste, whose understanding of 'rhythm' in Ancient Greece concerned the issue of 'flow' and 'waves': rhythm as schema or composition.

1.5 Hegel's Influence on Mondrian's Theory of Rhythm

Mondrian was influenced by Hegel — not directly, but through indirect sources. Of these, the writing of G. J. P. J. Bolland (see Chap. 1, note. 20), M. H. J. Shoenmaekers, and Mme Blavatsky are notable sources.

In Hegel's *Aesthetics,* there is reference to "the way painting exists for an observer, as a mere appearance rather than as an externally existing self-sufficient entity" (Iversen 1993, 9). Moreover, through "mere appearance", the observer internally activates the "way of painting" through the interplay of oppositional poles: spirit and nature, male and female, background and foreground, form and unform, curved and straight line, and so on. Oppositions themselves, Mondrian states, are intrinsically unstable and are to be equilibrated, but not harmonized by conciliation (Mondrian 1986, 48 no.1). Each oppositional element on the canvas conflicts with the other, annihilates the other, and finally the entity of opposition is itself "*destroyed* by … mutual opposition" (Mondrian 1986, 48 no.1). Inwardness and outwardness, universal and individual, spirit (man) and nature (animal). In the neoplastic doctrine of painting, the sets of oppositions manifest as colour (red, yellow, blue) and non-colour (white, black, grey), background and foreground, plane and straight line, substance and form, matte and gloss, and concavity and convexity. But the point is that even after the destructive interplay between the elements, toward reaching equilibrium or non-naturalistic harmony (which can only occur through the mutual destruction of opposites), there still remains the energy of conflict and dynamism. Here, the original Dutch '*opgeheven*' or '*opheffen*', which in English translates as 'destroy', is close to Hegel's '*aufheven*': but Hegel's term carries with it the triple sense of 'abolish', 'preserve', and 'lift up'. As Harry Cooper suggests, the English term 'sublation' is an appropriate term (Cooper 1998, 124).

In this dialectical conflict, Mondrian carefully eliminates or, to use an expression frequently used by Mme Blavatsky, 'annihilates', the oppositional units which constitute the fundamental logic of conventional European painting. That is, the background/foreground relationship itself, the curved line, naturalistic coloration, repetition, symmetry, and 'form'. Mondrian permitted only two oppositional units: *vertical and horizontal, colour and non-colour.* These units arise in his painting as configurations of specific physical traits: concave strips, impasto, matte, and semi-gloss.

Whether or not Mondrian read Hegel directly himself, we can surmise that through his affinity with the writing of Bolland and Schoenmaekers,[18] Mondrian may have known the essence of the Hegelian understanding of rhythm. Certainly, on this point, Hegel's is identical to Mondrian's early theoretical understanding of rhythm: rhythm is articulated in terms of balance and the 'equilibrated point'. In the Hegel citation there is a remarkable similarity with Mondrian regarding the theories of rhythm. Hegel wrote: "Rhythm results from the floating centre and the unification of the two [metre and accent]" (Hegel 1807, 66). The two elements do not bring about an annulment of each other. Accent, rather, gives the determinate sense activation to metre, which is the fixed pattern of notes. Accent has a subjective role of giving judgement and metre is the objective target of the accent. Rhythm is the equilibration of the two: Metre as a fixed pattern is the condition of 'being'. It is accented with judgement to reach the condition of 'becoming' a series of accented points (Hegel's idealistic 'becoming'), which compose the flow of time. This flow of time is rhythm, which "results from the floating centre and the unification of the two."

It is not clear what Hegel means by the unification between metre and accent. What is evident, however, is the close similarity between the theories of rhythm of the two thinkers, and Mondrian's evident Hegelian influence. Mondrian's rhythm, according to his writing, is to be internalized "through continuous abolition by opposition of *position and size*" (Mondrian 1986, 40). "The *rhythm* of the relationship of color and dimension (in determinate *proportion* and *equilibrium*) permits the absolute to appear within the relativity of time and space" (Mondrian 1986, 31). "[R]hythm is the individual element in the duality, opposing the plastic means, which is the universal element; just as, within the plastic means, color opposes non-color (black-white-gray)" (Mondrian 1986, 201).

Hegel's rhythm can contain stasis or stillness (metre) with dynamic (accent), but represents an idealised unification of the two (metre and accent) through conflict. It is a rhythm 'in the skull' which cannot be experienced in accord with empirical rhythm, since it lacks kinetic movement. In the sense that rhythm is constituted by stasis and dynamism but not kinesis, it is schematic rhythm. In this non-kinetic characterisation of rhythm, Hegel and Mondrian share a commonality of ideas which converge on the concept of rhythm as stasis. Interestingly, Hegel draws attention to movement in the static figures in sculpture and painting, while music, which is configured only in the time, "does not adopt movement as it occurs in space" (Hegel 1826, 913):

> [I]t is true that any movement of a body is also always present in space, so that although the figures of sculpture and painting are actually at rest they still have the right to portray the appearance of movement; music however does not adopt movement as it occurs in space, and therefore there is left for its configuration *only* the time in which the vibration of the body occurs (Hegel 1826, 913).

Even absolutely static figures in sculpture or painting can have movement, as long as they are in space. Such movement is not rhythm per se. However, a sense of rhythm

[18] Roobert P. Welsh suggests that Mondrian would have read Dr. M. H. J. Schoenmaekers in 1910 as the initial series of readings on Christosophy and Theosophy (Welsh 1998, 130).

can be evoked in the static composition of a certain type of painting, and this is what the ancient Greek sense of schematic rhythm conveys. The observation that stasis constitutes movement is canonical to Mondrian's doctrine of early Neo-plasticism, which is the focus of this book. Here also there are echoes of Hegel in Mondrian and van Doesburg's writings in *De Stijl*. The extent of Hegel's influence can be pursued in more subtle arguments. Here, though, the point is to establish the consequences of the influence of Hegel on the structure of Neo-plasticism itself: consequences which cannot be ignored, because what emerges in Mondrian's thinking about rhythm is a Hegelian dialectical dualism and rhythm as schema. The problem is, however, that all in all this rhythm does not necessarily manifest, but can nonetheless still be conceived as empirical beyond the ordinary sense of kinetic rhythm. The task here is to assert whether schematic rhythm can be experienced (as Mondrian asserted), and if so, what kind of process is involved in one's appreciation of such rhythm.

1.6 Theosophical Influence on Mondrian's Theory of Rhythm

Mondrian became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1909, although his involvement with Theosophy can be traced back to around 1900, when, according to his lifelong friend Albert van den Briel, he turned his back on the strong Calvinist faith of his parents.[19] Theosophy was developed by Mme Blavatsky in accord with her own experience of Hinduism, Buddhism and Western occultism. Theosophy is an eclectic religious representation, bridging Asia and the West in its doctrinal, textual, and historical scholarship. It constitutes a living representation of Asian traditions active in the West (Lipsey 1988, 22). In Theosophy there is no barrier against fusing the Judeo-Christian tradition with the religions, philosophies and mysteries of ancient Greece, Egypt and India. This may have been one of the reasons why Mondrian found resonance with Theosophy, which in the context of his strict Calvinist upbringing, would have been an unorthodox cult.

There is a notable trait in the theosophical theorem. The sect was receptive to new scientific developments, from Darwin's theory of evolution to the modern study of the human psyche. Blotkamp enumerates the objectives of the Theosophical Society:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.
3. To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in Man (Blotkamp 1994, 35).

[19] "But this remains a matter for speculation" (Blotkamp 1994, 34).

It is reported that in those days Mondrian kept a photograph of Mme Blavatsky on the wall of his studio. Moreover, numerous paintings done around 1909 attest to Mondrian's deep involvement with Theosophy. We should, though, be careful when dealing with Theosophy, about how much emphasis should be placed on Theosophy as a singular influence on Mondrian's theory of rhythm. Certainly, as the discussion has already suggested, the influence of Theosophy and Hinduism can be seen to emerge throughout Mondrian's ideas about rhythm as an identifiable trait. However, as further passages in his letter to Querido show, Mondrian's seriousness regarding painterliness, and his motto 'learning through experience' and 'intuition', should not be ignored. In the following part of the letter cited above, Mondrian understandably continues his attempt to clarify the role of Theosophy and occult thinking in his art practice:

> And you wish to warn me against this danger. I do not know how I shall develop, but for present I am continuing to work within ordinary, generally known terrain, different only because of a deep substratum, which leads those who are receptive to sense the finer regions. Therefore my work still remains totally outside the occult realm, although I try to attain occult knowledge for myself in order better to understand the nature of things. Accordingly I observe my work attaining greater consciousness and losing all that is vague (Blotkamp 1994, 36).

Here, Mondrian's attitude toward his practice is clear: his sense that his work, even while remaining within "generally known terrain", was not without its own "deep substratum" which he saw as yielding access to the "finer regions." Although he was uncertain how his work would develop in the context of such influences, Mondrian was careful to maintain a separation between occult influences on his general thinking (especially Blavatsky's doctrine which was pertinent at that time) and the theoretical development of his art. Commentaries about his own work, such as the one above, reveal an artist cautious to present his work as influenced primarily by sources other than "the occult realm."[20] As my analysis will argue, Mondrian's painting, and his theory of rhythm in particular, owe much of their 'deep strata' to his affiliation with theosophical and Hegelian thought.

Thus, it is interesting to note that the Hegelian dialectic finds a parallel in the Hindu concept of *maya*. In the context of Hindu *maya*, the process of creative destruction in the function of annihilation can be understood.[21] Heinrich Zimmer explains:

> The secret of *maya* is [Vishnu's teaching of] identity of opposites. *maya* is a simultaneous-and-successive manifestation of energies that are at variance with each other, processes contradicting and annihilating each other: creation *and* destruction, evolution *and* dissolu-

[20] Among those paintings which keep to 'ordinary terrain', *Portrait of a Man* shows an interesting reference to Rudolf Steiner's 'aura'. Something resembling an aura can be seen around the depicted head, which is imbued with an atmosphere of vibrating, radiating energy (Blotkamp 1994, 42).

[21] Heinrich Zimmer explains *maya* by etymology:

> The noun *maya* is related etymologically to 'measure.' It is formed from the root *ma*, which means "to measure or lay out (as, for instance, the ground plan of a building, or the outlines of a figure); to produce, shape, or create; to display" (Zimmer 1972, 24).

> tion, the dream-idyll of the inward vision of the god *and* the desolate nought, the terror of the void, the dread infinite (Zimmer 1972, 46).

The power of maya resides in the energies of creativity through destruction and the equilibrium of opposites, which are "fundamentally of the one essence, two aspects of the one Vishnu" (Zimmer 1972, 46). Zimmer sees the typical Hindu "total dynamism" in the Hindu statue, *Origin of the Lingam*: "The solid, static mass of the stone, by a subtle artifice of the craftsman, has been converted into a dynamomorphic, multiple event. In this respect, this piece of sculpture is more like a motion picture than a painting" (Zimmer 1972, 131). Mondrian's neoplastic canvas affords a similar reading in terms of a "dynamomorphic, multiple event." His early neoplastic canvas constitutes a form of static dynamism which resembles "*Shakti-maya*",[22] described as "the energy of the Absolute making it-self manifest, its static repose transmuted into procreative energy" (Zimmer 1972, 209). Zimmer further explains that "the Absolute itself, the Really Real, is not represented. It cannot be represented; for it is beyond form and space" (Zimmer 1972, 147). This esoteric reality of *maya*'s energy is analogous to the force of annihilation implicit in the static dynamic rhythm of Mondrian's early Neo-plasticism.

Blavatsky's explanation of 'annihilation' is in line with Mondrian's use of the word in the context of his struggle to remove representational content from his painting. The annihilation or destruction of traditional entities in painting—referential figures, 'naturalistic' forms, illusionistic three dimensionality, graduation of colour, picture frames, etc.,—were to be dispensed with as 'personal' entities "as a whole." The purpose of destruction, we must remember, is not to abolish entirely these personal entities as individuals, but to disband them as a whole. Mondrian saw this as a way to carve out 'abstractness'—comparable to divineness in Mondrian's thinking. In his commentary on Mme Blavatsky's *The Key to Theosophy*, G. de Purucker explains annihilation in more concrete terms:

> Now annihilation, as it is used in the esoteric philosophy, does not mean what people commonly imagine it to be. It means the breaking up, the dissolution, of a personal entity, but never of the immortal individuality, which is impossible. We speak, and speak correctly, of the dissolution or the annihilation of an army, or of the annihilation of a flock of sheep. When the separate entities are gone, killed, or whatever it may be, the flock of sheep is no more, the flock is dissolved. It is annihilated as a flock, as an entity (de Purucker 1979).

'Abstract-real' painting is regarded as equivalent to the 'divine' entity, which is its 'immortal spirit' distilled from 'naturalistic' or 'old' painting, and this is why Mondrian endeavored to show that the neoplastic essence can also be found in traditional painting, albeit in a 'veiled' form:

> Abstract Art is in opposition with the natural appearance of reality but creates like nature creates; this means according to the same laws. These laws are veiled in the natural aspect of things. Abstract Art brings them clearly to perception (Mondrian 1986, 371).

Thus the 'old' should be 'equilibrated' by the 'new'. The process of annihilating the 'old' is necessary to support the establishment of the 'new': the negation of the 'old'

[22] Shakti is the Goddess, who emerges from Nishkala Shiva (Zimmer 1972, 209).

must accompany the affirmation of the 'new'.[23] Here, the problem for Mondrian was how to ascribe to visual rhythm, 'energy' or 'force' as agents of movement, and to attain within this sense of rhythm, the operation of movement on the canvas, within the realm of the 'equilibrated' field.

Mondrian's more overt preoccupation with the role of rhythm can be seen in "Purely Abstract Art" (1926). In this essay he begins to emphasize the importance of the terms "vitality" and "energy." Also evident here is the introduction in his writing of the operation of 'force' which, as he saw it, belongs to both 'subjectivity' ("within us") and 'objectivity' ("outside us"):

> As the plastic expression of vitality, this beauty expresses and arouses the energy of life, thus the joy of life. Since this force is within us as much as outside us, its expression *changes* with the evolution of humanity (Mondrian 1986, 199).

Mondrian then contrasts nature with energy:

> Certainly, the natural is concrete, but only in contrast to energy, the abstract and invisible force. To express the latter, other plastic means are available, which may have a geometric appearance (Mondrian 1986, 200).

What is significant here is that 'energy' is situated outside of 'nature': if rhythm, as a trait intrinsic to dynamism, is connected to 'energy', which is the realization of force which is 'outside us', (as the expression of a denoted message, that is, the literal expression of rhythm), then rhythm might therefore be understood as residing outside of 'subjectivity'. This recalls Hegel's understanding of rhythm, which mediates between accent ('energy') and metre ('being', or the natural condition of things). Let us return to the passage (from "Purely Abstract Art") where Mondrian had written:

> Besides the simplicity of the plastic means, there is also rhythm, which animates the composition and opposes the constructive elements of the plastic means. For rhythm is the individual element in the duality, opposing the plastic means, which is the universal element; just as, within the plastic means, color opposes noncolor (black-white-gray) (Mondrian 1986, 201).

Rhythm's most remarkable aspect, in its transition from the earlier stage of Neoplasticism, is alluded to in the assertion (above) that it "animates the composition and opposes the constructive elements of the plastic means." Here it seems that in Mondrian's thinking the function of rhythm has been released from working within the composition to a point where it is perceived to 'animate' the work from elsewhere: i.e., from within that narrow threshold between the 'subjective' and the 'objective'. And yet typical of Mondrian's dialectic, rhythm is within the territory of 'the subjective' or 'the individual'. In the doctrine of Neo-plasticism, 'the subjective' is to be annihilated by the force of rhythm, by way of the function of

[23] Blotkamp shares the same view. He wrote: "…in Mondrian's thinking evolution was closely bound up with destruction. He did not view this as a negative concept: on the contrary, the destruction of old forms was a condition for the creation of new, higher forms. Initially this was expressed in his choice of subject-matter, exemplified in the paintings and drawings of flowers in states of decay" (Blotkamp 1994, 15).

equilibrium. The paradox of rhythm's force, or *maya* is that it creates energy and movement. The use of terminologies such as energy, equilibrium, and annihilation is conspicuous, and surely more than mere coincidence: in fact it would be stranger not to find parallels in definitions of rhythm between Theosophy's and that of Mondrian and Hegel. As far I am aware, there are no such parallels in Mm Blavatsky's nor in the first generation of Theosophists (Olcott, Baier, etc.) as a whole. But there is a similar definition of rhythm in the second generation of Theosophists.

Alice A. Bailey, a major writer among theosophy scholars, wrote in her book *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* in 1925:

> *Rhythm,* or the attainment of the point of perfect balance and of equilibrium (Bailey 1951, 158).

This definition is coloured by a spiritualism that reflects its theosophical roots in Hindu-Buddhism. It references almost all the key terminology which can be found in Mondrian's early neoplastic doctrine: stasis (rest or repose), relationships, balance, equilibrium, energy, dynamism, and rhythm. Mondrian himself mentioned "ancient India" in his writing: "in the literature of ancient India we often see two things that seemingly destroy each other" (Mondrian 1986, 142).

The terminology that is associated with the theosophical doctrine, and which to some degree constitutes Theosophy itself, is unlikely to seem accessible, let alone useful, to the more 'pragmatic' painter — or indeed, thinker — who may develop their "finer senses" exclusively through praxis. Development of the 'finer senses' may, though, occur through the way of meditation, or some such religious or spiritual doctrine: Blavatsky's "Secret Doctrine" (and "Isis Unveiled") did constitute a kind of method for Mondrian.

At this point perhaps we need to turn to more concrete issues, and ask what was the motivation behind Mondrian's dogged attempts satisfactorily to write about these complex theories associated with his art, and what was behind the commitment to maintain a parallel of both theory and practice in his work as 'philosopher-artist'. The difficulty Mondrian experienced in conveying his ideas about art to the public explains his tenacity, which in turn raises the question of what specifically it was about his ideas that, from his own point of view, made them so difficult to convey.

In the letter to Querido he wrote of "a painter's conscious spiritual knowledge," and "firsthand knowledge of the finer regions through development of the finer senses," which is evidently a reference to something beyond the normal exigencies of life, whether of a painter or 'layman'. To ask what it is that designates the "conscious spiritual knowledge", and where the "finer regions" might be, and to contemplate how these "finer senses" might be developed, is to initiate a move in the right direction in terms of finding (or at least constructing) answers to such questions. It suggests something of a spiritual nature, and is, in fact, a direct reference to Theosophy. We have already found, in the references to Blavatsky and Hegel, a connection between Hegelian dialectic and theosophical argument. It is my view that Mondrian's theoretical and philosophical ideas, in this early stage of his neoplastic thinking, derive significantly from both theosophical doctrine and Hegelian idealism. Both theosophical and Hegelian understandings of rhythm do not simply deal

with auditory rhythm, but are deeply engaged with visual and schematic rhythm. The understanding of rhythm from the schematic or static point of view is not necessarily connected to mysticism or idealism, but also to Ancient Greece and, consequently, this century's musicological and theoretical understanding of rhythm, a point elaborated in Chap. 5.

For Mondrian, art and philosophy were inseparable, but the philosophy that informed Mondrian's thinking, and consequently his theory, was very much imbued with certain occult themes found within theosophical thought. Mondrian in fact wrote in a letter to van Doesburg in 1918, concerning the article "The New Plastic in Painting": "I got everything from the Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky), not from Schoenm[aekers]."[24] This article was originally intended for publication in the magazine of the Theosophy Society of Holland in 1914, which rejected it. There is a single piece of documentation that reveals Mondrian's indignation toward the Society for this rejection, a letter dated June 12, 1914 to his friend Lodewijk Schelfhout, a Dutch painter who had for a time shared the same studio building in Paris as Mondrian:

> Last winter I wrote a long article on Art and Theosophy for a Theosophical magazine, but it was too revolutionary for them, and they refused to print it. Perhaps that is in the article's favor.[25]

More than likely he would have been disappointed by the rejection, but beneath his surface recalcitrance, Mondrian recognized himself as an independent seeker of theosophical truth, dissociated, however, from those who had come to personify the Society itself. In an earlier part of the same letter Mondrian wrote:

> You write: I cannot be a Theosophist—well, perhaps I agree with you if you mean Theosophists in general. But that doesn't alter the fact that I think the Th[eosophical] doctrine very wise, and that it leads to clarity in mental development (Henkels 1987, 199).

Although Mondrian could not subscribe to its dogmatic views on mysticism, he did endorse in theory the human subject's "mental development" through Theosophy. Thus, when we refer to Bailey's writing, it is evident that the terminology and style of expression is strikingly similar to Mondrian's way of writing, with its emphasis on the paradoxical and contradictory:

> This point of perfect balance then produces certain specific effects which might be enumerated and pondered upon, even if to our finite minds they may seem paradoxical and contradictory (Henkels 1987, 159).

[24] Mondrian may have been inclined to emphasise Blavatsky's influence over Schoenmaekers, since, at the time of publication of "The Neo Plastic in Painting", van Doesburg pointed to the direct influence of Schoenmaekers on the essay. Around 1918, Mondrian personally severed all association with Schoenmaekers (Mondrian found Schoenmaekers to be an "awful man"). Considering that Mondrian's affiliation with Theosophy and Blavatsky began not long after his initial interest in Theosophy in 1900, as Blotkamp suggests Blavatsky's direct influence over Mondrian was "probably not far from the truth" (Blotkamp 1994, 111).

[25] Mondrian's letter to Lodewijk Schelfhout of June 12, 1914 (Henkels 1987, 199).

To the 'spirit' which has yet to attain "the finer senses" this understanding of rhythm, according to Bailey, "may seem paradoxical and contradictory", an observation not far from the conflict with the ordinary sense of rhythm that we have observed. In actual fact, however, the 'real' motivation which prompted Mondrian to write to Querido reveals a new complication, since the letter was in protest against Querido's view that the occult could be discerned in Mondrian's painting. Reticence toward an occult interpretation of his painting is apparent when Mondrian proclaims "therefore my work still remains totally outside the occult realm." But if he seems to have been unduly concerned about Querido's views toward his painting, it is because he feared that his work could be misinterpreted as correlating to Symbolism, the leading Dutch advocates of which were Jan Toorop and Johan Thorn Prikker, whose implication of the occult was in some ways superficially similar to the esoteric theory of Theosophy. Mondrian was anxious to clarify a position that distinguished him from other leading Dutch modernists at that time, such as the symbolists, the work of Sluyters and van Dongen. Apart from these concerns, Mondrian's commitment to Theosophy per se remained intact, a view confirmed by the way in which he sought to clarify the issue: "for the present I am continuing to work within ordinary, generally known terrain," and "my work still remains totally outside the occult realm, although I try to attain occult knowledge for myself in order better to understand the nature of things." Moreover, the comment "I got everything from the Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky)" can be taken at face value: there is little in the way of ambiguity there.

Let us return to Mondrian's rhythm by way of a principal description he puts forward in "The New Plastic in Painting":

> If the new plastic is dualistic through its composition …, *the composition is also dualistic.* The composition expresses the subjective, the individual, through rhythm—which is formed by the relationships of color and dimensions, even though these are mutually opposed and neutralized.…
>
> Rhythm interiorized (through continuous abolition by oppositions of *position and size*) has nothing of the *repetition* that characterizes the particular; it is no longer a *sequence* but is *plastic unity.* Thus it renders more strongly the cosmic rhythm that flows through all things (Mondrian 1986, 39–40).

Note the expression in parentheses—"through continuous abolition by oppositions …." Albeit intended for a context different from that of painting, Bailey's definition of rhythm—"the attainment of the point of perfect balance and of equilibrium"—reflects Mondrian's early neoplastic theory of painting, where the ultimate goal was to attain static equilibrium between oppositional elements.

Reviewing the treatment of rhythm in the writing of other Theosophists who have sought to philosophise it, we see that there are certain traits concerning the expression of rhythm that echo Mondrian's: rhythm relates to two opposed 'systems' for Steiner, for instance, and brings about "the point of perfect balance and of equilibrium" for Bailey. Mondrian develops his treatment of rhythm further in the "Six neoplastic Laws" in "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926), in which the fifth is stated as follows:

> *Equilibrium that neutralizes and annihilates the plastic means* is achieved through the relationships of proportion in which they are placed and which create vital rhythm (Mondrian 1986, 214).

Here Mondrian is fairly clear when he proclaims that Neo-plasticism's end is to attain "equilibrium" and "vital rhythm", brought about by "the relationships of proportion." Whether Mondrian encountered the passages from Bailey or Steiner (above) directly, and to what extent he incorporated certain key phrases from their conceptions of rhythm cannot be verified, but it is certain that Bailey's thinking is based mainly on Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism via Mme Blavatsky, and that Bailey's pertinent description of rhythm can be taken as a sort of common knowledge of Theosophy, as might be derived from major textbooks on the subject.

Concerning Steiner, Robert Welsh wrote about the concept of 'devotion' and its influence on Mondrian's thinking in the essay "Mondrian and Theosophy":

> Though unacknowledged, Steiner's concept of "devotion" owes much to the *Thought Forms* of A. Besant and C. W. Leadbeater (trans. in Dutch, 1905) and, through these writers, to Madam H. P. Blavatsky, the founder spirit of modern Theosophy. The source of Mondrian's interpretation is therefore not necessarily limited to the writings of Steiner (Welsh 1971, 39 no.20).

The important issue is not whether Mondrian actually encountered certain passages by specific authors or not, but that he and other Theosophists arrived at significantly similar expressions for describing rhythm. The common source of Theosophy drawn upon by most Theosophists, though, is not limited to the writings of Mme Blavatsky, for the theories fundamental to Theosophy can be traced back to ancient Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism.[26] In Hinduism the equilibrated point is called the

---

[26] Bailey also seems to extract her particular definition of rhythm from Hinduism, writing, elsewhere in the same book:

Following on these two degrees of motion (which are characteristic of the atom, Mon, of the Heavenly Man or group, and of the Logos or the Totality) comes a period of rhythm and of stabilization wherein the point of balance is achieved. By the force of balancing the pairs of opposites, and thus producing equilibrium, *pralaya* is the inevitable sequence.

The "pralaya" to which Bailey refers in this passage is borrowed from Hinduism. In G. de Purucker's Occult Glossary "pralaya" is defined:

(Sanskrit) A compound word, formed of *laya*, from the root *li*, and the prefix *pra*. *Li* means "to dissolve," "to melt away," "to liquefy," as when one pours water upon a cube of salt or of sugar. … : a crumbling away, a vanishing away, of matter into something else which is yet in it, and surrounds it, and interpenetrates it. Such is *pralaya*, usually translated as the state of latency, state of rest, state of repose, between two *manvantaras* or life cycles. If we remember distinctly the meaning of the Sanskrit word, … pralaya, therefore, is dissolution, death.

Further on de Purucker explains:

There is another kind of *pralaya* which is called *nitya*. In its general sense, it means "constant" or "continuous," and can be exemplified by the constant or continuous change – life and death … It is a state in which the indwelling and dominating entity remains, but its different principles … undergo continuous and incessant change. … It is the unceasing and chronic changing of things that are – the passing from phase to phase, meaning the *pralaya* or death of one phase, to be followed by the rebirth of its succeeding phase. (de Purucker 1996).

These resources were suggested by Ms Thoa Tran, a member of the American Theosophy Society, who kindly replied to my request for information regarding the Theosophy Mailing List (http://

"*laya*-center," which is "the mystical point where a thing disappears from one plane and passes onwards to reappear on another plane" (de Purucker 1996), a conception which recalls Zimmer's explanation of *maya* as energy form.

When we take into account Bailey's expression "*pralaya* is the inevitable sequence" of equilibrium and rhythm, the meaning of '*pralaya*' will have an important role in one's understanding of the theosophical definition of rhythm. '*Pralaya*' is "the state of latency, state of rest, state of repose between two (life) 'cycles' and "the constant or continuous change" (de Purucker 1996): thus, the single word can contain two mutually antipathetic concepts, 'repose' and 'change'. Mondrian again, in "The New Plastic in Painting" writes:

> *Rest,* the opposite of movement, is perfectly equilibrated movement and is therefore expressed by equilibrated movement: *unity of movement and countermovement.* This unity of movement interiorizes the plastic expression of art. It attains exact expression in abstract-real painting through the unchangeable duality of rectangular opposition and a more inward rhythm (Mondrian 1986, 46–7).

Mondrian's explanation matches closely the definition of '*pralaya*' put forward above: "the state of latency, state of rest" and "the constant or continuous change"—that is (equilibrated) 'movement'. We are presented with an interesting coincidence between Mondrian's theory of rhythm in his early Neo-plasticism and that of Hindu-Theosophy and Hegelian dialectic. But such a coincidence is in itself not entirely satisfactory, because Mondrian was a 'practical' painter as well as a Theosophist; moreover, he was an independent thinker. Martin S. James wrote:

> While many stimuli could be cited as contributing to Mondrian's mature neoplastic art and theory, an overemphasis on influences and sources would divert attention from the unique synthesis he was able to achieve (James 1986, 19).

As a painter, Mondrian was an empiricist. It was inevitable, then, that he engaged with the actuality of expression in painting, and did not merely dabble with the potentiality of idealistic mystical thinking. Schematic rhythm, which Hegel, Theosophy, and Neo-plasticism engage with, was to Mondrian an empirical event in his painting. As already pointed out above, if we consider the genealogical or philological definition of rhythm, tracing its origins back to ancient Greek thinking, Mondrian's 'different' rhythm—rhythm as schema, not as kinesis—can be said to manifest in the empirical and practical field, a proposition which is discussed in detail in Chap. 4.

1.7 Becoming: Theosophy and Hegel

Theosophists employ the discourse of Western philosophy, and there are similarities between Hegel's dialectic and the style that typifies theosophical argument. For Theosophists, Theosophy is the philosophy of religion, and the theory of religion is

---

users.vnet/jem/theos-1.html) concerning the original source of Alice A. Bailey's definition of rhythm.

philosophy. The same can be applied to Hegel, for whom philosophy and religion are identical: "The content is the same, the form is different. For Hegel, philosophy 'accomplishes' Christianity" (Grace 1967). However, Hegel and the Theosophists differ fundamentally, especially in conceptions of 'universality'. While for Hegel 'universality' is the 'definition' given by the self or 'an I', for Theosophists 'universality' is attained by the equilibrium between oppositions, and, notably, reaches beyond the Ego: universality is not the 'definition' or judgement given by the subject by way of the conceptualisation or thinking of the object. The commonality between Mondrian's and Hegel's theory of dialectic is that the much sought-after condition of universality is attained only through the 'I': it presupposes a subject which grasps and conceptualises the object. This is in contrast to a subject who is merely exposed to the visual object as to pure data outside the self.

'Universality' in Theosophy is the starting point toward immediate experience at the highest level: Theosophically speaking, there is no logical contradiction between epistemology and 'immediacy' or immediate experience. By contrast, in Hegel's dialectic, such discrimination is entailed, thus the statement: "Thinking voids the immediacy of our first encounter with it." Hegel himself can be said to have been aware of the impossibility of attaining immediacy in the empirical world (Berthold-Bond 1989, 83–5).[27]

Kierkegaard and others describe Hegel's idealism in general as the way in which the truth of the object's being is ultimately the "thing thought", the object for consciousness (Berthold-Bond 1989, 85), concluding that 'becoming' and dialectic can only occur for Hegel "in the head" and not in concrete existence in the world. Hegel's idealism typically manifests in his concept of 'now' and 'becoming'. Heidegger concurs with this observation about Hegel's 'becoming':

> No detailed discussion is needed to make plain that in Hegel's interpretation of time he is moving wholly in the direction of the way time is ordinarily understood. When he characterized time in terms of the "now", this presupposes that in its full structure the "now" remains levelled off and covered up, so that it can be intuited as something present-at-hand, though present-at-hand only 'ideally'. … So even when he characterizes time as "becoming", Hegel understands this "becoming" in an 'abstract' sense, which goes well beyond the representation of the 'stream' of time (Heidegger 1962, 483).

For Heidegger (and Merleau-Ponty) "becoming" is a sequence of 'nows', which can be manifested by pure intuition. That is, "now" is encountered in either of two ways: Firstly, in which "'now' is-*no*-longer, and secondly, in which now is-*not*-yet; so it can be taken also as not-Being" (Heidegger 1962, 483). 'Becoming' is perceived by "pure intuition", and only through the concept of the 'stream' (or 'flow' in Husserl's

[27] A point of criticism: many commentators refer to it as Hegelian idealism. George Stack, for example, states that "Hegelian logic could not account for the process of becoming or genesis", and similarly, Calvin Schrag asserts that "everything Hegel has to say about becoming and movement in his logic is illusory" (Berthold-Bond 1989).

term[28]) of time, but not a sequence of specific 'points' as Hegel advocates.[29] Hegel's "becoming" incorporates 'eternity' in which the function of the 'point' is "the negation of space": in Hegel's dialectic, "as this negation, the point itself remains in space: a point is space after all." However, as long as Hegel regards "becoming" as a series of points (as the negation of space), Hegel's "becoming" is "ideal" and "abstract." Thereby, it only occurs "in the head", and thus bears no correlation to the empirical meaning of the "stream" of time.

For Kierkegaard, the most problematic aspect of Hegelian idealism was this very inaccessibility of 'becoming' or 'movement'. Daniel Berthold-Bond outlines certain points of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel:

> Kierkegaard constantly argues that Hegel's dialectic involves an illicit forcing of movement and transition into his logic. Movement is the "chimera" and "mirage" which is "produced only on paper" in Hegel's dialectic. Hegel's "introduction of movement into logic," Kierkegaard asserts, "is a sheer confusion," for "the category of transition [or becoming, or movement] is itself a breach of immanence, a leap," as opposed to the immanent necessity Hegel associates with it (Berthold-Bond 1989, 85).[30]

---

[28] According to Husserl's conception, 'flow' resides in both space and time intuitively. However, the consciousness of flow does not occur without categorical articulation either, as we see in Husserl's criticism of Heraclitus's description of flow. For Husserl, two faculties of memory deal with flow: retention and recollection. Retention deals with flow in the sense of the lack of an apex of presentness. Ontologically, it is 'nothing' (it has no property), but nonetheless appears to our consciousness: we are within the flow. With the help of the faculty of recollection, flow as nothingness can be recognized in the categorical sense of linearity, past, present and future (or flow as flow in articulated time). Thus flow itself occurs in this sense of 'flow', and is conditional upon the absence of 'presentness'. An explanation of the concept of Husserlian 'flow' helps fortify one's rationalization of the process of perceiving rhythm in a phenomenological sense. However, I do not attempt to address further this transcendental sense of flow and rhythm in this book. Husserl's 'flow' has been applied to the concept of 'image-object' and visual rhythm (Brough 1993, Tosaki 2000, 2001).

[29] Heidegger cites Hegel's understanding 'now':

> The "now" is monstrously privileged: it 'is' nothing but the individual "now"; but in giving itself airs, this thing which is so exclusive has already been resolved, diffused, and pulverized, even while I am expressing it (Heidegger 1962, 483).

The "now", for Hegel, is the privileged 'point', which is the negation of space, and "space is the abstract multiplicity of the points" (Heidegger 1962, 481). In this conjecture, Hegel connects 'time' and 'space' in the operation of his dialectics, but as the definition of 'point' (the negation of space) shows, his definition of "now" (or "becoming") cannot be said to be empirical.

[30] This view of Kierkegaard and George Stack is very common among the Hegelian students and critics. Calvin Schrag just flatly says, "everything that Hegel has to say about becoming and movement in his logic is illusory" (Berthold-Bond 1989, 85). However, Barthold-Bond repudiates those common criticisms of Hegel's 'movement' arguments (which he calls 'misunderstandings'). Barthold-Bond writes:

> … the suggestion that Hegel's dialectic of becoming is a 'mirage' which 'takes place only on paper,' or that Hegel 'could not account for becoming' or 'the transition from possibility to actuality,' is completely unwarranted. This sort of criticism reflects, I suppose, a distaste for Hegel's idealism in general, where the truth of the being of objects is ultimately the 'thing thought,' the object for consciousness. This leads Kierkegaard and others to the conclusion that becoming and dialectic only occur for Hegel 'in the head' and not in concrete existents in the world. But this is

It cannot be said that Hegelian idealism and theosophical mysticism share the same problem: actually they incur very different problems (especially where theory is applied to practical activities like painting). But as long as both Hegelian and theosophical dialectic occur only "in the head" and not via concrete existence in the world, then accounting for immediate experience of movement in the actual world remains an elusive quest; or as Kierkegaard put it, it evinces the danger of its being a "chimera" or "mirage."

For Mondrian and van Doesburg, the concept of Hegelian 'becoming' was applicable to the concrete realm of the canvas, and was not confined by an extensity only "in the head." In the Autumn of 1915, van Doesburg wrote an exhibition review of Mondrian's work which pleased Mondrian very much, and initiated the long-standing relationship between them:

> The task Mondrian set himself for no. 116 may be called very successful in its execution. Spiritually this work dominates all the others. The impression it makes is Peace; the stillness of the soul. In its methodical construction, 'becoming' is more than 'being'. This is a pure element of art; for Art is not a 'being' but a 'becoming'. This 'becoming' is given in black and white. […]To restrict the means so little and then to give such a pure impression of art with nothing more than some white paint on a white canvas with horizontal and perpendicular lines is extraordinary. … Mondrian is aware that a line has acquired an important meaning. A line has almost become a work of art in its own right, one can no longer spill [sic.] it so easily as in the time when it was a matter of imitating things seen (Blotkamp 1994, 95, Joosten 1998, 252).

The focus of this review is Mondrian's *Composition 10 in Black and White,* 1915 (Fig. 1.1). It signals the age of non-representational art: painting stands no more in 'being', but in 'becoming.' It gives the impression of repose: the stillness of the soul. This stillness is the resolution of a methodical construction which embodies 'becoming' rather than 'being' (Bois 1994, 338). Van Doesburg's usage of 'becoming' confirms a Hegelian influence, but the concept is modified to apply to Mondrian's painting; now 'becoming' comes not with 'movement', but with the impression of 'stillness' and 'peace'. If 'becoming' is to be understood in terms of stillness, would such an understanding entail an illogical modification of the concept of 'becoming': moreover, would such a modification mean that 'becoming' cannot logically be applied to Mondrian's non-referential painting?

When we refer back to ancient Greek thought, the meaning of "becoming" and its relation to movement is a theme which is elucidated with particular care. For Plato, 'Being' is "the unchanging form, uncreated and indestructible … imperceptible to sight or the other senses, the object of thought" (Plato 1965, 70–1), an indescribable prime function of Nature. That is, for Plato 'Becoming' is "that which bears the same name as the form and resembles it, but is sensible, has come into existence, is in constant motion … and is apprehended by opinion with the aid of sensation" (Plato 1965, 70–1). Becoming is known only by way of the faculty of intuition, which can arrest 'motion' just as it emerges into existence. It functions

---

simply not Hegel's view, for, … the fact is that the exemplification and manifestation of that truth takes place in concretely situated beings in the world" (Berthold-Bond 1989, 85–6).
However, criticism against Hegel's movement arguments by Kierkegaard and others can be said to be common among early twentieth century philosophers and theorists.

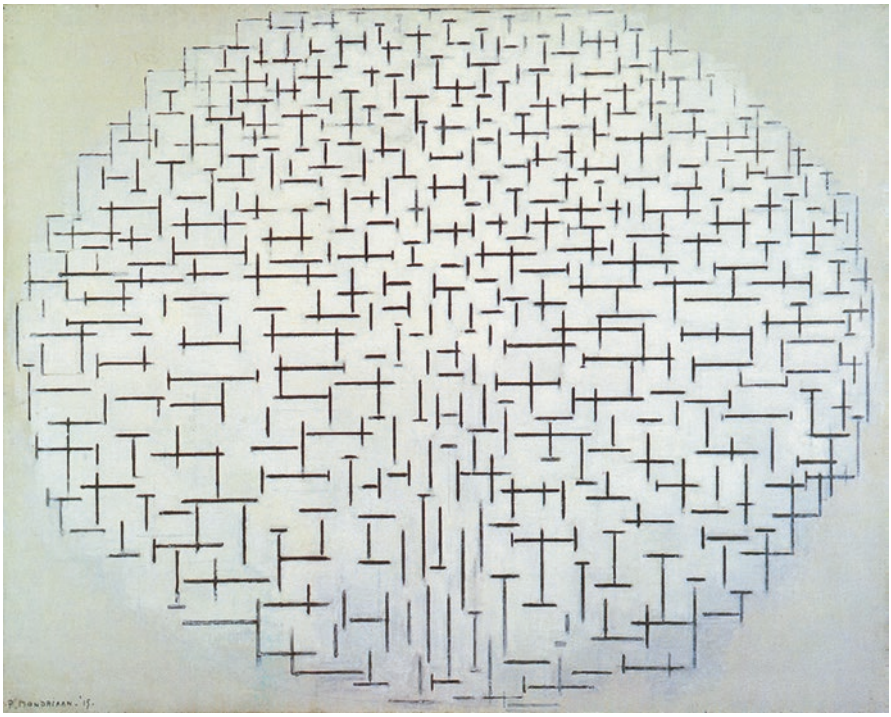


Fig. 1.1 Piet Mondrian, *Composition 10 in Black and White*, 1915 (B 79), Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo

only via sensation and feeling, which help to comprehend such 'movement.' For van Doesburg, then, Mondrian's canvas constitutes 'becoming' (a mixture of 'being' and 'becoming' in Plato's sense), since Mondrian has clearly used a basic principle (i.e., "pure elements of art"—horizontal and vertical lines) with much sensitivity and feeling, so as to constitute the unseen structure of 'being'. As a basic trait of 'being' (absolute stasis), the canvas attains 'dynamics' within "Peace" ("stillness of the soul"), through the incorporation of sensitized abstract lines. This conception of 'becoming' is closer to the concept of '*chora*' than its original sense in Plato.

Plato nominates *chora*, along with Being and Becoming. *Chora,* in Plato's thinking, comprises reality, and can be defined as the ambiguous condition of *in-between*: that is, between 'being' and 'becoming.' Plato explains:

> *Chora* is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in – we look at it indeed in a kind of dream and say that everything that exists must be somewhere and occupy some space, and that what is nowhere in heaven or earth is nothing at all (Pérez-Gómez and Parcell 1994, 8–9).

Ontologically speaking, *chora* is 'nothing'. According to Plato, however, it does constitute reality in the same sense as 'being' and 'becoming.' Chora is a

potentiality of space and position: a "receptacle with the space of chaos" (Pérez-Gómez and Parcell 1994, 9). *Chora* is the receptacle of the dynamism of space and time itself. Mondrian's 'becoming' can be better understood when we consider the concept of *chora* in addition to Plato's condition of 'becoming'. Van Doesburg's description of 'becoming' in his appreciation of Mondrian's canvas is initiated by a Hegelian 'becoming', which occurs in the head, but presupposes an activated 'becoming' beyond 'being' which elicits 'potentiality': dynamism in stasis or stillness. This actuality in stasis (or 'being') can only be understood in terms of *Chora* and the Hindu concept of "maya", which is discussed in Chap. 1.

1.8 Departure from Theosophy

By 1913, Steiner had already quit the Theosophical Society to found Anthroposophy. In February 1921, when Steiner gave a series of lectures throughout the Netherlands, Mondrian sent Steiner a copy of his recently published *Le Néo-Plasticisme*, together with a brief note; but received no reply. The lack of response prompted him to write to van Doesburg in February 1922. The letter reveals Mondrian's distrust of Steiner:

> As far as your remarks on the Steinerians are concerned, I couldn't agree more. And perhaps—I see in the illustration that it is so—this even goes for Steiner himself. Just like Schoenmaekers and Bolland: one-sided and opinionated (Blotkamp 1994, 182).

To Mondrian, Steiner's withdrawal from the Theosophical Society was of no consequence: he had in any case already distanced himself from Schoenmaekers, and other orthodox Theosophists. While it was for a comparatively short period, Schoenmaekers' influence is significant in the way it contributed to Mondrian's development of the concept of Neo-plasticism. A Theosophist philosopher, Schoenmaekers wrote broadly about philosophy (mainly Hegelian), science and mathematics. He was a quick-minded, obsessively talkative man and dogmatically expressive about his own ideas. Mondrian met Schoenmaekers in July 1915 through his music composer friends van Domselaer and Maaike Middelkoop (who later became van Domselaer's wife). Initially, Mondrian was deeply impressed with Schoenmaekers' ideas. Theo van Doesburg testifies to this after having visited Mondrian for the first time in January 1916, writing in his letter to Anthony Kok that Mondrian and van Domselaer were both "obsessed by the theories of De Schoenmaekers" (Blotkamp 1994, 111).

In an earlier letter to van Doesburg in September 1920, Mondrian reproached Vantongerloo, a Dutch sculptor and one of the main contributors to *De Stijl*, concerning his mathematical approach to Neo-plasticism. Mondrian wrote: "He approaches it just like an ordinary Theosophist." Although these testimonies indicate Mondrian's break with Theosophy, it was exclusively the Theosophical Society, and not Theosophy itself, from which he withdrew his affiliations, and he continued to see himself as an independent and dedicated theosophical thinker. Mondrian wrote in the same letter to van Doesburg:

> It is the N. P. [Neo-Plasticism] that exemplifies theosophical art (in the true sense of the word). Those people who are now so fond of calling themselves theos. or anthroposophists are all half-baked (Blotkamp 1994, 111).

Mondrian had extended the scope of his independence as a thinker and painter to include that of his dealings with Theosophy,[31] and his own interpretation of the theosophical doctrine became a personalized version of theosophical pliant to his particular way of thinking. Charmion von Wiegand, who was Mondrian's friend during the New York period, testified to this in her interview with Margit Rowell in June 1971. Herself affiliated with Theosophy, von Wiegand, in reply to a question about whether Theosophy as a discipline was still very important in Mondrian's life, stated: "One could say that he had gone beyond it. He had digested it as a discipline and it had become implicit to his life" (Mondrian 1971, 77).

The discrepancy between Mondrian and van Doesburg has been well documented, and relates to van Doesburg's introduction of the diagonal line. Carel Blotkamp identified further reasons for the discrepancy, such as Mondrian's dogmatic clinging to the basic tenets of neo-plasticism together with his reaction to van Doesburg's supposed infidelity to the dogma. The influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's understanding of neo-plasticism was much stronger than it was on van Doesburg. Thus, the concept of the fourth dimension, rejected by Mm Blavatsky, was a typical cause of discrepancy between the two artists: Van Doesburg was more enthusiastic and accommodating toward 'new' ideas and styles of expression than Mondrian. Van Doesburg did not hesitate to discard his painting in favor of architecture later in his life, whereas Mondrian dedicated his life to the art of painting. Mondrian's artistic development was slow and careful, and for him, any new endeavours would always be supported by his painterly practice and his own explo-

[31] Mondrian's friend A. van den Briel described Mondrian's contact with Theosophy as follows:

> He (Mondriaan) came from a strictly religious Calvinist background (his father was a friend and supporter of A. Kuyper) and, although he had long since gone his own way (was living with two brothers at Ringdijk, Diemermeer), he had still not shaken off the influence of his childhood. He had to be able to develop his personality in complete freedom, and in that process of liberating himself he came across the theosophical movement. Mondrian was receptive to the greatness of this world-view, but had a strong antipathy to the way the theosophists manifested themselves in clubs and societies, as the rather superficial gatherings in Amsterdam ('theosophical misses'). He may have been a member of the Theosophical Society for some years, but he did not attach much importance to that membership. Strictly speaking he cannot be said to have been a theosophist in those days. He was always an artist first and foremost, searching for a way to express what he felt and thought. For that reason it was not likely that a concrete religious conviction could ever take hold of him. In a more general sense, however, his view of life (and work) ran to a considerable extent (but not on the most essential points) parallel with the theosophical persuasion. In this period of transition theosophy did deepen his spiritual life, but he had no time for studying, and always his art claimed priority, and as he became freer himself his own personality became more dominant, and the link with theosophy became looser, […] The great lines that he formerly perceived in theosophy, and the awareness that the real truth underlying the material world he now found within himself, and it was his duty as an artist to express it (Henkels 1987, 189 n.40).

rations of Theosophy. Mondrian once mentioned to van Doesburg, "I learn everything from Mme Blavatsky" (Blotkamp 1994, 111). This comment can be taken literally. Mondrian's Theosophy was based mainly on his own reading of the core writings and his own interpretation of them, and his understanding and application of the fourth dimension should be understood in this light. Nelly van Doesburg commented on Mondrian's painting:

> Mondrian never doubted the validity of his art and its theoretical presuppositions. …, it was above all his activities as a painter which gave his life a special meaning and for which he was willing to go make any personal or material sacrifice without so much as a thought of regret. It was this steadfastness of purpose which explains many of his personal habits and which doubtless contributed much to the sustained high quality of his painting (Mondrian 1971, 22).

1.9 Against the Fourth Dimension: Van Doesburg and His Peers

Like many theorists and artists, Mondrian was attracted to emerging scientific understandings of space-time that were gaining popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century, and which included the possibility of a 'fourth dimension'. This 'new' science was probably introduced to Mondrian by Theo van Doesburg (1883–1930), Mondrian's peer and founder of *De Stijl* magazine. Mondrian refrained from visualizing this 'new' geometry literally, which van Doesburg did.[32] For Mondrian the issue was how to express the 'truth' in painting according to the higher spirituality of Hegelian-Theosophical thinking, accompanied by his approach to harmony, purity, dynamic energy, universality, and undiscriminating 'love' as elements of that 'truth'.

The depiction on canvas of the *fourth-dimension* as a subject was no more Mondrian's concern than was the theosophical doctrine, (the depiction of which on canvas would produce a 'mandala'-like painting). Mondrian kept uppermost in mind the role of the artist: for him, this was the painter, in the prevailing society, still in its intermediary stage toward reaching a higher spirituality. As we see in the triptych "Evolution" (Fig. 1.2), Mondrian recognized the status of artist as an intermediate one between supreme spirituality and mundane situation.[33] Mondrian wrote in "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" (1919–20):

---

[32] Theo van Doesburg visualized his ideas of 4th dimension in his painting and developed them into architectural design. His 'Elementalism' and 'Counter-composition' are very much inspired by his understanding of 4th dimension.

[33] In the theosophical reading, the triangle pointing downward is linked to a lower material state, while the triangle pointing upward is linked to a state of supreme insight. The validity of this interpretation will become clear especially as it is accompanied by the symbol of the flower around the shoulders, nipples, and navels which consist of both 'up' and 'down' triangles and, more significantly, the centre is an upward-pointing triangle. The figure on the right conveys the meaning of a state still in the process of evolving and progressing upward toward a higher level of existence. This is, according to Mondrian, the stage of an artist, who has a mission to lead laymen to the higher spirituality (Blotkamp 1994, 54, Welsh 1971, 37–8, 43–9, Tosaki 1996, 12–5).

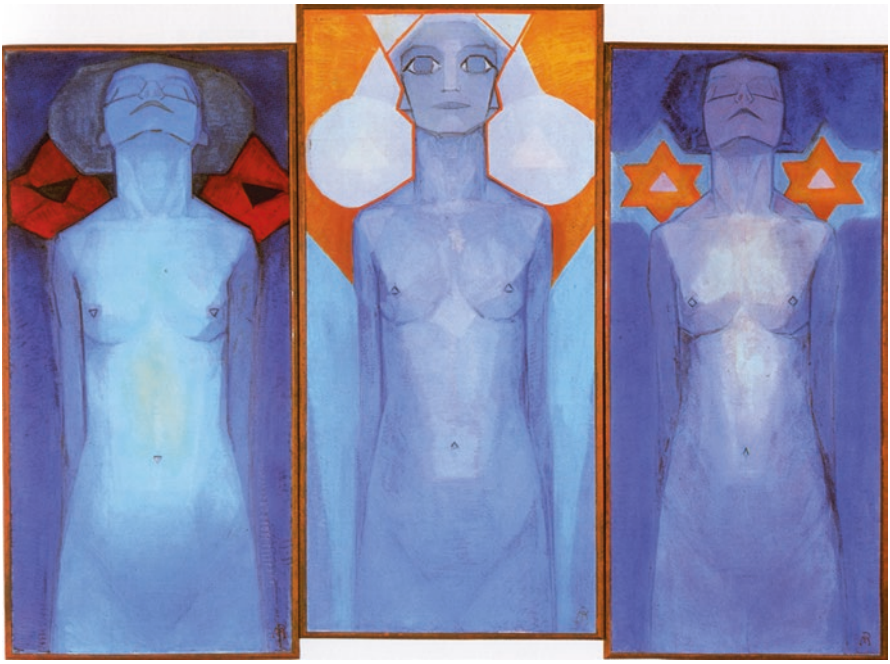


Fig. 1.2 Piet Mondrian, *Evolution*, c. 1911 (A 647), The Haags Gemeentemuseum

> When the new man has transformed nature into what he will have then become (natural-and-nonnatural-in-equlibrated-relationship), then mankind—including you—will have achieved the earthy paradise of the new man (Mondrian 1986, 120).

Mondrian's feelings about the idea of the "new man" ran deep. He discarded every vestige of representation, other than that associated with the highest spirituality within human society: "the earthy paradise of the new man." To engage a subject such as the fourth dimension was, for Mondrian, to engage with a representative topic: which was to be discarded. In one sense he is a very engaged practical painter, on the other hand, a life-time occultist. It is understandable, then, that Mondrian did not develop his concern about the concept of the fourth dimension very far. Mondrian mentioned the fourth dimension in his "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" (1919–20):

> It is indeed a happy phenomenon that the most recent painting reveals an increasingly conscious search for a pure and many-sided representation of things, because it expresses the new and more conscious spirit of our time, which aspires to a more determinate expression of the universal. This aspiration has been ascribed to our stronger awareness of the forth dimension, a conception that actually does come to the fore in recent art as partial or complete destruction of three-dimensional naturalistic expression and reconstruction of a new plastic expression, less limited in its vision (Mondrian 1986, 99).

For Mondrian the concept of a fourth dimension is suggestive of a powerful method for going beyond the ordinary naturalism of the three-dimensional image but he was not completely convinced of the efficacy of a fourth dimension, preferring instead to conceptualise 'dimension' itself according to Mm Blavatsky's notion of an 'n-dimensional' system, within which the 'fourth' would by definition be subsumed. Accordingly, Mondrian uses the term 'dimension' on many occasions in the context of the possibilities of *n*-dimensionality, although he wrote to van Doesburg about the fourth dimension in this letter dated December 12, 1917:

> As to that question of the 4th dimension, perhaps some time in the future you can better write about it then I can. I rather fancy your idea that the negative will be the 4th dimension, but I can't write about it. … In my work I do now see it that way. I'm getting more unity in my things, and the balance I'm looking for (Joosten 1998, 113, 261).

Their debate over the relevance and implications of the fourth dimension (among other disagreements) escalated into a grudge between Mondrian and Van Doesburg that ultimately ruined the friendship. What hindered conciliation between them was Mondrian's dogmatism (according to van Doesburg) regarding Theosophy. Mondrian's belief was derived from a combination of Mme Blavatsky and his own intuition, and Van Doesburg was so exasperated trying to persuade Mondrian to adopt a more reasoned attitude toward the fourth dimension, that he wrote about the issue to Oud, in 1919:

> I got a completely different view of Mondrian through his theosophical confessions (last week). It is terribly difficult to put it in writing, but in short he believes that after our work nothing more can develop. This work is developing as the highest stage in the plastic arts—and then comes the sixth sense. La peinture est finie! …
>
> Mondrian is actually a dogmatist, and in terms of his dogma (with all due respect!) he doesn't know what to do with the fourth dimension …. He did admit that I was much more advanced in my work and theory, but maintained that the Plane was the single and absolute consequence of all creativity (Doig 1986, 25).

Van Doesburg's irritation was obvious, and the tension between the two regarding the fourth dimension issue revealed other aspects of disagreement and antagonism between them. First, their attitude toward 'new' science. Second, toward the Theosophical doctrine. Third, toward painting, which for Mondrian was of utmost importance, but which for van Doesburg was the passage toward architecture. Fourth, their understanding of time in painting. Van Doesburg's criticism was intense—one reason being Mondrian's Checkerboard canvases. Van Doesburg described these canvases, continuing in his letter to Oud, that: "His last works have no real composition. The division of the plane is in a single module, which are therefore just ordinary rectangles of equal size. Contrast can only be achieved by colour. I also find this work a bit opposed to his theory" (Doig 1986, 25). Van Doesburg even suggests that "Perhaps his move to Paris was necessary in order to open up new possibilities in his work—to freshen it up" (Doig 1986, 25). Van Doesburg went so far as to set 'homework' for his mentor Mondrian (just as Boccioni did to his teacher Giacomo Balla, in 1909, when he developed his proto-Futuristic style (*Street Light*, 1909) into a mature-Futurist style (*Leach in Motion*, 1912) (Robinson 1981, 83–115).

Around 1922, an interesting debate about 'time' arose between Mondrian and van Doesburg. Van Doesburg's *The Will to Style: The reconstruction of life, art and technology* first appeared in *De Stijl Vol. V, No. 2 and 3,* 1922 and was later published in book form by the Bauhaus in 1925. In it Van Doesburg wrote:

> As a result of the scientific and technological widening of vision a new and important problem has arisen in painting and sculpture beside the problem of space, and that is the problem of time (Jaffé 1967, 154–5).

The long standing relationship between Mondrian and van Doesburg started to break down around this period. Van Doesburg was a painter of theory, while Mondrian was determined that theory should serve, not control, the process of painting. Van Doesburg attempted to introduce a dynamic picture of reality, exemplified by his famous "Elementalism", with its diagonal lines, enlivened by the conceptual impetus of the fourth-dimension. Van Doesburg was quick—and almost agitated by the need—to change his style. As a practitioner, Mondrian was slow to change his style as he clung to the single principle of a universal reality. In changing Nature, reality is disguised since the natural appearance is bound to time and changing phenomena. In Mondrian's understanding of the Universe, time and space are one inseparable entity and in his letter to van Doesburg dated May 25 1922, his reaction to *The Will to Style* converges on the issue of time:

> Now about your remark. Of course we are also basically of the same opinion in this. Only I do not agree at all with the positioning in time of architecture, because the new principle does away with time … because I want, on the contrary, to eliminate time in the contemplation also of arch.[itecture] …. The sentence on page 32 I find unfortunately phrased. One could read in it that you take time into consideration, although I believe that that is not your intention and that you only want to say as I also said that space and time act (as one and the same) …. (The sentence on P. 32 to which I am referring is this one: '… besides the problem of space another important problem; the problem of time' (Hoek 1986, 72).

Here, Mondrian is more radical, and vocal, in his rejection of time separated from space. The emphasis on the aspect of time in visual art is, for Mondrian, merely theoretical, or academic, and not to be realised in practical terms. Put another way, Mondrian clearly had a vision that the time issue in visual art would lead inevitably to the naturalistic expression of movement, and to a fake rendition of time and flow in visual art.

The debate on the nature of time would probably have continued for some time, especially when van Doesburg came to live in Paris in 1923 although any further correspondence about this issue between them is unknown. Van Doesburg concluded the difference with Mondrian at least from his side, in his letter to Oud of June 24, 1919: "I defended the concept that we were a transition …. Everything is in perpetual motion! Mondrian is in fact a dogmatic" (Hoek 1986, 72). Mondrian had a similar view, but his canvas is non-kinetic, or in equilibrated balance. Mondrian's rejection of the fourth dimension intensified around 1923 when the De Stijl architecture show (at Léonce Rosenberg's gallery in Paris) was held, and in which Mondrian was not represented (Blotkamp 1986, 147). He commented about the fourth dimension in an interview in October 1924:

> What I utterly fail to appreciate is this loose talk of the fourth dimension. Someone has written that Euclidean geometry is of no further use in determining points of support in the new architecture, that this is easy to do by means of non-Euclidean geometry in four dimensions. In the new architecture they moreover seek to express not only space, but time (plastic aspect of space-time), and to express both relationships through color. Who can make head or tail of it? (Blotkamp 1986, 148, Mondrian 1986, 171).

Mondrian's observation of time and space is very important for the development of his theory of visual rhythm. He was against the expression of rhythm in terms of sequence and repetition, or metaphorical expression of time and space (like El Lissitzky's *Proun 99* (Fig. 1.3)). Thus he was against van Doesburg's Elementalism, Futuristic expression of strobographical time, Kinetic sculpture, and any form of expression associated with repetitive modularity. Around his time, except for other De Stijl artists and followers of Mondrian, the only other advocate of Mondrian's theory of 'static' rhythm were the early Russian Constructivists.

Blavatsky evidently also grappled with the problem of defining the notion of the 'fourth dimension':

> The familiar phrase can only be an abbreviation of the fuller form—the "Fourth dimension of MATTER in Space." But it is an unhappy phrase even thus expanded, because while it is perfectly true that the progress of evolution may be destined to introduce us to new charac-

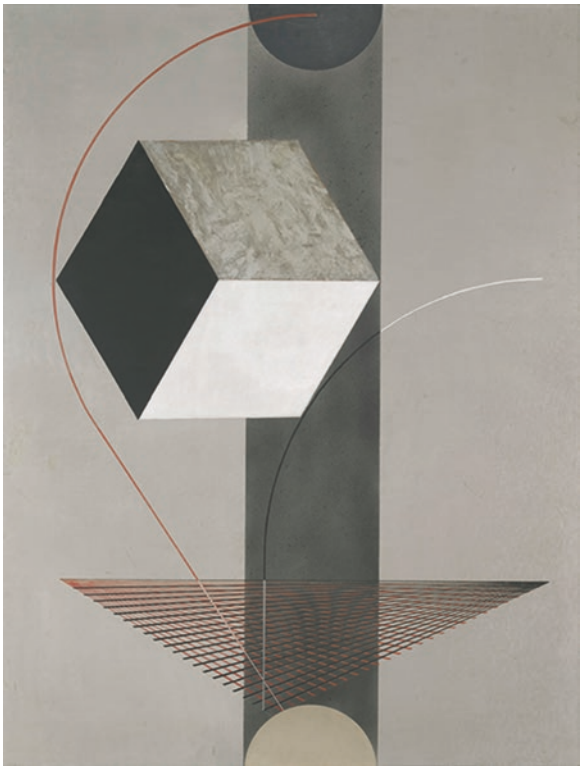


Fig. 1.3 El Lissitzky, *Proun 99*,1924, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT

> teristics of matter, those with which we are already familiar are really more numerous than the three dimensions (Blavatsky 1888, i-251, Henderson 1983, 32).

To Blavatsky *n*-dimensional thought is more plausible than *four-dimensional* doctrine (Blavatsky 1888), an observation followed up by Mondrian:

> Despite all relativism, man's eye is not yet free from his body. Vision is inherently bound to our normal position. Only the mind can know anything of the fourth dimension and detach itself from our poor physical body! (Mondrian 1986, 210).

Van Doesburg's observation of Mondrian's reservation about the adoption of the fourth dimension doctrine had further implications. Van Doesburg wrote to J. J. P. Oud November 11 1924, the year in which Mondrian stop contributing to *De Stijl* magazine and proclaimed the termination of visits between them: "The De Stijl group certainly includes Mondrian and Van Doesburg, but more Van Doesburg than Mondrian because the latter has lagged behind intellectually due to theosophical limitations" (Joosten 1998, 128). Van Doesburg's observation is rather personal, though in some senses it was correct.

For Mondrian, the concept of the fourth dimension is scientific, but belongs to the non-physical terrain (thus unpractical in painting) and is detached from ordinary sensitivity as well as theosophical doctrine. As a principle, Mondrian restricted theosophical doctrine to matters of spirituality and unearthliness. Mysticism itself, including quasi-science, he completely discarded. For his painterly practice, he counted on experience and intuition as a serious artist. In terms of theory, he relied on his understandings of philosophy (mainly Hegel) (Cooper 1998, 119). However, in theory, theory was to follow the practice of painting. Regarding the spiritual artist who is also entrapped in the bodily realm, the remedy seemed clear: "For the present at least I shall restrict my work to the ordinary world of the senses" (Mondrian 1986, 14). Mondrian's denial of forms and volumes as a neo-plastic principle also works in the direction of a denial of (conventional) architecture, and its adoption of the fourth dimension. He replied to Oud's and Van Doesburg's non-neoplastic adoption of fourth dimension in two articles ("The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today" (1922), "Is Painting Inferior to Architecture?" (1923)), which were published in *De Stijl* magazine. He wrote in the essay in 1922:

> The new vision … does not proceed from a fixed point. Its viewpoint is everywhere, and not limited to any one position. Nor is it bound by space or time (in accordance with the theory of relativity). In practice, the viewpoint is in front of the plane (the most extreme possibility of plastic intensification). Thus this new vision sees architecture as a multiplicity of planes: again flat. This multiplicity composes itself (in an abstract sense) into a flat image. At the same time, practice demands a visual-aesthetic solution (through composition, etc.) that remains relative, due to the relativity of our physical movement (Mondrian 1986, 171).

In a different context, that is, apart from van Doesburg's interpretation in terms of the fourth dimension, Mondrian deals with Einstein's theory of Relativity according to his own practical reasoning, with a somewhat esoteric result. He adopts multiple viewpoints (*n-dimensionality*) and rejects being "limited to any one position" such as suggested by a fourth dimension. However, this multi-viewpoint never leaves the flat ground of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism.

1.10 Mondrian and the East: Taoist Thought

In many respects, Mondrian's abstract art is a philosophical realization of his thought and artistic practice, and a deconstruction of the conventions of European painting. Mondrian's neoplastic doctrine penetrates the European convention of time and space while reflecting certain key aspects of Asian thinking, as expressed within Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. This section explores Mondrian's painting philosophy through the traits of mysticism it carries from Theosophy, while tracing the origins of an esoteric theory of visual rhythm which Mondrian based on non-repetition and non-sequential time.

The Japanese abstract painter Tatsuki Nanbata said in his book *Abstract* that whilst seeking the best suitable paintings for a '*chashitsu*'—the Japanese tea ceremony room—he simply conjured up Mondrian's paintings. The Japanese tea ceremony room is a symbol of serenity, simplicity and stasis. In order to match this mood with the pictorial equivalent, Nanbata must have had in mind the image of a well-balanced, silent, and simple picture, almost 'empty' of forms: consisting only of the most succinct 'geometric' design imaginable. Mondrian's so-named "Neo-plastic" canvases seem rigid, static, and mechanical, suggestive of mathematically composed objects featuring only squared primary colours dissected by black belts. The impression given by the canvases may be of something flat and cold-hearted. There are, however, elements of warmth, dynamism, and a sense of rhythm in these canvases. Neo-plasticism (1917–1944) espoused rules of limited painterly elements: straight lines, primary colours (red, yellow, and blue) and 'non-colours' as Mondrian called black, grey, and white. Surprisingly, neo-plasticism was against pictorial-space, repetition and any semblance of forms or shapes. Elimination of those basic elements of Western painting reveals Mondrian's antipathy toward conventional European painting and art in general. To illustrate how Mondrian envisaged the relationship between lines, planes, and the resulting configuration of space on the canvas surface, we can refer to an incident in which Mondrian was asked if he always painted squares, to which he replied "Squares? I see no squares in my pictures" (Reported by Hans (Jean) Arp. Hunter 1959, 15).

In his early mature Neo-plastic canvases (1921–1932) (Fig. 1.4), the square or rectangular shape itself does not have a positive value. Without exception, Mondrian's neo-plastic painting is composed of straight vertical and horizontal lines, which are normally black strips, and primary coloured[34] rectangular planes. It is this deceptively simple structure that serves to function as the generator of rhythm for Mondrian:

> It is a great mistake to think that Neo-Plastic constructs rectangular planes set side by side—like paving stones. The rectangular plane should be seen rather as the result of a plurality of straight lines in rectangular opposition. In painting the straight line is certainly the most precise and appropriate means to express free rhythm (Mondrian 1986, 231).

Mondrian sought to give positive value or 'force' to the straight lines, considering them to be the key element in the manifestation of visual rhythm. This is what

[34] Even primary colours can be seen in Mondrian's painting in a variety of tints, particularly blue.

Fig. 1.4 Piet Mondrian, *Fox-Trot A: Lozenge with Three Lines*, 1930, 1929/30 (B 211), New York Museum of Modern Art

Mondrian meant when he insisted that he could see no squares in his painting. Seeing these squares and rectangles as 'non-shapes' is actually quite difficult to do. We are accustomed to reading intersecting lines as forming shapes, not 'containing potential spaces'. The significance of the existence of the rectangular or square shape is attained only by the existence of the vessel, that is, the straight lines and black strips on the canvas. This brings to mind the concept of the vessel in Taoist thought:

> The thirty spokes unite in the one hub; but it is on the empty space (for the axle), that the use of the wheel depends. Clay is fashioned into vessels; but it is on their empty hollowness, that their use depends. The door and windows are cut out (from the walls) to form an apartment; but it is on the empty space (within), that its use depends (The *Tao Te Ching*, § 11).

In Taoism, the significance of the wheel—and the vessel in particular—is that the emptiness of each object is the source of its use; in other words its capacity or potential to be filled. Unless there is emptiness, there can be no use for the vessel. Paradoxically therefore, neither its contents nor the vessel itself are in themselves essential. Rather, both are contingencies of emptiness; that is, the ability to contain or be contained. Mondrian's exposure to Taoist and Buddhist thought is reported by his friend, A. P. van den Briel, with whom Mondrian became friendly in Amsterdam from 1897 until 1940, at which point Mondrian left Europe. Van den Briel wrote about his memories of Mondrian:

> [W]hen I got to know him he was liberal as far as the church is concerned. … At the Vrije Gemeente we got acquainted with diverse religious teachings: Buddhism, Chinese philosophies, among them the teachings of Lao Toh [sic.], etcetera, and other trends, and Mondrian found the way in which we approached these matters sympathetic (Harthoorn 1980, 8).

Van den Briel also reports that "Mondrian was strongly attracted by eastern cultures, particularly Chinese culture." As a painter Mondrian's interest seems to go a little further in terms of Chinese painting than his understanding of Chinese thought. Van den Briel has this to say about Mondrian's interest in Chinese painting:

> Particularly, though, painting, the brushwork; also line-drawing. Being a European (of the 19th century) it is, of course, very difficult to assess and understand the meaning and the spirit of Chinese painting; not in a European, but in a Chinese way. When evaluating that kind of painting from a European point of view, one does not grasp the intentions of the one who did it. That, naturally, was known to M[ondrian] and he made an effort to shake off his European heritage (Harthoorn 1980, 14).

The years before he joined the Theosophical Lodge in Amsterdam in 1909, were a spiritually adventurous period for Mondrian. Mondrian seems even to have attempted to forsake his European tradition. Van den Briel writes about a Chinese painting which particularly struck Mondrian: the picture of Han Shan (with a paper-scroll) and Shi Té (with a broom), both men clad in rags, untidy, laughing or grinning:

> They are two clowns, though, at a first glance, they seem to be neither vagabonds nor beggars, but wise men and they possess the kind of wisdom in relation to which all common (official) earthly wisdom is just an error. The paper-scroll with Han Shan is "The Book of Nature" and as such harbours more knowledge than can be found in other books. And the broom with Shi Té purifies man from worries, sorrow and suffering. A time will come when man will be in a position to smile at, or (following his personality) laugh about that which used to move or shock him, or could push him towards distress. This kind of portrayal, the fundamental philosophy and its implications with reference to life proper, has made a profound impression on M[ondrian] (Harthoorn 1980, 14).

How much Mondrian developed his understanding of Taoist thought is unknown, especially regarding the concept of 'emptiness' or 'nothingness'. Taoism emphasizes the function of emptiness, and Mondrian's focus is on the relationship itself and Hegelian dualistic dialectics: content and the container itself, the tool and its use. Interestingly, Mondrian himself uses the analogy of the wheel in his playful but theoretical short prose piece, which he called "essayistic exposition" (Blotkamp 1994, 134),[35] titled "Les Grands Boulevards" (Mondrian 1986, 126–7).[36]

> The table top before me is round, but I don't see it turning. The auto wheel is round, and the spokes in it are straight. The straight in the round.
>
> Everywhere? The round moves the straight, the straight moves the round. The outward and the inward: both are necessary.
>
> The wheel turns fast: I do not see the spokes. Nor do I see the motor that moves the car. The wheel moves and its hub stands still. Is the hub motionless then? Is the most inward,

[35] Modrian's attempt at experimental literary works was stopped soon after the *Two Paris Sketches*. He wrote to Lodewijk van Deyssel (1864–1952), who was a prominent Dutch writer and published his critical comments about Mondrian's *Les Grands Boulevards* in 1932: "Since then [1920] I have done nothing further in writing than to clarify my conception of art and life. I found that in literature I could go beyond a deepened Futurism—thus still descriptive. I see no possibility of 'pure plastic' in literary art" (Mondrian 1986, 133).

[36] Carel Blotkamp observes the characteristics of this essay and its theoretical importance: "[T]he observations of Mondrian the painter are interspersed with the more reflective passage of Mondrian the theorist" (Blotkamp 1994, 133).

> seen from without, always still? … Is the outward ever still? … Multiplicity of sounds is the annihilation of sounds and thoughts.

Mondrian's understanding of Taoist ideas is demonstrated in his description of 'emptiness' and 'nothingness" which appears in his folder of notes (circa.1938–44):

> Expression of Life and not expression of Space is important.
> Space is empty, life is full. Space-expression is or creates subjective feelings.
> Expression of life, vitality, dynamic movement, is universal.
> Form is space as well as empty space. Thus form, volume, plane and line must be destroyed and not expressed. This is required for the work as a whole and for its composing elements. Only then the constructive elements can create a continual opposition that forms the dynamic rhythm of life (Mondrian 1986, 385).

Neo-plasticism is the expression of life and not space or emptiness. However, Mondrian's understanding of emptiness is not ontological, but a negative one, and in this sense Mondrian is still a thinker of the West.

A brief reference to Heidegger's philosophical speculations on the notion of nothingness is useful here. Heidegger, more or less a contemporary of Mondrian, shows in his thinking one of the deepest understandings of "nothingness" or "emptiness" in Eastern thought. Heidegger once heard a Taoist-Buddhist monk remark that it is possible to understand that "nothingness is not 'nothing', but rather the completely other: fullness. No one can name it. But it—nothing and everything—is fulfillment." Heidegger responded by saying that this is what he had been saying his whole life. Taoist "nothingness" is the 'darkness' before the advent of the universe. But for darkness this cannot be so, for even this is something—darkness—in contrast with something else (lightness). "Nothingness" is the ubiquitous, and is the ultimate source of usefulness. It is not even similar to the notion of 'space' in traditional Western epistemology. In the West, space is typically illustrated by, say, an open area after the forest has been cleared. An open area has use value only in that it has the potential to 'be filled'; to be utilized: to provide a meadow, or a site for construction, or whatever other purpose.

Taoist emptiness, on the other hand, is not a 'space' to which something is to be added: it is already 'fulfilment'. Non-entity, non-movement, non-sound are Taoist-Buddhist basic principles, which also contain enormous energy. Mondrian's thinking is analogous to this Taoist concept in the sense that he regards movement in terms of stasis, and denies the Western concept of 'space' in his painting. Yet Mondrian still maintains this European tradition in his understanding of space, writing for example that "Form is space as well as empty space." For him empty space is still akin to the 'open space' in the forest. Mondrian (especially in his earlier neoplastic period) does not seem to go far enough to overcome the influence of European metaphysics, which Heidegger had attempted to do. Mondrian denies 'space' because of its emptiness. While Heidegger was unknown to him, Mondrian was deeply influenced by Hegel in whose dialectics, the annihilation of the subjective means fostering the objective within the subjective completely: all is a matter of balance or harmony. The issue for Mondrian is this balance between space and

dynamic life, movement and stasis, vitality and death: his quest was to equilibrate those dualities, bringing together the major thematic elements in Neo-plasticism, and converge through the principle of rhythm.

References

Bailey, Alice. 1951. *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. New York: Lucis Pub. Co.

Berthold-Bond, Daniel. 1989. *Hegel's Grand Synthesis*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1982. *The Space of Literature.* Trans. A. Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Blavatsky, H.P. 1888. *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*. Vol. 1 & 2. London: The Theosophical Publishing Company.

Blotkamp, Carel. 1986. Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction. In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 80–111. New York: Abbeville Press.

———. 1994. *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.

Blotkamp, Carel, Maurice Tuchman, Judi Freeman, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago Ill.). 1986. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*. New York: Abbeville Press.

Bois, Yve-Alain. 1990. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

———. 1994. The Iconoclast. In *Piet Mondrian 1972–1944*, ed. Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, and Hans Janssen. The Hague/New York: Haags Gemeentemuseum, National Gallery of Art, The Museum of Modern Art.

Brough, John B. 1993. Husserl and the Destruction of Time. *Review of Metaphysics* 46 (March): 503–536.

Chandler, Arthur. 1972. *The Aesthetics of Piet Mondrian*. New York: MSS Information Corporation.

Cooper, Harry. 1998. Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie. *October* 84 (Spring): 119–142.

de Purucker, G. 1979. *Fundamentals of the Esoteric Philosophy*. London: Theosophical University Press.

———. 1996. *Occult Glossary*. London: Theosophical University Press.

Doig, Allan. 1986. *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into Architecture, Theory into Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grace, Jeffrey R. 1967. A Review of 'The Problem of God in Hegel' by Georges Van Reit. *Philosophy Today*, Spring/Summer.

Grauer, Victor A. 1996. Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence. *Art Criticism* 11 (1): 25–26.

Harthoorn, J.M. 1980. *Mondrian's Creative Realism*. Mijdrecht: Tableau.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1807. Phenomenology of Spirit. In *Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

———. 1826. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.

Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. 1983. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Henkels, Herbert. 1987. *Mondrian: From Figuration to Abstraction*. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shimbun.

Herwitz, Daniel Alan. 1993. Mondrian's Plato. In *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde*, xv, 353 p. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hoek, Els. 1986. *De Stijl: The Formative Years*. Trans. E. Hoek. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hofmann, Hans. 1948. The Search for the Real: In the Visual Arts. In *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, ed. Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes Jr. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Hunter, Sam. 1959. *Mondrian (1872–1944)*. London: Beaverbrook Newspapers Ltd.
Iversen, Margaret. 1993. *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Jaffé, Hans L.C. 1967. *De Stijl*. Trans. R.R. Symonds and M. Whitall. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.
———. 1969. *Piet Mondrian*. London: Thames and Hudson.
James, Martin S. 1986. Piet Mondrian: Art and Theory to 1917. In *Piet Mondrian, The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.
Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.
Lipsey, Roger. 1988. *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. Boston/Shaftesbury: Shambhala.
Lissitzky-Küppers, Sophie. 1967. *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Mondrian, Piet. 1971. *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
———. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.
Pérez-Gómez, Alberto, and Stephen Parcell. 1994. *Chora Volume One: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*. Montreal/Kingston/London/Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Plato. 1965. *Timaeus*. Trans. H.D.P. Lee. Hardmonsworth: Penguin Books.
Robinson, Susan Barnes. 1981. *Giacomo Balla: Divisionism and Futurism 1871–1912*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
Seuphor, Michel. 1956. *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Stoichita, Victor Leronim. 1979. *Mondrian*. Trans. A. Cheorghitoiu. Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House.
The Tao Te Ching. Trans. J. Legge. Accessed 2 Aug 2016. http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/taote.htm
Threlfall, Tim. 1988. *Piet Mondrian: His Life's Work and Evolution 1872 to 1944*. New York/London: Carland Publishing Inc.
Tosaki, Eiichi. 1996. *The First Four Diamond-Shaped Canvases and Mondrian's Painterliness*. Post Graduate Diploma Thesis: The University of Melbourne.
———. 2000. *Husserl's Flow as Retained Presentness*.
———. 2001. *Husserl's Image Object and Abstract Art*. In The Seventh Australasian Postgraduate Philosophy Conference, Graduate Centre, Melbourne University.
Van Dijk, Marcel. 1983. *The Time of Jakob Van Domselaer*. Masters, Department of Music Studies, The University of Amsterdam.
Van Doesburg, Nelly. 1971. Some Memories of Mondrian. In *Piet Mondrian: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
Welsh, Robert P. 1971. Mondrian and Theosophy. In *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.
———. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné I: Catalogue Raisonné of the Naturalistic Works (Until Early 1911)*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.
Zimmer, Heinrich. 1972. In *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Zuidervaart, Lambert. 1991. *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press.

Chapter 2
Rhythm in Mondrian's Early Theory of Painting

What is brought torestaesthetically is art

– Piet Mondrian (Mondrian 1986, 127).

Obviously plenty of definitions are required to elucidate this "vision" and Mondrian, in a supplement to the catalogue, supplies them. If you are as unprogressive as I think you are, dear reader, you are in for a considerable struggle with these definitions, but to keep it and ponder over it, and then go occasionally to see the Mondrian's paintings

– Henry McBride (McBride 1942, 23).

2.1 Interpretation of Mondrian's Rhythm

Mondrian's neoplastic painting shows a transition from a covert to an ostensive treatment of rhythm. The transition roughly divides Mondrian's practical development into two periods: the first from 1919 to 1932, and the next covering the 'double-line' and New York periods of 1932 to 1944. The transition in Mondrian's theoretical development, however, which this Chapter investigates through analyses of Mondrian's own writing, indicates a shift which occurs a few years earlier than its practical counterpart: the two periods which divide Mondrian's theoretical development occur, roughly, from 1917 to 1927, the first stage of his early mature painting period, and then from 1927 to 1932 (before the 'double-line' was introduced in 1932), which is the second early mature painting period. Finally, the years 1932 to 1944 mark the period of dynamic (kinetic) rhythm, and includes the New York period of 1940 to 1944.

In 1917, Mondrian wrote his first major essay, "The New Plastic in Painting", which was published in eleven installments in *De Stijl* magazine.[1] In this article, Mondrian's ideas show the first signs of a tenable theory of rhythm. Then from around 1927, Mondrian's ideas about rhythm become more assertive, and begin to take on issues other than those concerning harmony and composition, leading to

[1] *De Stijl* magazine was first published in 1917 by Theo van Doesburg.

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_2

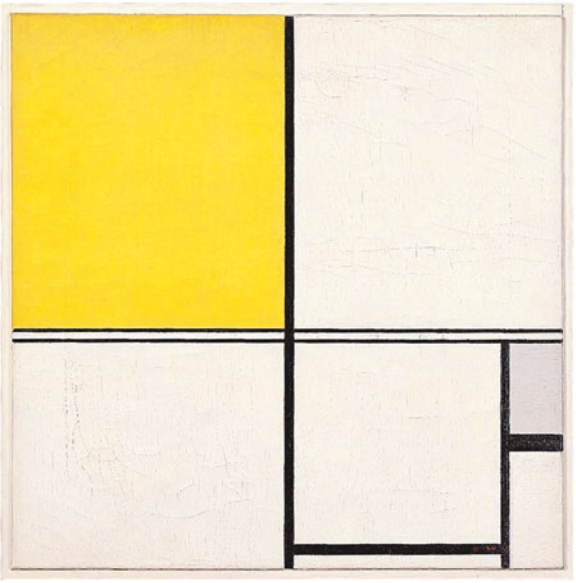


Fig. 2.1 Piet Mondrian, *Composition B, with Double Line and Yellow and Grey, 1932* (B 231), Private collection

Mondrian's late theoretical apogee – his long essay "New Art – New Life" (1931). Here, Mondrian's theory of rhythm begins to merge with his other major concept: "equilibrium". By 1934, in his essay "The True Value of Oppositions in Life and Art", rhythm is identical in meaning to the term "dynamic-equilibrium." Even when merged with the term "dynamic-equilibrium" in 1934, the term "rhythm" is still used. After the introduction of the "double-line" paintings in 1932 (Fig. 2.1), the term "dynamic rhythm" was gradually introduced: it contrasts with Mondrian's conception of 'static' rhythm which he had opted for in the earlier stage of Neo-plasticism. These transitions in the meaning and role of rhythm in Mondrian's writings between 1917 and 1944 are the focus of the discussions that follow.

As a body of work Mondrian's writing is complex. It is structured around key terminologies such as those mentioned above, and many a confusing turn of phrase masks the importance of particular concepts. This presents difficulty in the understanding of what I believe Mondrian was attempting to say about rhythm. As a consequence, it is sometimes more problematic, in an analysis such as this, to attempt to paraphrase the more difficult passages – it seems that one paraphrase merely suggests another, resulting in simplistic explanations that in the end are not adequate. It should be kept in mind, then, that Mondrian's own text, while equivocal and idiosyncratic at times, is the source to which we must refer, and that a certain flexibility of mind will more likely allow the sense of what he wrote to come through to the contemporary reader, rather than a rigid insistence on one absolute meaning for each term. As Blotkamp's suggestion, noted in the Introduction, points out, only

a careful interpretation of Mondrian's text will enable understanding of the seeming 'oddity' of Mondrian's philosophy. Such an approach will facilitate understanding of the special rhythm which inheres in Mondrian's neoplastic painting.

2.2 A Rudimentary Theory of Rhythm: 1917–19 and After

Mondrian's concern about rhythm can be traced to this first published essay, "*The New Plastic in painting*",[2] since it marks the very beginning of the formative years of his engagement with Neo-plasticism.[3] In this essay, Mondrian states: "Thus it renders more strongly the cosmic rhythm that flows through all things" (Mondrian 1986, 15). To this comment a note is attached: "The ancient Chinese conceived of rhythm as the life-fluid." The source of Mondrian's information about rhythm in the perceptions of "the ancient Chinese" is not known,[4] and is not the issue, but the distinguishing point here is that Mondrian himself thought of rhythm as flowing "through all things" and as "the life-fluid", flowing through the 'old' and 'new' art, through particular forms of art (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, dance, literature and so on). He perceived it in the old towns, in modern cities, and as manifest in all human activities; that is, 'rhythm' for Mondrian prevailed over time and space and throughout the entire cosmic system.

---

[2] The original Dutch title was "De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst." This essay was published over a series of issues (twelve installments) of *De Stijl* magazine, beginning its first year of circulation in October 1917, and continuing until May 1918 (although under the same title it appeared sporadically until October 1918). Strictly speaking two articles were in fact published prior to the essay's ('De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst') publication in *De Stijl*. The first was Mondrian's letter to the author Israël Querido, who published it in the magazine *De controleur* in the summer of 1909. A rare supporter of Mondrian's painting, Querido "had discussed the Spoor-Mondrian-Sluysters exhibition at great length" in the magazine (Blotkamp 1994, 35). The second, a letter to the critic Augusta de Meester-Obreen, was printed in the magazine *Elsevier's Maandschrift*, 25, no. 50 (February 1915) as an artist's response. In part this explains why Mondrian refrained from too emotionally loaded paintings (such as the flower series) and painted instead the so-called 'Plus-Minus' painting – 'cold and without feeling', which astonished the critic (Mondrian 1986, 15).

[3] Neo-plasticism (between 1914 and 1917, but *before* the first publication of *De Stijl* magazine) are neither known nor documented in any form other than in letters to friends, and so on. But Mondrian's struggle to elucidate his ideas about 'new art' can be thought to have converged in the essay "The New Plastic in Painting" of 1917. According to Blotkamp, this article was originally intended for publication in *Theosophia* in 1914, but was rejected. Subsequently the article was expanded into book form in 1915, but remained unpublished. After his encounter with Theo van Doesburg late in 1915, and later with Bart van dar Leck in 1916, Mondrian revised the work considerably in response to their suggestions, in preparation for publication of a new art magazine – *De Stijl*. Mondrian wrote to the collector H. van Assendelft, referring to this essay: "For the moment at least, my long search is over" (Mondrian 1986, 28, Blotkamp 1994, 107).

[4] An obvious reference would be to Mme. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine,* regarded as the 'Bible' of Theosophy. A. P. van den Briel, Mondrian's friend from around 1898 until Mondrian left for London 1938, comments on Mondrian's attachment to non-European art, especially Chinese painting (Harthoorn 1980, 14).

Had he restricted his use of the term 'rhythm' to themes such as "life-fluid", for example, 'rhythm' in Mondrian's writing and painting would remain imbued with mystical connotations, or at the very least be reducible to a blanket term convenient for settling a number of pedantic queries concerning interpretations of his work and thought. However, Mondrian's 'rhythm as praxis' as it might be called, in his neoplastic theory and painting, bears distinct characteristics which relate it to more robust theories of rhythm in philosophy and musicology. Ironically, it is this relationship with philosophy and musicology which occasionally elicits the view that Mondrian's approach was 'odd'.

The following passage represents the start of a protracted attempt to intellectualise and satisfactorily articulate the principles of rhythm. Mondrian's struggle to succeed in this is characteristic of his experience of his entire neoplastic period, from 1917 to 1944.[5] Mondrian writes:

> Rhythm becomes determinate: naturalistic rhythm is abolished.
>
> Rhythm interiorized (through continuous abolition by opposition of *position and size*) has nothing of the *repetition* that characterized the particular; it is no longer a *sequence* but is *plastic unity.*
>
> Individuality typically manifests the law of repetition, which is nature's rhythm, as law characterized by *symmetry*. Symmetry or regularity emphasizes the *separateness* of things and therefore has no place in the plastic expression of the *universal as universal* (Mondrian 1986, 40).

Several pivotal idioms associated with Mondrian's rhythm are presented: rhythm is "interiorized" by "opposition", has "nothing of *repetition*", is "no longer a sequence" but "*plastic unity*" and is against symmetry (and regularity[6]). Among these concepts of anti-repetition and anti-sequence will be found the rubrics of Mondrian's rhythm, especially in his earlier period of Neo-plasticism, from 1917 to 1927. Yve-Alain Bois responds to "The New Plastic in Painting" with a genealogical diagnosis of Mondrian's rhythm. Bois begins with this comment:

> For Mondrian, rhythm is the subjective part of composition, the relative ("natural," particular) element that must be interiorized, neutralized by the constant nonrepetitive opposition of plastic elements; it is by this means that we may attain the universal, the balance, repose, and that the tragic can be abolished.[7]

---

[5] There is a slight time difference between the theoretical neoplastic period and the neoplastic works themselves. Mondrian's neoplastic theorising started from his first publication ("The New Plastic in Painting") in 1917, but his (immature) neoplastic work appeared in 1920, after a period of experimentation (from 1916 to 1919, which included the two Checkerboard and four Diamond-shaped canvases).

[6] The meaning 'regularity' here has no correlation to 'structure' or 'composition', but to a calculated (including that mathematically measured in, for example, the 'golden section') series of repetitive pulses or spaces among the pictorial elements.

[7] Yve-Alain Bois responds to 'The New Plastic in Painting' with a genealogical diagnosis of Mondrian's rhythm. Bois begins with this comment:

For Mondrian, rhythm is the subjective part of composition, the relative ("natural," particular) element that must be interiorized, neutralized by the constant nonrepetitive opposition of plastic elements; it is by this means that we may attain the universal, the balance, repose, and that the tragic can be abolished (Bois 1990, 161).

Bois' view that 'non-repetition' is a key concept in Mondrian's concept of rhythm is aligned with one put forward in this book, in addition to 'non-sequentiality': a key concept, non-repetition and non-sequentiality, is described by Bois. However, while Bois does describe the concepts, he does not clearly investigate these two key elements distinctly (and does not touch on non-sequentiality in his writings) in Mondrian's visual rhythm. Also, Bois does not investigate the difference between 'naturalistic' rhythm and 'internalized' (or 'interiorized') rhythm; the latter denoting neoplastic and 'static' rhythm. Bois' scepticism with regard to Mondrian's 'abnormal' rhythm seems to get in the way of his elucidating the meaning of rhythm as stasis or repose, or of investigating the meaning of 'repose' itself, which is crucial to understanding Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm.

The character of Mondrian's rhythm is seen as a 'subjective' and 'natural' element, and the function of this 'nonrepetitive' element is the means for attaining 'the universal', 'the balance', and 'repose.' For Mondrian, rhythm is the emphatic form of creative energy which is generated through the power of nature. It is resilient to nature's overwhelming presence. But nature is always present, for example, in the form of the bare surface of the canvas, a precondition which Mondrian noted: "In painting, the empty canvas is an expression of naturalistic space, determined by [its] circumference."[8] When Mondrian established his theory of neoplastic rhythm, rhythm was to be the expression of Neo-plasticism: Neo-plasticism, in turn, was to function against nature. This transition occurred a number of years before the first mature neoplastic canvas was painted, in 1921.

Neo-plasticism and rhythm are the products of the dialectic between nature and artifice, and constitute a dialogue between them. When one aspect is emphasized over another, the suppressed aspect expresses its existence. Mondrian recollected his formative years of Neo-plasticism in "Toward the True Vision of Reality" (1941): "The first thing to change in my painting was the color. I forsook natural color for pure color. I had come to feel that the colors of nature cannot be reproduced on canvas. Instinctively, I felt that painting had to find a new way to express the beauty of nature" (Mondrian 1986, 338).

Nature is, on the whole, an overpowering force. For Mondrian, "the natural appearance of things is too capricious and attracts too much attention for relation-

---

Bois' view that 'non-repetition' is a key concept in Mondrian's concept of rhythm is aligned with one put forward in this essay, in addition to 'non-sequentiality': a key concept, non-repetition and non-sequentiality, is described by Bois. However, while Bois does describe the concepts, he does not clearly investigate these two key elements distinctly (and does not touch on non-sequentiality in his writings) in Mondrian's visual rhythm. Also, Bois does not investigate the difference between 'naturalistic' rhythm and 'internalized' (or 'interiorized') rhythm; the latter denoting neoplastic and 'static' rhythm. Bois' scepticism with regard to Mondrian's 'abnormal' rhythm seems to get in the way of him elucidating the meaning of rhythm as stasis or repose, or of investigating the meaning of 'repose' itself, which is crucial to understanding Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm. In his comment that "Mondrian's theory of rhythm is a theoretical hocus-pocus" (Bois 1990, 161), Bois is aligned with other critics who do not take Mondrian's theory of rhythm before the Boogie Woogie paintings seriously.

[8] Mondrian, 'A folder of Notes (ca. 1938–44)', in *New Art*, 385.

ship to be expressed *determinately*" (Mondrian 1986, 45). Humanity is helpless in the face of the overwhelming power and dynamic transformation of Nature, a view Mondrian acquired through his experiences as an established landscape painter in the very early years of his career as a painter, from 1890 to 1911. Mondrian's task, then, was to create an *equivalence* between humanity and nature. He stated in 1926:

> The new composition is based upon *permanent, contrary, and neutralizing oppositions.* Line is *straight* and is always placed in its two principal opposite positions, which form *the right angle,* the plastic expression of the constant. And the relationships of dimension are always based upon this principal relationship of position. In this way the new plastic is an "equivalent" of nature, and the work of art no longer visually resembles natural appearance (Mondrian 1986, 204).

Early mature Neo-plasticism between 1921 and 1932 is a characterised by the struggle to concretize 'static rhythm' (or rhythm as schema), reinforcing artificiality and stasis against natural and ocular dynamism. In the early neoplastic doctrine (1919–1932) stasis is the unshakable 'absolute' order. The destiny of Neo-plasticism is its ongoing dialectical trajectory: an ever-changing progression towards pure expression. Mondrian, borrowing Bergsonian terminology, states in 1939–41: "We feel the complete life that art establishes as the pure expression of life (*élan vital*). We see this life in art as dynamic movement-in-equilibrium" (Mondrian 1986, 321).[9] In 1934, Mondrian termed his new development "dynamic equilibrium." This alludes to dynamic movement and thereby represents a complete change from his early neoplastic theory of rhythm: rhythm as stasis.

Mondrian admits that even in his last canvas *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1943–44), while realization of rhythm is brought "nearer", it was necessary to continue with the endeavour. It is important to consider how Mondrian had "struggled" to concretize his ideas of "dynamic movement", and to acknowledge the extent to which his work had progressed from the early neoplastic paintings at the beginning of the 1920s. If certain other passages in Mondrian's writings are also taken into account, then his theory of rhythm will appear not to have been confined to the 'subjective' entity of painterly composition.

---

[9] Whether Mondrian himself read Bergson or not is uncertain, and as Michel Seuphor writes:

I don't believe that he ever read Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, but in the little book by Krishnamurti …, noting that he kept it until his death, I find this echo of Bergsonism, dressed up in religious phrases: "The religion of a man and the race to which he belongs are things without importance; what is really important is to know God's plan with respect to man. Now God has a plan, and this plan is evolution. Once man has understood this plan and really knows it, he cannot help but work for its realization, identifying himself with it. Such is his glory and his beauty. Because he knows he is on the side of God, he can give himself utterly to the good, resisting evil, working for progress and not for his own interests." And the following could serve as an epigraph for Mondrian's whole life: "Be a force for evolution!" (Seuphor 1956, 177).

However, Mondrian did use the French term "*élan vital*" in his essay "Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life (1939–40) as we see immediately below in this Chapter.

The term "élan vital" had become something of a slogan among artists and writers around the early part of the twentieth century, although the original Bergsonian meaning of the term may have come from van Doesburg. Nelly van Doesburg mentioned Bergson as being among van Doesburg's reading list in her memoir of her husband (Van Doesburg 1971, 72).

Bois states: "It wasn't until 1927—not coincidentally in connection with jazz – that rhythm was given a positive value" (Bois 1990, 161). Here Bois contends that rhythm was given "a positive value" only after 1927 and implies Mondrian's connection to a specific music: jazz. If we interpret 'positive value' as meaning an initial (but still latent) instance of a tangible realization of rhythm onto the canvas then we can agree with Bois' observation, since the year 1927 marks the ascension of the role of the straight line over that of the colour plates. Bois states:

> Not limited or formal, the "free rhythm" of jazz is universal, not particular. By a kind of theoretical hocus-pocus, which is more common than we would generally believe, Mondrian dissociated rhythm from repetition, which remained "individual" (the oppression of the machine or biological limitation) (Bois 1990, 161).

Rather, the notion that Mondrian's theorising of rhythm with a more 'positive value' was "theoretical 'hocus-pocus'", as Bois proposes, can be challenged: evidence would suggest that rhythm was given a more 'positive value' well before 1927. For, as we have seen, 'non-repetition' had been a fundamental trait of Mondrian's relatively early conception of rhythm, as our analysis of *The New Plastic in Painting* of 1917 has shown. Bois' comment is understandable for two reasons though: Mondrian's enthusiasm in applying the 'newly' discovered theory of rhythm from contemporary European music to his own interpretation; and the intrinsic ambiguity of the definition of rhythm.

Blotkamp obviously recognizes the importance of Mondrian's theory of rhythm, but does not investigate fully the crucial element of rhythm in Mondrian's paintings over the whole of Mondrian's life as a painter. In his book Mondrian: *The Art of Destruction*, when describing *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, Blotkamp only once offers a positive evaluation of rhythm on canvas: "That function has been appropriated by the tiny dots of colour that lend rhythm to the surface of the painting" (Blotkamp 1994, 240). Unfortunately, Blotkamp does not go further in explaining the rhythm on the surface of the early mature neoplastic canvases in the 1920s.

Yet these observations of the sense of rhythm (Bois, Blotkamp and others) fail to portray the seriousness of Mondrian's struggle to introduce 'expressive form' into 'static rhythm'. It is true, in Aristoxenus'[10] words, that "if you cannot feel rhythm, there is no rhythm." However, we should not ignore the more difficult path, in which 'static' visual rhythm becomes observable through understanding and perception. In this way it is possible to overcome the somewhat limited conception of dynamic rhythm, which endows it with a familiar and conventional understanding: that is, in which rhythm is thought to be generated by repetition and flickering effects. The commonplace tone in this observation of rhythm is echoed in the writing of Clement

[10]Aristoxenus of Taras, a leading disciple of Aristotle, is purported to have written over four hundred books, of which only three on the Elements of Harmony and part of Book II of his Elementa Rhythmica have survived. There are numerous references to his other works, and later scholars refer to Aristoxenus's interpretation of rhythm, which seems to include the missing volume I. Elementa Rhythmica was published in English translation only in 1990 (Pearson 1990). We will discuss Aristoxenus's definition of rhythm in Chap. 5.

Greenberg.[11] In a "Review of Mondrian's *New York Boogie Woogie* and Other New Acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art", Greenberg says:

> The checkered lines of orange squares produce a staccato rhythm – signifying jazz – too easily contained by the square pattern and white ground of the picture. At hardly any point does the rhythm threaten to break out of and unbalance this pattern enough to justify the latter's final triumph (Greenberg 1986, 153).

This partial and somewhat shallow observation was in error, as Greenberg was compelled to acknowledge himself a week later:

> My memory played tricks when I discussed last week the new Mondrian at the Museum of Modern Art. The painting has no orange, purple, or impure colors. Seeing it again, I discovered that … But I have the feeling that this after-effect legitimately belongs to one's first sight of the painting. The picture improves tremendously on a second view, and perhaps after an aging of six months or so it will seem completely successful (Greenberg 1986, 154).[12]

It is notable that Greenberg noticed the rhythm most prominently on the yellow belts, in the "tiny dots of colour", and that this rhythmic effect was perceived to expand across the entire surface of the painting. But these observations fail to consider that Mondrian repeatedly referred to rhythm as 'non-repetitive, non-time'.

The lack of serious attention to Mondrian's 1920s and 1930s theory of rhythm hinges on his extraordinary type of rhythm: rhythm as stasis or schema, or static rhythm. We will investigate 'static rhythm' in Mondrian's work further, in comparison with Futurists, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Duchamp, who were all interested in the 'becoming' sense of time and a simultaneous vision of movement, but offered very different understandings to that of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism.

Certain aspects of Mondrian's thinking inevitably conflict with what might be called a commonsense understanding of rhythm, generally conceived as having some connection to movement, flow, repetition, duration, and sequence. For example, a definition in 'ordinary language' of rhythm is provided by the seventh edition of *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English*:

> [A] measured flow of words and phrases in verse or prose determined by various relations of long and short or accented and unaccented syllables; aspect of musical composition concerned with periodical accent and the duration of notes; movement with regular succession of strong and weak elements; regularly recurring sequence of events.

---

[11] Greenberg had met Mondrian in the 1940s. At that time Greenberg was a writer responsible for *The New York Times* art column.

[12] On this correction Bois conjectures the background which might have brought Greenberg to perceive the painting incorrectly. He points out, interestingly, the different lighting effects on the canvas in Mondrian's studio and the Museum of Modern Art respectively. He cites Holty's comment: "Mondrian complained of the radiance of the yellow in *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* when he saw the painting hanging in the Museum of Modern Art." Bois points out that this radiant yellow produced an optical mixing; turning the tone of adjacent white fields into yellowishness by reflection. This optical mixing, in Bois's contention, might have been a factor in Greenberg's erroneous observation (Bois 1990, 175–6).

Another example from the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* describes rhythm as 'a regular movement': "She was lulled to sleep by the gentle rhythm of the boat in the water." When viewing a pre-New York period Mondrian with a title pertaining to 'rhythm', such as *Fox Trot A* (1930) (Fig. 1.4) or *Composition B, with Double Line and Yellow and Grey* (Fig. 2.1), we may be justified in questioning the nature of this rhythm: *If* Mondrian's painting is to yield an element of rhythm, *how* is it that these 'static' geometrical paintings, terms which Mondrian had at times applied to his work, 'move', 'flow', 'oscillate' or recur?

Susceptible, we might say, to conventional definitions of rhythm, are viewers perhaps oblivious to the 'ambivalent' static rhythm of a Mondrian? Do these works thereby mislead the viewer, who is perhaps simply unprepared to perceive Mondrian's stated intention to reveal the rhythmic potentialities of seemingly static paintings? It will be argued here, though, that Mondrian's painting is predisposed to provoke the viewer to challenge 'naturalistic' assumptions about rhythm and its representations: conventional representations which, according to Mondrian, adhered to a regular sequentialflow of time, matter, and 'individuality' (Mondrian 1986, 218–21).

Mondrian was aware of the difficulty for the viewer who maintains a 'naturalistic' attitude toward art – and rhythm in particular – in recognizing in these early neoplastic paintings an essence of visual rhythm, which he suspected would be obscured by the dualism of his particular Hegelian 'dialectic'. In 1941 Mondrian wrote retrospectively, "Abstract Art is in opposition with our natural vision of nature" (Mondrian 1986, 331). He laments as early as 1921, just after the mature style neoplastic paintings emerged, that:

> [T]he multitude recognize inwardness only in its most outward and basically "animal" form. They appreciate art only when it is cloaked in the natural. They understand nothing of "interiorized" outwardness and "exteriorized" inwardness. Only through this unity-in-duality are mature individuality and conscious universality expressed (Mondrian 1986, 153).

In Mondrian's own perceptions of rhythm, 'non-repetitiveness' and 'non-sequentiality' are not contradictory terms. Moreover, the idea of rhythm as a 'form of energy' is self-evident to Mondrian, making it all the more difficult to determine any absolutes in interpretation of his work. In the next section we will look at Mondrian's somewhat idiosyncratic treatment of rhythm through a close analysis of his writings, especially "The New Plastic in Painting." I will examine how he conceived this contentious notion, and explore some of its seeming contradictions. For example, what is the meaning of rhythm, which is at once the dynamic element, yet is expressed in 'stasis'? In a process where the 'subjective' is to be annihilated in order that the 'objective' be fortified, how is it that rhythm retains its function as the dynamic element when it is regarded as the subjective entity – and thus restricted to operating within the 'subjective' that has to be annihilated. In this view of Mondrian's dialectic, the understanding of 'rest' or 'repose', which is normally taken as the opposition to rhythm and movement, opens up the deeper comprehension of early neoplastic rhythm on its own terms. For 'rest' or 'repose' in Neo-plasticism is, against our familiar sense, not the oppositional element to neoplastic rhythm, but

composes the complex double-dialectical pair: naturalistic rhythm and ordinary 'rest', and neoplastic rhythm and neoplastic 'rest'.

2.3 The Concept of 'Rest' in Neo-plasticism

An understanding of Mondrian's concept of 'rest' is important in appreciating his work. Mondrian wrote in his brief sketch *Les Grands Boulevards* (1920): "He who creates motion also creates rest. What is brought to rest aesthetically is art. Rest is necessity, art is necessity. Hence dilettantism, movement is a necessity. Hence the boulevard and art too" (Mondrian 1986, 127). For dilettantism (which for Neo-plasticism is akin to Philistinism), expressed movement is necessary, but for Mondrian and Neo-plasticism "rest is necessity", and aesthetical treatment of rest is art. Michel Seuphor identifies the origins of Mondrian's repose:

> In a diagram in his notebooks [1912–14], Mondrian explains that the line to the horizon symbolizes *repose*, that the alignments of black piles, forming irregular horizontals "are not in repose, but indicate the direction of repose." This direction is a continuation of the line to the horizon and gives, by means of the right angle obtained, the complete repose of the image, that is to say, "the masculine and the feminine, the spiritual and the material element, forming the unity of the whole (Seuphor 1956, 120).

Rhythm is deemed naturalistic because repetition is factored into it. What is significant above, is that Mondrian has treated rhythm in terms of its function within the property of 'subjectivity', while "the inward rhythm", opposed to 'naturalistic' rhythm, is a factor in the pursuit of "*rest*" without the factor of repetition. Rest (or repose) is not attained by horizontal lines (while vertical lines indicate its direction), but in relation to the opposition which the right angle constitutes. Mondrian's affiliation with the Theosophical doctrine of dualism (femininity and masculinity) is inscribed here too. One could even go further and suggest that Mondrian's ideas become more consistent when seen through the filter of the theosophical notion of duality. However, as a practical painter, Mondrian saw 'repose' as something which went beyond mysticism, and saw it, instead, as an *event* on the canvas. Here repose becomes 'neoplastic' repose, which is attained through the equilibrated tension of oppositional conflict.

In his first essay "The New Plastic in Painting," Mondrian had defined 'rest' as "Starting from the nonvisible, from the inward," suggesting that "*expansion* is expressed by a (new) spatial expression; *rest,* by equilibrated movement." For Mondrian, "rest" is by no means a "null" moment. Rather, it is an expressive entity in space and a point of the equilibrated expansion which arises from the opposition between the horizontal and vertical line. 'Rest' in Mondrian's thinking is a nonvisible energy, which resides in the dialectical conflict between two extreme opposites. Thus, 'rest' is definable as "the opposite of movement":

> [Rest] is perfectly equilibrated movement and is therefore expressed by equilibrated movement: *unity of movement and countermovement.* This unity of movement interiorizes the plastic expression of art. It attains exact expression in abstract-real painting through the

> unchangeable duality of rectangularopposition and a more inward rhythm …. Movement and countermovement in music are formed by melody and rhythmic division (tempo) and in modern dance by the music's rhythm and the dance rhythm (steps) (Mondrian 1986, 46–7).

Mondrian's definition of 'rest' may at first seem nonsensical, since 'rest' is an aspect of movement ("perfectly equilibrated movement"). However, once examined in a dialectical way, it is a perfectly valid definition. This is especially the case when we refer to Hindu music (rhythm as equilibrated point – see Chap. 1), to the unity of *arsis/thesis* in the Aristoxenusian sense, and to group theory in contemporary music, where, in dealing with composition or the structure of music itself, a voluntary listener can generate arbitrary rhythm. Mondrian's Hegelian dialectic also comes to mind here, in which "objectivity develops within subjectivity": thus it is understandable that 'rest' is part of 'movement' or even 'speed', and is to be disassociated from any notion of 'dead' rest. 'Dead rest', according to Mondrian, presupposes naturalistic 'rest', through which the individual 'voice' can enter. Rest is the perfection of the event of two oppositional elements or moments, the point when or where movement is equilibrated, and speed is abruptly interrupted. Rest is by no means the lowest point in such an event, but rather, its apogee. The fundamental aim of early neoplastic painting is 'stasis', and establishing 'rest' as synonymous with 'stasis'.

In the citation above, a further understanding of Mondrian's rhythm emerges. Mondrian proposes a binary opposition between "music's rhythm" and "dance rhythm (steps)." Prior to this particular binary relation, he alludes to another binary set, concerning "melody" against "rhythmic division (tempo)." In Mondrian's theory of rhythm, melody is a natural element to be annihilated, in order that "tempo" can be aligned to speed (and abrupt stop), and to the voluntary participation ("counter movement") of the dancer. "Music's rhythm", then, is a naturalistic element when opposed to 'dance's rhythm' which manifests in terms of a dancer's response to music's rhythm (with steps). For Mondrian, neoplastic rhythm is analogous to a dancer's voluntary steps at variable speeds, which annihilate the naturalistic rhythm that derives from music (and melody). This is the neoplastic internalisation of rhythm.

In a later part of *The New Plastic in Painting*, Mondrian explains the function of space and colour from the point of view of 'movement'. As I argue, Mondrian defines movement according to what he sees as its function within neoplastic painting, in which it manifests as 'equilibrated movement'. Its role, paradoxically, is the attainment of 'rest':

> Starting from the visible: *space* is expressed in the new plastic not by naturalistic plastic but by the (abstract) plastic of the plane; *movement* is expressed by movement and countermovement in one[b]; *naturalistic color* is expressed by plane, determinate color; and the *capriciously curved* line by the straight line. Thus the relative finds plastic expression through the *determinate* (a direct exteriorizing of the absolute). Starting from the nonvisible, from the inward: *expansion* is expressed by a (new) spatial expression; *rest,* by equilibrated movement; *light*, by pure planar color. Thus in the new plastic, the *absolute* is manifested through the *relative* (in the composition and the universal plastic means).

> [b]*Rest,* the opposite of movement, is perfectly equilibrated movement and is therefore expressed by equilibrated movement: *unity of movement and countermovement.* This unity of movement interiorizes the plastic expression of art. It attains exact expression in abstract-real painting through the unchangeable duality of rectangularopposition and a more inward rhythm (Mondrian 1986, 46–7).

"Equilibrated movement", then, is movement expressed by "movement and countermovement in one." "*Rest*", which Mondrian asserts as the "opposite of movement" is described as "perfectly equilibrated movement." This unity "*of movement and countermovement*" is attained by the interiorized plastic expression of art – "a more inward rhythm." This 'repose' is not naturalistic repose, but neoplastic repose. This concept of neoplastic repose is also a key term for understanding Mondrian's persistent engagement with 'relationships'. He wrote in 1919 in the first installment of the *De Stijl* essay, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality", again using the device of a fictional, constructed 'trialogue' to explain his own ideas. Here, Z (An Abstract-Real Painter) says to X (A Naturalistic Painter):

> You *emphasize* tone and color, whereas I emphasize what these express – repose. But we are all *trying to do the same thing.* Repose *becomes plastically visible* through the *harmony of relationships*, and indeed, that is why I emphasize the *expression of relationships* (Mondrian 1986, 84).

Neoplastic repose is thus a meta-pictorial factor. It does not exist as such in the image, but is brought about by the operation of relations, and so is a fundamental principle of Neo-plasticism. Repose is also very important for this investigation of 'static' visual rhythm in the early mature neoplastic paintings of Mondrian.

The notion of 'rest' or 'repose' changes dramatically after 1930, as Mondrian gradually begins to emphasise the dynamic function of equilibrium (dynamic equilibrium). Up until this point, rest or repose derive from equilibrated movement, a "unity of movement and countermovement." Moreover, rhythm is similarly tied to its function in attaining *rest*, but neoplastic rest: that is, a highly tensioned stasis. However, in "Realist and Surrealist Art: Morphoplastic and neoplastic" (1930) Mondrian wrote:

> This equilibrium is clearly not that of an old gentleman in an armchair or of two equal sacks of potatoes on the scales. On the contrary, equilibrium through equivalence excludes similarity and symmetry, just as it excludes repose in the sense of immobility (Mondrian 1986, 229).

Equilibrium is not a parity of balance, nor is it a point of peaceful repose, suggesting the low energy of relaxation. Rather, it is akin to a brief moment of respite in mid-battle. This repose containing hyper-energy is a trait associated with the earlier mature neoplastic canvases of 1920 to 1932. However, the emphasis on repose in the earlier canvases gradually diminished, with the emergence of the term "dynamic equilibrium."

The transition in Mondrian's exegesis on rhythm can be more or less represented as mirroring the transition in his work from the earlier Neo-plasticism to the New York period. It is embodied also in the shift in his conception of rhythm: that is, from an earlier definition – *rhythm as something that remains in a state of stasis* or

static energy, where rhythm is a property of the subjective terrain ("inward rhythm") – to the latter definition – *rhythm as something that is a form of kinetic energy*. Here, rhythm becomes a force which effects equivalence between subjective and objective ("universal rhythm").

Mondrian explains two types of 'equilibrium' in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney in 1943, concerning the following terms: "1. static balance; 2. dynamic equilibrium" (Mondrian 1986, 356–7) Mondrian goes on to explain the importance of the latter, "dynamic equilibrium":

> The great struggle for artists is the annihilation of static equilibrium in their paintings through continuous oppositions (contrasts) among the means of expression. It is always natural for human beings to seek static balance. This balance of course is necessary to existence in time. But vitality in the continual succession of time always destroys this balance. Abstract art is a concrete expression of such a vitality (Mondrian 1986, 357).

It is worth recalling that one cannot take the term 'annihilation' at face value. Both the earlier expression of 'rest' and later expression of 'dynamic equilibrium' have vitality, but there is a marked difference in manifestation of vitality in each case. The difference resides in the introduction of time in the later stage of Neo-plasticism; the factor of 'time' was a negative factor in earlier Neo-plasticism. However, once introduced, the factor of 'time' – or in my terminology 'metre' – brings about a change in the function of rest: formerly, rest was characterised in terms of highly tensioned equilibrated points, akin to the accumulation of enormous energy prior to a volcano's eruption. In Mondrian's later neoplastic work, however, this energy is not contained, but allowed to be expressed.

The development of the theory of neoplastic rhythm is equivalent to the process of 'destruction' of naturalistic elements, brought about by the specific function of 'annihilation' in Mondrian's thought. The concept of repose and its transformation through Mondrian's neoplastic period in terms of the meaning of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' is developed in the discussions below.

2.4 Rhythm as the 'Subjective' Entity

In his Introduction to *The New Plastic in Painting* (1917) Mondrian had attempted to expound his idea of rhythm, stating:

> *Composition* leaves the artist the greatest possible freedom to be subjective – to whatever extent this is necessary. The *rhythm* of the relationship of color and dimension (in determinate *proportion* and *equilibrium*) permits the absolute to appear within the relativity of time and space.
>
> Thus the new plastic is dualistic through its composition. Through its exact plastic expression of cosmic relationship it is a direct expression of the universal; through its rhythm, through its material reality, it is an expression of the subjective, of the individual.
>
> In this way it unfolds a world of *universal* beauty without relinquishing the "universally human" (Mondrian 1986, 31).

The proposition that rhythm is a 'subjective' or 'individual' entity, for instance, which on first encounter resists comprehension, becomes intelligible when the last sentence of this particular passage is closely inspected. Categorizing rhythm as a property of the 'subjective' is a means for Mondrian to prevent humanity (the "universally human") from being relinquished in the drift toward a preference for the objective (the "universal"), which is literally anti-natural, anti-human, and pro-scientific, in terms of cosmic relations. In Mondrian's thinking, it is through the operation of equilibrium that this objective would be realized; although we should recall that in this earlier stage of Neo-plasticism the ultimate goal of equilibrium is to bring about *stasis,* whereas in his later writings, especially after 1934, he posits that the goal of equilibrium is overt dynamism. Universal beauty, for Mondrian, can be attained only through subjectivity by way of the function of rhythm and equilibrium. The goal of Universal beauty is stasis with hyper energy. Rhythm in 'subjectivity' is associated with Mondrian's earlier writings. For further investigation of the concept of rhythm in both the earlier and later writings, however, the relation between 'composition' and rhythm is crucial.

During the early phase of his Neo-plasticism, the fundamental importance of 'composition' was established. For Mondrian, 'composition' "has always been fundamental to painting, all modern painting has been distinguished by a *new way* of being concerned with it" (Mondrian 1986, 39). This would grant a degree of autonomy to abstract art, thereby confirming its departure from nature-referential art. In order to establish a link to and thus contextualise Cubism, Mondrian emphasized the necessity of the advent of 'abstract-real'[13] painting that would, he believed, take painting further than Cubism had already done on an international scale. In effect, in his interpretation of the 'larger picture' of art at the time, Cubism would inevitably evolve into abstract-real painting. In *The New Plastic in Painting* he states:

> In modern art, especially in Cubism, composition comes to the forefront and finally, in consequence, abstract-real painting expresses *composition itself*. While in the art of the past, composition becomes *real* only if we abstract the representation, in abstract-real painting composition is directly visible because it has truly *abstract* plastic means (Mondrian 1986, 39).

Subsequently, Mondrian is regarding rhythm as a property of composition, when he continues on from here to state: "Through this plastic *expression* of composition, the *rhythm*, the *proportion*, and the *equilibrium* (which replaces regularity or symmetry) can be perceived clearly" (Mondrian 1986, 39). In a subsequent passage in *The New Plastic in Painting*, he makes it clear again that rhythm will be brought to our perception through "his plastic *expression* of composition." At this point rhythm

[13] Strictly speaking, the term 'abstract' is not fully appropriate to Mondrian's painting because as stated in his article "The New Plastic in Painting" in 1917: "The new plastic is *abstract-real* because it stands between the absolute-abstract and the natural or concrete-real" (Mondrian 1986, 35–6). However, Mondrian himself, perhaps for convenience, often uses "abstract" instead of "abstract-real". In his last published essay, "A New Realism" (1942–43), he succinctly defined it thus: "[A]bstraction means reducing particularities to their essential aspect" (Mondrian 1986, 345).

is expressed through composition and makes composition real, rather than operating as an autonomous entity independent of composition. Theoretically, the autonomous status of rhythm was implicit after 1927, although it did become a more visually apparent, perceptual entity after the 'double-line' period after 1932. This development is problematic in terms of the neoplastic principle, since it brings with it the introduction of the naturalistic elements, repetition and sequentiality. Mondrian continues in the same article in 1917:

> If beauty is truth (the universal) subjectively apprehended, then beauty must always express the tragic. And if truth (as universal) is objective – then truth must be free of the tragic. *Although in the new plastic subjective vision is reduced to a minimum,* it nevertheless remains subjective and still must express *something* of the tragic. It does this through the rhythm of the composition (Mondrian 1986, 53).

In Mondrian's definition, 'subjectivity' is aligned with the individual ego, with nature and the inward and with humanity, while 'objectivity' is aligned with the universal, the outward, the cosmic, and with science. In the context of Mondrian's thinking here the 'subjective' is given (in his application of Hegelian dialectics) a positive sense in spite of the way in which the doctrine of Neo-plasticism clearly prioritizes 'objectivity'. The dualistic relationship between the 'subjective' and the 'objective', though, is not a simple oppositional one: for 'objectivity' is conceived within and fostered by the 'subjective' – wherein 'subjectivity' must ultimately be annihilated. Yet it is only through the individual (an adjunct of 'the subjective') that the 'universal' (an adjunct of 'the objective') can be attained: that is, through "the rhythm of the composition", or through equilibrated relationships.

It is for this reason that in Mondrian's thinking the rhythm of composition still expresses a sense of the tragic, which is inherently human and to be annihilated through objectification. Such convolution is a condition of the Hegelian dialectics which underlies Mondrian's thinking, as noted in the Introduction. In the same article Mondrian wrote:

> The subjectivity of the universal is *relative* – even in art. A great *heightening* of subjectivity is taking place in man (evolution) – in other words a *growing, expanding consciousness.* Subjectivity remains subjective, but it diminishes in the measure that objectivity (the universal) grows in the individual. Subjectivity ceases to exist only when the mutation like [sic] leap is made from subjectivity to objectivity, from individual existence to universal existence; but before this can happen there *must be a difference in the degree of subjectivity.…*
>
> Subjectivation of the universal – the work of art – can express the consciousness of an age either in its relationship to *the universal,* or its relationship to *daily life*, to the *individual* (Mondrian 1986, 41–2).

At this point in his thinking in 1917, Mondrian considers art to be in a state of transition toward universal spirituality: the artist remains in the realm of the subjective, within humanity – the one element which cannot be abolished in the effort to equilibrate between the subjective and the universal (the objective).

In later stages of early mature Neo-plasticism, rhythm becomes the force or manifest energy which vitalizes this need to equilibrate between the subjective and the universal. But in Mondrian's early Neo-plasticism, rhythm, while being confined to

the property of the subjective and 'humanity' (and in a sense, mixed with the notion of 'naturalistic' and 'inward' or 'artificial' rhythm), also functions as the force for animating the dynamics of opposition between the elements of composition – "color and dimension" – and between the particular and the universal within the property of the 'subjective'.

These developments of the neoplastic operation, which Mondrian termed its 'evolution', hinge upon the transition of the concept of rhythm, and the limitations of its activation as a 'force' on canvas. What precisely, then, was Mondrian's new discovery of rhythm in 1919?

2.5 New Understanding of Rhythm 1919: Rhythm Versus Harmony

Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg in 1919:

> I read this article [the Trialogue] to you before, but I've changed and modified so much since then that it is now too long. I'm sending you the first half now, and the second half will follow at the end of the month. I believe I have thought up some nice things, such as the bit about *rhythm, which I had not treated that way before* [emphasis added] (Henkels 1987, 202).

Mondrian's famous "Trialogue – Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)" was published in *De Stijl* magazine in thirteen installments,[14] from June 1919 through July 1920. What is special about this single, lengthy article – to which Mondrian is referring in the letter to van Doesburg above (April 18th 1919) – is that it was written as a series of essays over a period of about a year. Since it was Mondrian's habit to conduct last-minute revisions of his essays before publication, we can assume that any new ideas that emerged would have been inserted into these installments as each was about to go to press.

There is a point to be made here concerning timing. It is significant in the way it throws light on the relationship between transitions in Mondrian's practical work and those in his development of a theory of rhythm. If given due consideration, its timing will indicate that an important transition in Mondrian's treatment of rhythm occurred during his writing of the "Trialogue". This 'new' treatment of rhythm, in my view, sheds light on Mondrian's affirmative step towards neoplastic rhythm as *schema* or stasis.

After the "Trialogue" it was some months before the next 'scholarly' work appeared,[15] this being the publication of the first neoplastic essay, ("The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence") in early 1920. Mondrian had written to van

[14] Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James mention 'twelve installments' but there were in fact thirteen installments if one actually counts them in the original text (Mondrian 1986, 82).

[15] There were the *Two Paris Sketches* of 1920, but these are works of an experimental or literary kind, rather than 'scholarly' essays concerning theories of art.

Doesburg, several months later, in August 1919 that he had 'thought up some nice things … about rhythm': even if he had written most of "A Trialogue" before August, there is good reason to speculate that Mondrian inserted these new ideas ("nice things") about rhythm into a later part of "A Trialogue" (Mondrian 1986, 83). This means that there had been a revisal in Mondrian's ideas about rhythm sometime in 1919, between commencing and concluding "A Trialogue." If so, what was it at this point in 1919, that Mondrian had newly determined concerning rhythm?

While he does not specify as much in the 1919 letter, Mondrian's comment to van Doesburg, together with evidence that can be drawn from the text of "A Trialogue" itself, suggests a correlation between the "nice things" and the shift toward a 'positive value' – which Bois had attributed to Mondrian's rhythm only after 1927. In "A Trialogue" (1919–20) Mondrian wrote:

> Z [*An Abstract-Real Painter*]. Through multiplicity [for example the starry sky], *rhythm* also arises [as well as harmony]. This is the *plastic expression* of life, as it were, for us men; it *merges all particularity into unity*, as X [*A Naturalistic Painter*] will agree. The multiplicity of particularities creates *natural* rhythm, however, which *to some extent destroys the capriciousness of individual things,* while the multiplication of the primary relationship creates a more *inward* rhythm that in turn *destroys the absoluteness of this primary relationship*. This difference separates the old plastic from the new: the task of naturalistic painting was *to accentuate the rhythm of the plastic*; while the new art precisely serves to *destroy naturalistic rhythm as far as possible.* In the New Plastic, rhythm, even though interiorized, continues to exist; it is, moreover, varied through the inequality of the relationships of dimension by which the relationship of position, the primordial relationship, is expressed. This permits it to *remain a living reality for man* (Mondrian 1986, 90).

By comparing the above treatment of rhythm to the way in which rhythm is described in 1917, it is possible to determine what had been modified in the treatment of rhythm over that two year period: in 1917, in "The New Plastic in Painting", rhythm was the property of the subjective (or the individual), as Mondrian states: "Through its rhythm, through its material reality, it is an expression of the subjective, of the individual." In the same 1917 article, he expressed the same idea of rhythm, but in a subtly different way:

> The composition expresses the subjective, the individual, through rhythm – which is formed by the relationships of color and dimensions, even though these are mutually opposed and neutralized (Mondrian 1986, 39).

What the 1917 essay emphasizes, is that rhythm is the implicit expression of the absolute through compositional relationships – but this is still something that occurs within the subjective: rhythm makes subjectivisation possible through its becoming inward (Mondrian 1986, 39 n.x). However, in the "Trialogue" of 1919–1920, Mondrian states that rhythm can emerge through multiplicity as well as harmony.

The term 'harmony' was frequently used in reference to both naturalistic and neo-plastic implications, for example "naturalharmony" ("The New Plastic in Painting", 1917), "new harmony" ("Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence", 1920), and even "disharmony" ("Down with Traditional Harmony", 1924). However, to avoid misunderstanding, 'harmony' gradually ceased to have an important meaning compared to 'equilibrium': "When we speak

of "harmony," we do not mean anything like traditional harmony. Everything that for us springs from the new spirit – and is therefore of the future – appears rather as disharmony to conservative feeling, even though it is pure equilibrium." ("Purely Abstract Art", 1926) "That is why the new aesthetic speaks of 'equilibrium' instead of harmony." ("The New Art – The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships", 1931). At this stage of early Neo-plasticism, however, the significance of harmony cannot be ignored. In *The New Plastic in Painting* (1917) harmony was assigned a special position over rhythm, proportion, and equilibrium. In the article Mondrian says:

> Through this plastic *expression* of composition, the *rhythm,* the *proportion,* and the *equilibrium* (which replaces regularity or symmetry) can be perceived clearly. The exactness with which the new plastic expresses these laws of harmony allows it to achieve the greatest possible inwardness.

"The rhythm, the proportion, and the equilibrium" were thus components of the 'laws of harmony' in Mondrian's thinking at this time. In Mondrian's Hegelian-based dialectic, harmony also played a major role. Tim Threlfall says, "For Hegel the Greek concept of harmony through a unity of the objective and the subjective became the major premise of his philosophic thought" (Threlfall 1988, 290).

Thus, at this point in 1919, what Mondrian had newly determined concerning rhythm was that rhythm assumes a role on the same level of magnitude as that of harmony. The most significant revision in Mondrian's thinking that gave rhythm its more positive role as early as 1919 occurs where, for Mondrian, it becomes "a more *inward* rhythm that in turn *destroys the absoluteness of this primary relationship*" (Mondrian 1986, 90). Here rhythm is given the force of annihilation (destruction) – which is rhythm in a nascent stage of its manifest expression – and is emancipated from its role as a function of an oppositional relationship. Hence, "[i]n the New Plastic, rhythm, even though interiorized, continues to exist." Rhythm is no more a mere entity to be absorbed into the subjective or the individual, but rather operates as "a living reality for man." This is the birth of neoplastic rhythm.

Bois' reading gives rhythm a positive value only after 1927 (if we take his observation at face value). In contrast, my interpretation of Mondrian's work is that, alongside his theoretical revision of the notion of rhythm in 1919–20, the first positive value in rhythm should be considered to have occurred in 1920, after the two 'checkerboard' canvases of 1919. Records of Mondrian's output further attest to this. It was around this period in 1921 that eighteen early mature style neoplastic paintings appeared. The year 1920 saw an increase in output, when nine completed canvases were produced, compared with the previous year's five: here, the regular grid (typified by the Checkerboard canvases and seven 'grid' canvases [1918–19]) was discarded, to be replaced by irregular rectangles. The contrast between primary colours, as well as between square planes and lines, contributes to the annihilation

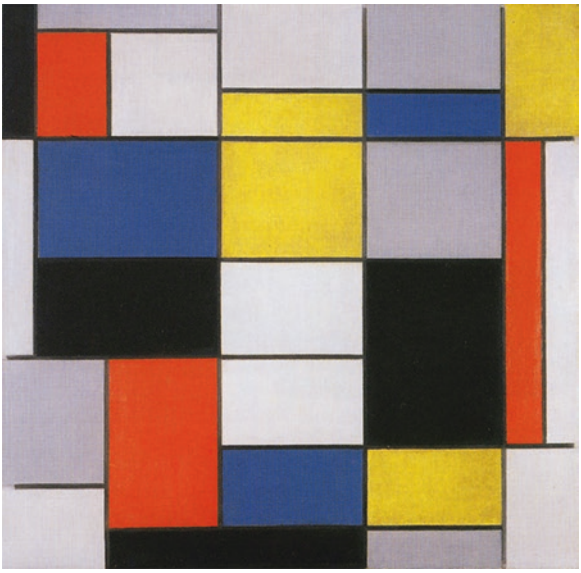


Fig. 2.2 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray*, 1920 (B 114), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

of the illusion of three dimensionality,[16] and the attainment of 'planeness' or 'flatness'. At the end of 1920, the first mature-style neoplastic canvas appeared: *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray* employs the 'black line' as an independent compositional element (Fig. 2.2).

In this first mature-style neoplastic painting, Mondrian's propensity for destruction advances without limits, until the destruction of the form itself is effected. To destroy form in painting, the role of rhythm takes on an important function for Mondrian. Rhythm is activated by the black lines and the contrasts among the primary colours. This was also the first time Mondrian applied primary colours non-attenuated by the addition of small amounts of white pigment. The productive years continued until 1923 (seventeen paintings in 1921, sixteen in 1922). Mondrian produced only two works in 1924.

[16] This interpretation is shared by Els Hoek:

> The most important aim was, as Mondrian formulated it in a letter dated September 16, 1919, to represent rhythm and proportion in a living harmony. In order to achieve this, he decided to vary the dark colors of the lines, and not to adhere to the regular division of the plane any longer. He wrote about this in a letter dated October 11, 1919; the formulation shows that he was seeking a solution to the problem in consultation with van Doesburg: "I also had already noticed that not all lines must always be equally dark. I think you are right. Now again I do not always stick to the regular division (Hoek 1986, 62).

But the extent to which this process of rhythm can be said to become a compositional element, and to operate as a function of contrast which is perceived or comprehended *as* 'rhythm', cannot yet be determined, and remains a question to be explored in Chaps. 6 and 7.

2.6 New Harmony?

There are two aspects of Mondrian's theory of Neo-plasticism that must be attended to here: the destructive (or deductive), and the constructive. In "Pure Abstract Art" (1926) he states:

> The new construction must therefore be a duality of construction and destruction. This it achieves by creating a counterconstruction that reduces naturalistic construction (Mondrian 1986, 90).

The destructive side of Neo-plasticism has been elaborated upon and emphasized by several art historians (Blotkamp 1994, 240, Greenberg 1986, 139)[17] while its counterpart, the constructive, has not been examined fully. Yet the conflict between these two 'sides' was a great problem for Mondrian, especially in his attempts to be more persuasive in elucidating his theory. We see him lament in the same article:

> How deplorable that such timeworn, conventional language must serve to express the new beauty: to describe that means and the goal of purely abstract art, we are compelled to use the same terms that we use for naturalistic art – but with what a difference in their meaning! (Mondrian 1986, 200).

The 'destructive' motivation of Neo-plasticism seeks to 'annihilate' everything 'old' and attempts to establish the 'new' art, but this process of 'destruction' or 'annihilation', as we might expect, is far from straightforward. In the "Trialogue" (1919–1920), for example, Mondrian's 'Abstract-Real Painter' states:

> Naturalistic harmony, the old harmony, is not *plastically expressed* according to the concept of *pure* equilibrated relationship. It is expressed as *relative* equilibrium. It remains dominated by the "repetition" characteristic of nature: it expresses opposition but not the *continuous annihilation of the one and the other.* That is why the New Plastic is precisely *against* the old harmony (Mondrian 1986, 114).

Mondrian regarded "repetition" as an attribute hostile to nature and as an adversary of the 'new' harmony, such that the characteristic function of the 'new' harmony is to 'annihilate' "the one and the other" in Mondrian's dialectic, and thereby express "opposition." In this context the term 'annihilation' is used in a positive or constructive sense in Theosophic-Hegelian dialectic, and pertains to the conflicting field of oppositions: it constitutes the process of the construction of objectivity (the universal or meta-human) through the destruction or sublation of subjectivity (the natural or the human). Neoplastic art, therefore, resides in the property of in-between: it does not reside in either the subjective or the objective, but is a 'force' field of destruction. Thus, the question arises: what is to be destroyed and what is to be constructed?

As the citation above suggests, the target of neoplastic destruction is "old harmony", which consists of three elements: first, conventional pictorial space (per-

[17] Clement Greenberg contends: "Mondrian … has shown us that the pictorial can remain pictorial when every trace or suggestion of the representational has been eliminated" (Greenberg 1986, 139).

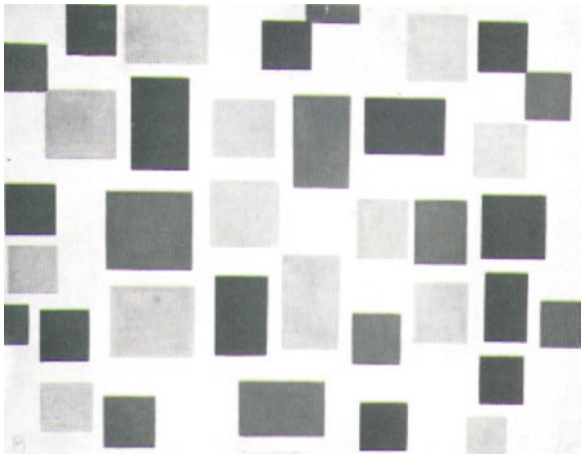


Fig. 2.3 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Color Planes 1*, 1917 (B 87), Private collection

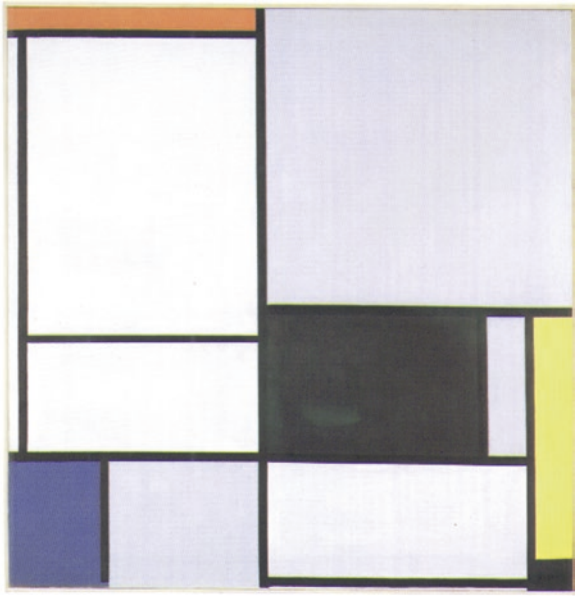


Fig. 2.4 Piet Mondrian, *Composition A: Composition with Black, Red, Gray, Yellow and Blue*, 1920 (B 105), Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea

spective, background-foreground dichotomy); second, tonal colour; third, form and contour lines. The first element relates to the beginning, or experimental phase of Neo-plasticism of around 1917. Here, Mondrian attempts to destroy conventional pictorial space through the use of irregular rectangular shapes in intuitive configurations (Fig. 2.3) – rectangular shapes possess the trait of two dimensionality according to their dominant horizontal-vertical structure – then through the use of the regular grid and then by way of rendering the black (gray) lines according to minimal adjustments of tonalities. The second element concerns the attenuation of pri-

mary colours through the addition of white: this is reversed as Mondrian instead renders them as pure primary colours and non-colours, for example, in his 1920s canvas *Composition A*: *Composition with Black, Red, Gray, Yellow and Blue* (Tosaki 1996, 40–5) (Fig. 2.4). The third element concerns form and contour lines which were destroyed by way of the adoption of black belts: the latter do not function in terms of making 'form', or, as independent elements of composition which resist the forming of rectangular families of groups, of composing repetition. Thus the first mature neoplastic canvas appears: *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue, and Gray* wrong image. These three destructions are the fundamentals of Neo-plasticism from 1917 to 1944. In Mondrian's New York phase, from 1940 to 1944 however, the black lines were segmented by the interpolation of multitudes of small squares of primary colour.

The first and third destructions cooperate with each other, in the sense that the destruction of conventional pictorial space brings about the attainment of the 'flat' surface in painting: it also presupposes the destruction of form, since if forms are recognised, the foreground-background dichotomy of pictorial space will immediately arise. Mondrian was emphatic in his assertion that the 'subjective' reading of pictorial figures must not occur, which implies that the viewer must only be confronted by the mere physical surface, of oil pigments and canvas. However, contradiction emerges here, since as long as the canvas is a painting, then there must be some sort of painterly arrangement or configuration (or in other words, 'image'), and it is this which conflicts with the notion of constituting a physical entity strictly in terms of the flat surface of the canvas. Mondrian's Neo-plasticism is aimed precisely at this *image/physical entity* conflict: Neo-plasticism is especially engaged with this conflict when it attempts to spotlight the 'image' itself (this aspect of 'image' in relation to Husserlian phenomenology will be investigated in Chap. 6), which is always accompanied by the physicality of the surface. In constituting his neoplastic method in this way, Mondrian is predisposed, both theoretically and practically, to pursue the relationship between 'image' and physicality. Thus, Mondrian can advocate the non-repetitive or non-sequential traits of his neoplastic-configurations, and emphasise the function of rhythm and composition. It is precisely on this 'image' – the flat surface of the physical canvas – that the neoplastic operation of equilibrium, or rhythm against the "old harmony" is activated.

Through this process of "destructive-constructive" (Mondrian 1986, 219), 'annihilation', reality in the "old harmony" is destroyed: in turn, the 'new' reality, or the "abstract-real" is constituted. But the abstract-real is a reality which must be understood in terms that are fundamentally at odds with the notion of reality as it is rendered according to the conventions of European pictorial space, and exemplified by Renaissance perspectivism (the difference in the concept of reality between Leonardo and Mondrian is discussed in Chap. 6).

2.7 Theory of Rhythm in Later Neo-plasticism After 1927

In "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926), Mondrian wrote about the six elements of Neo-plasticism, in which he delineates plastic means from 'composition' as we saw above. The properties of the plastic means are the rectangular plane, its primary colours (red, blue and yellow) and non colours (white, black, and gray). The function of non-colour is specific: it is the equivalent of 'empty space' in architecture. Around 1927, Mondrian's neoplastic canvases are characterised by a broad, central white area. Mondrian wrote: "Generally, equilibrium implies a large area of noncolour or empty space opposed to a comparatively small area of colour or material" (Mondrian 1986, 211, 214). Primary colours are 'materialistic', but according to neoplastic convention, yellow and blue are considered less materialistic than red.

The principal function in the realization of equilibrium is 'perpendicular opposition', which functions both in the plastic means as well as in composition. For composition, the straight line is the main expressive factor: it is the "boundary of the pure plastic means" (Mondrian 1986, 211), and is not the boundary of the shape or form. The straight line operates by way of perpendicular opposition, and in this way equilibrates the relationships among the proportions of planes. Straight lines criss-cross the planes, primary-colours, and non-colours. They even cut through the physical thickness of the layers of oil paint, reaffirming, in an unusual way, the 'flat' two dimensionality of the surface. Thus, the straight lines in Mondrian's canvasses criss-cross the plastic means to create "vital rhythm" (Mondrian 1986, 211). All this, however, must operate at the conceptual level, without infringing upon key principles of Neo-plasticism: non-repetition, non-sequentiality and asymmetry.

In his 1926 description of neoplastic principles, a shift in the importance of the role of rhythm is conspicuous: "vital rhythm" becomes a central function of the principal of perpendicular opposition, which governs both the plastic means and composition. This is, again, very different from the role of rhythm as expounded in 1919–20, when rhythm was conferred a role on a parity with harmony. The function of rhythm can be observed to be endowed gradually with a more prominent role – more so even than composition itself.

Mondrian's transition from "static equilibrium" to "dynamic equilibrium" encompasses the solving of problems concerning the difficulty in attaining the sense of movement on canvas. It is precisely as such problems are addressed and ultimately resolved that the transition manifests in his writing and painting. For Mondrian it was the 'actual world' of the canvas in which this problem of realizing rhythm, or attaining movement as 'static equilibrium' and later as 'dynamic equilibrium', was to take place. At the same time, a transition such as this runs the risk of opening up a Pandora's box of naturalistic or ostensive rhythm: akin to a conduit through which aspects such as 'repetition', 'sequence', 'flow of time', 'shape' and 'pictorial space' begin to leak, it prepares the introduction of the 'double-line' in his painting. The transition from early static rhythm to dynamic equilibrium (kinetic rhythm) constitutes a further dialectical process, this time between the liberation of vital rhythm, and the reformation of neoplastic doctrine itself.

In his writings after 1927, Mondrian began to ascribe to the role of the line greater value in its expression or realization of rhythm as movement on the canvas. The problem, and solution, here involved the issue of how to ascribe 'energy' or 'force' as factors of movement to rhythm, and to attain within this sense of rhythm the operation of movement on the canvas within the realm of the 'equilibrated' field.

Mondrian's more overt preoccupation with the role of rhythm can be seen in "Purely Abstract Art" (1926). In this essay he begins to emphasize the importance of the terms "vitality" and "energy", and we also see here the gradual introduction in his writing of the operation of 'force' which, as he conceived it, belongs to both 'subjectivity' ("within us") and 'objectivity' ("outside us") (Mondrian 1986, 199). Mondrian then contrasts nature against energy:

> Certainly, the natural is concrete, but only in contrast to energy, the abstract and invisible force. To express the latter, other plastic means are available, which may have a geometric appearance (Mondrian 1986, 200).

What is significant here is that 'energy' is situated outside of 'nature': if rhythm, as a trait intrinsic to dynamism, is connected to 'energy', which is conceptualised as the force realised 'outside us', (as the expression of a denoted message, that is, the literal expression of rhythm), then rhythm might therefore be understood, we might surmise, as residing outside of 'subjectivity'. Let us return to the passage (from "Purely Abstract Art") where Mondrian wrote:

> Besides the simplicity of the plastic means, there is also rhythm, which animates the composition and opposes the constructive elements of the plastic means. For rhythm is the individual element in the duality, opposing the plastic means, which is the universal element; just as, within the plastic means, color opposes noncolor (black-white-gray) (Mondrian 1986, 201).

Rhythm's most remarkable aspect, at this stage in 1926, is alluded to in the assertion (above) that rhythm "animates the composition and opposes the constructive elements of the plastic means." Here it seems that in Mondrian's thinking the function of rhythm has been released from working within the composition to a point where it is perceived to 'animate' the work from elsewhere; perhaps from within that arbitrary threshold between the 'subjective' and the 'objective'. And yet in Mondrian's dialectic, rhythm is, as paradoxically as ever, within the territory of 'the subjective' or 'the individual'. Mondrian's writing seems to commit a logical mistake at this point, because even if rhythm is the force which "animates the composition", inevitably it is a property *of* composition. Composition itself might not be a property of the physical canvas, nor might it be a semantic property of the painting. Nonetheless, the element of rhythm in painting cannot be conceived to occur outside of composition. Rhythm is in some sense identical with composition, or with the structure of the painting (see Chap. 5), but it is a logical contradiction to assert that rhythm, which is a property of composition, can at the same time activate the composition in the manner of a target outside itself. Rhythm as composition or as structure is a timeless condition of arrangement or configuration of pictorial elements, but when the element of time is introduced, rhythm is closer to *metre*. Thus, rhythm assumes naturalistic traits and is less engaged with the principle of rhythm as schema.

In 1930, in "Realist and Superrealist Art (Morphoplastic and neoplastic)", rhythm is given a penetrating role both within and outside of composition and dimension (and possibly, as we saw above in the 1931 essay, the 'relationships' themselves), and is clearly independent of any naturalistic traits of rhythm: repetition and sequential sense of time. Mondrian wrote:

> If it succeeds in not establishing form, it is because this free rhythm is the plastic hidden in the plastic of form. It is created independently of natural appearance through the conscious feeling of the universal equilibrium within us (Mondrian 1986, 232).

"Free rhythm" is the property of the plastic, but is hidden in the formal plastic relations, which belong to composition. Form, Mondrian contended, should disappear when a shift in aspect (or a change in dimension) occurs, from a rectangular shape to a plane (or, in our terminology, a 'field'). The shift itself is engendered by "the opposed duality of the straight line." Here, entrapped rhythm in form is partly liberated: it has not become integral to the dialectical function which occurs between rhythm and composition itself, nor between rhythm and straight lines. Here, the role of the viewer as agent is brought to our attention. Mondrian expresses the importance of the arbitrary participation of the viewer, which arises "through the conscious feeling of the universal equilibrium within us." The role of the agent, which maintains its importance throughout his entire theorization of Neo-plasticism, and which is implicitly expressed in his former writings ('internalization', 'inwardness', 'subjectivisation' with esoteric signature), becomes more palpable, and is neutrally expressed.

2.8 Theory of Rhythm in "The New Art – The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships" (1931)

In this essay Mondrian uses the definition of rhythm by Hélan Jaworsky, whose essay Mondrian had already read by 1924 (Mondrian 1986, 193). Mondrian wrote:

> By following the rhythm of the two contrary oppositions of the straight line, we can say that the real life basic to man is simply the action of equilibrated opposition—for example, the double movement of respiration, which is contrary and complementary. It is a pure expression of vital rhythm, that Dr. Jaworsky defines as a dual movement of interiorization and exteriorization, which ancient wisdom spoke of as the action of expansion and compression or limitation. What Dr. Jaworsky says about this is interesting:
>
> The two movements, interiorization and exteriorization, combine and counterbalance each other without ever becoming confused, and this perpetual rhythm, this intertwining of two contrary currents without confusion, is found everywhere (Mondrian 1986, 49).

Mondrian had written about the important relationships between interiorization and exteriorization on many occasions. For example, in the earliest essay, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), he wrote: "Properly understood, the reciprocal action of opposites, inwardness and outwardness, shows life and art as *recurring stages of*

growth on the one hand, and of decline on the other" (Mondrian 1986, 49). At this stage (1917) Mondrian did not think of rhythm as a unity of the reciprocal action of internalization and exteriorization: this was the role of composition itself. Recall that in his early neoplastic essays, rhythm is the property of internalization and subjectivity. This limited status of rhythm, as we have seen above, was radically revised in 1919–20 to the same status as harmony, and again in 1926 to the status of composition. This 1931 essay testifies to another modification (amplification) of the role of rhythm. Now rhythm is endowed with a function on a par with 'relationships' themselves, and is regarded as the goal of composition. In this sense, rhythm is identified with neoplastic composition itself, which in turn is defined as the field of force and tension of relationships between pictorial elements. Rhythm is the force of structure, where endless conflict between oppositional pictorial elements is equilibrated: that is, among straight black lines in rectangular orientation, primary colours, non-colours, physicality and non-physicality are battling, both in accord with and beyond their own oppositional field. When we recall the importance of the 'relationships' in the principles of Neo-plasticism, this modification is significant.

The concept of rhythm in terms of respiration is very interesting: along with its conceptual associations with the heartbeat, this definition is one of the most common understandings of rhythm in both the West and the East. Mondrian wrote about rhythm in terms of breathing in the essay above, stating that in an ideal world "man is entitled to live without care", a state in which "he really breathes" and:

> feels his rhythm at one with the vital rhythm everywhere and in everything. The constant, contrasting, cadenced opposition of this rhythm being equilibrated, he lives in perfect equilibrium (Mondrian 1986, 49).

Life, Mondrian states, "is basically simple." It is complexity which "needs to be perfected: simplicity is man's perfect state" (Mondrian 1986, 49). There are many theorists of rhythm who use the metaphor of respiration as well as that of the heartbeat. The importance in this investigation of Mondrian's visual rhythm is that he gradually emphasises the definition of rhythm in a more positive sense that testifies to *life*: that is, he increasingly articulates rhythm in terms of breathing. This emphasis occurs in parallel with the development in the practical manifestation of rhythm, or dynamic rhythm (or later "dynamic equilibrium"), especially after Mondrian's introduction of 'double-line' painting.

2.9 After 1932: The Introduction of Double-Lines

After 1932, in his neoplastic canvases, the balance of Mondrian's neoplastic principles starts to lean toward naturalistic and ostensive dynamism, and in this way rhythm becomes more apparent. The introduction of the 'double-line' was the beginning of the change in Mondrian's work on depicting rhythm. That single lines are replaced by double-lines indicates the introduction of the factor of time, in the sense in which Aristoxenus of Tares theorised it: the introduction of the double unit

for the expression of rhythm is echoed by Aristoxenus when he deems that two signals are necessary to compose the 'foot'. Aristoxenus wrote:

> One *chronos* cannot make a foot. That is clear enough, because a single signal (*semeion*) does not create time-division, and it seems that there cannot be a foot without division of time.
>
> It is the length of feet that make them need more than two signals (Pearson 1990, 10–13).

Further, based on the criteria of the limitation of human cognition with regard to numbers, Aristoxenus explains the reason why more than four signals are not acceptable for rhythm, acknowledging the division of 'feet' into more than four parts but that "a foot is not itself divided into more than four parts" (Pearson 1990, 13). In order for rhythm to be sensible, two 'signals' are an imperative condition. Alternately, to experience rhythm, the subject's mind articulates these two signals as a set, constituting a series of pulses, which have extensity in time and space. Aristoxenus enunciates this dual unit necessity in terms of feet in poetry. Ancient Greek poetry is a composite art form which incorporates recitation, music and dance. Moreover, Aristoxenus's lost *Elementa Rhythmica Part I* can be considered to have been written in terms of visual rhythm or schematic rhythm (in sculpture, architecture and painting). This, then, is considerable evidence that Aristoxenus's advocation of a requisite two signals in the experience of rhythm can be applied to visual art and in particular, to painting.

The importance of the necessity of two signals in Aristoxenus is that his theory of rhythm is fundamentally about time length (*chronoi*). Time length can be applied to space in Aristoxenus' concept of form (*schimata*) however, and in the experience of it in duration. In this sense, the introduction of double-lines is controversial in the case of Mondrian's neoplastic painting, since Mondrian's rudimentary theory of rhythm is based on anti-durational repetition. The double-line facilitates the sense of repetition and, according to the theory of Gestalt eye-movement, thereby facilitates the sense of duration. The question, then, is how Mondrian deals with the introduction of double-lines in his theory. Not coincidently, he treats the double-line as a single line. In his letter to Jean Gorin on January 31, 1934 Mondrian wrote:

> You talk about double-line and say that it causes symmetry. I do not agree with you since the double-line is still the single line, similar to your grooves. In my last work, the double-line enlarges itself into the plane, but still remains a line. Be that as it may, I do not believe that this question is outside of theory, nor is it so subtle that they would reside in the mystery of "art." However, this is not yet clear to me (Joosten 1998, 155).

Aristoxenus had written:

> The time-length which is too short to contain even two notes or two syllables or two signals we shall call a *proto chronos*. How the senses will recognize this *chronos* will be explained in our discussion of the way feet are composed (Pearson 1990, 9).

The 'proto chronos' is the unit of two functions that comprise the very basic composition of feet, as they are experienced (that is, not just in the theory) by the listener and performer. Thus, here Bois' reservation is tenable:

> The doubling of the line, an apparently simple gesture, created an immediate crisis in Mondrian's art: on the one hand, lines became increasingly active and prominent through their rhythmic repetition; on the other, the double line (especially as it widened) tended also to be read as a single plane, thus blurring the distinction between two essential elements of Mondrian's vocabulary. These interrelated changes were accompanied by a decisive shift in Mondrian's theory: he sought from this point on to "destroy" all static elements and to create a "*dynamic equilibrium*." In almost every sense, the art of his last decade was directed against the principles that had characterized the previous one (Bois 1994, 254).

The 'double-line' was a 'new' discovery to Mondrian, although, as Blotkamp points out, Marlow Moss, the English female painter and a follower of Mondrian, applied the 'double-line' in her work in 1931: one year prior to Mondrian. Mondrian wrote to his friend, Alfred Toth, in 1932: "I am presently involved in new research into painting with a double line" (Blotkamp 1994, 215, Welsh 1977, 26).

This 'discovery' meant two things to Mondrian. As Bois argues, the introduction of a new element can bring about crisis, for it does take the risk of running against one of the principles of Neo-plasticism: anti-repetition. In his determination to avoid contravening neoplastic doctrine, Mondrian tenaciously clings to the ideal of the single line or plane, strongly resisting recognition of the double-line as two separate lines. The expression of rhythm must be freed from its static or covert condition, to unleash the dynamic compulsion of rhythm. This was a great risk, and can be viewed as evidence of Mondrian's theoretical concession. Moreover, it is a subtle adjustment to the practicality of what was until then fundamental to his theory of visual rhythm. However, the expedience of the double-line overcame dogmatic constraints.

Second, the introduction of the double-line signals Mondrian's transition toward empiricism: from a methodology conditioned by theory, to one drawn from the expressive fact of painting. The double-line is like a practical 'supplement' to neoplastic law (Derrida 1976, 295). On canvas, its introduction provided a conduit for the previously constrained 'naturalistic' rhythm, which could now be discharged as expression, moderated, however, by the presence of artificial (static) rhythm which remained in accord with neoplastic doctrine.

Mondrian's attempts in his later works in New York, though, were informed, as ever, by the definitive neoplastic principle of dialectical opposition. Theoretically, this carries through his entire neoplastic period. Static versus dynamic rhythm, null-form versus expression of neutral form, the interplay of the plane and the straight line: each element, through its dialectical relationship with the other, affects and is affected by the other. Thus, in the course of attaining "dynamic equilibrium" – rather than "static equilibrium" of the period prior to the New York paintings – the resulting equilibrium presupposes an intense battle between the elements across the surface of his canvases.

A substantial shift occurs here, for while the function of the single straight line can, at a metaphysical level, imply 'speed', the introduction of the double-line introduces a more physical and more visually ostensive rhythm: static (schematic) rhythm becomes dynamic (kinetic) rhythm. Thus, Mondrian amended neoplastic law according to the demands of his painting, influenced in part by his exposure to

the dynamic rhythms of jazz. Theory was regulated in Mondrian's late neoplastic period by the practical issues of *painting*, concerning how to manifest rhythm as kinesis, within the principle of "dynamic equilibrium."

2.10 Dynamic Equilibrium: 1934

In 1938, in his summary of the principles of Neo-plasticism written for a Swiss journal, Mondrian reiterates the idea of relationships and their anti-symmetrical function: "Through opposition, the relationships of dimension vary continually so that all symmetry can be destroyed" (Mondrian 1986, 305). The circle is symmetrical, so also is the rectangle and the square. All the regular geometrical forms are symmetrical. Mondrian must destroy these, since the sense of symmetry is a trait which can be identified with naturalistic harmony, and what Mondrian regarded as 'dead' stasis. Neoplastic stasis, by contrast, is the equilibrated point of the force of opposition, and implies enormous energy: a definitive quality of Neo-plasticism which was obvious to Mondrian, but not necessarily to the viewer. Mondrian attempted to explain his notion of 'static' rhythm in his early writings from 1917 to 1934, for which reason the word 'rhythm' in his writing gradually became redundant. His writing started to engage with the more ostensive realm of rhythm and it was at this point in 1934 that he adopted the expression "dynamic equilibrium."[18] In "The True Value of Oppositions in Life and Art", the dynamic force of the manipulative operation is endowed to rhythm. In the essay Mondrian wrote:

> Intuitively, man wants the good: unity, equilibrium – especially for himself. Thus he falls back into the search for false ease and static equilibrium, which is inevitably opposed to the dynamic equilibrium of true life. He satisfies himself with false unity and in seeking it rejects the duality of oppositions, which, while difficult to perceive, is nevertheless very real to us (Mondrian 1986, 283).

Here, Mondrian's self-criticism can be heard, in which the static rhythm ("static equilibrium"), which did not necessarily reflect the true condition of life and was implied in static rhythm or rhythm in the expression of stasis, is replaced by kinetic rhythm ("dynamic equilibrium"). This is still difficult to perceive, but has more reality in our life. Thus he concluded, "Once their equivalence is found, rhythm is freed, the way is clear, open to life" (Mondrian 1986, 284). It followed that in his paintings (especially after the introduction of the "double-line" in 1932),[19] the expression of rhythm became more ostensive and empirical. From around that time, Mondrian sought a new expression of visual rhythm: kinetic rhythm, which is opposed to schematic rhythm, or rhythm as stasis. He sought a rhythm which would hold "the

[18] The term "dynamic equilibrium" first appeared in Mondrian's writing in 1934 (Bois 1990, 161, 1995).

[19] Bois rightly pointed out that "Mondrian did not employ this term [dynamic equilibrium] until the 1930s" (Bois 1986, 17). Actually the term first appeared in Mondrian's writing in his essay 'The True Value of Oppositions in Life and Art' (1934).

perpetual movement of changing oppositions" (Mondrian 1986, 284) between the painterly elements in the open form structure of Neo-plasticism. However, theoretically speaking, this revision in 1934 is compromised by the move toward a more accessible, 'lively' rhythm, which implies an 'organic' or natural condition of rhythm. This goes against Mondrian's former understanding of rhythm, which is characterised by his antipathy towards rhythm which reflects the condition of nature. This shift, however, originates not in Mondrian's theorising of rhythm, but emerges out of a distinct empirical shift in his painting. This empirical conversion was probably not unrelated to his affiliation with syncopated jazz and modern dance, which is discussed in the following Chapter.

As Aristoxenus wrote, "when rhythm is not heard by the listener, there is no rhythm".[20] Thus Mondrian started to compromise his theory of static rhythm (without repetition, or any sequence) and adopted the more obvious type of rhythm: a metre-oriented rhythm. Along the same lines, I argue that the earlier mature neoplastic rhythm is a non metre-oriented rhythm. Mondrian's canvases which depicted a static rhythm became transformed into an optically dynamic rhythm with metre, based on a pulse-oriented rhythm.

Remember that Mondrian contended that there were two types of rhythm: naturalistic and inward or artificial rhythm. It is understandable that rhythm does possess both natural and artificial aspects. Yet it should not be forgotten that rhythm does not reside between these two poles; that is, rhythm always exists both in the natural and the artificial, in a dialectic process. The issue concerns which side is to be suppressed or annihilated, and thereby sublated into equilibrium Accordingly, it concerns time-based kinetic rhythm and non time-based schematic rhythm.

In early Neo-plasticism, Mondrian emphasized artificial rhythm, but he did not attempt to eradicate natural rhythm in its own right. Rather, somewhat boldly, he probed a method by which to wipe out traits of naturalistic rhythm as these manifested as *expressions* of rhythm. Mondrian thus contrasted artificial against naturalistic rhythm by way of his attempt to 'annihilate' naturalistic rhythm altogether; according, that is, to the theosophical meaning of 'annihilation' (as the Introduction details), and to the Hegelian method of dialectic[21]

2.11 New York Paintings: Boogie Woogie and the Expression of 'Form'

In 1943, at the climax of his New York period, Mondrian's expression of life-rhythm and its energy erupted. The new Modernist terrain developing rapidly in New York (surely coming with Boogie Woogie Jazz) so captivated Mondrian that one might

[20] Paul Creston, tracing this Aristoxenian line, writes: "[R]hythms which cannot be *heard* do not really exist" (Creston 1961, 34).

[21] Victor A. Grauer points out that Mondrian's use of dialectics is similar to Adorno's 'negative' dialectics (Grauer 1996, 25 n.65).

think he suffered amnesia, becoming suddenly opposed to 'stasis' and 'static balance', qualities which he revered throughout his mature neoplastic days (1921–1932). Mondrian's 'new' approach is decisive at this point, and the term "dynamic equilibrium" becomes something of a catchword. Moreover, its manifestation on canvas emerges in full expression.

After downgrading "static balance" harshly in an English draft for an essay (ca.1942–44) titled "Plastic Art: Reflex of Reality", Mondrian writes

> In plastic art we see the expression of form subordinated through the expression of dynamic movement. Forms appear as necessary but only as *means of expression* (Mondrian 1986, 352).

Actually, as we saw in the first section in this chapter, Mondrian never emphasized the absolute stasis of balance. Balance or equilibrium has to contain enormous energy (like the *laya* centre in Hindu thought). However, Mondrian's emphasis on the 'expression' of the dynamic element in his later neoplastic period is arresting.[22] Strangely, Mondrian is no longer directly engaged in the destruction of form and pictorial space, opting instead to compromise, and to use form as an expressive means: squares and rectangles start to produce the kinetic effects of rhythm, dissecting the straight lines into small segments, manifesting as multitudes of tiny squares. This results in a flickering effect, and, thereby, operates according to repetition. The straight line is now the target of destruction. First, black belts are replaced by primary coloured belts. Up to a point just prior to the final stage, commercial tape was used for this purpose. To compensate for the deterioration of the straight line, Mondrian reinstalls form and *repetition*. He continues in the following passage to explain his compromise with form (now regarding it as 'expressive' form), which in his early neoplastic period had been targeted for destruction:

> Plastic art reveals in the course of its culture that the more determined the expression of dynamic movement becomes, the more particular form has to disappear and the more its constructive elements free themselves from the limitation of particular expression. It is of the greatest importance to see that the particular expressions of the elements of form also exist independently of us and have a *definite character*. Using the elements of form as means of expression, their choice is important (Mondrian 1986, 352).

Mondrian here appears to concede that squares and rectangles *are* forms which can function as expressive means. However, they are to be restricted to the 'neutral' condition of form (that is, not as specific forms, but in terms of form in the most generic sense). He continues in the same passage:

---

[22] Mondrian's emphasis on 'expressive' form and the dynamic feature of his painting and theory can be seen in many of his writings of the New York period, and in interviews around that time. In his 'Interview by James Johnson Sweeney in 1943', Mondrian said:

> The great struggle for artists is the annihilation of static equilibrium in their paintings through continuous oppositions (contrasts) among the means of expression. It is always natural for human beings to seek static balance. This balance of course is necessary to existence in time. But vitality in the continual succession of time always destroys this balance. Abstract art is a concrete expression of such a vitality (Mondrian 1986, 357).

> It is logical that the most neutral elements of form are the most adequate to express dynamic movement in the way *it appears in reality*: this is, as universal, thus manifesting everything without limiting it (Mondrian 1986, 352).

Mondrian's struggle to compromise form is revealed in more detail in a note attached to the above passage, in which he wrote:

> Neutral means of expression have no relation with any particular form or idea (Symbolism). They are pure colors, dislocated parts of form, and especially the constructive elements of form: in painting, lines; in sculpture, planes or volumes. It has to be remarked that, although the circle and the square are particular forms, they do not appear as such in abstract art. The circle, due to its perfectly balanced manifestation, can, through composition, become a more or less neutral expression. Although the circle is a particular form (like an apple), it can constitute a more or less neutral manifestation because of its perfectly equilibrated expression (Mondrian 1986, 352).

Interestingly, Mondrian denies signification of the 'neutral means of expression" (the square and the circle), but acknowledges them as expressive forms. What is surprising here is that Mondrian, for the first time, acknowledges the 'circle' as an neutral means of expression. However, if we consider what Mondrian was attempting to do with his new conceptions about form, it is understandable that even the circle, with its curved lines, must be acknowledged as 'form'. If not, Mondrian cannot properly advocate use of the square as an 'expressive form.' His struggle to endow the square with expression reaches its extreme in the following passage, which is a continuation of the citation above:

> In abstract art, it is possible ultimately to annihilate the square more completely, for its limiting lines can be continued indefinitely. However, multiplicity of the square is needed (Mondrian 1986, 352).

Mondrian remains committed to the 'annihilation' of the square, and continues to emphasize the importance of (straight) lines over the 'square' form. Most interestingly, he sees it necessary that the square be multiplied, and thus activated as expressive form in his New York canvases. There is an obvious jump in the logic of his argument here. In fact, these 'new' canvases demanded the use of the multiplied squares, which he used in his two Boogie Woogie paintings very effectively, in two ways. One, where the multiples of squares were lined up to compose the straight lines (bands) themselves, and the other, where the square functions as an independent 'dislocated' form, which floats on the surface of the canvas.

2.12 The Problem of the New York Paintings

It is pertinent at this point to emphasise that although these works show clearly a new 'openness' of expression, what they represent is Mondrian not at his 'best' or most resolute. Rather, they reveal the artist at a point where he seems to have momentarily loosened the self-imposed constraints (perhaps having become overwhelmed by the sheer energy of New York City) that had characterized his method

during most of his painting career, in which he had committed himself to reconcile his 'new' method with that of Neo-plasticism. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *New York Boogie Woogie* appear successfully to realize the rhythmic sense because they are so obvious in their use of optical effects that read, almost at a physical and tangible level, as flickering, oscillating, bouncing rhythms across the surface of the canvas. The realization of rhythm in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *New York Boogie Woogie* can be interpreted as a kind of emancipation from the long battle to reify "dynamic equilibrium" and "open rhythm" before the New York period, and this encourages, on the part of the viewer, recourse to already familiar notions of 'naturalistic rhythm', thereby merely confirming the general view of what 'visual rhythm' might look like.

Further compounding the problem is that these explicitly rhythmic works appear as explosions of dynamic colour and form in comparison to Mondrian's 'quieter' works, in which his more typically restrained methodology worked toward a far more subtle and considered realization of rhythm that is, I believe, more difficult both to detect and to describe. The more 'silent' or static works are arguably more representative of Mondrian's commitment to realize the rhythmic sense in painting, despite the fact that *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *New York Boogie Woogie* must have seemed at the time, paradoxically, even to Mondrian himself, a liberation.

Thus when art historians talk about Mondrian's realization of rhythm, they tend to spotlight these later works (see Introduction, note 3). After the long 'silence' of Mondrian's neoplastic period, these particular paintings appear to quiver and flicker: an effect possibly caused by "the tiny dots of colour" on the surface of the canvases (Blotkamp 1994, 240). We might interpret these optical effects as recalling the electrically lit buildings and cars in the dynamic evening cityscape of New York as seen perhaps from the heights of the Empire State Building, an interpretation appropriate enough given Mondrian's fascination with New York, and all that it symbolized for him of the 'modern society'. However, unlike the works of the late 1900s, such as *Sea Towards Sunset* of 1909, the background of deep evening blue is replaced in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *New York Boogie Woogie* by the shimmering white of daylight or artificial light. The result is that an optical rhythm is transmitted to the eyes of the viewer, manifesting as a 'naturalistic' sense of rhythm.

The dominant 'static' nature of the paintings before the New York period may therefor have something to do with the general lack of perception of subtlety in much of the work from Mondrian's neoplastic period. The dominance of the element of 'stasis' (or 'silence' in Krauss's view) effaces the dynamic operation of rhythm. And there is an apparent rift between the theory of rhythm, which Mondrian repeatedly voiced from the early 1920s, and its reification in the early mature neoplastic paintings themselves.

Mondrian's theory of rhythm is based on an idiosyncratic dualism, a dialectical process which cannot remain harmonized within an equilibrium. Mondrian's dialectical mode of rhythm can be attained, not through a process of absolute offset, nor by way of compensatory harmonization. Rather, Mondrian sought dynamic equilibrium through the harnessing of dynamic counter-oppositions, such that they are 'equilibrated'. In Mondrian's view, dualism should be 'annihilated' by the attain-

ment of 'equilibrium' – "*equivalent duality forms a true unity*" (Mondrian 1986, 118). Therefore, 'equilibrium' binds together energized opposites, not to effect conciliation between opposing factors, but to attain a narrow dynamic-static point between its constituent opposites. The paradox associated with Mondrian's concept of "dynamic-static" is not a source of conflict, however, within the esoteric doctrine of Hindu-Theosophy. As Chap. 1 points out, there is an interesting (and rather pertinent) connection between Mondrian's "equilibrated movement", and the Hindu-Buddhist conception of the "*laya* center" and "*pralaya*" – realms in which phantom-like, incorporeal entities are able to transgress a pair of extreme poles; stasis versus constant change: a conceptual construct which might seem unthinkable in the context of mainstream western logic (but embodied perhaps in the west in Greek mythology's characterisation of the duplicitous *Janus*). Mondrian's equilibrated point is precisely the animated 'energy' point, whose transposition is too 'fast' to catch (or only a trained 'intuition' can grasp it). When correctly read, this equilibrated point is not in the least bit the 'cold' or 'dry' mathematically calculated geometrical 'point' it is often taken to be,[23] but rather, the absolute opposite, constituting a locus of humanity (Mondrian emphasised that he is always lead by 'pure intuition' and experience)[24]: thus, ultimately, Mondrian's attempt to reach objective 'universality' is not through the arbitrary destruction of the subjective 'nature' or 'humanity' (Mondrian 1986, 151).

Mondrian's well-known aversion to 'nature' should not be taken as presupposing that he wished to wipe out every visible trace of any natural elements. Certainly he made far more of human culture than of nature, but this is because, especially in Mondrian's time but still even in our time, in art "naturalistic elements" were still dominant to the exclusion of other means of expression. It would, therefore, be more correct to say that Mondrian sought for the equilibrated point between human culture and nature. In concluding his essay "The Manifestation of New-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' *Bruiteurs*" (1921), Mondrian wrote:

> Music thus conceived may move more rapidly toward its final goal of "equivalence with nature" – the goal that Neo-Plasticism in painting has already achieved.[25]

Mondrian, it seems, did not renounce 'nature' but craved a dynamics of art equivalent to that of nature.

---

[23] An interesting episode concerns a peer of Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, who measured Mondrian's neo-plastic canvases. Finding that these measurements came close to the 'golden section', Vantongerloo applied the formula to his own painting. Mondrian vehemently rejected Vantongerloo's 'discovery' as too mathematical, a principle in which Mondrian never took recourse (Mondrian 1986, 133–4, Blotkamp 1994, 204).

[24] Harry Holzman explains:

> Mondrian's painting method, which he called "pure intuition," constituted a direct approach by way of trial and error in relation to the given space of the canvas. There were no a priori measures of any kind, there was no "golden section." He also referred to it as "pure sensuality" (Mondrian 1986, 6).

[25] Mondrian 1986, 155.

Neoplastic rhythm is a mode of equilibration between binary oppositions. However, the fundamental question remains to be asked: What *is* rhythm in Mondrian's neoplastic painting? In order to answer this question, the following chapters will concentrate on the interpretation and appreciation of Mondrian's early expression of *static* rhythm, rather than overly engage with *kinetic* rhythm. In a sense, the latter can be interpreted as compensatory: Mondrian's recondite early neoplastic rhythm shifts to a more manifest kinetic rhythm, which in turn foreshadows the reintroduction of 'naturalistic' rhythm in his later work. Static rhythm, however, is at the heart of Mondrian's original preoccupation with the problem of visualising rhythm: as such, it is emblematic of Mondrian's contribution to art history and the philosophy of art.

References

Blotkamp, Carel. 1994. *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.

Bois, Yve-Alain. 1986. Review of Kermit Swiler Champa's Mondrian Studies. *Art in America* 74: 19.

———. 1990. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

———. 1994. The Iconoclast. In *Piet Mondrian 1972–1944*, ed. Angelica Zander Rudenstine, Yve-Alain Bois, Joop Joosten, and Hans Janssen. The Hague/New York: Haags Gemeentemuseum, National Gallery of Art, The Museum of Modern Art.

———. 1995. Book Review: Dutch Feat. *Artforum* Summer.

Creston, Paul. 1961. *Principles of Rhythm*. New York: Franco Colombo Inc.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*, 1st American ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grauer, Victor A. 1996. Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence. *Art Criticism* 11 (1): 25–26.

Greenberg, Clement. 1986. *Perceptions and Judgements, 1939–1944: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 1. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Harthoorn, J.M. 1980. *Mondrian's Creative Realism*. Mijdrecht: Tableau.

Henkels, Herbert. 1987. *Mondrian: From Figuration to Abstraction*. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shimbun.

Hoek, Els. 1986. *De Stijl: The Formative Years*. Trans. E. Hoek. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.

McBride, Henry. 1942. Mondrian's First One-Man Show. *The New York Sun*, January 23.

Mondrian, Piet. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.

Pearson, Lionel. 1990. *Aristoxenus Elementa Rhythmica: The Fragment of Book II and the Additional Evidence for Aristoxenean Rhythmic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Seuphor, Michel. 1956. *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Threlfall, Tim. 1988. *Piet Mondrian: His Life's Work and Evolution 1872 to 1944*. New York/London: Carland Publishing Inc.

Tosaki, Eiichi. 1996. *The First Four Diamond-Shaped Canvases and Mondrian's Painterliness*. Post Graduate Diploma Thesis, The University of Melbourne.

Van Doesburg, Nelly. 1971. Some Memories of Mondrian. In *Piet Mondrian: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Welsh, Robert P. 1977. The Place of 'Composition 12 with Small Blue Square' in the Art of Piet Mondrian. *Bulletin* 29: 3–32.

Chapter 3
Dynamic Rhythm and Static Rhythm: Polemics of Mondrian's Theory of Rhythm

In art, time and movement are fixed; thus contemplation is easier.

– Piet Mondrian (Mondrian 1986, 323).

Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it too with a gesture.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein et al. 1998, 26e).

3.1 Neoplastic and Constructivist Static Rhythm

At the end of the nineteenth century, Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge investigated the movement of the body in serialised form using new cinematographic techniques. These photographic experiments deeply influenced Euro-American avant-gard artists and thinkers of the early twentieth century, including the Cubists and Futurists, and artists such as Robert Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka, Marcel Duchamp, Theo van Doesburg and Thomas Eakins.

At the turn of the twentieth century, some modernist painters, especially Futurists or Simultaneists, incorporated sequential elements in their works (typically Marey's storobophotographic images and Eakins' resynthesis of Marey's works). Their approach to painting references strobography through the use of overlapping or imbrication, which functions as an ostensive 'metre' and manifests as repetition within the painted image. Not surprisingly, the Futurists and Simultaneists believed that strobophotography generates a sense of rhythm in the viewer (Braun 1992, 276). However, Neoplastic and Constructivist debates about rhythm reject this idea, claiming that this is not rhythm, but an ocularcentric or false movement.

Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard and Gilles Deleuze (respectively) emphasise repetition in which the arbitrary participation of the viewer rather than ocular stimulus (e.g. strobophotography) brings about an experience of 'every-time-new' through similarities of recurrence. Deleuze distinguishes two types of repetition:

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_3

> One which concerns only the overall, abstract effect, and the other which concerns the acting cause. One is a static repetition, the other is dynamic. One results from the work, but the other is like the 'evolution' of a bodily movement (Deleuze 1994, 20).

Kierkegaard wrote:

> As soon as the question of a *repetition* arises, the collision is present, for only a repetition of what has been before is conceivable. …
>
> In ideality alone there is no repetition, for the idea is and remains the same, and as such it cannot be repeated. When ideality and reality touch each other, then repetition occurs. When, for example, I see something in the moment, ideality enters in and will explain that it is a repetition (Kierkegaard et al. 1985, 171).

Also in "Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology" Søren Kierkegaard states:

> Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy (Kierkegaard et al. 1983, 131).

This cognitive (rather than ocular) conception of repetition can be understood as a creative act on the part of the viewer. Another example of this way of conceptualising rhythm is found in the architect Peter Eisenman's use of the term "iteration". In his interview with Robert E. Somol, Eisenman said:

> Displacement concerns iteration. Repetition is self-sameness, while iteration is a non-self-same repetition. In displacement, there is the superposition of the original and the displaced condition which in itself is never a repetition. Because a repetition would be a self-same condition where there was no displacement. In other words, the displacement would fall over itself like a square on a square. … If one were to draw a square repeatedly it is repetition. However, when you draw a square on a rectangle, the displacement is a third figure as it is inscribed on the original square, the superpositions become a constantly shifting and reframed construction (Eisenman 1993, 137).

Mondrian, the Russian Constructivists, and many twentieth century contemporary composers also thought differently: they deny rhythm as a linear allocation of a repetitive pulse (or rhythm as tempo – see Chap. 4), and engage instead with rhythm as structure or composition. Rhythm as structure is non-linear (although it may yield to hierarchical structure in a viewer's mind), and presupposes a 'grouping' oriented composition, through the interchange of similarity and contrast. Typically, in the visual field the reiteration of patterns and cyclic movements suggests the fluid procession of movement and time; a circle of dancers, or a cyclist's feet or those of a person walking generates an image of repeated cyclic motion. Mondrian categorized such 'depictions' of rhythm as naturalistic rhythms, and was strongly opposed to them. But how best to elucidate what specifically it was that Mondrian looked for in his particular brand of 'static' rhythm? Counter-examples help: for static rhythm is a feature of Mondrian's neoplastic works that becomes apparent when compared with the ideas of other 'painters of rhythm' such as Wassily Kandinsky, or Futurist painting in general.

3.2 Two Types of Visual Rhythm: Stroboscopic and Static

Kandinsky classified Matisse's 1909–10 canvases *The Dance* and *Music* in terms of rhythm:

> The two pictures by Henri Matisse demonstrate how "rhythmical" composition (*Dance*) has a different inner life, hence a different inner sound, from compositions in which the parts of the picture are juxtaposed in an apparently arrhythmic way (*Music*) (Kandinsky et al. 1982, 255; 1974, 182).

Matisse's *The Dance* (Fig. 3.1) suggests a circular motion and implies the continuation of the movement. A subjective and representational reading of this picture implies the duration of time. This is hinted at in the recurrence of rotation in the repetitive mode, which is essentially linear. As musicologist Jonathan Kramer puts it, linearity is established "in accordance with implications that arise from earlier events of the piece" (see Chap. 6). Each dancer is in a different phase of the *arsis/thesis* relation of foot positions. For the viewer who knows that what the figures are doing is 'dancing', the combination of *arsis/thesis* is repetitive. The cyclic chain of the dancers' postures generates a strong sense of wave-like movement. In our mind, this becomes a continuum of sequential rotation, since we know or can reasonably surmise on the basis of our understanding of what it means to dance, that dancers do keep dancing, at least for a while. In the viewer's subjective and iconic reading, then, *The Dance* depicts a linear, sequential sense of movement and repetition and

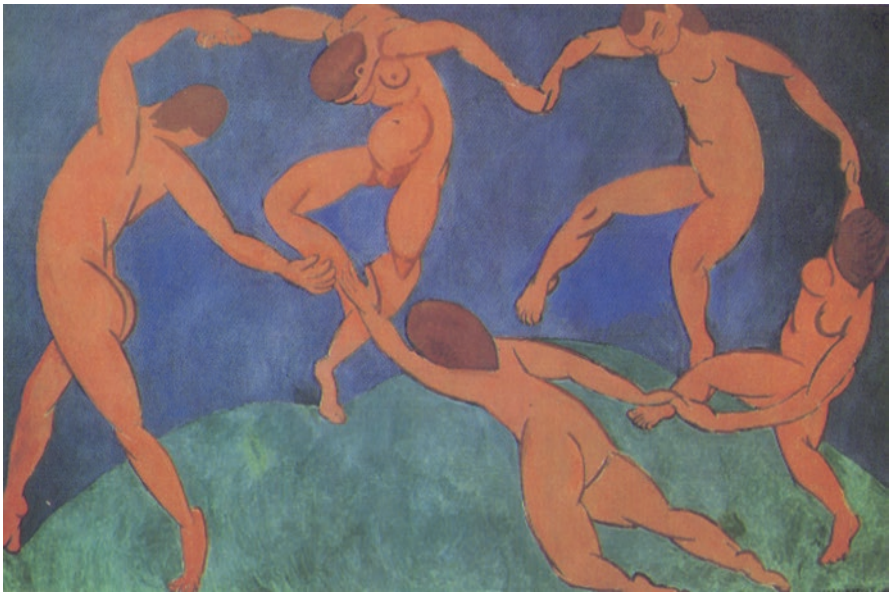


Fig. 3.1 Henri Matisse, *The Dance*, 1909-10, The Hermitage, Leningrad

generates a durational sense of time. While it does suggest some rhythmic content and a manifestation of repetitive movements, *The Dance* is a representation (subjective depiction) of dancers dancing: it is a representation *of* rhythm, rather than an encapsulation of rhythm's dynamic structure itself.

Matisse's *Music* (Fig. 3.2), on the other hand, suggests stasis. It does not insinuate any movement by way of iconographic or subjective readings. Each musician is depicted with both feet on the groundline (except the flautist, whose legs are relaxed on the ground) with no *arsis/thesis* movement of the feet. Compared to *The Dance*, in the viewer's subjective or iconic reading, the 'music' in *Music* is being played by the musicians and singers 'quietly' and 'melodiously' (maybe with some minor beats but no strong accents). The contrast between verticality (the stretching fiddler) and horizontality (the four sitters, and horizontally directed leg of the flute player), generates a sense of stability and a pause in time: that is, of non-sequential time. For Kandinsky, these two paintings typified a sense of music: in *The Dance*, beats, dynamism and rhythm; in *Music*, melody, stasis and arrhythm. We might be tempted to think that the static traits in *Music* must function against the manifestation of rhythm and its dynamism. On the basis of this observation, and compared to *The Dance*, are we to conclude that *Music* conveys no sense of rhythm? Looking at *Music* closely, we can see how this painting successfully generates a sense of rhythm despite outward appearances.

It is easy to recognize the structure or composition of the work. There is a pattern of similarity and contrast among the three sitting singers and flautist, and within its variation, implicit repetitions within similarities. Each sitter's hands are in a different

Fig. 3.2 Henri Matisse, *Music*, 1910, The Hermitage, Leningrad

position, which creates a sense of movement among the similarities. The various directions suggested by the position of legs and knees of the four sitters generate a variety of movements too. The standing fiddler and four sitters provide a contrast of verticality against horizontality, and this is moderated by the undulating ground line coming up toward the right. One can recognize some sense of movement in these contrasts and similarities. The composition also elicits (implicit) repetitions with a non-linear (non-sequential) sense of arrangement, also enlivened by a variety of contrasts.

Kandinsky sees in *The Dance* a pictorial expression of rhythm, whereas Mondrian, emphatically, would not. Mondrian might acknowledge a subjective reading of rhythm in *The Dance*, but in view of the 'naturalistic' rhythm which entails in this painting, he would reject *The Dance* in accord with the doctrine of Neo-plasticism. More likely, Mondrian would acknowledge rhythm in the composition of *Music* as pictorial expression, since his own neoplastic rhythm connotes *Music's* mode of static rhythm: rhythm as composition or structure itself, with no symmetrical or sequential repetition, but rather, similarities with contested differences. We are thus confronted by a sense of rhythm in the static composition of a picture, in which Kandinsky does not see it, but Mondrian most definitely does. Turning now to the work of the Futurists, to Naum Gabo's Constructivism and Mondrian's canvases, the stark difference between stroboscopic and static (structural) expressions of rhythm emerges.

3.3 Futurist and Constructivist Rhythm

Gabo, one of the founders of Russian Constructivism, notes in his "Realist Manifesto" (1920) that:

> Futurism has not gone further than the effort to fix on canvas a purely optical reflex which has already shown its bankruptcy with the Impressionists. It is obvious now to every one of us that by the simple graphic registration of a row of momentarily arrested movements one cannot recreate movement itself. It makes one think of the pulse of a dead body (Gabo 1974, 8).

Gabo was critical of the ocularcentric bearing of the Futurist's arrested moment.[1] Gabo notes the limitations of attempts by the Impressionists, in particular the impressionistic, ocular-agitative brushwork and on-site "fixing" of ephemeral phenomena, especially the shifting ambient light conditions. Gabo's observation of Futurism is insightful but not completely accurate, since the Futurists contention of simultaneity (inner-mind synthesis of speed, movement and rhythm) went further than that of a "purely optical reflex." For example, the Futurists knew of the

[1] Gabo and Mondrian coincide in their criticism of Futurism and Cubism. However, where Cubism is concerned, the difference in their stance towards the theory of avant-garde art is pronounced. While Gabo vehemently repudiated Cubism's chaotic compositional mode, Mondrian acknowledged its radicality and took its influence on his art in a more positive sense. Modrian was similary positive towards Impressionism and Futurism.

recreation of movement of a moving body as stimulated by momentary registrations in the mind's 'camera-eye' image: an effect consummated only through the mental faculties of memory and synthesis. Evidently, Gabo had in mind a different category of movement from that of the Futurists. Gabo was against the notion of presentness as a 'frozen moment' and the depiction of the flow of time by way of the concatenation of "arrested movements". Instead, Gabo's interest lay in visual movement, and in rhythm in relation to the structure and composition of the art work.

Gabo's criticism of the Futurists' recreation of movement is worth consideration, especially in the context of the analysis of visual rhythm in Neo-plasticism, since it emphasises the function of memory in the reconstruction of movement and the passage of time. But, Gabo insinuates, this is not the only way in which to express the flow of time, the sense of 'now', or that of speed. Indeed, the Futurists were keen to elaborate the Impressionists' instant-by-instant rendition of time toward an infinitesimal or absolute calculation of time. They were also interested in the way in which the mind might engage with a synthesis of the flow of images, beyond the attempts by Marey and Muybridge, who employed the technical registration of movement, using chronophotographic devices. The Futurist photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890–1960) wrote in his "Futurist Photodynamism" (1911):

> To put it crudely, [Marey's] chronophotography could be compared with a clock on the face of which only the quarter-hours are marked, cinematography to one on which the minutes too are indicated, and Photodynamism to a third on which are marked not only the seconds, but also the *intermovemental* fractions existing in the passages between seconds. This becomes an almost infinitesimal calculation of movement (Apollonio 1973, 40).

Bragaglia repudiates the cinematographic image as well as chronophotography, stating that the priority of Photodynamism is that it is analytical**,** able to reproduce infinitesimal calculations in the level of depiction of movement. He wrote that cinematography subdivides movement, without rules, according to mechanical arbitrariness, disintegrating and shattering it without any kind of "aesthetic concern for rhythm" (Apollonio 1973, 39). He repudiates Marey's chronophotography on the same grounds, since it belongs to the same family of cinematographic form, which breaks up movement coldly, and, despite the almost negligible interstice between each still image in cinematography making it a more subtle instrument, chronophotography nonetheless "shatters the action" (Apollonio 1973, 39).

Interestingly, Duchamp shares a similar interest to Mondrian in terms of the anti-strobographic movement. Duchamp wrote in reply to James Johnson Sweeney's question about the relationship between *Nude Descending a Staircase* and *Futurism:*

> No, I do not feel there was any connection between the *Nude Descending a Staircase* and futurism. … Chrono-photography was at the time in vogue. Studies of horses in movement and of fencers in different positions as in Muybridge's albums were well known to me. But my interest in painting the *Nude* was closer to the cubists' interest in decomposing forms than to the futurists' interest in suggesting movement, or even to Delaunay's Simultaneist suggestions of it. My aim was a static representation of movement – a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement – with no attempt to give cinema effects through painting (Duchamp 1973, 124).

Duchamp's aim was not to configure a series of movements in the form of a strobographic image as in the work of Muybridge, but was more akin to Thomas Eakins' synthetic vision of concentric duplication of movement. Eakins' synthetic vision of Muybridge's chronography evokes Cubism's static assemblage of movement, which is more pronounced than that of either the Futurists or Muybridge. Thus Duchamp's comment that the "*Nude* was closer to the cubists' interest in decomposing forms" is understandable. But in the notion of stasis or composition as rhythm – a major concern of Mondrian and the Constructivists – Duchamp's *Nude* is far closer to chronography than is Mondrian's Neo-plasticism and Constructivism.

These two forms (cinematography and chronophotography) employ the same imperious hand as the chronometres, which deals with time digitally even though this flows analogically in a continuous and constant stream (Duchamp 1973, 124). Instead, Bragaglia ranks 'photodynamism' (*fotodinamiche*) higher than those other two forms, advocating that his photodynamism can analyse movement precisely in its details, as well as synthesize it (Duchamp 1973, 124). The term 'intermovemental states' indicates for Bragaglia "the form of small regular sequences of connecting strokes which fill the interstices of each small section of strobographic concatenation" (Robinson 1981, 91). Inter movemental states thus connote a mind system (memory) able to synthesize a series of pulses into duration. Further, Bragaglia contends, in contrast to Marey's chronophotography, photodynamism is an art form, since it obtains sensation, the very tempo and the speed with which the images dwell "in a space and in us" (Robinson 1981, 91).

Bragaglia's photodynamism was highly acclaimed by many other Futurists. For example, Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), who posed for Bragaglia's *fotodinamica*, *The Guitarist* (1912) (Fig. 3.3). Balla responded in kind to *The Guitarist* with his own painting *Rhythm of the Bow (1912)*. Balla was directly affected by Bragaglia in respect to the analysis of dynamic movement, and produced his two famous Futurist canvases: *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) and *Little Girl on a Balcony* (1912). The method of the works by both Bragaglia and Balla is identical. Their rendering of rhythm is based on the famous proclamation about Futurist dynamism by Umberto Boccioni in his Futurist manifesto of 1910:

> On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular (Apollonio 1973, 28).

More interesting, perhaps, is that Boccioni was against repetition. Boccioni attempts to explain his Futurist art in connection to the "infinite succession of events" in real life. He wrote in "Plastic Dynamism" (1913):

> It seems clear to me that this *succession* is not to be found in the repetition of legs, arms and faces, as many people have idiotically believed, but is achieved through the intuitive search for *the one single form which produces continuity in space.* This is the key to making an object live in universal terms (Apollonio 1973, 93).

Boccioni saw duration within a single form, an observation similar to Gabo's (and Mondrian's). However, it necessitates the representative expression of 'succession'

Fig. 3.3 Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *The Guitarist*, 1912, Private Collection

or 'continuity': not four legs, but twenty. The complexity of this relation between 'one single form' and 'twenty legs' requires further investigation. Boccioni was evidently not opposed to twenty legs per se, but attempted nevertheless to protect the sophisticated method of the Futurists, with regard to the notion of duration, from the "idiotic belief" in the concept of succession according to the mechanical method of chronophotography. For this reason, Boccioni attempts to synthesise 'mad' movement in accord with the geometric construction of the 'triangular'.

In the same Manifesto of 1910, Boccioni asserted the necessity of the Divisionist technique, emphasizing the importance of the radiance of light, which shines "like blinding daylight": "We conclude that painting cannot exist today without Divisionism. … Divisionism, for the modern painter, must be an *innate complementariness* which we declare to be essential and necessary" (Apollonio 1973, 29). Boccioni compares, in the same text, "innate complementariness" to free metre in poetry or polyphony in music. He also contends that "movement and light destroy the materiality of bodies" (Apollonio 1973, 30). Boccioni calls dynamism in these complexities (free metre and polyphony) and in the synthesis of static and movement 'simultaneity' (Apollonio 1973, 92).

What, then, is the Futurists' rhythm, and what is entailed in their "aesthetic concern for rhythm"? Carlo Carrà's definition is pertinent here:

> [Rhythm in Futurism] is dynamic and chaotic in application, producing in the mind of the observer a veritable mass of plastic emotions; this is because each particular perspective in our painting corresponds to a vibration in the mind. In this way we have achieved architectural unity within the painting, which allows a more intense, more living and more profound truth to leap off the canvas. And the painting, with its mysterious content of complex rhythms, acquires a force which stirs and enthrals the observer more by what it suggests than by what is materially expressed in it (Apollonio 1973, 92).

Bragaglia's conception follows a similar line of thinking:

> … every vibration is the rhythm of infinite minor vibrations, since every rhythm is built up of an infinite quantity of vibrations. In so far as human knowledge has hitherto conceived and considered movement in its *general rhythm*, it has fabricated, so to speak, an algebra of movement (Apollonio 1973, 41).

Bragaglia's Pythagorean mathematical (i.e., countable) rhythm contrasts with the rhythm of the Constructivists and Mondrian (and runs counter to that of contemporary music).[2] Rhythm, for Bragaglia, is algebraic (whether countable or not), and thereby implicates the metric system. The sum of each small metre of 'vibration' or movement, which is visible or tangible to the senses, is predisposed to cause a "minor vibration." It is when the viewer sees "an infinite quantity of vibration" that this "minor vibration" is activated, since the part (minor vibrations) exists solely in relation to the whole. Bragaglia's model also draws from Henri Bergson's well known concept of 'duration.' In fact Boccioni cited Bergson when defending himself against accusations of being merely 'cinematographic': "Henri Bergson said: 'Any division of matter into autonomous bodies with absolutely defined contours is an artificial division', and elsewhere: 'Any movement, viewed as a transition from one state of rest to another, is absolutely indivisible'" (Apollonio 1973, 89). Embracing the Bergsonian concepts of 'matter and memory' and 'duration', Bragaglia explaines that "intermovemental states" happen in the painter when he or she can "become acquainted with the *volumes of individual motions*" (Apollonio 1973, 43). So acquainted, the relationship between the minor and major 'motions' composes a hierarchical system. Regarding photodynamism, Bragaglia argues that in a viewer's mind, by "remembering what took place between one stage and another, a work is presented that transcends the human condition, becoming a *transcendental photograph of movement*" (Apollonio 1973, 43).

The difference between Bragaglia's and Marey's respective systems is mainly the matter of quantity (or volume), which creates the difference in quality. 'Vibration' in Marey's chronography is, according to Bragaglia, not fine enough (the mark of "quarter-hours") or too cold for the inner self ("in a space and in us") to compose the sense of dynamic vibration of rhythm. Our perception (the mind) fills the gap between the 'finest' "infinitesimal calculation of movement." This is what Bragaglia means by "the *intermovemental* fractions existing in the passages between seconds." Bragaglia explains: "Indeed, we represent the movement of a pendulum, for example, by relating its speed and its tempo to two orthogonal axes. We obtain a continuous and infinite sinusoidal curve" (Apollonio 1973, 41). Bragaglia's pendulum is of course theoretical, by which line of speculation he asserts that it never stops, but constitutes the endless undulating line of a sinusoidal curve. Bragaglia's model of rhythm distills into a (visible) wave model of rhythm. The adoption of time as a wave is a representational or iconographical expression of rhythm and time. It synthesises repetitive form, and is thus phenomenal and naturalistic: on these grounds, as well as being not abstract enough, Mondrian and Gabo both reject Bragaglia's model. In contrast to Bragaglia's, this brings Gabo's and Mondrian's models closer to S. K. Langer's conception of

[2] For the arguments about the difference between Pythagorean (Quininianus) and Aristoxenus, see Chap. 5.

'composition' and its relation to rhythm: that is, rhythm *as structure and stasis*. In Langer's theory, the abstract faculty of 'composition' itself, in the music performer's mind, can unfold a rhythmic flow or melody in time.[3] But ultimately, Gabo's interest in static rhythm was short-lived. Instead, he went on to mobilize physical sculpture in real time, advocating kinetic rhythm in sculpture as representing the more developmental stage of 'structurism'. With this realization of 'kinetic' art in his sculpture came Gabo's rejection of 'static' rhythm on the grounds of it being 'conventional', and in his view indebted to the canons of Western art dating from the Renaissance (traceable to ancient Egyptian art). Gabo wrote in 1937:

> [T]he problem of Time in sculpture is synonymous with the problem of motion. …We can find traces of these efforts in almost too many examples of ancient sculpture. It was only presented in illusory forms which made it difficult for the observer to recognize it. For instance, who has not admired in the Victory of Samothrace, the so-called dynamic rhythms, the imaginary forward movement incorporated in this sculpture? The expression of motion is the main purpose of the composition of the lines and masses of this work. But in this sculpture the feeling of motion is an illusion and exits only in our minds. The real Time does not participate in this emotion; in fact, it is timeless. To bring Time as a reality into our consciousness, to make it active and perceivable, we need the real movement of substantial masses removable in space (Gabo 1937, 108).

Gabo acknowledges the dynamic lines and masses of *The Victory of Samothrace* (and for the same reason Boccioni's *Unique Forms in Space* of 1913), as did Lessing in *Laocoon*. But this was not without concession to 'kinetic' rhythms. Gabo is critical of 'static' rhythm and motion on the grounds that these are an illusion that exists "only in our minds." This aspect of dynamism in a picture, as a function of the mind, was exactly the concept that emerges in Gabo's earlier work and in Mondrian's neoplastic painting. Gabo would have expected Mondrian to reject the idea (as Alexander Calder had proposed) of 'kinetic' movement of artworks in a real space. Mondrian was furiously opposed to any such notions. Nevertheless, Gabo's thinking rapidly shifted; as Gabo rejected static rhythm and proceeded instead towards kinetic sculpture, his ideas about movement became more literal and physical. In an interview with Arbam Lassaw and Ilya Bolotowsky in 1956, Gabo referred to undulating lines in terms of 'flow':

> By time I mean movement, rhythm: the actual movement as well as the illusory one which is perceived through the indication of the flow of lines and shapes in the sculpture or in painting. In my opinion, rhythm in a work of art is as important as space and structure and image. I hope the future will develop these ideas much further (Gabo et al. 1957, 160).

Here Gabo's definition of rhythm accords with both Plato ("rhythm is the order of movement") and Aristoxenus ("rhythm is the order of time"). If the former is an idealist's definition of rhythm, the latter is an empiricist's, and Mondrian was emphatically aligned with the former definition (Plato), rejecting completely the expression of flow as wavy lines. Mondrian's rejection of wavy lines is, predictably, that they can be seen everywhere in nature.

[3] S. K. Langer's theory of 'composition' and rhythm is discussed in detail in Chap. 5.

Thus, the concept of 'flow' and movement as propounded by the Futurists in their works, is understood by Mondrian as the manifestation of naturalistic harmony. For the registration of arrested moments in natural arrays is a representation of time according to a conventional understanding of linear time (which incorporates past, present and future) and repetition. What Mondrian aims at is quite different. Inserting the linear element of 'metre' (or pulse) is not necessarily the solution to the depiction of 'flow' and movement in art. His early mature neoplastic works, especially, were in this sense impervious to the introduction of 'metre' or a time sequence articulated in such a way.

In his late New York work, which pushes his idea of "dynamic equilibrium" further, and marks the transition from 'static rhythm' to 'dynamic rhythm', Mondrain comes closer in his thinking to Gabo. This transition is antithetical to Mondrian's neoplastic doctrine of the 1920s, however, and contributed an additional tension to Mondrian's work. In the New York canvases (especially the two *Boogie Woogie* canvases), Mondrian struggled with the irresolvable conflict which arose as sensual, or empirical 'dynamic rhythm', was played out within the premises of compositional static rhythm.

Gabo's treatise on rhythm in painting is somewhat inconsistent (considering his earlier criticism of Futurism). For example, Gabo emphasises 'kinetic' rhythm in painting through the use of cinematographic techniques, in preference to [in contradiction to principles of] 'static' rhythm:

> The existence of the arts of Music and Choreography proves that the human mind desires the sensation of real kinetic rhythms passing in space. Theoretically there is nothing to prevent the use of the Time element, that is to say, real motions, in painting or sculpture. For painting the film technique offers ample opportunity for this whenever a work of art wishes to express this kind of emotion. In sculpture there is no such opportunity and the problem is more difficult (Gabo et al. 1957, 108–9).

Yet the introduction of cinematographic technique into the neoplastic canvas is at odds with the early neoplastic theory of rhythm. It suggests the introduction of a descriptive rendition of naturalistic time (a sequence of time) and, above all, of repetition. However, as Gabo may have predicted, this method did eventuate in Mondrian's New York canvases. Hence, the surfaces of Mondrian's late neoplastic canvases are characterised by irresolvable conflict.

Gabo's observation is half correct in terms of static rhythm, where he advocates it has a long tradition from the Renaissance, and Mondrian's static rhythm can be understood according to this tradition. However, rejecting static rhythm and taking on kinetic rhythm is not a solution in painting. This might be a solution for sculpture in terms of movement and rhythm, but even three-dimensional sculpture, which allows for various viewpoints, contains its own problems of static rhythm and shifting into actual 'kinetic' movement is merely one of several choices. The problem of resolving or manifesting 'kinetic rhythm' in sculpture is both complex and difficult: as Gabo asserts, it is a more difficult for sculpture. Painting, which is already conceived in terms of structure or composition in conventional European painting, nonetheless requires attention. Mondrian's neoplastic canvases contain both traditional and progressive aspects of visual rhythm. Mondrian's endless struggle is the

annihilation/sublation of conventional visual rhythm in a Hegelian (negative) dialectical sense, in which the positive side develops without obliterating the negative, but rather utilizes the negativity as a ground.

Mondrian criticized Russian Constructivism in 1930: "neoplastic is as destructive as it is constructive. It is quite wrong to call it 'Constructivism'" (Mondrian 1986, 231). Mondrian's anti-form stringency clearly rejects the "Constructivist" label, which would perhaps associate it with Russian Constructivism. When Mondrian criticizes Constructivism as "constructive" and devoid of any "destructive" entity, he means that Russian Constructivism still engages with naturalistic form. In Mondrian's view it is not functionally dynamic since it lacks the significance of the dialectical conflict between construction and destruction. Of course we cannot take Mondrian's criticism of Constructivism literally. Mondrian's desire to establish an original contribution to the art world was so strong that he had an inclination to repudiate (often severely) any similarities with other art movements. Mondrian maintained his critical stance toward earlier movements – Symbolists, Cubists, Futurists – and later toward his own peers, such as van der Leck, Vantongerloo, van Doesburg, and toward Bauhaus artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. The advocacy of Russian constructivists' theories by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner mistakenly highlighted the concept of movement in static rhythm in Neoplasticism, which is why they finally allowed, in both painting and sculpture, a literal 'kinetic' dynamism into their 'constructivism'.

Mondrian rejected Gabo's introduction of 'kinetic-rhythm' into neoplastic painting since, once 'kineticised', a canvas would become sculptural. This is a categorical problem. However, if we interpret Gabo's proposal to mean an emphasis on the empirical rather than the categorical, then such a proposal deserves serious consideration in the context of painting, as Mondrian intended. The investigation of why Mondrian rejected 'kinetic-rhythm' in his canvasses (which, to the uninitiated, resemble 1970s Op Art[4]), will lead us to the crucial question of the fundamental purpose of the neoplastic canvas: each neoplastic canvas, in its place on the wall, functions as a module of 'composition', activating a key concept which affects other canvases in its vicinity, as well as the colour panels which comprise the walls.

Mondrian's studios left a lasting impression on other artists who visited them, especially the one at 26, rue du Départ, Paris, where Mondrian lived from 1921 to 1936. Among the retrospective comments on the effects experienced in Mondrian's studio, those of Alexander Calder and Ben Nicholson are notable. Calder's impression is discussed in Chap. 7. Here Nicholson recollects in a letter to John Summerson in January 1948, that the paintings were "entirely new to me & I did not understand them on this first visit …. They were merely, for me, a part of the very lovely feeling generated in the room". Afterward, sitting outside at a café near the very noisy Gare Montparnasse, Nicholson recalls "an astonishing feeling of quiet & repose!", stating that: "the thing I

[4] Here, I am referring to the Op Art of Bridget Riley's and Victor de Vasarely's painting, whose calculated control of the viewer's optic nerve causes the effect of kinetic movement. These works can be contrasted with, for example, the later Josef Albers' and Mark Rothko's 1950s works, which engage the viewing subject's volition.

remembered most was the feeling of light in the room & the pauses & silence during & after he'd been talking" (Joosten 1998, 155). 'Stasis' and 'silence' are terms which feature in comments made by visiting artists, specifically when describing their experiences of Mondrian's studio. Holistically, the image of Mondrian's studio and its canvases aimed at attaining this stasis, a stasis vivified by silence. Thus Nicholson poetically added: "The feeling in his studio must have been very like the feeling in one of those hermits' caves where lions used to go to have thorns taken out of their paws (Joosten 1998, 155). Here we should not forget the existence of the physical surface, on or in which the sense of rhythm and movement takes place.

3.4 Mondrian Is a Painter of Thickness?

No other painter was so particular about surface, both in the physical and conceptual sense, as Mondrian. Mondrian was a painter of the plane (flatness): of the surface as surface, but with 'thickness'.[5] The 'pure' flatness that the early twentieth century painters sought was a futile aim: perhaps only with the help of the representational cognitive system, as described above, could such absolute flatness be attained.

When Naum Gabo recognized the impossibility of this pursuit in the context of Mondrian's practice, Mondrian took notice. Gabo, also a member of the Circle[6] (as was Mondrian), was an outstanding advocate of the theoretical foundations of Russian Constructivism. Describing his encounter with Mondrian, Gabo writes:

> He was against space. Once he was showing me a painting. 'My goodness!' I said, 'Are you still painting that one?' I had seen it much earlier. 'The white is not flat enough,' he said. He thought there was still too much space in the white, and he denied any variations of colour. His ideas were very clear. He thought a painting must be flat, and that colour should not show any indication of space. This was a main principle of neo-plasticism. My argument was, 'You can go on for ever, you will never succeed' (Gabo 1966, 292).

Mondrian's struggle to realise 'flatness' came about not merely because of the difficulty in attaining an appearance of 'flatness' in the image.

Surface with thickness is a contradiction in terms. Each of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases has its own veritable geology, each is comprised of different kinds of surfaces; concave, impasto, glossy and matte, for example.

The word "thickness" distills in two ways the essence of Mondrian's treatment of the surface of painting. First, there is the manifest sense of thickness, that is, thickness which manifests as the result of accumulated layers of oil pigment. The second aspect of 'thickness' in Mondrian's painting can be termed its 'abstract' meaning. It is this second aspect – 'thickness' in relation to the important notion of

[5] Deleuze and Guattari summarized Mondrian's idiosyncrasy as a painter in the similar way: "It could be said that Mondrian was a painter of thickness" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 194).

[6] An artist group associated with the publication of *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, edited by J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo, published in London in 1937, in which Mondrian published his seminal essay "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art".

'surface' (which in common thinking would tend to connote ultimate thinness, that is, that surface has no thickness as such) – that Mondrian pursued further.

For Mondrian the 'surface' of painting constitutes a field for anti-naturalistic and anti-perspectival painting, in which, according to his own terminology, even "destruction of form" is to take place in the realization of anti-naturalistic visual rhythm. Mondrian wrote in "New Plastic in Painting" (1917): "The plastic is necessary in painting because it creates *space*. Because painting expresses space *on the flat surface*, it *requires a plastic other than naturalistic plastic* (which is *not* perceived on one plane)" (Mondrian 1986, 38). For Mondrian the 'flat' surface is not the sort of flatness where, literally, every sense of 'space' is to be eliminated. Rather, the flat surface is the place where a special type of 'space' (neoplastic space) is to be created, in contrast to "naturalistic plastic" subjective space. For Mondrian, the 'space' on the 'flat' surface is not 'depth' in the conventional perspective of pictorial space. Rather, the 'image' itself, is 'plastic' in the viewer's mind's eye. Our task then is to articulate a sense of what space could be on the flat surface of the canvas, and determine by way of analysis how it relates to the sense of (visual) rhythm and the concept of 'composition' in painting (and also of Langer's 'composition').

The surface of Mondrian's canvas is comprised of areas of sometimes such thick paint that some parts are like tiles stuck to the canvas, with the black belts cutting between them like 'grooves'. Mondrian presents the viewer with great difficulty in this regard, because we are implored (by Mondrian) to read these 'tiles' and 'grooves' as non-shapes, as interstices and 'spaces'. These thick painterly elements are so physically evident that it is almost impossible not to see them as positive entities. Yet Mondrian requires that the viewer sees 'plastic space' beyond the physicality of the neoplastic canvas. Mondrian explains in a letter to van Doesburg on March 3 1919, where he writes: "You [van Doesburg] look at the painting, and not at its outward appearance [physical shape]" (Bois and Joosten 1994, 184).

We are accustomed to seizing upon the image-subject (a concept elaborated upon in Chap. 6) within the painted surface as our gaze searches for the satisfaction of 'good' gestalt.[7] The difficulty here resides in how one's gaze can resist or avoid becoming completely subjectivised in response to the image-subject, and remain for an extended period, instead, with 'the image' itself.

In 1912 to 1914, in the early stage of his formative years of Neo-plasticism, Mondrian notes the disappearance of the surface of the painting:

> Although less bound by the material, we are still very far from the spirit. The relativity of matter. The surface has little meaning. In the present period there is more penetration. The surface disappears. One draws near to force; less matter, more force (Mondrian 1969, 71 II-41).

Mondrian's conceptualisation of force as something that emanates from the reduction and subjugation of 'matter' is fully developed in the doctrine of Neo-plasticism, in which the surface becomes a 'field' which transcends material, and from which

[7] 'Good Gestalt' is the psychological propensity to see forms and shapes within indiscernible configurations of tangled lines or other complexities, accompanied by the background-foreground, or locality-whole dichotomy (Wertheimer 1974, 71–88, Wulf 1974, 147).

force can be generated. Mondrian explains this transcendental understanding of matter and substance by way of Aristotle's concept of 'substance':

> Pure vision shows us this original unity as the *enduring force in* all things, as *the universally shared force common to all things.* This *deepest universal element* was termed by Aristotle *substance – that which is,* the *thing-in-itself*, existing itself, independent of those accidents of size, form, or qualities which constitute only the *outwardness* by which substance is manifested. It is only substance that makes externality into what it is for us (Mondrian 1986, 48).

In Mondrian's neoplastic doctrine, matter itself is understood not only as literal appearance, but also in terms of a field of force, related to the transcendental concept of *thing-in-itself*. The neoplastic surface is a substance, but not merely *as is*. This transcendental, Aristotelian understanding of the surface as 'substance', is in marked contrast to the emphatic, physical presence of the surface in Mondrian's painting, which manifests by way of the thickness of impasto and the shallow glossiness of the black belts.

In reproductions, the physicality of the canvas is rarely discernible. We may regard this as a 'loss' resulting from the translation of a painterly canvas into a printed and bound or digitised reproduction. Neo-plasticism may be thought to be more, rather than less, accessible in its reproduced and reduced (i.e., 'flattened') form from the point of view of the viewer, since material physical aspects are minimized, and the view of the image seems 'cleaner' and more direct. But in terms of neoplastic rhythm, and its energy or 'force', this is not necessarily so. The surface of the neoplastic canvas constitutes a site of dialectical relations between the conceptual surface, and the surface as a manifest physical entity. This dialectical relation between ideality (conceptuality) and physicality is further activated by the function of black lines. In my investigation of Mondrian's ideas, his theory of visual rhythm comes across as 'static', but at the same time constituting a particular kind of dynamism. Mondrian's rhythm is opposed to the expression of repetition and associations with the sequence of time, and thus contrasts markedly with Futurist expressions of movement and rhythm. Mondrian's early mature neoplastic rhythm was integrated into the composition, that is, the very *structure* of neoplastic painting. Can a viewer observe or experience neoplastic 'static' rhythm and covert movement? And if so, in what way? To attest to the efficacy or presence of neoplastic 'static' rhythm is a difficult task, since it requires that one describe the viewer's experience in terms of instructions about how to read Mondrian's canvases, which one must elicit from Mondrian's ideas. In the following section, discussion turns to Mondrian's own assertions about the actual reading of the neoplastic canvas, especially where this relates to the surface of his 1920s canvases.

3.5 Appreciation of Rhythm in Neoplastic Canvas

Faced with Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvases of the period 1921 to 1931, one might be confronted by the emptiness of the contents on the 'flat' surface of the canvas. Even if informed that there is some sense of rhythm and dynamism, the viewer is more than likely to be perplexed by the resolutely tile-like rectangles, dissected by austere and dominating black belts, and the overall effect of placid stasis. The impression of the surface of the canvas is of a straight-jacketed dynamism, contained within a well configured design on canvas, accompanied by bold colours. Some of Kandinsky's, Boccioni's, Matisse's, and Klee's canvases, which are also deeply concerned with music and rhythm, appear to contain more freedom of rhythm and movement. Why does Mondrian shackle openhandedly the intrinsic dynamism of painting and so confidently proclaim that 'free rhythm' and 'dynamic rhythm' are found in neoplastic painting? His condemnation of the 'layman', who cannot see dynamism in his painting, seems altogether unfair.

From a lifetime committed to the art of painting, Mondrian's professionalism bordered on arrogance at times, and an impatience toward those who did not take his neoplastic theory seriously. Mondrian's seriousness toward art tends to eclipse the more playful aspect of his character.[8] He systematically presented enigmatic questions to his viewers, and was certainly dogmatic in his approach to art. But Mondrian was far more than a strategist seeking to manipulate art discourse for his own ends. Mondrian carried the burden of the enlightenment tradition, and clearly possessed a Hegelian Utopian ideology with regard to the potentialities of everyday life. Like Hegel, Mondrian was dedicated through his art and theory to a society where art is no longer necessary.

Mondrian's ideas are richly imbued by a variety of theories of rhythm. These include a restatement of Greek theories of non-metre based rhythm (schema), which is in line with contemporary music composers, and an introduction of African-American anti-melodic polyrhythm (of jazz), Hindu-theosophical rhythm as equilibrated point,[9] and rhythm as composition based on Hegelian logical dialectivism (rhythm in contrast). To work out these complex understandings of rhythm, the canvas becomes Mondrian's empirical theatre for constructing and testing his ideas about rhythm. Mondrian's 1920s neoplastic canvases are testimony of the struggle between his theory of art, and his commitment to empirical experience as a painter.

Herbert Read,[10] describes with clarity the difficulties faced by what we might call the 'naturalistic' viewer when confronted by abstract paintings in general:

---

[8] Many an acquaintance of Mondrian comments on the humorous side of his character – his wit, bawdiness, and jokes. This is testified by Nally van Doesburg, Harry Holzman, J. J. P. Oud and others.

[9] In his writing, Mondrian seems to have taken care to distance himself from this esoteric understanding of rhythm, in order that his thinking not be taken as mere arcane mysticism.

[10] Harbert Read was an internationally acclaimed art critic in the 1940–50s. He was an acquaintance of Mondrian's especially during the latter's evacuation to England in 1938–39 (Burstow 1997).

> There is no doubt that many people, not prejudiced by emotional factors, people of general aesthetic sensibility, find difficulty in discovering an aesthetic response to non-figurative art. I believe that in most cases such people cannot separate the superficial 'decorative' appeal of a non-figurative composition from its constructive significance. They are like those people (not necessarily to be despised) who only appreciate the melodic or linear element in music, and are incapable of grasping its polyphonic depth (Read 1951, 235).

There is the insinuation here that in order to reach the point of appreciating Mondrian's painting in its "polyphonic depth", the 'naturalistic' viewer needs to have learnt something beforehand. Rudolf Arnheim laconically expresses this bewilderment of 'polyphonic' complexities of neoplastic canvas in terms of stasis: "The lifework of Mondrian presents the extraordinary case of a world in which a maximum of stability combines with a sense of nowhere and everywhere" (Arnheim 1986, 292). Effectively, Arnheim invites us to deal with Mondrian's equilibrated stasis beyond a conventional view of painting.

Beyond Romanticism's linear melodious line, as Read maintains above, we may learn something in order to have an ear for 'new' aspects of the structure of music and its rhythm, in such composers, for example, as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Antheil or Messiaen. In order to hear rhythm in these composers' works, the listener inadvertently integrates the fragmented array of sounds. On the other hand, the polyrhythms of African drumming, Indian music, and jazz are built upon strong metres, and are therefore more palatable than non-metre based contemporary music. Apart from conventional sense of melody or linear articulated lines, listeners are required to develop ears to appreciate constructive or synthesising aspects of a piece of music. When (as voluntary listeners) we hear the 'polyphonic' or 'polyrhythmic' music of some contemporary European composers, it is crucial that we keep listening deeply in order to linger on the layers of flickering similarities and contrast. Here, the sense of a linear order of past-present-future is completely disrupted, replaced instead by an unfolding process of 'becoming'. Without the help of metre, repetition, or regular tempo – the elements of linearity in music – this sense of 'becoming' can be difficult to discern for the 'naturalistic' listener.

The same is true for the appreciation of non-figurative art; especially in the case of the non-referential canvases of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism, which is also non-iconic abstract art, and which is again in contrast with Kandinsky's canvases. Using Read's notion of "constructive significance", the viewer generates the sense of rhythm and structure within himself or herself. Jean-Paul Sartre argues for the positive role of the viewer of abstract painting: "We keep on looking, for if we ever stopped, everything would disintegrate" (Sartre 1963 (1961), 76–77).

Although orthodox, Edmund B. Feldman's definition of visual rhythm is worth considering, in the light of the necessity for elements of metre in the listener's cognition of rhythm: "we might define rhythm in art as *the regular recurrence in space of one or more of the visual elements.*" Feldman discusses the power of metre-oriented rhythm, which, he explains, compels the eye to "follow a repeat sequence almost against our will" (Feldman 1992, 243–4). In his comparison between Mu Ch'i's "individual" repetition (Fig. 3.4) and the "boring" repetition of Wayne

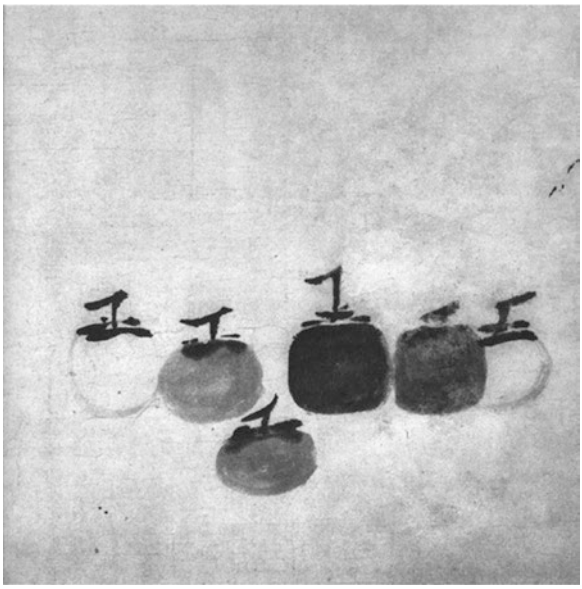


Fig. 3.4 Mu Ch'i, *Six Persimmons*, c. 1270, Ryokou-in, Kyoto

Thiebaud's *Seven Jellied Apples*, Feldman explains in more detail the power of an ostensive expression of rhythm in linear structure:

> They employ *repetition with variation,* which is like *theme and variation* in music. Thus, simple alternations between black and white, solid and void, warm and cool can be varied by introducing an unexpected element, a slight change in emphasis; the goal is to "wake up" the viewer without destroying the rhythmic pattern of his or her experience (Feldman 1992, 243).

Feldman also writes that "A rhythm is like a habit: it creates unity but it can frustrate variety" (Feldman 1992, 243). Murray Schafer's view is that: "Rhythm says 'I am here and I want to go there'" (Schafer 1986, 65), which echoes the definition of rhythm as an imperative force. Feldman's and Schafer's respective observations of rhythm are all encompassing and based on practicality.

Matisse's *The Dance* has just such a manifest power upon the viewer. As we saw above, the circular movement of dancers constitutes a "regular recurrence in space" (Schafer 1986, 65) and a repetition which suggest progression. *The Dance* possesses a regulated linear structure and metre. By contrast, Matisse's *Music* constitutes a non-linear type of rhythm, characterised by an irregular recurrence in space, with no flow or sense of progression. Among the four sitters, there is a noticeable sense of "alternation". If we take the former painting as constituting "individual" repetition and the latter as (so-called) "boring" repetition, then the commonalities between the two are "repetition with variation" (or "theme and variation"), and the "wake-up" effect of an irregularity which does not destroy the "rhythmic pattern" of the viewer's experience. With its undecided gesture indicating both left right and left, the bottom right figure in *The Dance* brings about the "wake-up" effect for the viewer. These important elements of visual rhythm ('variety in repetition' and the 'wake-up'

effect) are not relevant to the metre, nor to the linear structure of the painting. Rather, these elements reside in the structure or composition of the paintings themselves.

Mondrian's views might coincide with Feldman's and Schafer's empirical description of rhythm. An empirical expression of rhythm in his neoplastic works,[11] as far as conventional understandings of rhythm are concerned, may not become apparent until the New York period, 1940–44, (or perhaps earlier, in the Double-line period, 1934–1939). But for the *non*habitual, or 'unconventionalised' viewer or listener (which of course includes Mondrian himself), non-repetitive static rhythm, as structure or composition, does indeed manifest. The paradox is that it does not appear as such in the pictorial configuration by way of depiction, but, rather, manifests for and by way of the creative, arbitrary viewer or listener. On the basis of this activating viewer or listener, one can expect, or 'trust', the unifying impetus of recurrence, and thereby experience rhythm in the composition. When we examine Mondrian's aversion to repetition more closely, we find that it specifically concerns the 'sequence' of repetition. In "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917) Mondrian wrote that "to see life as a constant recurrence (in different ways) of the same thing, as continual *repetition*" (Mondrian 1986, 54) is not the way to depart from nature and reach the abstract. He does acknowledge repetition, since it presupposes difference and the power of change, but in his view its power is insufficient for the spiritual development of humans: "While not denying *change* in life and in art, this vision [of continual repetition] denies their *continuous tendency to depart from the natural: their growth toward the abstract*" (Mondrian 1986, 47–48). Mondrian's fundamental stance in his Neo-plasticism is clear:

> We see the natural *outside* of man *repeating* itself, for (in this world) nature is bound to the law of repetition…; but man's spirit is (relatively) free and – in evolving – abolishes this repetition (Mondrian 1986, 47 n.g).

An echo of Hegel emerges here. Hegel wrote, in *The Philosophy of History*:

> The changes that take place in Nature – how infinitely manifold so ever they may be – exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle; in Nature there happens "nothing new under the sun," and the multiform play of its phenomena so far induces a feeling of *ennui*; only in those changes which take place in the region of Spirit does anything new arise (Hegel 1956, 54).

In Mondrian's Hegelian dialectic, "the spirit's rising development" occurs only "through the maturing of the natural in a man" (Mondrian 1986, 47). On the contrary, nature's repetition shackles the development of human spirituality. In Mondrian's thinking, theosophical 'evolution' and the Hegelian "spirit with the History of the World" is so strong that spiritual development should not be cast in

[11] There are earlier examples of Mondrian's work, which pronounced more ostensive visual movement and repetition, before his neoplastic period (1918–1944); for example, *Pier and Ocean* (or *Plus-Minus*) Series (1914-16), *Composition in Colour A* (1916). However, according to neoplastic doctrine, in which Mondrian denied the 'naturalistic' treatment of repetitive and sequential rhythm, these canvases lack structure. The (rectangular) shapes float on the surface against a vague background space, thus constituting a background-forground dichotomy which, in his neoplastic period, he vehemently denied.

terms of a cyclic mode of repetition. Regularly pulsed repetitive patterning should be avoided, since it lacks contrast and oppositions and results ultimately in *ennui.* Thus it is 'natural' for Mondrian to proclaim in 1926 that: "Naturalistic repetition, symmetry, must be excluded."[12] Mondrian repeatedly rejected this "non-spiritual" (naturalistic) repetition. But as his more subtle arguments suggest, he does not reject that repetition which comes about through the contrast of oppositions:

> True, regular division incurs the risk of repetition. But this repetition can be annihilated through opposition. Anything can become a system – irregular division as well as regular: it depends on how one solves it (Mondrian 1986, 82).

Mondrian's methodology – the annihilation of repetition – consists of "*constantly annulling opposition*: destruction of repetition" (Mondrian 1986, 154). Thus he replaces 'old' harmony with 'new' harmony:

> Naturalistic harmony, the old harmony, is not *plastically expressed* according to the concept of *pure* equilibrated relationship. It is expressed as *relative* equilibrium. It remains dominated by the "repetition" characteristic of nature: it expressed opposition but not the *continuous annihilation of the one and the other.* That is why the New Plastic is precisely *against* the old harmony. To realize the new harmony is the difficult task of the new artist (Mondrian 1986, 114).

Mondrian's evolutionary development cannot accept regular continuation and continuous fusion of simultaneous events, which nullifies the tension of contrast. "Continuous fusion and repetition are the principal characteristics of the natural" (Mondrian 1986, 153), which Mondrian was completely against. However, under the grand narrative of 'evolution' and anti-repetition, Mondrian puts forward sensitive arguments about the practicality of (creative) repetition. Writing in 1922 he states:

> [B]y repeating sounds in different relationships, it will be possible to express with a minimal number of sounds and noises the richness and fullness that neoplastic painting achieves with its few basic colors. Although of brief duration, the composition will allow the formation of an "image" (Mondrian 1986, 162).

The construction of the "image", from the composition, is the important issue here. Be it in the construction of a piece of music or a neoplastic canvas, the emphasis is on the necessary condition that only strictly limited expressive means can be used to elicit an "image." Mondrian explains the dynamic of the image in relation to the neoplastic canvas, asserting our perception of "successive relationships":

> [A]fter the first general impression our glance goes from one plane to its oppositions, and from these back to the plane. In this way, avoiding traditional repetition, we continually perceive new relationships which produce the total impression (Mondrian 1986, 162).

Thus, Mondrian's strategy consists in avoiding conventional (or 'naturalistic') repetition and in our perceiving "successive relationships." Here, the notion of "relationships" relates to 'variation' (with similarity) and to 'wake-up' (through contrast). Such relationships in composition can be recognised not just through 'natural' or 'habitual' vision, but through concept and understanding.

[12] The sixth item in General Principles of Neo-Plasticism (Mondrian 1986, 214).

Mondrian's synthesis of visual rhythm constitutes a reciprocal activity between seeing and understanding. "The total impression" is both the means and the end. It is the equilibrated point, toward which the *rhythmising* process brings a viewer to experience a further level of totality. The process of *rhythmisation* constitutes an endless spiral, a set of recurrent cognitive processing of relations: from one plane to its oppositions, and from these back to the plane, which leads to "the total impression." This incessant shift constitutes a continual 'aspect-dawning' and relates to the sense of 'speed' in the neoplastic force field.

3.6 Transcendental Black Lines: 'Speed'

In *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, Blotkamp suggests that the principle element in Mondrian's neoplastic painting is "destruction", pointing out that Mondrian described the totality of his work over a lifetime as a series of destructive actions. Blotkamp cites a letter to Sweeney dated May 24 1943, in which Mondrian writes: "Now the only problem is to destroy these lines also through mutual opposition" (Blotkamp 1994, 240). Blotkamp draws attention to a phrase in the margin of the letter, where Mondrian had written, "I think that the destructive element is too much neglected in art" (Blotkamp 1994, 240), but continues by stating that: "Freed from subject-matter, these expressive means can be composed in such a relationship that they dissolve themselves and establish only the dynamic rhythm which is the true expression of plastic art" (Mondrian 1986, 380). This sense of rhythm in neoplastic painting – Mondrian's own sense of rhythm – cannot be equated with the self-limiting interpretation at which Blotkamp has arrived:

> In the last two paintings, however – and this change goes even deeper – he has also relinquished the lines as the structuring principle of the composition. That function has been appropriated by the tiny dots of colour that lend rhythm to the surface of the painting (Blotkamp 1994, 240).

The very last vestige of the early neoplastic principle was the straight line. The function of the straight line and Mondrian's understanding of it is of enormous value to the investigation of neoplastic visual rhythm. Mondrian states in "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919):

> B (A Painter). The search for the expression of vastness led to the search for the *greatest* tension: the straight line; because all curvature resolves into the straight, no place remains for the curved (Mondrian 1986, 77).

Thus, curved lines are to be replaced by straight lines because they lack sufficient tension. In "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" (1919–20), Mondrian describes the dual function of rhythm as at once 'expansion' and 'limitation', and explains the meaning of the perpendicular in his painting:

> I have already explained that this expression consists of the straight and the planar: *only the straight can express expansion and limitation equivalently.* These two opposites appear

> plastically through the most extreme difference of position: *the perpendicular* (Mondrian 1986, 118).

The opposing function of expansion and limitation generates tension in the straight line, and this tension is most acute in the perpendicular position, accented by the criss-cross points. The generation of rectangular planes is a by-product of the straight line, and is not to be confused as a primary form. These rectangles exist through their function in terms of contrast among and between the primary colours and non-colours. Contrast between colour and non-colour planes becomes a very important element in the generation of the sense of rhythm and energy in Mondrian's painting. Mondrian elucidates more clearly the idea of the 'rectangular' opposition of straight lines:

> The absolute is expressed in the straight. Painting and architecture in the new aesthetic are consequent realizations of *composition of the straight in self-annihilating opposition, thus a multiple duality of the constant rectangular relationship* (Mondrian 1986, 173–4).

Straight lines constitute "self-annihilating" opposition, and are thereby the force of destruction. The endless combination of grouping of the 'rectangular' produces dynamism and rhythm: all of which occur on the static, 'cool' geometric surface. Here rhythm functions as 'static' energy.

As the theosophist Alice A. Bailey explained, "*Rhythm,* or the attainment of the point of perfect balance and of equilibrium," is a form of great energy at the point of equilibrated conflicting energy. For Mondrian, the identification of the concept of rhythm with one from theosophical philosophy is far from a retreat into mysticism: rather, it has quite concrete implications.

The opposition between vertical and horizontal straight lines is the abstract embodiment of 'form'. In Neo-plasticism, this abstract embodiment becomes a 'field' in which only the relations between these elements express energy and force. For Mondrian 'form' "must be reduced to the duality of opposition of the straight line in order to realize equilibrium" (Mondrian 1986, 220). Further, the function of the straight line does not imply merely a deductive role: it also constitutes the 'open' principle of form. Mondrian elaborates this point, using as an example the conventional 'open' form of the circle, and laboriously endows the straight line with the limitless 'openness', which pushes it beyond the circle and the curved line:

> We can distinguish forms as closed and open forms. We may consider closed forms those in which the circumference has neither beginning nor end, such as the circle. When the circumference shows a beginning and an end, it can be considered an open form, such as a segment of a circle. It is clear that the open form is less limiting than the closed form. Forms composed of straight lines are more open than those in which the circumference is a curved line. They are established by intersection and not by continuation (Mondrian 1986, 346).

The curved line has iconographic associations with the notion of continual time. A segmented circular line loses the sense of closure, but maintains the function of continuation. Despite their segmentation, they continue to suggest circular movement: but this effect manifests in the form of *enclosed* movement.

Mondrian endows the straight line with the function of both beginning and end, 'speed' (like the 'ray') and the inherent force of the perpendicular. Schematically

speaking, the straight line in Neo-plasticism combines the dual operations of both the 'speed' of the straight line, and the force by which forms are 'opened up' (that is, in contrast to the way a form is 'closed' by its corners once a 'shape' is established as such). This force is violently energized at the point of each intersection. Since it amounts to an 'abrupt' stop, but is at the same time a 'rushing' start, it implies 'segmentation' of the flow of time. The straight line in Neo-plasticism operates in contradiction to the contour line, whose function is to shape, or *enclose*, its forms. Thus, the straight line can be understood as an independent element of the composition: it might be envisaged as a sharp cut, dissecting primary-coloured and non-colour planes across the surface of the canvas.

Seeing these squares and rectangles as 'non-shapes' is actually quite difficult to do, accustomed as we are to reading intersecting lines as forming shapes, not 'containing potential spaces'. The existence of the rectangle or square arises by way of the presence of structural force; that is, the straight lines and black strips on the canvas. The rectangles operate as modules which form multitudes of simultaneous configurations with other rectangles, which in turn accentuate "the limiting lines, crossing [the rectangles] one over the other. Thus the planes were not only cut and abolished, but their relationships became more active" (Mondrian 1986, 340).

Mondrian wrote in 1930 that the difference between "morphoplastic and neoplastic is that the latter represents rhythm *itself*." The neoplastic thus represents rhythm "in an exact way", rather than "clothed in [the] limited form" of the morphoplastic. As a result, Mondrian argued:

> the eye is not charmed at first, at least the eye of those who seek the complicated beauty of form. They see only straight lines and rectangular planes (Mondrian 1986, 238).

For the viewer who, as Mondrian put it, is "blinded or bound by tradition" and cannot see rhythm in neoplastic painting, who can only see "straight lines and rectangular planes", education in accord with the 'new' aesthetic is necessary. Mondrian himself was aware that this amounts to very "complex aesthetics" which go way beyond the "morphoplastic"[13] and into "interiorized beauty." In short, one must *learn* the neoplastic concept of rhythm, or otherwise risk being in the dark and simply not understanding it. Here, Wittgenstein is pertinent, when he reminds us of the relationship between knowing the rules (the concept of the game or the process of learning rules) and playing a game: "I say: The person who cannot play *this* game does not have *this* concept" (Wittgenstein 1977, 31e III – §115).

Mondrian's black-and-white neoplastic paintings, of which there are six known canvases produced in the period from 1926 to 1936,[14] can be examined in terms of the visual effects that arise from a limited palette. In these canvases, the contrast between the black belts and white planes is maximal, determining one's reading of the interactions between black line and white plane: black appears to protrude while

[13] *"Vormbeelding"* denotes the plastic form, and is translated by Holtzman and James as "morphoplastic" (Mondrian 1986, 394 n.5).

[14] Mondrian made 'black-and-white' canvases in 1926 (one canvas), 1929 (one), 1930 (two), 1931 (one) and 1934 (one).

white retreats, creating space in the surface. Against the definitive figuration of black lines, which read as objects 'on' or across the white surface, the white reads as transparent and thus invisible, adding to the instability of the planar surface as something to be read as a modulated, but definitively flat, plane. Presented in this way, especially as black lines or shapes on a white canvas, black presents itself according to the pictorial convention or dialectic of figure and ground relations. White therefore reads not so much in terms of background, but as 'absence' of ground altogether (as with the blankness of a page: we literally do not "see" it there accompanying the printed text, unless intending to do so). While remaining clearly recognisable as 'white' (according to indexical reading), it is *virtually invisible* in formal-pictorial terms in these paintings. The white of Mondrian's black-and-white neoplastic canvas offers no resistance, yielding instead to a blank 'nothing' which retreats infinitely back between the black lines. This, of course, presented a problem for Mondrian. To suppress the illusion of transparency or absence, and attain flatness across the surface of the canvas, Mondrian thickened and also applied a matte effect to the white. Thus, white gained physical and apparent substance in contrast to black. This prevented the white parts from appearing to retreat from the surface, and at the same time made the glossy black belts appear thin, shallow, and thereby at one with the planar surface of the canvas.

The black strips[15] were varnished: in visual terms, the shine functions to give a sense of 'speed' to the narrow bands of black running between the thick impasto white planes. By applying varnish to them, Mondrian perhaps attempted the impossible – of making 'black light'; an entity or imaginable quality summoning the energy of light to imply 'speed'. As Wittgenstein remarks, black light is something of a paradox. Substituting "blackness" for the highlights in a picture, he asserts, "… wouldn't get black lights":

> A *shine*, a 'high-light' cannot be black (Wittgenstein 1977, 19e III – §22).

Yet Mondrian wrote in his notebook (1912–14) during his pre neoplastic stage, that:

> In order to express in form the power that emanates from nature, lines generally must be made much blacker in the plastic arts than one ordinarily sees them in nature (Mondrian 1986, 18).

Clearly, he required something extraordinary from the means available to him as a painter. We can speculate that Mondrian's ploy, in using varnish only on the black strips, was to make the black belts 'blacker' (Fig. 3.5). The application of varnish is necessary, since for Mondrian 'blacker' does not mean a matt, velvet-like black (that is, a black which is stable, absolute, flat, and retreating into deep pictorial space), but a shiny black which 'emanates' from a reflective surface above the materiality, to become fully distinguishable from the matt impasto of the primary- and non- colour planes. Wittgenstein asks: "Mightn't shiny black and matt black" have "different colour-names?" (Wittgenstein 1977, 36e III – §152), suggesting that the qualitative

[15] My thanks go to Harry Cooper who, in his feedback to my manuscript, pointed out that not all the black strips of neo-plastic canvases are varnished.

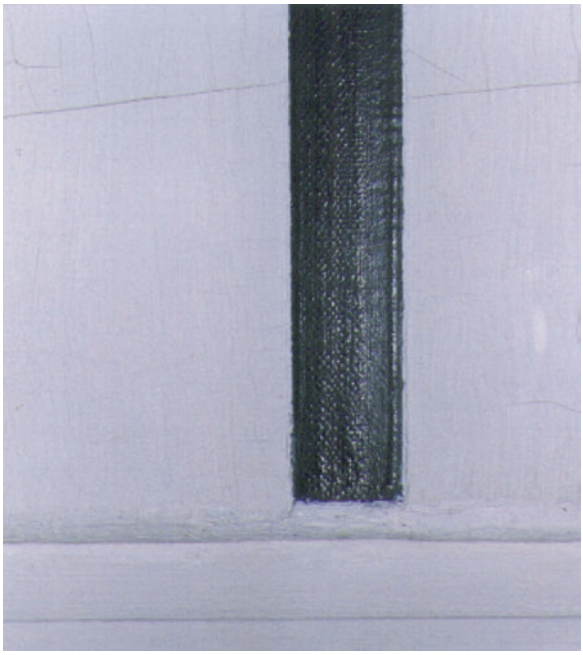


Fig. 3.5 Piet Mondrian, *Composition B, with Double Line and Yellow and Grey, 1932* (B 231) (details)

difference between them is sufficient to permit distinct perceptual effects or experiences. Mondrian’s notion of a ‘blacker’ black seems allied to Wittgenstein’s comment that shiny and matt black are different kinds of black (for example, as distinct from ‘pale’ and ‘dark’ black, which would imply variations of the colour grey).

My view is that Mondrian’s use of varnish on the black strips imbues them with a sense of ‘speed’ which would also ally them more to his overall quest to bring about visual rhythm through the opposition of elements. ‘Speed’ is not a property of painting in the same sense that ‘rhythm’ is not. Both are aspects of painting, based on the viewer’s subjective participation. ‘Speed’ is an ultimate tempo: it provides the tenuous grounds for a sense of quick movement: here, visualized ‘speed’ is associated with visualized rhythm.

A smooth glass pane is amenable to the sense of ‘speed’ for the very simple reason that its surface, compared to a matt one (paper, cloth, etc.) evokes a particular haptic sense (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 218). Merleau-Ponty describes this as the (imagined or envisioned) sensation, drawn from visual perception and empirical experience of the glass, of one’s fingertip moving over the glass surface without resistance. Given Mondrian’s assiduousness when working and reworking the surface of each canvas until the balance of tensions between elements was right, this point is very important when we contemplate his intentions in exploiting the difference between velvet-like matt white (or colour) planes, and the shiny, gleaming varnished black strips. The former feels ‘slow’ compared with the latter.

Mondrian’s static rhythm is imbued with both conventional and progressive traits. The static configuration and rigid construction of painterly space connotes the

Renaissance tradition, and is found in the painterly structure of his compatriot Jan Vermeer's canvasses. However, Mondrian's progressive traits are far more meaningful and radical than the works of his contemporaries. Mondrian's static rhythm, in particular, is distinct in its specific structure, which is asymmetrical and against the chronographic (or strobographic) expression characterised in the works of the Futurists and Duchamp. A most notable trait is Mondrian's propensity to oppose metre and any sequential expression of time, as was adopted successfully according to their own terms by the Futurists, Simultaneists and Duchamp. Moreover, the seemingly simple complexion of Mondrian's neoplastic painting is far more complex than initial impressions suggest. It connotes the dialectical conflict between opposed aspects: the composition and the "image" itself, the features of the physical surface of the canvas (black belts and impasto planes), form and non-form. Even the black belts, apparently of the same width, are, on closer inspection, all slightly different. Although it does not come across in reproductions of Mondrian's canvasses, one can observe that varnish has been applied only to the black belts to produce a noticeable gloss which contrasts with the matt effect of the impasto planes: in this way, the colour black becomes 'blacker' and its glossiness and shine thereby convey an impression of 'speed' to the viewer.

The seeming simplicity of Mondrian's neoplastic canvasses may suggest that a casual inspection of his work will suffice. However, if the viewer pays attention to what appears across the surface of these still, arid paintings, many complexities are to be discovered. Mondrian's neoplastic canvas is completely different from the regular configuration of tiles, which can bore the viewer: their simple and predictable regularity does not stimulate our memory system, since it is very easy to memorize and once understood, easily forgotten. On the contrary, Mondrian's canvasses are inimical to memorization, beyond their more simplistic features.

References

Apollonio, Umbro. 1973. *Futurist Manifestos. The Documents of 20th Century Art*. New York: Viking Press.

Arnheim, Rudolph. 1986. The Center Surviving Mondrian. *The American Society for Aesthetics* XLIV (3, Spring): 292–293.

Blotkamp, Carel. 1994. *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.

Bois, Yve-Alain, and Joop Joosten. 1994. *Piet Mondrian: 1872–1944*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Braun, Marta. 1992. *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Burstow, Robert. 1997. The Limit of Modernist Art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War': Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monment to the Unknown Political Prisoner. *The Oxford Art Journal* 20: 68–80.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy? Trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson*. New York: Verso.

Duchamp, Marcel. 1973. *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchard Du Sel)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Eisenman, Peter. 1993. *Re-working Eisenman*. London/Berlin: Academy Editions; Ernst & Sohn.
Feldman, Edmund Burke. 1992. *Varieties of Visual Experience*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.
Gabo, Naum. 1937. Sculpture: Carving and Construction in Space. In *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, ed. J.L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, and Naum Gabo. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
———. 1966. Reminiscences of Mondrian. *Studio International*, December.
———. 1974. *The Tradition of Constructivism*. Boston: A Da Capo Paperback.
Gabo, Naum, Herbert Edward Read, and Leslie Martin. 1957. *Gabo: Constructions, Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings, Engravings*. London: Lund Humphries.
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1956. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover Publications.
Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.
Kandinsky, Wassily, Franz Marc, and Klaus Lankheit. 1974. *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*. New documentary ed, *Documents of 20th-century art*. New York: Viking Press.
Kandinsky, Wassily, Kenneth Clement Lindsay, and Peter Vergo. 1982. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 1 (1901–1921)*, 2 vols. London: Faber.
Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard Vincent Hong, Edna Hatlestad Hong, and Søren Kierkegaard. 1983. *Fear and Trembling; Repetition, Kierkegaard's Writings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
———. 1985. *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard's Writings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. C. Smith. London/New York: Routledge.
Mondrian, Piet. 1969. *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912–1914*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International nv.
———. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.
Read, Herbert Edward. 1951. *The Philosophy of Modern Art: Collected Essays by Herbert Read*. London: Faber and Faber.
Robinson, Susan Barnes. 1981. *Giacomo Balla: Divisionism and Futurism 1871–1912*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963 (1961). The Unprivileged Painter: Lapoujade. *Essays in Aesthetics*. London: Peter Owen.
Schafer, R. Murray. 1986. *The Thinking Ear: Complete Writings on Music Education*. Toronto: Arcana Editions.
Wertheimer, Max. 1974. Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms. In *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, ed. Willis D. Ellis. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1977. *Remarks on Colour*. Trans. L.L. McAlister and M. Schättle. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G.H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler. 1998. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, Rev. 2nd ed. Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
Wulf, Friedrich. 1974. Tendencies in Figural Variation. In *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, ed. Willis D. Ellis. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Chapter 4
Mondrian's Rhythm and Contemporary Music (His Music Peers)

> *Many a one would like to know how the true movement of a musical work can be known. Such knowledge, alas, is beyond words. It is the ultimate perfection of music, accessible only through great experience and talent.*
>
> – Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister,* 1739 (Sachs 1953, 380)

> *A (A Singer). How can you say that, not being a musician!*
> *B. (A Painter) I can say it because, fundamentally, all art is one. Painting has shown me that the equilibrated composition of color relationships ultimately surpasses naturalistic composition and naturalistic plastic—when the aim is to express equilibrium, harmony, as purely as possible.*
>
> – Piet Mondrian (Mondrian 1986, 79)

4.1 Is Mondrian's Visual Rhythm a Different Rhythm?

Mondrian's idea of rhythm is based on 'anti-sequential repetition'. If visual rhythm is only plausible by way of producing repetitive or sequential motifs, then we need to establish whether or not it is possible to identify Mondrian's specific idea of rhythm, not only in terms of how Mondrian himself put it, but in terms which accord with existing theories of rhythm within modern Western thought. So how does Mondrian's rhythm compare to the ideas of other theorists: does the word "rhythm", as Mondrian uses it, imply significations and associations completely at odds with those of other thinkers, especially those from within the Western tradition? Is there any common understanding of rhythm between Western and Eastern, between ancient and modern thought, e.g., from Europe, India, Java, Africa, China, and Japan, from early Greek thought to that of our time? As Wittgenstein suggests, whether a particular word is necessary "in the ostensive definition" is very much a matter of whether *without* that word "the other person takes the definition otherwise than I wish" (Wittgenstein 1958, 14e).

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_4

Faced with a diversity of understandings of rhythm, there is great potential for misunderstanding, and more so perhaps for the Western influenced mind. Here we would benefit from establishing or finding common ground on which the word "rhythm" might effectively mean something similar to persons of dissimilar cultures. If this is not possible, there is value nonetheless in accounting for the significant diversity—of commonalities and differences—in understandings of rhythm in the West and the East, in Africa, and where jazz is concerned. It is worth noting the way in which different types of rhythms from Asia and Africa were incorporated into Western musical conventions, thereby modifying the Western understanding of rhythm. The definition of rhythm that Mondrian proposed tends to be regarded as 'different' rhythm; that is, *unconventional* in the full sense of the term. Our task in this chapter is to determine whether, and by what criteria, Mondrian's definition differs from understandings of rhythm from among the diversity of definitions developed by various thinkers and theorists in the West.

Mondrian, though in a sense a model of Western rationalism and culture, clung, especially with regard to music, to ideas that might seem alien to the modern West: that is, more akin to ideas found within Eastern perceptions, in particular to Hindu-Buddhist traditions, and those of ancient Greece. How it was that Mondrian's thought came to be imbued with Eastern (and ancient Greek) traditional conceptions of music and rhythm may seem an enigma, unless one considers that Mondrian was influenced by theosophical thought, which itself originates from a mixture of various religions, notably Indian Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, and of varieties of philosophical thought both ancient and modern. The influence of Theosophy, aside from a mixture of Western philosophies, was significant, although there is still dispute about the degree of its influence upon Mondrian's conception of music and rhythm: that is, it is difficult to imagine that a single factor, such as an association with Theosophy, could dominate over all others and thereby structure fundamental notions about music in the mind of an artist and thinker brought up within the Western music tradition and its influencing atmosphere. This suggests that there may have been other sources of influence.

In the discussion below, I will examine the attitude toward music and rhythm in Western Europe in the early twentieth century, the era which defined the atmosphere in which Mondrian lived prior to his move to New York in 1940. Of particular concern here is how the theory of rhythm in music and the visual arts was and has been acknowledged in western thinking. First, I will discuss Mondrian's theory of rhythm in relation to rhythm in Western contemporary music, to which Mondrian was exposed through various associations and friendships, but especially (at that time) contemporary Dutch composers. Second, I will discuss the influence of jazz, especially on Mondrian's later work (after 1927), including his New York period. Mondrian was a great fan of jazz, and a fanatic ballroom dancer. He wrote several essays about jazz and music, and used numerous musical metaphors to explain his art, in the light of which the influence of music on Mondrian's Neo-plasticism cannot be ignored.

4.2 Rhythm Without Metre?

There are two types of theoreticians of rhythm. One who says that metre and rhythm are inseparable, and the other, mainly post-1950, who regard metre and rhythm as completely different entities. The former includes such theorists as Ludwig Klages and Gisèle Brelet. The latter, Grosvenor Cooper, Leonard B. Meyer and Jonathan Kramer, among others. A typical example of the former references the experience of rhythm in the train, characterised by periodical repetition and regular tempo. Examples of the latter include the Gregorian chant and Japanese music, which are characterised by an organic sense of interval or 'space'. Indian music and Hindu music (including Javanese or Indonesian *gamelan* music) can be placed roughly in the middle: in its practical form as music played/performed, it uses an exact metre (or tempo) and a specific sense of 'space' or interval; in terms of pure theory, there is an emphasis on the special meaning of non-time-based interval or 'space'.

In the contemporary European music scene (from the end of the nineteenth century) the influence of Asian music, notably Javanese *gamelan* music, cannot be ignored. The 1889 Paris Exhibition gave the general European public their first opportunity to hear the *gamelan* orchestra, and its impact on European composers was far reaching. To European composers, the advent of 'space' oriented or non-linear sound was an astonishing development, and its influence can be said to have contributed to the atmosphere of contemporary music, exemplified in the compositions of, among others, Mahler and Schoenberg. And, as well, the French so-called 'Impressionist' composers Debussy and Ravel.

It is not necessarily easy, in music, to discern which passages are 'rhythmic' and which are not. Rhythm is a subjective matter, rather than a matter of recourse to a predetermined notion. So-called 'rhythmic' music (which includes much classical, ethnic and pop) has a manifest metre and regular beats. For some listeners, these definitive beats motivate an almost automatic response. Musical rhythms such as the Samba, African drumming, Flamenco, mainstream jazz, or any music which might be deemed 'danceable', are characterised by an emphasis on beats and pulsed metres. We might define this type of rhythm in terms of an objective property, based on which listeners almost unanimously respond to the rhythm and dance. Yet some listeners might appear indifferent, seemingly unaffected by even the most compelling rhythmic beat.[1] Contemporary classical music such as Olivier Messiaen's

[1] Certain psychological and physiological experimentations similarly suggest that even in the most stoic of listeners, a variety of subtle movements will reveal an empathy with the beat: light tapping of fingers or toes, nodding head, etc.

For example, Wittgenstein reports his own experience:

> When I imagine a piece of music, something I do every day & often, I —always I think — rhythmically grind my upper & lower front teeth together. I have noticed it before but usually it takes place quite unconsciously. Moreover it's as though the notes in my imagination were produced by this movement.

I think this way of hearing music in the imagination may be very common. I can of course also imagine music without moving my teeth, but then the notes are much more blurred, much less clear, less pronounced (Wittgenstein et al. 1998, 32e).

L'ascension (1933) does not have a discernible regular metre, however, the listener is induced to work out the groupings from the concatenation of tonalities within the flow, by which means the functioning of metre does not reside in the music, but takes place in the listener's mind. The acquisition of music's rhythm for the listener is therefore arguably as much the result of an intellectual process as it is a sensual or 'intuitive' response.

T. S. Eliot alludes to the special sensibilities that operate in relation to music, in his poem, *Dry Salvages*.

> For most of us, there is only the unattended
> Moment, the moment in and out of time.
> The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
> The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
> Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
> That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
> While the music lasts (Kramer 1988, 17).

Though Eliot's *Dry Salvages* was dedicated in general to the appreciation of European (and thus conventional) classical music, he does not suggest that through our auditory senses alone we are predisposed to being emotionally moved or directed by music. Rather, the suggestion is that there is a 'mind's-ear' at work. The dynamic aspect of the ambient effect of strong beats on the listener, in turn, may diminish the function of the arbitrary 'mind's-ear', overpowering it: Thus, "… music heard so deeply/That it is not heard at all." A certain piece of music with strongly stressed beats, might be said to be 'felt' (in the original meaning of 'feeling', which relates to touch) or to 'resound' in the listener; again, not only through the corporeal ear—i.e., that part of the body which receives sound—but also by way of the *inner ear*, that part of the self which directs the function of a *listening mind*: it is this latter species of ear which demands attention in an analysis of rhythm such as this.

Hegel describes our susceptibility to the "beat of music", stating that it has "a magical power" over us to the extent that upon hearing it "we beat time to it without being aware of the fact" (Hegel 1975, 249). Music reaches the body as something external to the physical self, but is 'internalized' in a kind of cooperation between the physical body and one's inherent or 'inner sense' of rhythm and its beat. It might be said that to be unmoved or indifferent (i.e., to remain still) while listening to rhythmically intense music would require either the listener's intention to resist the inner propensity of the listening mind, or, alternatively, a sufficiently powerful distraction.

Contrary to general understanding about musical rhythm, to envisage that a person would be motivated to 'dance in tune' to a painting on the basis of its composition would require an extreme stretch of the imagination together with an extraordinary notion of what 'visual rhythm' might entail. One can rephrase Eliot's dedication to music, such that it now reads: "Painting seen so deeply/That it is not seen at all, but you are painting, while the painting lasts." Could this be taken, in the discussion of visual rhythm, beyond a merely semantic alteration?

In the context of viewing a painting, the visual intuition can include the process by which new information *accumulates* on the surface of the canvas. The experience of appreciating a painting implicates a temporal mode of experience, in which the

painting continues to unfold its contents; its emotive and sensory, dynamic and plastic energies emerge, combine and recombine as aspects of what is presented to view. It is conditional to the perceptual process that attention oscillate between specific localities on the canvas and the image as a whole, a process during which further information accumulates. Moreover, in synoptic vision,[2] we are already engaged in appreciation. In parallel with the cognitive process, we engage with the sensation of colours, the force of configuration and other painterly aspects (brushwork etc.), which our eye traces from the local to the whole, and vice versa, during which affective aspects accrue along with the painting's energy. Often, this is accompanied by a certain sense of movement. However, the energy or movement of the painting cannot be equated with the somatic response of a dancer keeping time with musical beats. Alternatively, we might discern the rhythm of dancers configured in a painting, but this is clearly not the same as feeling sufficiently moved by the painting to sway oneself in response. It is harder still to imagine anyone who would be motivated to dance in response to a picture as visually 'silent' and static as one of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases of the 1920s.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations which restrict the capacity of painting, there is a rhythmic sense in some paintings: for example, the reiterated or strobographic movement characteristic of Op, Minimalist, and Futurist art. In these paintings, we can read repetition in terms of repeated motifs, thereby reading visual rhythm as analogous to, say, the pulse which generates the sense of time in music. Following this line of thinking, a viewer who cannot discern the repetitive motif (or pattern) may assume that there is no rhythm. The sense and mode of repetition in the visual and sonic fields respectively are very different. In painting or sculpture (excluding those which employ a non-human scale, such as land art etc.), the viewer is exposed to the repetitive moments simultaneously, while in music or acoustic art, one experiences, in each moment of listening, the repetitive moments according to the way they occupy a realm of experience in which moments are both passing and yet to come. Expectation of the next recurrence of a repetitive movement is a significant force.

Is the term 'rhythm', then, to be understood completely differently between the auditory and visual arts, and if so, is the meaning of the term 'rhythm' to be used in completely different ways? In order to address the different uses to which the term 'rhythm' might be applied, new terminlogy could be coined. However, this would likely only cause further confusion. Since we want to use 'rhythm' to explain the sensation evoked in a certain kind of painting (as well as sculpture and architecture), in the same way that 'rhythm' is used to explain qualities of music or dancing. Then what is required in our discussion is the identification of certain rhythmic nuances that are common to both the auditory and visual arts. Composition

[2] I have borrowed 'synoptic vision' from Harold Osborne, The Art of Appreciation: "When we look at a colour reproduction we do not examine with a magnifying glass each almost imperceptible dot left by the printer's screen, but we stand back and see the general effect. We cannot hear a melody by listening to each note separately on so many different days; we must hear the whole in our minds and perceive it as a whole. This is the principle of configuration. It is the sort of perception which … I have called 'synoptic' vision" (Osborne 1970, 190).

and sturucture are common terms used in both auditory and visual art. Evidently the term 'composition' is exclusively used in music until the advent of abstraction particularly. Mondrian started to use the title 'composition' from the Tree series of 1913 and from then on Mondrian's excursion into musical terrain began. Around 1913 is also the time Mondrian started to associate with Jakob van Domselaer, who was a Dutch progressive music composer.

4.3 Mondrian and Contemporary Music Theory

Mondrian's initial engagement with music began in his pre-De Stijl period; that is, before 1917. Mondrian's letter (dated January 29, 1914) to H. P. Bremmer, the critic, editor and art advisor to Mrs. H. Kröller-Müller, reveals his interest in music, and its relation to his work:

> The masses find my work rather vague; at best they say that it makes them think of music. Now, I have nothing against this, but I am against continuing this line of reasoning to say that, because of this, my art falls outside the boundaries of visual art. … I believe it is possible that, through horizontal and vertical lines constructed with *awareness*, but not with *calculation,* led by high intuition, and brought to harmony and rhythm, these basic forms of beauty, supplemented if necessary by other direct lines or curves, can become a work of art, as strong as it is true (Blotkamp 1994, 81, 129–30, Joosten 1998, 105).

It is clear from this passage that music had already begun to have an effect on Mondrian's thinking. The passage above reflects his concern that his art may be going too far into music, and "outside the boundaries" of painting.

During the early years of abstraction, many artists were eager to engage with music. Including Kandinsky, Kupka, Delaunay and Arp. Mondrian's associations with contemporary classical music at the beginning of the twentieth century came from various sources, the most influential of which involved four personalities: Jakob van Domselaer, Daniël Ruyneman, Paul Sanders and Nelly van Doesburg. There were also the Futurists and their associates, and George Antheil.[3] Mondrian's association with the Dutch composer van Domselaer strongly influenced his approach to understanding music in his early neoplastic period. Mondrian had established associations with a certain number of artists and musicians before his affiliation with the De Stijl group in 1917. Apart from painters, there were architects, poets, writers, and composers (Blotkamp 1994, 129). But with the exception of his music composer friends,[4] "these contacts did not go any deeper than the kind of socializing customary

[3] George Antheil was a very important avant-garde contemporary music composer, and was also influenced by jazz. Antheil was a contributor to *De Stijl* magazine after 1926. Mondrian mentioned his name in 'The New Plastic Expression in Painting' (1926). Mondrian also met and associated with the Futurist painter and composer Luigi Russolo (who had given his first *bruitiste* performance in June 1913), whose concerts Mondrian attended in Paris in 1921.

[4] "Mondrian enjoyed the company of musicians, but, strange to say, not painters. He never wanted to go and visit any big name painters, Picasso or Léger, etcetera." Joop Joosten, editor of Piet Mondrian, *Catalogue Raisonné II*, made this comment during a conversation I had with him in his

in artistic circles" (Blotkamp 1994, 130). The titles Mondrian gave to his writings are revealing.[5] It is also significant that Mondrian contrived the character 'a Singer' as one of the interlocutors in the famous debate in "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919): while only minor in themselves, these observations testify to Mondrian's deference towards music. The character, 'A' (the 'Singer'), might be interpreted as representing a certain friend of Mondrian's, perhaps a musician or composer, perhaps even van Domselaer himself. Mondrian would have wanted to avoid an open or obvious imitation of one of his close friends, choosing instead to employ the opinions and reflections of the character of a naive music fan (a singer): someone who knows about music, but is not necessarily familiar with contemporary music theories. The earliest association with a professional music peer, as far as is known, was with the violinist Aletta de Jongh, in Laren, between 1912 and 1914 (Blotkamp 1994, 129). In 1916 he met Frits van Hengelaar, a psychology student and amateur composer, as well as the composer and music critic Paul Sanders.[6] Sanders, who had been a music critic of the Dutch daily *Het Volk*, recollects the time when he visited Mondrian in Paris in 1924. Sanders notes that Mondrian "had shown a remarkable interest in music", and had even put forward the theory "that the training for composers was completely outdated" (Joosten 1998, 128). With Sanders, Mondrian continued corresponding until the 1920s on matters concerning modern music.[7]

In his book *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, Blotkamp briefly but adequately summerises Mondrian's idea of music and rhythm. However, Blotkamp states in the section which he called "Neo-Plasticism in Music" that:

> His theories concerning neoplastic music were never worked out. He made no effort to put his ideas on music into practice, as he had done for literature with his prose pieces. In all probability he did not have the basic knowledge of music that would have been necessary (Blotkamp 1994, 164).

---

house in Leiden, November 1998. Similarly, Blotkamp notes that: "But with the exception of the representatives of the music world, these contacts [with other artists — painters, architects, poets, actors, etc.] did not go any deeper than the kind of socializing customary in artistic circles" (Blotkamp 1994, 130).

[5] Mondrian wrote several essays in relation to music: 'The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' *Bruiteurs*' (1921), 'Neo-Plasticism: Its Realization in Music and Future Theater' (1922), 'Down with Traditional Harmony!' (1924), and 'Jazz and Neo-Plastic' (1927). He also wrote two other pieces, 'Les Grands Boulevards' and 'Little Restaurant — Palm Sunday' (1920), both of which are lighter treatments of the topic, and normally called 'Two Paris Sketches'. They are experimental 'soundscape' descriptions of a day of Paris life, based on the free associational connection of sounds, scenes, imagination and memory.

[6] Paul Sanders, the Dutch critic and composer whom he first met in the spring of 1917, was a close friend of Mondrian. In 1925 Sanders moved to Paris for a sabbatical and visited the artist frequently. During the spring, when Mondrian contracted influenza, Sanders provided care and support. He wrote to his brother Martijn, describing the artist's condition and financial problems, and asking whether he would consider purchasing a painting. Martijn sent money, which Mondrian regarded as excessively generous. He therefore insisted on giving two paintings in return, of which *Composition with Blue, Black, Yellow, and Red*, 1922, was one (Bois and Joosten 1994, 206).

[7] Later Sanders recalled Mondrian's frequent mentioning in 1917 of Schoenberg and Busoni.

Blotkamp may well have intended his use of the term 'practice' in this particular instance to be restricted to the 'practice' of music. Yet an alternative reading of this use of the term, so as to be applicable to 'practice' in painting, makes equal sense given that Blotkamp in his book persisted in treating Mondrian's theory of rhythm far less seriously than I believe it deserves.

Mondrian's association with the pianist Nelly van Doesburg (the second wife of Theo van Doesburg) is similarly of great significance. She gave recitals of works such as Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke,* Bartók's *Three Burlesques*, Malipiero's *Barlumi* and Jakob van Domselaer's *Proeve van Stijlkunst.* She became an important figure in the Dada music scene, and in 1922 was proclaimed the 'indispensable Dada musical instrument for Europe' (Koopmans 1976, 7).

4.4 Mondrian's Music Peer: van Domselaer[8]

The composer Jakob van Domselaer was one of two major music composers with whom Mondrian was closely associated. This association began in Paris in 1912 and continued until after the first World War, a period during which they exchanged ideas about art and music through innumerable discussions which focused generally on the future of music. During the period when van Domselaer attended the French school he took organ, piano and theory lessons from Mr. Enderlé in Nijkerk. He afterward enrolled at the music school run by Martinus Petri, in Amersfoort, then studied under Dr. Johan Wagenaar, who took piano and composition at the conservatorium in Utrecht. Among the other students were Peter van Anrooy, Alexander Voormolen, Willem Pijper and Henri van Goudoever. There, van Domselaer was more interested in studying piano, to which he devoted himself completely. Wagenaar finally urged van Domselaer to take classes with the famous piano virtuoso Frederick Lamond in Berlin, where van Domselaer stayed from 1911 until the fall of 1912. In the winter of 1912 he went to Paris where he met Mondrian. Van Domselaer made his debut in April 1914 in London and conducted a few concerts in Holland. Although he was generally well received, van Domselaer decided against continuing his career as a concert pianist. In the summer of 1913 he had taken up composition again that he had not touched since his time as a student in Utrecht. He settled in Laren (N.H.) in May 1914. There he soon met the Philosopher Dr. M.H.J. Schoenmaekers. Van Domselaer was very taken with

[8] Until recently, van Domselaer's rather taciturn personality and involvement in mysticism rendered him not widely accepted as a composer and pianist: for example, Marcel van Dijk interprets van Domselaer as a martyr to theology along the lines of Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Spinoza. According to comments made to me in conversation in Utrecht in 1988 with Prof. Op de Coul, musicologist and music historian of Utrecht University and a correspondent of Nelly van Doesburg (second wife of van Doesburg), van Domselaer is one of the "very important" composers in this century's Dutch contemporary music scene. From around the 1990s, van Domselaer's music has been reevaluated and played by several musicians, and recordings have been released mainly in the Netherlands.

Schoenmaekers, making frequent visits with his future wife, Maaike Middelkoop, whom he was to marry in 1916. In 1915 and 1916, Mondrian lodged in van Domselaer's house (Van Dijk 1983, 4–5). One notable phase of this relationship occurred in 1916 in Laren, the village near Amsterdam when Mondrian lodged with van Domselaer and his wife. Mrs. Domselaer (Maaike Domselaer-Middelkoop) recalled in her writing:

> Whenever I read the essay from the first issue of *De Stijl* ["The New Plastic in Painting" (1917)] I can fully recognise the train of Mondriaan's thoughts in that time in Laren. Each morning when he left for his studio he would look in at the door and greet us, and often we continued the discussion of the night before about the "work". J. [Domselaer] mostly would sit at his grand piano and Piet would lean against it, with his head cocked a little to one side, speaking hesitantly, one could say "tentatively". Sometimes he would suddenly put a little notebook on the piano and with a tiny stump of a pencil hastily scrawl a thought that he liked in it. He always had the little book on him, and when he had to some extent arranged his fleeting thoughts and more or less made them into a whole, he would read it to us in the evenings. It was not easy for him, and very often he had to re-work the whole thing, and he would again read the changes [improvements] out to us (Van Domselaer-Middelkoop 1959–60, 275–60).

It is evident that Mondrian was already looking for a synthesis between the arts, in this case, between contemporary music with which van Domselaer was familiar, and his own ideas about Neo-plasticism. From the point of view of his own theory of neoplastic rhythm, Mondrian's intention was to challenge the advocates of music proper, who were equipped with progressive practical knowledge of classical music, a position which was fundamental to the formation of Mondrian's neoplastic theory of rhythm. This challenge can be seen in his first publication of "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917), where he unfolds the core ideas about composition and rhythm in Neo-plasticism, principles which he maintained throughout his neoplastic period.

Van Domselaer was a Theosophist and experimental composer. It was van Domselaer who introduced Mondrian to the Hegelian-Theosophic philosopher Dr. M. H. J. Schoenmaekers (Van Dijk 1983, 7–9) in late 1914 or early 1915.[9] Mondrian had met him through a certain Mrs. Hannaert, who also lived in Laren, and who had met van Domselaer in Berlin.

Schoenmaekers was in those days a famous personality in the Gooi area, giving many lectures and acquiring a large circle of readers. He had been trained in the Jesuit College in Rome and afterwards became a priest. However, at some time he retired from the Church and devoted himself to writing books in which he exhibited a very personal manner of thinking. Schoenmaekers called this manner of thought 'positive mysticism' or even sometimes 'expressive mathematics'. The basic thought of his esoteric philosophy is that behind the perceivable forms of manifestation in the world there exists an additional so-called 'ideal' reality that is characterized by a definite regularity and structure. Van Dijk points out that this

[9] Mondrian must have known some of Dr Schoenmaekers' writings, since his article, *Christosophie*, appeared in the esoteric weekly *Eenheid* 1910, to which Mondrian subscribed (Blotkamp 1994, 111).

mystical propensity echoes a growing interest in Holland in Spinoza after 1880. In particular, Spinoza's emphasis on the geometrical order of the world was an aspect that coincided with Schoenmaekers' world of ideas.

In the year that Mondrian lodged with him, Domselaer published a suite of seven piano pieces under the title of "Proeven van Stijlkunst" (Experiments in Style, 1916), inspired by Mondrian's pictures. "Proeven van Stijlkunst" became the official *De Stijl* music. In 1922 Van Doesburg wrote in his *De Stijl* article "The Will to Style" (also published from Bauhaus in 1925):

> The striving for pure monumental creation is revealed in music too, … (Musical examples: Jacob van Domselaer. Neoplastic examples: Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Vantongerloo, Rietveld, Van't Hoff). The Music compositions of Jacob van Domselaer are based on the same principle: musical, harmonic creation using the relationships of pure sounds to soundlessness (Jaffé 1967, 163).

Marcel van Dijk alludes to the confluence of Neo-plasticism with music and the visual arts. This indicates that Mondrian's notion of 'visual rhythm' was a plausible idea in the context of the prevailing atmosphere of experimentation in Europe at that time. His intuition to seek associations among innovative, experimental, progressive composers such as van Domselaer suggests that Mondrian's understanding of developments at the time was insightful – i.e., Mondrian could sense the direction in which music and the plastic arts needed to, and would surely, go. Van Dijk examines the principle of van Domselaer's music, noting that the relationship between his philosophy and his composition reveals that van Domselaer "started with the idea that music can express something which lies outside itself" (Van Dijk 1983, 2). Van Domselaer's approach to music was not to comply with the conventions of classical musical grammar: but to be open to a range of ideas and understandings of music. Thus, van Domselaer did not hesitate to acknowledge the influences of philosophers, as well as other artists and religious minds (Jaffé 1967, 163). The main sources of influence on his music around 1916 were Dr. Schoenmaekers, Mondrian and Theosophy.

Mondrian's intense relationship with van Domselaer, a young, progressive composer and pianist, urged him to take the theory of music seriously. It directly induced the various later episodes, in Paris and New York, in which Mondrian intently explored music and its attributes in relation to his painting. Around the time when he composed "Proeven van Stijlkunst" (1915), Van Domselaer was himself under the influence of Claude-Achille Debussy (1862–1918), Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924), Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), and Gustav Mahler (1860–1911). Around this time the atmosphere of the 'new' Dutch musical scene was mostly coloured by French rather than the otherwise dominant German music. Beatrix Baas wrote: "the major influence came from those who vigorously resisted the German domination of Dutch musical life between 1890 and 1914, giving priority instead to French music" (Baas 1981, 29). Van Domselaer was one of the innovative Dutch composers who absorbed the French new wave, represented in music by Debussy, Fauré and others. "Proeven van Stijlkunst" is characterised by its 'harmonic' and 'nonlinear' traits, which Jonathan D. Kramer, an American musicolo-

gist and composer, nominates as being the particular and defining characteristics of early twentieth-century European music.

4.5 Proeven van Stijlkunst: Experiments in Style, 1916

In Michel Seuphor's interview, Domselaer recollected the time when he composed "Proeven van Stijlkunst", indicating Mondrian's vital influence on his early masterpiece:

> I tried to translate into music my impression of Mondrian, both the man and his works, I was then entirely under his influence. I realize, now more than ever, how essential it was for me to meet Mondrian. He was a man magnificently rooted in his period, and far superior to his countrymen, who were much too bourgeois (Baas 1981, 29).

Thus van Domselaer, eighteen years younger than Mondrian, was deeply influenced by Mondrian's radical ideas about art, and deeply impressed by works such as the Paris "tree" series and those of Laren, later known as the "plus-minus" or "pier and ocean" series. He attempted to apply Mondrian's plastic principles as a parameter for the configuration of his musical composition. As van Domselaer's widow recalls in her memoirs, Mondrian proclaimed the first of these pieces "an audible confirmation […] of the emergence and "portrayal" of the upright and reclining (the vertical and horizontal) element" (Blotkamp 1994, 159). In his letters Mondrian more than once confided to friends that the pieces were created under the influence of the plus-minus compositions that he painted around 1915 (Blotkamp 1994, 159).

Mondrian himself mentioned "Proeven van Stijlkunst"[10] in his essay "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence" (1920):

> In the new music, isn't the descriptive, the old melody, already losing its dominating power? Has there not appeared in music "another color," less natural, another rhythm, more abstract? Does not music show the beginning of neutralizing opposition (for example, in some of the "experiments in style" ["Proeven van Stijlkunst"] by the Dutch composer Van Domselaer)? (Mondrian 1986, 143-4).

[10]Van Domselaer did not use the name, 'Proeven van Stijlkunst', for the first time until after the first three numbers had been composed. Originally he had called them simply 'compositions'. That the name 'stijlkunst' occurs for the first time in 1915 suggests that the origin of the term was Mondrian, or even earlier Schoenmaekers, from whom Mondrian borrowed much terminology for his essays. Van Dijk quotes Schoenmaekers' phrase:

> Positive mysticism ...creates in art what we in a strict sense, call style (stijl) in art, style is the general in spite of the particular. Through style, art is brought into general cultural life. Style is a generally valid, mystical expression of life, which causes the distinct, artistic beauties to move in harmony with the broad stream of cultural life (Schoenmaekers 1915, 32).

It is highly probable van Doesburg adopted the term 'stijl' after Schoenmaekers via the suggestion of Mondrian, since Mondrian suggested the name to van der Leck in his letter in May 1917, when the first *De Stijl* magazine was published. However, the term was already used by the architect H. Berlage in his essay, "Gedachten over de Stijl in de Architectuur," in 1905 (Van Dijk 1983, 15-6).

Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop recalled that in 1914 Mondrian was enthusiastic about the first piece of the "Proeven van Stijlkunst" suite, because there "for him the relationship between progression (horizontality) and the static (verticality), the basic relationship that occupied him himself was strongly expressed" (Van Dijk 1983, 13).

Jaffé interprets the structure of the pieces, which are composed of 15 bars. They express, Jaffé states:

> a similar tendency towards harmony and musical equilibrium. They are, however, an expression of a static balance and therefore more parallel to the plastic movement of *De Stijl's* early years. What Van Domselaer tried to realize in his short compositions, was to substitute melody and its continuous flow by a marked harmonic opposition which created equilibrium by simultaneous contrast (Jaffé 1956, 187).

"Proeven van Stijlkunst" is tranquil, almost sluggish. Melody, insofar as it exists, is too dilatory to constitute melodic form as such. All that can be heard are the deliberate kaleidoscopic transitions between various harmonic units. In this sense, the sense in which it probably so impressed Mondrian, "Proeven van Stijlkunst" alludes to the changing hues of colours, such as that observed in the colours of a stained glass window, as sections are subtly modified according to the modulations of light outside. The piece is a remarkably quiet, astutely controlled procession of sounds, akin to recent post-minimalist environmental music[11]: that is, where stasis is used as a primary expression, there is a stagnation of flow, and a deliberate expression of very subtle details within individual tones.

In his introduction to the score, van Domselaer himself explained that:

> the static element (harmony) was to be in the foreground and the movement (or melody) should recede to the background, but that the latter should nevertheless continue in an unconstrained manner (Maur 1980, 287).[12]

Mondrian once observed to Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop, regarding the first part of these pieces, "an audible confirmation […] of the emergence and "portrayal"

[11] "Environment music" describes a type of music after minimal music, and is not related to another "environmental music", which was popular from the 1960s onward and which aimed to facilitate work efficiency in industrial or office context. Here, sound was used subliminally to address the subconscious and mobilise the inner motor. Environment music is represented by, for example, the late 1970s and 1980s Brian Eno "Music for Airports" (EG Records, 1978), Harold Budd "The Pavilion of Dreams" (Obscure, 1978), Gavin Bryars "The Sinking of the Titanic" (Obscure, 1975). Basically their concept is based on John Cage's apprehension of noise. For Cage, noise is a sound which one does not want to listen to. To attain a quiet sonic environment one (especially a city dweller) has to produce the sound by oneself, otherwise "drawn sound" (for example, traffic noise and street noise) keeps invading one's environment. Their compositions are not necessarily based on harmonic contrast, but rather on agogic accent, which lends a note prominence by means of increased length rather than greater volume or higher pitch (The New Everyone Dictionary of Music, sixth edition, 1988), and subtle signs of change and contrast of tones, in many cases using very slow melodious repetition.

[12] Seuphor translated from Dutch the same line in a different way: "they [the seven pieces] be played in such a way that the static element (the harmony) be accentuated, while the movement (or the melody) remains peaceful and flowing" (Seuphor 1957, 136).

of upright and the reclining (the vertical and the horizontal) element' (Blotkamp 1994, 159). Mondrian's comment reads like a literal interpretation of the piece into the language of Neo-plasticism.

Mondrian's definition of van Domselaer's composition can be interpreted in 'B's' comment from this section of the "Dialogue on the New Plastic (1919)." It is also noteworthy that this interchange resembles a situation in which Mondrian publicly defended the composition against similar views that is was 'monotonous'[13]:

> A (A Singer). Nevertheless, in what little I have seen of the New Plastic [neoplastic], I noticed just this monotony; I failed to experience the inspiration, the deep emotion that more naturalistic painting gives me. It is what I fail to hear in the compositions of modern music; as I said earlier, the recent tone combinations without melody fail to stir me as music with melody does.
>
> B (A Painter). But surely an equilibrated composition of *pure* tone relationships should be able to stir one even more deeply (Mondrian 1986, 78-9).

Mondrian's propensity towards the anti-melodic can also be seen in the *Trialogue*, where he advocates the commonality between non-form music and Abstract-real or neoplastic painting ("Abstract-Real painting appears without form; it has this in common with music" (Mondrian 1986, 84)): "*Modern* musical compositions, however, in which melody and form are destroyed, are in agreement with Abstract-Real painting" (Mondrian 1986, 84). Mondrian's predisposition towards jazz music around the 1920-30s is also understandable for the same reason. He wrote in 1920 in "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence":

> In the midst of traditional music in our time there appears, perhaps somewhat brutally, the *jazz band,* which dares abrupt demolitions of melody and dry, unfamiliar, strange noises that oppose rounded sound (Mondrian 1986, 144).

Mondrian's rejection of melody is decisive. In "Trialogue," involving a physician, a naturalistic painter and an 'abstract-real' painter (a synonym for Neoplastic), the latter says:

> … the combinations of sound also, at any rate in traditional music, create form, even if it cannot be seen, it can be heard. That which is audible can be well and truly naturalistic, traditional music certainly teaches us that. In modern musical compositions, in which melody, the creation of form, is sublated [*opgeheven*], I do see a correspondence with the art of abstract-real painting (Mondrian 1986, 84, 1919).

Under the guidance of Hegelian dialectic, melody and form, or shape, is to be sublated or 'destroyed': in effect, this was the principle aim of abstract-real painting. What is left after the sublation of melody and form, are the relationships of tonal structure and composition. For van Domselaer tonal relationships are of primary concern, over melody or the notion of conventional linear structure.

---

[13] In 1916 Mondrian attended van Domselaer's piano concert of 'Proeven van Stijlkunst'. At one point in the foyer of the Concertgebouw, there arose an argument about the quality of van Domselaer's music. Against this criticism, Mondrian, contrary to his usual taciturn disposition, stood up and defended the value of the composition (Van Dijk 1983, 12).

Karin van Maur explains that growing discord between the views of van Domselaer and Mondrian increased as van Domselaer became more deeply involved in the dogma of theosophic doctrine. Although he still held to the theosophical creed as a guide in his philosophy of life, Mondrian was decisive in his inclination away from mysticism, towards modernity and the logical reasoning implicit in the progression of modern art (Maur 1980, 288). Harry Holtzman interprets the reason for the discrepancy with an astute remark: "After 1916 … van Domselaer lapsed, as Mondrian saw it, into the melodic" (Holtzman and James 1986, 148).

Mariike van Domselaer-Middelkoop ascribed their disagreement to the fact that while Mondrian adhered to the basic structure of horizontality and verticality as the ultimate schematic theme for plastic art, van Domselaer increasingly felt that sound did not manifest from within this basic relationship, but from within the chaotic sound-material itself. Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop recalled that for van Domselaer, sound-material "becomes audible and perceptible through the basic relationship … [of] unordered, chaotic sound" (Van Dijk 1983, 13–4, Van Domselaer-Middelkoop 1959–60, 281).

4.6 Musicological Understanding of van Domselaer's 'Proeven van Stijlkunst'

For Mondrian, destruction of the melodic could be compared with the destruction of the conventional dichotomy of foreground and background in painting, and, further, the destruction of 'form' itself. This antipathy towards melody was shared by other *De Stijl* members. For example, van Doesburg wrote in De Stijl in 1919:

> … modern composers will be forced to employ a reasonable limitation of the relationship of the musical media (sound-silence)… what is in painting the annihilation [*vernietigen*] of the natural manifestation of form, is in modern music the annihilation of melody. The modern composer thus brings the harmonic to the fore by which means the melodic is completely subjugated within the music's structural whole (Van Dijk 1983, 19).

Van Doesburg's assertion of "the annihilation of melody and form" is shared by (and possibly influenced by) Mondrian. Van Domselaer's remark that "the static element (harmony) was to be in the foreground" is particularly meaningful, since harmonic stasis is regarded as a trait typical of early twentieth-century composition. For example, Jonathan D. Kramer wrote in his book *The Time of Music*:

> With composers such as Debussy and Stravinsky, we first encounter true harmonic stasis: no longer the tension-laden pedal point of Bach but rather segments of musical time that are stationary and have no implication to move ahead; no longer textural constancy as an overlay to harmonic motion but now the freezing of several parameters into miniature eternities (Kramer 1988, 44).

Kramer goes on to explain 'nonlinearity' in terms of what is called the "Markov chain", which is "loosely speaking, a series of antecedents contributing to the

probability of a consequent event" (Kramer 1988, 22). The sense of linear passage in van Domselaer's "Proeven van Stijlkunst" is both slow and unpredictable, making it difficult for the listener to detect the contrast between each transition in harmony. To the extent that "Proeven van Stijlkunst" does not comply with the condition of a Markov chain, it can be said to belong to the category of nonlinear composition, a term Kramer uses to refer to music in "vertical time", and which accords with "zeroth-order Markov music" (Kramer 1988, 55).

Kramer explains the 'vertical' in music, contrasting it to the 'horizontal', which has a teleological, tonal, and linear value:

> In music without phrases, without temporal articulation, with total consistency, whatever structure is in the music exists between simultaneous layers of sound, not between successive gestures. Thus, I call the time sense invoked by such music "vertical" (Kramer 1988, 55).[14]

"Proeven van Stijlkunst" has this "vertical time." It has, despite the regular rise and fall of phrases, as Kramer explains in Terry Riley's "A Rainbow in Curved Air" (1969), this similar characteristic in that:

> its phrases refuse to form a hierarchy and are therefore heard to some extent as arbitrary. Every cadence is of approximately equal weight. No distinction is made as to the degree of closure. Thus the work exists primarily in vertical time despite the presence of comfortable phrases (Kramer 1988, 55).

Despite its "comfortable phrases", "Proeven van Stijlkunst" does awaken the listener to a sense of willed non-teleological engagement. The music of Terry Riley, especially after 1970, presents a very interesting case, since there are similarities with "Proeven van Stijlkunst" to be found. He was directly influenced by Indian music, while van Domselaer's suggests oriental influences, derived possibly from his interest in non-European music and thought, through his affiliation with Theosophy and the French music scene around the turn of the twentieth century, as well as Gregorian chant.

There are many music theorists who point to the influence of non-European music (especially Javanese *gamelan* and Japanese *Noh* music) upon contemporary western compositional genres. Kramer contends that the "increased interest" in harmonic stasis and nonlinearity, which are notable characteristics of "Proeven van Stijlkunst," contributed to the absorption of "music from totally different cultures, which over centuries had evolved virtually unexposed to Western ideas" (Kramer

[14] As music which has 'vertical' time, Kramer nominates Iannis Xenakis' *Bohor I* (1962), Larry Austin's *Caritas* (1969), and Terry Riley's *A Raibow in Curved Air* (1969). In my thinking, Terry Riley's minimalist music, for example, *In C* (1964), which is strongly influenced by Indian music and is against melody, has a pronounced similarity with van Domselaer's *Proeven van Stijlkunst* (Riley et al. 1992).

1988, 22).[15] The influence of Javanese *gamelan* music on Debussy is well documented.[16] Its impact was "enormous." Kramer goes on to state that:

> [Debussy's] music is really the first in the West to contain extended moments of pure sonority, events that are to be appreciated more for themselves than for their role in linear progressions (Yasuda 1999, 520).

Van Domselaer's commentary regarding his own music, that "the static element (harmony) was to be in the foreground and the movement (or melody) should recede to the background …", is somewhat idiosyncratic, but is nevertheless in tune with the propensity of progressive music in Europe at that time.

Leonard B. Meyer comments on the influence of Javanese music and Oriental philosophy (especially Zen Buddhism), referring to this music as "anti-teleological." Meyer suggests that Debussy's "enthrallment" was due to the fact that "the art of music, and [Debussy's] attitude toward it, had developed to a point where such an experience was possible." Meyer summarises the situation epitomised by Debussy's receptivity:

> It is because Western art had already developed ways of perception, modes of organization, and philosophical attitudes approximating those of the Orient that the avant-garde could be influenced by them (Meyer 1967, 73).

This may not necessarily be an accurate assessment of the confluence of western and eastern perceptions and philosophical attitudes. However, it does rightfully emphasise the impact of non-European music on the European 'avant-garde' music scene at the end of the nineteenth century. What interests me here are the particularities of Debussy's receptivity. Kramer explains:

> [T]he strange sounds he was hearing were unfolding in a different time world. He heard sonorities that were allowed to be themselves, that did not exist primarily in functional relationship to other sounds, that were not participants in an upbeat-downbeat compositional world (Kramer 1988, 44).

---

[15] Kyo Yasuda investigates the background of the Javanese *gamelan* music performance at the Paris Exposition of 1889. She mentions that the members of the *gamelan* group did not come from the same court of Java, where the performance of a *gamelan* which does not belong to that particular court is prohibited (even today). Yasuda also notes that the group was composed of temporary members under pressure from the Netherlands, members of which participated in the Expo on a personal rather than national basis (mainly as merchants). The Javanese village, *kampong javanais*, was very popular among visitors. The girl dancers especially, notably Wakiem, Sariem, Soekia and Tamihah, became very famous among Parisians. However, the *gamelan* music itself was not authentic, and even the musical instrument set, according to Yasuda, was provided by a German merchant, G. Mundt, the owner of a tea plantation in Java. The four girls were sent by Mangk-Negaran Palace, which was located in middle Java, while the musicians were from West Java, which as Yasuda points out, means that the dancers possibly danced to music from a different region (West Java). Such an arrangement never normally happens in Java, implying that the *gamelan* in this instance was performed only for the occasion of Paris Exposition (Yasuda 1999, 505-24).

[16] However, *gamelan* music's influence on Debussy is not without complications — i.e., that the *gamelan* orchestra he witnessed performing at the 1880 Paris Exposition was not an authentic one (Yasuda 1999).

Kramer indicates, then, that Javanese *gamelan* music is not based on an "upbeat-downbeat compositional world", which means that it has a different rhythmic structure to that of the European tradition. The latter can be seen in Aristoxenus's theory of rhythm in its original form, in which rhythm is composed of the combination of *arsis* and *thesis* (upbeat and downbeat). The structure of Javanese *gamelan* music constitutes "a different time world" (Becker 1981). For example, Judith O. Becker describes the traits of nonlinear or non-progressive time, explaining that for Javanese "time is believed to be an illusion of the phenomenal world, a deception of our senses which we must overcome if we are to clearly understand our world." She also points out that Javanese and Balinese culture have "the idea of static time, or the immediacy of the present as against the demands of the past or future." Becker also notes the close correlation of this nonlinearity to the structure of Javanese language: "Balinese, Javanese and Indonesian are all tenseless languages." For Kramer, this presupposes "nonlinear temporalities", and for Meyer an "anti-teleologic" sense. Thus, it is not surprising that its traits emerge in the work of Gustav Mahler,[17] especially the composition *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908), in the final song of which "a decidedly Oriental time sense is played off (dramatically, it must be said) against a Western linearity" (Kramer 1988, 44).

Jaffé's observation (above) regarding "Proeven van Stijlkunst" — that "to substitute melody and its continuous flow by a marked harmonic opposition which created equilibrium by simultaneous contrast," — is shared by Daniël Ruyneman (Maur 1980, 288). In Paris immediately after the war Mondrian met Daniel Ruyneman, the Dutch composer and pianist. Ruyneman was also experimental and in a sense was more radical than van Domselaer himself. Jaffé describes Ruyneman's music at the time when Mondrian started to be acquainted with him, soon after Mondrian's departure with van Domselaer: "Ruyneman's composition of these years show an increasing tendency towards the use of elementary musical means, their contrasting effect resulting in a well-established balance" (Jaffé 1956, 187). Ruyneman was more conspicuous as a radical musician in the Dutch music scene than was the taciturn van Domselaer. As a composer Ruyneman was experimental, and even went so far as to invent new musical instruments by himself. His composition, like that of van Domselaer's, was based on strong sound contrasts, novel sound combinations, and balance or equilibrium. This trait is comparable to Kramer's definition of 'nonlinear' music, as discussed above (in the main text). With Ruyneman, who was fourteen years younger than Mondrian and who, by means of concerts, organizations and magazines had helped modern music to become accepted in the Netherlands, Mondrian occasionally was able to continue and develop the dialogue about the fundamental renewal of music, which he had begun with van Domselaer.

Jaffé's observation also relates to Kramer's understanding of 'nonlinear' traits of twentieth century European composition. Kramer explains the difference between 'linearity' and 'nonlinearity', citing them as the "two fundamental means" by which time and music structure each other. He states that "[n]onlinearity is not merely the

[17] Mahler heard the *gamelan* in 1900 in Paris, when the Javanese *gamelan* orchestra paid its second visit to Europe.

absence of linearity but is itself a structural force", and urges us to "identify linearity as *the determination of some characteristic(s) of music in accordance with implications that arise from earlier events of the piece.*" Thus, Kramer argues,

> [L]inearity is processive. Nonlinearity, on the other hand, is nonprocessive. It is *the determination of some characteristic(s) of music in accordance with implications that arise from principles of tendencies governing an entire piece or section* (Kramer 1988, 20).

Kramer suggests we define 'linear time' in terms of "the temporal continuum, constituted by events in succession, "in which earlier events imply later ones and later ones are consequences of earlier ones." Kramer concludes that:

> Nonlinear time is the temporal continuum that results from principles permanently governing a section or piece (Kramer 1988, 20).

Kramer further contends that "[w]hile linear principles are in constant flux, nonlinear determinations do not grow or change" (Kramer 1988, 21). On the basis of the dichotomy of the cerebral spheres, Kramer also attempts to explain nonlinearity, using European analytical language as a metaphor for linearity: "Nonlinearity is mainly a right-brain phenomenon, yet our discussion of it inevitably utilized left-brain logic" (Kramer 1988, 21). He listed non-European languages which do not have a linear time sense: Balinese, the language of The Trobriand Islands, Southern Indian, including many language groups in Africa, the Hopi in the American Southwest, and the inhabitants of Java. Memory (im)prints the former sequence of events and projects it onto future successions. These principles of nonlinearity relate to non-growth or non-change: moreover, nonlinearity is itself "a structural force," that is, the force of 'composition' itself.

Nonlinearity gains force from structure itself, and is also independent of breaks in the linearity or continuity (or contiguity). It is heterogeneous in comparison with the predictability of the linear (or non-constant flux) sense of time; that is, to the conventional sense of time, past, present and future. In nonlinearity, there can be no sense of before and after, only of "now going on": there is only the time of "the temporal continuum." Nonlinearity contains no sense of procession: it is governed by "principles of tendencies governing an entire piece or section." How does nonlinearity gain force or energy from structure itself? Kramer does not provide an answer, yet this question is crucial to understanding rhythm in terms of its origins in ancient Greek thought, especially that prior to Plato, who first introduced temporality into the seminal theory of static rhythm.

"Anti-teleological" or "non-linear" types of music began to prevail among European avant-garde composers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Van Domselaer was among these, and Mondrian's avant-garde leanings closely allied him to that circle. Debussy's music, however, was not radical enough for Mondrian. If, according to Kramer's definition, van Domselaer's "Proeven van Stijlkunst" belongs to "the compositions of the avant-garde music scene around the turn of the twentieth century, which originally include Debussy as well," then the question arises as to why Debussy's music, in particular, was deemed objectionable according to Mondrian's criteria of 'progressive' music. Mondrian had commented to his

dancing partner and friend Willy Wentholt that Debussy's composition still implied "natural emotion." He wrote to her in February of 1918 in response to a review of a Debussy concert which Wentholt had sent to him:

> I read them with approval, and yet I cannot help feeling that De Bussy [sic.] still portrays "style in the manner of nature". Of course this is good, too, but it means that natural emotion plays too dominant a role …. Later French musicians—their names escape me—have gone further (Blotkamp 1994, 159).

The phrase "style in the manner of nature" implies much for Mondrian. It raises an important question concerning how Mondrian viewed the avant-garde music scene around that time. Unfortunately, it is not known which particular Debussy piece Mondrian was referring to, nor to which "French musicians", but when Mondrian's various comments about 'progressive' music are referenced, a certain consistency emerges and Mondrian's intentions are clear:

> The oppression of the individual is felt as much in music as in painting, and from it arise comparable efforts toward freedom. Thus new "color" was introduced into music like that of the Luminists and Neo-Impressionists in painting—freer and lighter (Debussy). Finally, by various methods and means, music will succeed in expressing the new spirit in all its purity (Mondrian 1986, 155).

Here Mondrian acknowledges Debussy's contribution to contemporary music, which he characterises as "freer and lighter," and yet Mondrian's own aspirations are aimed much further towards "the new spirit in all its purity", which, in his thinking inevitably leads to the annihilation of 'individuality', a principle which Neoplasticism had already realized. In the context of the comment above, the particular composition Mondrian had in mind in his remark to Wentholt suggests one of Debussy's 'impressionistic' works. Debussy himself once wrote: "I would like for music a freedom which it can achieve perhaps more than any other art can, not being limited to a more or less exact reproduction of nature, but to the mysterious correspondence between Nature and Imagination" (Griffiths 1978, 978).

For Mondrian, the inherent limitation of Debussy's 'impressionistic' composition is that while the layer of 'harmony' is fixed and static, 'melody' or what Mondrian would term "the descriptive, the old melody" is still dominant. Moreover, these traits were conceived as 'naturalistic' in Debussy's impressionistic works, as Debussy himself acknowledged. It was on this basis that, in Mondrian's view, Debussy was to be denied the status of a 'progressive' French composer. Debussy's obvious reference to nature and his entrainment of melodious traits (even while not a 'teleological' entrainment) was a source of disillusionment for Mondrian, who noted that Debussy "still portrays 'style in the manner of nature'." Thus, we can surmise Mondrian's stance in relation to 'melody' as a part of 'nature'. Melody is thus relegated as a negative trait within compositional associations in music. Clearly, for Mondrian, such traits hinder the closer understanding of what structure entails in progressive compositional musical works. The reason why Mondrian objects to Debussy's composition as "style in the manner of nature" relates to his own aspirations toward "the new spirit."

In Mondrian's thinking, and in accord with the fundamental principles of neo-plastic doctrine, "the manner of nature" belongs to 'subjectivity' and the 'individual'. It follows, as we saw in the previous chapter, that "the new spirit in all its purity" belongs to 'objectivity' or the 'universal'. To Mondrian "the mysterious correspondences between Nature and Imagination" occur according to the premises of subjectivity. The problem here for Mondrian is the 'emotive' potential of the subjective realm, and its disposition towards 'tragedy'—anathema to the principles of Neo-plasticism. Both Mondrian and van Domselaer esteemed Debussy's radicalness in abandoning traditional tonality and developing new rhythmic complexity, but depreciated the emotive melody lines: Mondrian and van Domselaer purged 'melody' from their work because of these very connotations. The denial of the melodious element in Debussy becomes more clear-cut when compared with Mondrian's appreciation of Bach's fugues.

Mondrian refers to van Domselaer's "Proeven van Stijlkunst" only once more in his writings, in "The Manifestation of New-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' *Bruiteurs*" (1921). Interestingly he parallels "Proeven van Stijlkunst" with Bach's fugues:

> The timbre of conventional instruments is basically animal and individual in character, like the human vocal organs that they more or less imitate. Such means of expression dominate or veil composition; thus rhythm, the natural, dominated—despite the spiritual intention. As soon as the composition is stressed and the rhythm becomes more absolute, the expression becomes more universal (the fugues of Bach, for example, or in modern music Van Domselaer's "Experiments in Style" ["Proeven van Stijlkunst"]) (Mondrian 1986, 151–2).

Here we should not be confused by the two 'rhythms': naturalistic rhythm and 'absolute' or 'pure' rhythm. In neoplastic doctrine 'naturalistic rhythm' should be replaced by 'absolute rhythm' in the course of the realization of the 'universal'. It must also be kept in mind that both 'composition' and 'rhythm' harbour a binary opposition in Mondrian's thinking. This opposition of equilibrated forces is fundamental in the constitution of a voluntary listener/viewer—via composition—to energize the neo-plastic painting: "In all art, it is through composition (as opposed to *rhythm*) that some measure of the universal is plastically manifested and the individual is also more or less abolished" (Mondrian 1986, 39). Also he mentioned, "Composition and plastic means create a 'rhythm' different from natural rhythm and comparable in expression to the rhythm of Neo-Plastic painting" (Mondrian 1986, 162) and "besides the simplicity of the plastic means, there is also rhythm, which animates the composition and opposes the constructive elements of the plastic means" (Mondrian 1986, 201). Where the individual and nature are concerned, Mondrian aligns the "timbre of conventional instruments" with the "human vocal organs" which he regards as "basically animal and individual in character", and which the former (instruments) "more or less imitate." Moreover, Mondrian contends that as a means of expression, such instruments "dominate or veil composition; thus rhythm, the natural, dominats—despite the spiritual intention" (Mondrian 1986, 151–2).

In "Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence (1920)" Mondrian wrote:

> In the music of the past, we see, just as in the plastic of the other arts, a confusion of active and passive, although occasionally there is a more evident structure, more marked opposition (in the fugues of Bach, for example). But for the most part constructive plastic is veiled by *descriptive melody* (Mondrian 1986, 143).

Here Mondrian nominates 'the fugues of Bach' as being more aligned than other "music of the past" with the idea of 'universality', and of containing 'pure' rhythm, because of the evidence of its clear structure and consequent abolition of melody.

It is interesting that Mondrian references both Bach and van Domselaer as examples of rhythm, favorable because of their affinity with the neoplastic principles of the "absolute" and the "universal." For Mondrian, the music and other forms of art of the past were afflicted by a confusion of "active and passive" rhythms (Mondrian 1986, 143). In the neoplastic doctrine, 'naturalistic rhythm' (passive) should be replaced by 'absolute rhythm' (active) in the course of the realization of 'the universal'. What emerges when we investigate Mondrian's high regard for Bach's fugues in parallel with van Domselaer's composition, is an analogous relationship between "the new spirit in all its purity" in music and the "neoplastic theory of music." In the 'new spirit' which is active and in which the structure or composition is 'absolute' (or conspicuous, as in Bach's fugues), rhythm becomes active, and the passive entity of melody is thereby abolished. The annihilation of passivity (melody) has to be thorough, and this stricture must be applied even to structurally progressive art forms such as Debussy's impressionism. Mondrian's astuteness regarding structure in music and other forms of art becomes more evident when we examine his criticism of Luigi Russolo's performance "bruiteurs futuristes Italiens' in 1921, with which Mondrian was otherwise very much impressed.

4.7 Russolo and Bruiteurs Futuristes Italiens

Russolo's performance was introduced by Filippo T. Marinetti, between June 17 and 24, 1921, at the Théatre des Champs-Elysées in Paris. Among the audience were Maurice Ravel, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud and Edgar Varèse. Earlier versions of the concert by the Noise Intoners, which were first demonstrated in Marinetti's house in 1914, impressed Stravinsky and Diaghilev. Russolo was originally inspired by Francesco Balilla Pretella, Italian progressive composer and author of a very important essay for the Futurists, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music" (1912). Russolo conducted the first performance of the Noise Intoners at Modena in June, 1913 (Tisdall and Bozzolla 1977, 111–9). Mondrian occasionally met Russolo later in the 1930s, mainly in the context of the Cercle et Carré group. At the concert, Russolo used twenty-three mechanical noise-makers, or "Noise Intoners" (*intona-rumori: bruiteurs*). Russolo made later versions of the Noise Intoners, the *Rumor armonio,* or Noise Harmonium, and *Russolophone*, which combined several Noise Intoners with a rudimentary keyboard. Mondrian was particularly attracted to the instruments themselves:

> The *Bruiteurs*, of various sizes and proportions, take the shape of rectangular prisms with a horn for amplification, a lever for adjustment, and a crank to be turned. Seen in the rear of the stage during a performance, these instruments, painted in primary colors, contrasted vividly with the old instruments standing in front of them (Mondrian 1986, 155).

It is interesting that Mondrian observed and described the *Bruiteurs* in terms which reflect the neoplastic vocabulary, noting the arrangement and shape of the instruments (rectangular, primary colours), and that these qualities are established in opposition to the old instruments. Mondrian's response to Russolo's performance was immediate and characteristic: he began work straight away on an article about music and Neo-plasticism. Characteristically too, Mondrian was not completely satisfied with the performance, drawing attention to their naive use of 'melody' and their Futuristic rendition of 'speed' ("they merely show the (old) relative speed in a new guise") (Mondrian 1986, 155). More importantly, Mondrian intuited the need for 'new instruments' in the constitution of a new art. Thus, in a letter to van Doesburg on October 3, 1921, Mondrian wrote: "I am now busy writing on neoplastic music itself and describing the instruments" (Mondrian 1986, 156) which he followed up 2 months later, saying: "I am not able to work out my neoplastic music completely, because the instruments do not exist; but I will try to indicate everything" (Mondrian 1986, 156).

Mondrian's interest in 'new instruments' can be traced to various sources. Daniël Ruyneman, for example, was a prominent advocate of 'new instruments', and Paul Sanders recollected that Mondrian read about Theremin's 'ether-wave' instrument, and that he may have reasoned that this was:

> … just the very beginning of something new, or even that the starting point was wrong, but it proved nevertheless that the time was not far off when instruments would be built that are different from those now in use, instruments that are made for the microphone, and not the other way around (Sanders 1979).

Mondrian was fascinated by the possibilities of music performance without enlisted players; that is, music performed by the composer directly. He predicted the advent of electric synthesized sound without a 'musical' instrument, commenting that "it is time that the composers immerse themselves in the study of electronic acoustics" (Sanders 1979) Mondrian's acknowledgment of machines and mechanised sound is not as straightforward as many writers on Mondrian have suggested. Mondrian championed the machine as a symbol of universal modernity, but in terms of its function, rejected it as still naturalistic. In his view, the automatic repetitive commotion of the machine opposes neoplastic rhythm. I would argue that it was not the machine or mechanisation itself with which Mondrian was so captivated, but with the *possibilities* inherent in the 'new' timbre and rhythmic structure of repetitive sound produced by machines. We can see this in the following citation taken from "The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' *Bruiteurs*" (1921):

> Man will prefer sounds and noises produced by inanimate nonanimalized materials. He will find the noise of a machine more sympathetic (in its "timbre") than the song of birds or men. Depending upon how it is produced, a given rhythm will affect him as being more or less individual (Mondrian 1986, 153).

Man will prefer the sound of the machine to those of the human voice or of birdcall: an unlikely hypothesis if taken literally, but indicative of the extent to which Mondrian was opposed to the idea of nature as a source of rhythm, arguing, for instance, that "[r]hythm produced mechanically by matter alone will echo [man's] individuality less than the rhythm produced by the human voice" (Mondrian 1986, 153). The extent to which he was willing to idealise the machine may have been misinterpreted as the obsessive notion of someone who has taken his ideas too far. However, if analysed closely, we can see why it was that, although a mechanised sound would surely produce a more regulated or in other words 'repetitive' rhythm, Mondrian asserted his commitment to the idea of the machine as the source of sound and originator of rhythm: "…*with regard to its timbre,* the rhythm of a pile driver will affect him more deeply than any chanting of psalms." On the basis of its timbre, mechanical rhythm "automatically" compels "the new man… to seek truly "new" instruments (Mondrian 1986, 153). The 'new' instruments are yet to come, however, since there is still something missing structurally: that is, the structure of oppositional equilibrium.

It was inevitable, then, that in reference to his neoplastic principles of rhythm, Mondrian reflected more deeply on the nature of mechanical repetition. In "Jazz and neoplastic" (1927), he wrote:

> As the machine is now used, it does not abolish individuality. Mechanical rhythm is *repetitive*: like nature's rhythm. This has its place in nature but not in fully human life. If natural rhythm were also human rhythm, man would be either a higher animal species or else would have a dual being, half natural and half nonnatural: disequilibrated. *As a dualistic being, he could never achieve full humanity.* Man has a rhythm *unique to man.* He opposes his rhythm to nature's rhythm and creates his *own environment*—in opposition to nature (Mondrian 1986, 219).

Here, Mondrian is aware that mechanical rhythm remains limited because of the way it was currently utilised. Mechanical rhythm, as such, cannot reach its potential in evoking equilibrated opposition, because it is repetitive "like nature's rhythm", and is thereby merely opposed to a rhythm which is "*unique to man*".[18] Mondrian then goes on to explain why the machine's rhythm lacks this important neoplastic element. The last part of this passage illustrates the degree to which Mondrian sought to extract, from within the repetition of mechanised rhythm, the basis of an equilibrated rhythm:

> The machine's rhythm can be accelerated and nothing is changed. Accelerated rhythm without the opposition of relationship is devastating to man. The new culture will have to assimilate the machine properly to its own rhythm. The perfected machine is indispensable to the new culture, just as is the sublimated physical in man (Mondrian 1986, 219).

"Full humanity" requires that objectivity be equilibrated with (or annihilated by) subjectivity, which is natural and individual: in other words, the condition in which

[18] In this sense Max Kozloff's observation is wrong. Kozloff wrote: "Where artists like Léger and Mondrian deeply sympathized with the urban vitality of America, this was precisely the motif — especially in its accent on machined rhythms — that the Abstract Expressionists thought deadening to the human soul and had to escape" (Kozloff 2000, 110).

being is rendered "half natural and half nonnatural" is not acceptable. Therefore, rhythm which is precisely (mechanically) pulsated and "accelerated" must be modified (or 'sublimated') into a form which has an affinity with the human organism. Thus, the "perfected machine" presupposes a sophisticated machine which can accommodate a more 'creative' repetition, that is, one opposed to naturalistic pulsated repetition (Hence: "Mechanical rhythm is *repetitive*: like nature's rhythm.") Here we find that Mondrian's aversion to repetition is not to 'repetition' in a generic sense. Rather, Mondrian's concern is specifically with the 'sequence' of repetition, since it is this which opposes neoplastic rhythm. This observation is very important in understanding Mondrian's development of the expression of rhythm in his later neoplastic painting: dynamic equilibrium is definitive in its violation of the sequence of repetition.

Given Mondrian's emphatic rejection of melody and naturalistic rhythm, it is understandable that Russolo's naïveté with regard to melody and various rhythms was a source of dissatisfaction to Mondrian. In the "*Bruiteurs*" article. He wrote:

> Luigi Russolo says: "My *bruiteurs* can produce diatonic and chromatic melodies in all possible tones of the scale and in all rhythms." But in this way the old mode of expression persists—which the new music will not permit (Mondrian 1986, 154).

Rhythm accompanied by melody (with any range of diversity) remains within the limitation of the "old mode of expression", and this Mondrian rejected along with the possibility that sequential repetitive rhythm might be incorporated in "all rhythms." Far from seeking for an all-round versatile machine, Mondrian sought instead for a specific mechanism by which to contribute to the enforcement of neoplastic structure and rhythm.

4.8 Neoplastic Theory of Music: Silence, Rest, Break

Even Schoenberg was not sufficiently radical according to Mondrian's criteria for "the new spirit in music." Mondrian critiques Schoenberg because of an understandable recourse to naturalism through the role of silence in his music. He argues in the "*Bruiteurs*" article:

> The old music repressed opposition either by repetition or by a pause, that is, by "silence." This silence should not exist in the new music. It is a "voice" immediately filled by the listener's individuality. Even a Schönberg, despite his valuable contributions, fails to express purely the new spirit in music because he uses this "silence" (in his piece of piano) (Mondrian 1986, 154).

In this passage, Mondrian implies that 'silence' is inimical to 'opposition'. In his thinking, 'silence' is a 'pause' associated with naturalism, which would provide a conduit for the individual (human) voice to enter into and fill in the silence or pause, thus blocking the way to the 'universal'. Also, for Mondrian, 'silence' is conceptualised as a naturalistic 'rest', which is accommodated by the horizontal line. In this way, it differs from the neoplastic 'rest', which is the equilibrated point between

oppositions (as we saw in Chap. 2). A theme in Mondrian's thinking emerges then — in his discussions of melody, repetition, and the way silence is used in "the old music": for Mondrian, the concept of dialectical 'opposition' is the fundamental method of Neo-plasticism, and it is 'repetition' which threatens to diminish and ultimately erase the 'opposition'.

Here, Mondrian's understanding of 'silence' may seem based on the conventional Western interpretation of 'nothingness': that is, voidness, 'null-space', or 'null-time'. However, if we reconsider 'silence' or 'pause' in terms of Mondrian's binary way of thinking, that is, as "equilibrated duality" ('sound' versus 'non-sound'), and in terms of which Nelly van Doesburg argued her understanding of 'rest', then the term implicates a double-fold complexity. Mondrian's letter to Nelly indicates the complexity in Mondrian's own understanding of 'tranquility':

> In my view the question about "tranquillity" in music is a principle [sic.] issue. I regard this "tranquillity" as being something similar to what the background, the fond, is in old painting. Doesn't Does[burg] also think so? Does[burg] knows that Van der Leck made the mistake of retaining this "fond" in another form. We have *abolished* that fond, and yet it is always depicted. I won't say that we portray the old fond in white, black and gray; I believe that is not completely pure. But in any case the fond is abolished; there is always *something* there. This should also be the case with music; the devil himself couldn't persuade me otherwise (Joosten 1998, 121).

'Tranquillity', when interpreted in the way Mondrian suggests, should, like the 'fond' (the background or a primary coat) in painting, be 'abolished' or sublimated (*opgeheven*), but "there is always something there." This 'something' is not sound or figuration itself (as the oppositional element in a binary set), but something else, which exists when the background-foreground or sound-rest dichotomy is abolished and reaches a non-discriminatory state in relation to the two: every element of painting, or sound in music, should have the same value.[19]

Mondrian wrote about 'rest' in music in succession to the "*Bruiteurs*" article, following an argument with Nelly van Doesburg, after which he was inspired to

[19] In this context, reconsideration of John Cage's similar attempt in 4'33" ('Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds') to abolish background sound (or, as many theorists advocate, foregrounding background noise and converting noise into musical sound) may contribute to this argument.

4'33" is played at the piano and is divided into three movements. All of the notes are silent. The composition takes its name from the fact that it requires four minutes and thirty-three seconds to perform. The pianist uses a stopwatch to control his tempo. This tune lasts for exactly 4'33".

Almost all theorists interpret 4'33" in terms of the reversal action of background 'noise' into foreground 'sound'. However, if Cage's influence from Zen Buddhist thought is considered, the reversal action is not a sufficient explanation, since in the context of Zen, no discrimination of the duality (of background and foreground) would be correct. (On this issue, a conversation with Zen Buddhist master, Eikai Korematsu, was beneficial.)

Cage's (final) intention would be the non-discriminatory condition of sound: no background-foreground, no noise-sound, no life-art discrimination. Mondrian's annihilation or sublation of foreground-background dichotomy can be taken as similar to the ultimate goal of Cage's 4' 33". For Mondrian, one of the primary goals of Neo-plasticism is complete flatness, where each painterly element has an undiscriminatory effect on the other elements in the non-background-foreground dichotomy of the Gestalt field.

"attempt to refute" Nelly's proposal "confirming that in music 'rest' is the opposite of sound." Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg on December 28, 1921:

> I have really worked on the articles, and I hope soon (perhaps in two weeks) to send you the conclusion on neoplastic music. … I was pleased that Nelly wrote me from Vienna confirming that in music 'rest' is the opposite of sound … and I will attempt to refute this (Mondrian 1986, 156).

The results of Mondrian's thinking about rest were published in an article, titled "Neo-Plasticism: Its Realization in Music and in Future Theater" (1922). In this article Mondrian's understanding of 'rest', or 'silence' is equated with his conceptions of 'interruption', and the binary relation between 'sound' and 'nonsound'.

> The limitation of sound will be found *in sound itself* …. This will be "strengthened" by abrupt interruption, just as in painting the limit of a color is strengthened by the straight line. This interruption never becomes the "silence" of the old music (Mondrian 1986, 161).

Rather than the opposite of sound, as Nelly van Doesburg argued, 'rest' becomes synonymous with "the limitation of sound", "abrupt interruption", "the limit of a color", "the straight line" and "silence." We should note that Mondrian's understanding of "the opposite of sound" is not "non-sound" but (abrupt) "interruption" or "silence" within sound itself. When sound is "strengthened" (or broken) by abrupt interruption, Mondrian contends that 'silence' (or 'rest'), as a horizontal line in the conventional sense, never manifests. Rather, a different kind of 'rest' results, that is, 'rest' which is the equilibrated point of oppositional tension. The relationship between sound and 'rest' (or 'abrupt interruption') is not a linear sequence of sound and silence (or 'nonsound'), reciprocally, but sound and interruption—interruption which is *within* sound. Thus, in Mondrian's conception, music's background-foreground binary is abolished. This interpretation of rest is at odds with the concept of the Markov chain, and instead aligns itself with Kramer's understanding of 'nonlinearity': i.e., "Total nonlinearity corresponds to a zeroth-order Markov chain, in which each event is understood as independent of preceding events."

If a piece of music is melodious, rhythm may still be present, but this rhythm does not necessarily constitute neoplastic 'rest' or 'interruption'. In a structural sense, such music is weak according to the criteria of the neoplastic doctrine of internalised rhythm. Even so, the listener's response to it, for example to 'tempo', can constitute a neoplastic engagement. Tempo is an objective element imposed upon the music (for example, where a metronome is used for measurement) and also involves the voluntary participation of the listener (for example, tapping in time to the music).

Even if this observation is applied to naturalistic painting which has a 'fond' (background, and also underpainting), the neoplastic viewer can extract the structure (internalised rhythm) itself from the representation (melody), since she or he is able to respond, according to objective criteria (which in music would be termed 'tempo'), to subjective 'naturalistic' melody. In the development from naturalistic or representational painting, toward the emphasis of neoplastic rhythm, the viewer participates in response to the painting. This is akin to seeing the steps in musical rhythm. Neoplastic painting is composition (with the structure of steps) itself: it presupposes the equilibration of all pictorial elements non-hierarchically, and the

lack of a background-foreground Gestalt field. Neoplastic painting is neoplastic (or internalised) rhythm itself, to which a viewer (in the manner of a dancer) responds with an understanding of oppositional tension.

4.9 Composition: Noise and Silence Versus Brushwork and Flatness

Mondrian's serene anti-natural neoplastic painting gives the impression of an urban cityscape. It can be described in terms of 'noise', and resonates with the work of the Futurists, Dadaists, "Art Brut" and the music of Eric Satie.

The 1950s American experimental composer John Cage believes that, "[w]herever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating."[20] More recently, Murray Schafer wrote in a more succinct manner, that "[n]oises are the sounds we have learned to ignore."[21] Schafer suggests that in the urban sonicscape city dwellers unintentionally learn the skill of ignoring noise. Inversely, Schafer implies that when one intently listens to this noise, it can become 'fascinating' sound. The city dweller's skill, however, which is an implicit faculty in the pursuit of everyday life, cannot be undone: it is therefore unlikely that one can unlearn the reflex by which one ignores this noise. By drawing from these conceptions of 'noise', we can understand the means by which the neoplastic painting merges the surface of the canvas with the atmosphere of the room, whereby the canvas is, as it were, hung alongside ubiquitous urban sounds. Jacques Attali more radically acknowledges the chaotic force of noise, which "destroys orders to structure a new order" (Attali 1985, 20). Attali sets out to rewrite the history of music to accord with the various strategies by which noise has been regulated and rendered as a social form:

> When power wants to make people *forget,* music is ritual *sacrifice,* the scapegoat; when it wants them to *believe,* music is enactment, *representation*; when it wants to *silence* them, it is reproduced, normalized, *repetition.* … Today, in embryonic form, beyond repetition, lies freedom: more than a new music, a fourth kind of musical practice. It heralds the arrival of new social relations. Music is becoming *composition* (Attali 1985, 20).

Attali's use of 'composition' heralds a return to the etymological components of the word, "to put together" (Attali 1985, 156). Thus, he argues that "[f]inally, we can envision one last network, beyond exchange, in which music could be lived as *composition,* in other words, in which it would be performed for the musician's own enjoyment, as self-communication, with no other goal than his own pleasure, as something fundamentally outside all communication, as self-transcendence, a solitary, egotistical, noncommercial act" (Attali 1985, 32). Similarly, Neo-plasticism 'composes' its own visual noise beyond 'repetition', although unlike Attali's

[20] Cage, John. 1968. *Silence: Lectures & Writings,* 3. London: Marion Boyars.

[21] Schafer, Murray, 1973. *The Music of the Environment,* 3. Wien: Unesco, Universal Edition.

"solitary, egotistical" programme, Neo-plasticism harbours utopian values, such as the communicative role of composition.

Mondrian views his neoplastic canvases as a matrix of the idealized cosmopolitan city and society. Even in this idealized city, there will be a wide spectrum of noises. Mondrian, who was fond of living in metropolitan Paris, found these to be not mere noise, but treated them as 'sounds', or even 'music'. Cage would no doubt agree with this stance as far as 'noise' was concerned.

In his 1913 manifesto, the futurist Luigi Russolo glorified noise.

> Today noise reigns supreme over human sensibility …
>
> Let's walk together through a great modern capital, with the ear more attentive than the eye, and we will vary the pleasures of our sensibilities by distinguishing among the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic pipes, the rumblings and rattlings of engines breathing with obvious animal spirits, the rising and falling of pistons, the stridency of mechanical saws, the loud jumping of trolleys on their rails, the snapping whips, the whipping of flags. We will have fun imagining our orchestration of department stores' sliding doors, the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways. And we must not forget the very new noises of Modern Warfare (Schafer 1970).

Mondrian wrote in the Paris Boulevard sketch, in response to Marinetti's book *Mots en liberté futuristes* (1919) (Mondrian 1986, 124)[22]:

> Ru-h ru-h-h-h-h. Poeoeoe. Thik-tik-tik-tik. Pre. R-r-r-r-r-uh-h. Huh! Pang. Su-su-su-su-ur. Boe-a-ah. R-r-r-r. Foeh … a multiplicity of sounds, interpenetrating. Automobiles, buses, carts, cabs, people, lampposts, trees … all mixed; against cafés, shops, offices, posters, display windows: a multiplicity of things. Movement and standstill: diverse motions. Movement in space and movement in time. Manifold images and manifold thoughts.
>
> …
>
> Is the outward ever still? Ruh! ru-ruh-h. There is stillness in the desert—so long as we are not in it. Multiplicity of sounds is the annihilation of sounds and thoughts.
>
> Poeoe-pang … one sound breaks the other. A new harmony arises (Mondrian 1986, 126–7).

To Mondrian, the ultimate goal of Neo-plasticism is "the creation of a useful and esthetic environment" (Mondrian 1986, 392). Mondrian does not reject the frenetic energy of city noise, but welcomes it into his thought, whether sitting in a café or working in his studio. Thus, these noises are incorporated, through metaphor, into his canvases. In Mondrian's observation of noise, there is no conflict between the circumspection of the neoplastic canvas and the turmoil of urban city dwelling outside. To Mondrian, city dwelling signifies the non-conventional, non-hierarchical structure of life—something he deeply appreciated.

In line with his somewhat Utopian thinking, Mondrian's plane surface and (unresolved) struggle to attain complete pictorial flatness can be interpreted in part as representing an attempt to annihilate the 'hierarchical' social system. City noise is an outsider to this hierarchical system. Put another way, in a visual sense the city noise and city 'visual noise' (such as random juxtapositions of colour, form and

[22] The book may have been given to Mondrian, since it has Marinetti's inscription, "Mondrian, simpátia, futuristá".

texture, and the text-images of advertising) are inimical to the coherent mapping of the city's functionality: that is, the level of the resolution does not match that required for the mapping of the city. Interestingly, to make a clear map for a specific use (which is generally any map's purpose), the focused and unfocused areas need to be clearly discriminated, such that the information-hierarchy system can be organised within the map. Everything outside of that system is to be ignored: too little and too much detail are equally avoided. The renaissance perspectival system is one such system which employs the logic of an hierarchical system of mapping and resolution. When Albertian perspective is employed in a painting, one is drawn toward the desire to enhance the resolution of detail. Ideally, the degree of resolution would be unlimited, approaching seamless representational realism.

Thus Cézanne renounced the detailed rendering of subjects, and achieved a controlled but limited amount of detail, resulting in a rougher resolution of the limitations of pictorial reality. There is a direct relationship between the degree of detail given to make an object visually convincing – or illusionistically 'realistic' – and the technical means used for its depiction, a relationship determined by the size of each brush stroke. In Cézanne's painting (especially his late post-impressionist painting) the limitation of pictorial realism is tied to the effect of the marks of each individual brush stroke on the surface.

Mondrian's attempt to control resolution to constitute a neoplastic rather than representational 'reality' can be interpreted as a more thorough version of Cézanne's annihilation of illusionistic perspective.[23] To attain complete flatness on the canvas, Mondrian tried to annihilate any possible single element which might be read in terms of illusion or volume, such as that produced by perspectival depth. In Cézanne's painting, the 'noise' of large rough brush strokes which remain on the surface is not completely incorporated into the configuration on the canvas.

On the contrary, Mondrian attempts to annihilate from his surface the daubs or 'noise' ("neoplastic art agrees with hygiene, which demands smooth, easily cleaned surfaces" (Mondrian 1986, 211)) as well as any perspectival system (or pictorial space). Mondrian creates levels of tonality different from that of, for example, Cézanne's low resolved tonality. With Cézanne, the 'daub' can be mostly taken as 'noise' because the brush-stroke is partly depicted matter and partly something else. But Cézanne's so-called 'passage', which engaged André Lhote, the French philosopher and art critic, remains unresolved 'noise'. This is explained as Cézanne's method, by which different levels of tonality are realized by a "*passage*" bridging the 'noise' of low resolution brush strokes with the viewer's gaze. In this sense it relates to Mondrian's higher level of 'noise' inherited from Cubist painting. The Cubists, Picasso and Braque, and other post-Cézanne painters, took the effect of 'passage' further, anticipating the path which the viewer's gaze might follow, thereby effecting a sense of movement.

The sense of 'movement' brought about by "passage" in both Cézanne's and Cubist painting can be activated in the viewer's mind, thereby conforming to a 'nat-

[23] The concept of 'resolution' was inspired by Richard Shiff's series of lectures given at both the Fine Arts Dept., Melbourne University, and Victorian College of the Arts, in 1997.

uralistic' or physical time sense: that is, as the eyes trace the small daubs of paint which retrace the painter's brushwork. However, according to Mondrian's concept of movement or 'speed' in neoplastic painting, if a viewer can catch the element on his canvas, this should be realized via a non-natural or non-physical time sense (or more simply, via 'non-time'). This conception of non-physical time is akin to the 'vertical time' in Jonathan Kramer's conception.

In addition to Mondrian's notion of an active surface or 'meta-passage' on his canvas, Langer's notion of "composition" is pertinent. In Langer's thinking, composition is activated in the performer's or listener's mind in 'virtual time', and forms a generative matrix of the whole music as it unfolds 'now'.

Mondrian's ultimate goal for composition in painting, in early mature Neoplasticism, was 'stasis' accompanied by the tension of 'rhythm'. The neoplastic composition unfolds this 'now' through the structure of 'meta-passage' and non-hierarchical resolution. Mondrian's principal interest in the structure of jazz music is, in this context, understandable, but he thematises a specific aspect of jazz, one which is suitable for the composition of Neo-plasticism. The structural tension and release of jazz is one aspect in which Mondrian was particularly interested. Mondrian's observation about jazz is supported by the jazz theorist Lee B. Brown:

> Now if we wonder why jazz *rhythm* should stand in such a special relationship with spontaneity, the answer is that jazz is preoccupied with rhythm in a game of tension and release (Brown 1991, 124–5).

Mondrian is famous for his collection of jazz gramophone records. Paul Sanders recollects what Mondrian had said about his experience of listening to music through the gramophone or radio.

> No, Paul, believe me, the gramophone and radio will bring about a revolution. They will put us in the position for the first time of being able to listen in a concentrated way, undisturbed by other listeners who cough, or tap out the rhythm with their feet or distract us in other ways. You will be able to sit listening in your room with as much attention as you can read a book or look at a painting or print on the wall (Sanders 1979, 1–7).

For Mondrian, jazz music was not just about the simple pleasure of the physical gratification associated with dancing to a strong beat (although Mondrian apparently did dance in his studio accompanied by dance music from the gramophone). Mondrian listened to jazz deeply, in the sense in which Eliot describes the listening self, and with the same intensity as he looked at a painting on the wall. Mondrian sees structure in jazz, and renounces any association with pulsted metre or repetitive beats. Mondrian's predisposition towards seeking structure, rather than a concatenation of pulsted notes or metre, requires special attention.

For Mondrian, rhythm is not identified with tempo or metre, but with composition itself and the force of structure. Mondrian's interest in jazz was also in its off-beat polyrhythms. One episode which reveals Mondrian's interest in responding to structure, and not just following the tempo or strong beats, is reported by Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop:

> I remember that one evening he wanted to go to the "Miss Blondy"; I couldn't say now where it was, but I remember a packed room in which a Black orchestra were playing, and

> a plumpish young woman was sitting at a table on the side wall. As soon as the music started, she began to sway from side to side and to beat out a counter-rhythm on the table and the mirror hanging alongside her with a pair of small sticks. Piet gazed at her attentively and said that 'she really had something, man', but when Miss Blondy at one point drummed on in some sort of trance and suddenly sprang at least a metre in the air, his seriousness disappeared too (Van Domselaer-Middelkoop 1959–60, 288–9).

"Miss Blondy's" tapping out the off-beats or counter-rhythm enchanted Mondrian. He was not at all interested in rhythm aligned to chronometric time, or which followed only the 'beats'. Mondrian rejected overemphasis on already accented beats, preferring a rhythm that allowed for non-hierarchical participation. Rather than bringing about equilibrium between on-beats and whatever we might call 'non-beats', or between regular beats and off-beats, he was interested in ways that blurred the resolution of beats into something approaching 'free metre'. For Mondrian, understanding composition was not about eliciting the grid or some other ostensive structure, but was about a dialectical opposition among elements in the composition, a propensity which is curiously conspicuous in his style of dancing.

4.10 Mondrian and Dance

Mondrian's preference for dance and a passion for rhythm contrast a great deal with photographs of the man himself, which depict an austere, silent, introverted figure.

Many artists were enchanted by jazz in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe and the United States, including Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger, and Stuart Davis. Most of them were thrilled by the vitalism implicit in jazz music. Mondrian was the same, but in terms of his own art, he did not reflect the vitality of jazz music directly, as did Matisse and Davis. Rudy Koopmans describes Mondrian's particular propensity for jazz:

> It is interesting to note here that in his reflections on jazz Mondrian does not highlight its vitalistic aspects, as was usual in the twenties, but dwells upon the formal, abstract qualities of the rhythm (Koopmans 1976, 7).

Mondrian's interest in jazz and dance revolves specifically around the structure and style of dancing. Mondrian replied to the question by the same correspondent about the danger of the 'frightfully physical' (that is non-intellectual) frenzy of jazz:

> Yes, the way Europeans dance it, it often looks hysterical. But negroes like Josephine Baker have an inborn, brilliantly controlled style. All modern dances look feeble against such powerfully maintained concentration of speed (Henkels 1987, 31).

But Mondrian's way of dancing was also unusual (perhaps neither 'inborn' nor controlled, but certainly 'speedy'). He frequented dance halls throughout his mature life. In New York, where he arrived in 1940, he was also a regular customer of the dance hall. The wife of the painter Stuart Davis frequently accompanied him and is

attributed with the following description of Mondrian's dancing style as having "steps too complicated … to follow" (Seuphor 1956, 170).[24]

Mariike van Domselaer-Middelkoop also described Mondrian's way of dancing: "The dancing was a very serious business for him. He danced with a straight back and his head looking up on an angle, and did 'styled' steps" (Van Domselaer-Middelkoop 1959–60, 284). J. J. P. Oud describes Mondrian's 'original' styled dancing:

> I have seen him dancing with some lively girl to the current rhythms of the day (especially jazz), which made such a strong appeal to him. Although he always followed the beat of the music, he seems to interpolate a rhythm of his own. He was away in a dream, yet remained prim and precise and always kept exact time, although creating the impression of an artistic, indeed almost abstract, dancing figure. It could not have been much fun for the girl to drift across the dance floor in a kind of trance in the midst of all the normal pleasure-seeking throng. He himself was aware of this and later compensated the girl—most generously, considering his slender means—for giving up her time to him. 'Perhaps she was expecting something else,' he would then say with that worldly wise, yet good-natured air of his (Wijsenbeek 1968, 118-9).

L. J. F Wijsenbeek's description reflects Oud's report above that Mondrian "slid across the dance floor like an automaton miraculously brought to life, with a fixed, ecstatic look on his face" (Wijsenbeek 1968, 119). With Mondrian for a dancing partner, the other cannot maintain a unified line. Instead, especially if the dance becomes 'successful', then dialectically opposed and abstractly, unidentical conflicting lines would appear. When dance becomes neoplastic, naturalistic elements such as curved lines and fixed forms are to be annihilated, exactly as he suggested in his writings:

> Previously the music and the movement of the dancing couple tended to *flow together*: its expression was the continuous curved line. Now, in the more advanced dance forms and in the music to which—or rather, against which—one dances, *a duality is manifested in which the music and the dance are equivalently opposed* (Mondrian 1986, 97).

Thus Mondrian introduces the parameters of his Neo-plasticism into dancing, not in terms of a fanciful co-ordinating curved line, but by way of the counter-balance between right-angled straight lines, nuanced with Mondrian's incredible speed. Mondrian's steps were perhaps too straight and too fast to constitute any normal sense of partnership. Mondrian's obsession with straight line and speed can be seen in his writing:

> The curved and the closed, however, always express form and therefore limitation in time and in space. The straight, on the other hand, is plastic expression of the greatest speed, the greatest power, and so leads to the annihilation of time and space (Mondrian 1986, 117).

Mondrian's dance-floor becomes an idiosyncratic battle-field of oppositions: tension between horizontal and vertical lines rendered at absolute speed. The rapidity

[24] Seuphor also describes Mondrian's fanaticism with dance and his 'unusual' style of dancing at various times:

In Laren, he had gone to dances every Sunday. "He would pick out the prettiest girl," Mr. Van Tussenbroeck, who knew him in that period, told me, "and would dance as stiff as a ramrod, his head in the air, and without saying a word to his partner" (Seuphor 1956, 170).

of the tempo is quite characteristic in the Shimmy, as well as the opposing heel-toe duality. This is the "new spirit" for Mondrian, but just at its beginning:

> Modern dance music (shimmy, fox trot, tango) already shows us that mere stress upon duality in the tempo is not sufficient to create art. Nevertheless, in the shimmy as "dance" the opposing duality (heel-toe), as well as the rapidity of its tempo, are quite remarkable. Although the new spirit is beginning to show itself in this dance, it remains rather banal, especially because of the superficiality of its tempo. Its banality increases when the duality is put in relief by the highly accented meter in two or in three, or when "melody" is added. Even though this accentuation is partially annihilated by multiple oppositions, it *individualizes* itself. It draws attention to itself: it *limits* (Mondrian 1986, 162).

The marked 'metre' is the source of banality, made worse when 'melody' is added to the accented metre. Metre and melody are 'individual' and not 'universal', and are thus counter to Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm. The principle of Neo-plasticism naturally concerns the stasis and a specific 'rest', which are based on equilibration of contrast.

Mondrian's fundamental concept of static rhythm which makes much of 'rest', is coherent throughout his early neoplastic and mature neoplastic career until 1932, when the 'double-line' is introduced. He wrote in "Jazz and neoplastic" (1927):

> Everything in the bar moves and at the same time is at rest. Continuous action holds passion in check. The bottles and glasses on the shelves stand still, yet they move in color and sound and light. Are they less beautiful than candles on the altar? They both have the same abstract form: height dominant over breadth. The dancers with made-up faces move and come to rest (Mondrian 1986, 221).

Here too, Mondrian's doctrine of static-dynamic equilibrium permeates his observation: the equilibrated point between kinesis and stasis. It is notable that Mondrian sees 'rest' even in the driving and kinetic mode of jazz and its manifestation in a jazz bar, where energetic jazz rhythm animates everything. He sees horizontality in the swaying mode of the driving force of jazz, and verticality in the still mode of bottles and glasses on the shelves, on which the varying movements of colours and light are also energized by the sound of jazz. 'Stop' & 'go' is Mondrian's mode of dynamic rhythm and equilibrium. He prefers to see 'rest' in the completely opposite mode against the agitative mode of kinethesia, the combination of which brings about the dynamics of Neo-plasticism.

4.11 Melody Versus Rhythm: Kandinsky and Mondrian 1

According to Charmion von Wiegand, who was a close friend of Mondrian, Mondrian used to leave the dance floor as soon as the melodic element predominated: "Let's sit down. I hear melody" (Carmean 1979, 49 n.68). Mondrian's first mention of melody in a context in which he opposed it to rhythm appears in his earliest writing, "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917): Movement and countermovement in music are formed by melody and rhythmic division (tempo) and in modern dance by the music and dance rhythms (steps) (Mondrian 1986, n.r.47).

Mondrian's opposition to melody in the context of contemporary music is also evident in later writings, such as "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919):

> A (A singer): 0… It is what I fail to hear in the compositions of modern music; as I said earlier, the recent tone combinations without melody fail to stir me as music with melody does.
>
> B (A painter): But surely an equilibrated composition of *pure* tone relationships should be able to stir one even more deeply (Mondrian 1986, 79).

"Pure tone relationships" are equivalent here to 'repose' *becoming "plastically visible* through the *harmony of relationships"* (Mondrian 1986, 84).

In "On the Spiritual in Art" (1912), Kandinsky elaborated 'form' by way of analogy to the various forms in music. 'Simple composition' he called 'melodic', noting that it "is subordinated to a clearly apparent, simple form." More complex compositions which he called 'symphonic' might consist of 'several forms', but these too are subordinated to an "obvious or concealed principal form." Various 'transitional forms' are to be found between these two main forms. Kandinsky writes that the "whole process of development is strikingly similar to that in music" (Kandinsky et al. 1982a, 215).[25] Mondrian, also drawing from music (but with less emphasis on the analogic relations between musical and visual forms), sees melody as 'limited form', proposing that certain kinds of music fall short of neoplastic 'free rhythm', which is opposed to 'natural rhythm'. In 'American jazz', for example, free rhythm is "approximated but not realized—because melody, that is, limited form, is not entirely destroyed" (Mondrian 1986, 240). Mondrian's antipathy towards melody is consistent throughout all his writings. In 1943 Mondrian said in a written interview with American art critic James Johnson Sweeney (1900–1986):

> True Boogie-Woogie I conceive as homogeneous in intention with mine in painting: destruction of melody, which is the equivalent of destruction of natural appearance, and construction through the continuous opposition of pure means—dynamic rhythm (Mondrian 1986, 357).

For Mondrian, melody is categorically allied with nature, and thus to be 'annihilated' at all costs. Rhythm acts upon and in relation to structure, and thus destroys all reference to natural entities. Repetition, according to Mondrian, is also a property of a natural entity, and he clearly rejected it too. Kandinsky, on the contrary, emphasised its importance, commenting in *On the Spiritual in Art* that repetition or "the piling-up of the same sounds, enriches the spiritual atmosphere necessary to the maturing of one's emotions." Kandinsky writes of another and "more complex" form of repetition, in which "different elements participate in different forms", nominating the 'different arts' ("i.e., realized and synthesized—monumental art")

[25] Mondrian must have read this text since in his writings Kandinsky's influence is obvious. Mondrian wrote in terms of Kandinsky's 'inner necessity': "… when this manner of rendering results from an inner feeling of necessity that it *must* be so and not otherwise" (Mondrian 1969, I-59, 44). Also Mondrian wrote about Kandinsky's theory of colour: "Kandinsky has aptly observed that 'cold' can become 'hot', so to speak (just as 'hot' can seem 'cold')" (Mondrian 1986, 240).

and 'different means' as the context in which such variations of repetition might manifest (Kandinsky et al. 1982a, 191–2).

Mondrian's canvases function to enlighten the viewer—all viewers, though not through vocabulary or by way of analogy, but, rather, through a painterly vocabulary: the language of plastic relations. Like Plato and Hegel, Mondrian comprehended the power of music, and attempted to draw upon and apply it to painting, within the strictly limited means of painting's vocabulary: primary colours, straight lines, and colour and non-colour planes; and in this respect Mondrian again differs from Kandinsky because of the latter's incorporation of any pictorial element for the purpose of 'orchestration'. Mondrian and Kandinsky were two painters with similar goals, to make painting alive and spiritual.[26] For Kandinsky, the way in which to realize and enliven art was to draw upon a multiple of factors and methodologies. For Mondrian, the only way to attain a kind of painting that was 'alive' was to pursue intentionally narrow means. Kandinsky asserted that abstract painting has as its means "an unlimited number of so-called free forms" and from among the primary colors "an unlimited quantity of inexhaustible tonalities" (Kandinsky et al. 1982b, 760). According to Mondrian's neoplastic principle, Plastic means must be the rectangular plane or prism in primary colours (red, blue and yellow) and noncolour (white, black and gray), and also the straight line (boundary of the pure plastic means) in its principal, perpendicular opposition (Mondrian 1986, 214).

Kandinsky fully acknowledged the impossibility of depicting music as such. Admitting that he was 'personally … unable to paint music, basically unattainable" (Kandinsky et al. 1982a, 345), Kandinsky reveals an insatiable interest in expressing music almost literally, transposing musical value into colour value, and vice versa. Mondrian plainly and simply did not believe that his paintings would constitute a literal analogy between painting and music, or even rhythm. Mondrian's neoplastic canvases are an immanent and conceptually construed expression of rhythm, and his neoplastic practice converges on the problem of how to implicitly express visual rhythm without recourse to the expression of rhythm through the natural elements of time and space, i.e., 'repetition' as Kandinsky understood it.

Like Hegel, Mondrian elevated painting above all other art forms, but recognised rhythm to be the common element of force among every art form, too. His painting has no referential, iconographic, or representational content, but employs the force of opposition, in which rhythm resides. Thus, Mondrian attempted to express the power of rhythm, but not just in terms of a physically 'danceable', kinetic energy (Jaques-Dalcroze), but with the energy held or contained within an 'absolute' balance of equilibration, that is, 'static' rhythm. However, this would arise only after an intense conflict between extreme oppositions. Mondrian's understanding of rhythm reflects an individualistic reference to Modernist music. His treatment of rhythm is controversial, and it is necessary to keep in mind that his theory of

[26] For example, Kandinsky states:

> The birth of a work of art is of cosmic character. The originator of the work is thus the spirit. Thus the work exists *in abstracto* prior to that embodiment which makes it accessible to the human senses (Kandinsky, Lindsay, and Vergo 1982a, 345).

Neo-plasticism is based on the function of oppositions in the Hegelian dialectic sense—activation of the negative side for the benefit of the positive side. We are confronted, then, with the prospect of a type of painting which expresses the force of rhythm, yet somehow encompassed by an overall impression of *stasis*. This may be possible in theory, but we will no doubt still ask: How can any viewer appreciate such a convoluted rendition of rhythm on canvas?

To resolve this problem, some preliminary work is required: we have to know what rhythm itself is; which, given the contentiousness of debate surrounding its definition, presupposes reference to a range of definitions as they have been proposed by thinkers both ancient and modern. The aim of the next chapter is to develop an understanding of static rhythm, or rhythm as structure (or composition), and to consider to what extent this type of rhythm is currently understood to be incorporated in shaping one's perception of rhythm. A definition of rhythm has been given for poetry, music and dance, but rarely for visual art. Structure or composition is a common ground among different artforms. The structure of visual art in space and time, specifically as it is articulated in painting—in the context of the discussion here, non-referential painting—can conceptually overlap with other artforms. However, evidence of rhythmic elements that pertain to the surface of the canvas require a very specific definition. Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvas confronts the researcher with an extreme case of this specificity, particularly with regard to the concept of *static* rhythm. His rhythm, however, in being so inclined to remain unnoticed, will, upon close analysis, indicate the way towards a new understanding of how movement, time and space, might manifest in visual art. Mondrian's elevation of rhythm over melody testifies to his concern for the structure of painting, rather than for expressive or linear tonalities rendered in terms of melody. Rhythm as structure is the focus of the following chapter, in which the question concerning how a viewer can appreciate Mondrian's rhythm on canvas is addressed.

References

Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music, Theory and History of Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Baas, Beatrix. 1981. Dutch 20th Century Piano Music in Development – Part I: The Renovators Born Before World War I. *Key Notes: Musical Life in the Netherlands* 13 (1): 17–19.

Becker, Judith O. 1981. Hindu-Buddhist Time in Javanese Gamelan Music. In *Study of Time IV*, ed. J.T. Fraser. New York: Springer.

Blotkamp, Carel. 1994. *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.

Bois, Yve-Alain, and Joop Joosten. 1994. *Piet Mondrian: 1872–1944*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Brown, Lee B. 1991. The Theory of Jazz Music: 'It Don't Mean a Thing'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (2).

Carmean, E.A., Jr. 1979. *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions*. Washington, DC: The National Gallery of Art.

Griffiths, Paul. 1978. *A Concise History of Avant-Garde Music: From Debussy to Boulez*. New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Hegel, G W F. 1975. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Vol. I*. Trans. T.M. Knox. New York: Clarendon Press.
Henkels, Herbert. 1987. *Mondrian: From Figuration to Abstraction*. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shimbun.
Holtzman, Harry, and Martin S. James, eds. 1986. *Piet Mondrian, The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.
Jaffé, Hans L.C. 1956. *De Stijl 1917–1931 – The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
———. 1967. *De Stijl*. Trans. R.R. Symonds and M. Whitall. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.
Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.
Kandinsky, Wassily, Kenneth Clement Lindsay, and Peter Vergo. 1982a. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 1 (1901–1921)*, 2 vols. London: Faber.
———. 1982b. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 2 (1922–1943)*, 2 vols. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.
Koopmans, Rudy. 1976. The Netherlands in the Inter-War Years: Society, Culture and the Arts. *Key Notes: Musical Life in the Netherlands* 3 (January): 4–9.
Kozloff, Max. 2000. American Painting During the Cold War. In *Pollock and After*. Oxford: Routledge.
Kramer, Jonathan D. 1988. *The Time of Music: New Meanings New Temporalities New Listening Strategies*. New York: Schirmer Books.
Maur, Karin V. 1980. Mondrian and Music. In *Mondrian: Drawings Watercolours New York Paintings*. Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie.
Meyer, Lenard B. 1967. *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
Mondrian, Piet. 1919. Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City). *De Stijl II* 8.
———. 1969. *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912–1914*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International nv.
———. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.
Osborne, Harold. 1970. *The Art of Appreciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Riley, Terry, Gamall Awad, and Ammon Haggerty. 1992. *Interview with Terry Riley*. Accessed 20 July. http://www.qaswa.com/thoughts/entry/terry_riley/?/rhythmos/terry.html
Sachs, Curt. 1953. *Rhythm and Tempo: A Study in Music History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Sanders, Paul. 1979. Herinneringen aan Piet Mondriaan (Reminiscences of Piet Mondrian). *Maatstaf* 12 (27): 1–7.
Schafer, R. Murray. 1970. *The Book of Noise*. Wellington: Price Milburn & Co. Ltd.
Schoenmaekers, M.H.J. 1915. *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld*. Bussum: Van Dishoeck.
Seuphor, Michel. 1956. *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. London: Thames and Hudson.
———. 1957. *Piet Mondrian, Leben und Werk*. Köln: Dumont.
Tisdall, Caroline, and Angelo Bozzolla. 1977. *Futurism*. London: Thames and Hudson.
Van Dijk, Marcel. 1983. The Time of Jakob Van Domselaer. Masters, Department of Music Studies, The University of Amsterdam.
Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, M. 1959–60. Herinneringen aan Piet Mondrian (Memories of Piet Mondrian). *Maatstaf* 7.
Wijsenbeek, L.J.F. 1968. *Piet Mondrian*. London: Studio Vista.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G.H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler. 1998. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*. Rev. 2nd ed. Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
Yasuda, Kyo. 1999. Javanese Dance and Music Performance at the Paris Exposition of 1889 (Japanese). *South Asian Studies* 36 (4): 505–524.

Chapter 5
Concepts of Rhythm in Music, Philosophy and Painting

You need new conceptual glasses.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein et al. 1980, 94e § 525)

5.1 Rhythm as Structure

In this Chapter, various key theories and ideas about rhythm, composition, structure and metre will be examined, in particular, those theories of rhythm that have been proposed by Western thinkers who refer to ancient Greek conceptions of rhythm and metre, and to its visual counterpart: structure or *schema*. Scanning the diversity of theories of rhythm, schema and metre in order to trace transitions in the definition of rhythm as they might emerge in *historical* order is not the intention here. In the interests of clarity, however, it is often necessary to maintain a degree of critical distance with respect to the specific theories of rhythm of other thinkers. As we have seen, Mondrian theorised and worked on the basis of his own original ideas, and in that sense was somewhat distanced from the ideas of other theorists engaged in the visual field. Conceptually, I do not subscribe to theories of rhythm which are identified with metre or tempo (or a series of pulses). Following Mondrian, I am dissatisfied with the notion of rhythm being based on regular movement (repetition) or a sequence of notes or equivalent visual elements. Conceptually and philosophically, I regard rhythm as structure (*schema*) or composition. Empirically, in terms of the audience or viewer's volition, I consent to concur with the necessity for metre and a certain degree of repetition (or a sequence of auditory or visual elements). This is not rendered in terms of a manifest sense (auditorily or visually), but, rather, in terms of a mental or internalised sense.

Pivotal to the concept of rhythm argued in this chapter is the philological distinction between two readings of the word "rhythm" as they are found in ancient Greek texts: a fixed 'form' or schema (σχημα), and a fluid or kinetic (or mobile) 'form' (ρυθμοσ or ῥυθμός); in the discussion below, I refer to the former as 'schematic' or 'static' rhythm, and to the latter as either (just) rhythm, or as 'kinetic' rhythm.

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_5

The concept of rhythm as schema and its manifestation in practical terms is explored, specifically, according to two major parameters: rhythm and metre.

5.2 Philological Understanding of Rhythm and Schema

According to the French semiologist and philologist Emile Benveniste, a modern etymological understanding of rhythm (ῥυθμός) as flow (ῥοία) does not connote the conception according to which the term 'rhythm (ῥυθμός)' was actually used in ancient Greece, where it was more closely related to 'form' or 'schema' (σχημα). Benveniste goes so far as to contend that 'rhythm (ῥυθμός)' "does not even mean 'rhythm'" (Benveniste 1971, 282) in the philological sense. In ancient Greece, the use of the term ῥυθμός can be generalized according to its use as σχημα.

The ordinary sense in which people now use the term 'rhythm' connotes 'movement', 'mobility', 'fluidity' and 'repetition', for example, the movement of waves in the sea, or concentric ripples across the surface of water: that is, according to repetitive movements in time and space. Images which surround these common (mis-) conceptions of rhythm can, according to Benveniste, be derived from the transition of reciprocal meanings of the term, in history, between 'rhythm' (ῥυθμός) and 'schema' (σχημα). Benveniste wrote:

> There is a difference between σχηεμα (σχημα) and rhythm (ῥυθμός); schema (σχημα) … is defined as a fixed 'form,' realized and viewed in some way as an object. On the other hand, rhythm (ῥυθμός), according to the contexts in which it is given, designates the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency; it fits the pattern of a fluid element, of a letter arbitrarily shaped, or a robe which one arranges at one's will, of a particular state of character or mood (Benveniste 1971, 286).

The meaning of rhythm (ῥυθμός) is derived originally from one of the definitions of 'form' (σχημα) as it was conceived in ancient Greece. Thus ῥυθμός designates the 'form' or 'static' object which connotes 'movement', 'fluidity', corporal inconsistency in the premises of the concept 'form', but not of 'kinetic' object. Benveniste further contends that after Plato, it developed a more autonomous set of meanings: that is, the element of actual 'movement' is emphatically introduced into rhythm (ῥυθμός) (according to Plato, "Rhythm is the order of movement."). However, there remains a question: where is the problematic correlation between rhythm and repetition — such as that associated with regular movements (the waves of the sea for example) — derived from? This question also relates to the often binding correlation between rhythm and *metre,* which connotes regularity and repetition within itself. Thus, an investigation of rhythm necessitates that one first investigate the genealogy of this persistent (and arguably misleading) relationship between rhythm and repetition.

The original sense of the word flow (ῥοία) in relation to rhythm (ῥυθμός), which alludes to "the regular movements of the waves of the sea" (Benveniste 1971, 281),[1] Benveniste argues, does not reflect the original meaning of ρειν. 'Flow' (ῥοία) more correctly refers to the river rather than the sea, pointing out that 'flow' is not appropriate in relation to the sea: the sea, he notes, does not 'flow'. Moreover, his observation that rhythm (ῥυθμός) was never used to describe the recurrent movement of the waves is emphatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 364).

On the morphological level the connection between 'flow (ῥοία)' and rhythm (ῥυθμός), and the specificities of their differences, can be illustrated. At the semantic level, such a connection is impossible (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 364). It is easy to see how usage of the term rhythm might be understood in relation to movement or repetition, and thus be derived from notions about "the regular movements of the waves of the sea." But at what point and in which context did flow (ῥοία) come to be related to the sea (and not the river)? An investigation of this shift in use

[1] Gilles Deleuze criticizes Benveniste's interpretation of the origin of 'rhythm' in ancient Greece: "This text, often considered decisive, seems ambiguous to us because it treats rhythm as a "secondary specialization" of the form of the body" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 554 n.25). They explain their criticism of Benveniste:

> [T]he recent studies on rhythm, on the origin of that notion, do not seem entirely convincing. For we are told that rhythm has nothing to do with the movement of waves but rather that it designates "form" in general, and more specifically the form of a "measured, cadenced" movement. However, rhythm is never the same as measure. And though the atomist Democritus is one of the authors who speak of rhythm in the sense of form, it should be borne in mind that he does so under very precise conditions of fluctuation and that the forms made by atoms are primarily large, nonmetric aggregates, smooth spaces such as the air, the sea, or even the earth (*magnae res*). There is indeed such a thing as measured, cadenced rhythm, relating to the coursing of a river between its banks or to the form of a striated space; but there is also a rhythm without measure, which relates to the upswell of a flow, in other words, to the manner in which a fluid occupies a smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 364).

Deleuze's and Guattari's criticism of Benveniste is not sufficient (it misses a rather important point), for Benveniste problematises the definition of rhythm without metre, in terms of 'flow'. The point of Benveniste's etymological explanation is to spotlight the definition of rhythm whether it is metrical or not, and without reference to the concept of 'flow', which relates to the linear movement of dance or music: that is, rhythm as schema.

Benveniste's contribution to the understanding of rhythm is his articulation of rhythm as schema in contrast to the notion of rhythm as kinesis. Rhythm as schema provides a means by which it is both plausible and possible to discern rhythm within a static form or design (such as in a painting or sculpture). Deleuze's and Guattari's misunderstanding of Benveniste (especially with regard to rhythm as schema) is based on a premise which dichotomises rhythm as being either with metre or without metre. Benveniste's point about schematic rhythm is valid, since it connotes a broader and deeper sense of rhythm which relates non-chronological rhythm, and which directly concerns form or structure. Rhythm as schema can cover not only music, poetry, and locution, but painting, sculpture, and architecture. Benveniste's delineation between rhythm as flow and cadenced movement (such as the regular movement of the waves) is also very useful, since it provides the grounds for a rethinking of rhythm as the common basis of 'flow' (challenging even the etymological meaning of rhythm), and invites an opportunity to elucidate the meaning of flow in relation to rhythm (and to time and space).

and derivation of the term rhythm will contribute to debate about the historical and genealogical transformations underlying the establishment of the meaning of 'rhythm (ῥυθμός)' as movement or repetition (and flow). The impact of this shift on modern usage is especially pertinent to this present book.

Arguably, a current of water (flow or flux) does not have 'rhythm' but rather, has 'form'. The ancient Ionian authors, such as Leucippus and Democritus, used the term rhythm (ῥυθμός) as the equivalent of 'form' (σχημα),[2] an equivalence which remained unchallenged throughout the Ionian and the Attic periods. Understandably, 'rhythm' (ῥυθμός) would have been aligned with the meaning of 'configuration' or 'arrangement', for example, "a letter arbitrarily shaped." Xenophon used ῥυθμός as 'proportion' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284). The verbal form ρυθμιζω or ῥυθμός meant 'to give form' or 'to picture, to localize' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284). Thus, Benveniste summarises, the constant meaning of ῥυθμός, from its earliest use down to the Attic period, as "distinctive form, proportioned figure, arrangement, [and] disposition." Thus, the term rhythm throughout this period was never related to 'flow', much less to 'the recurrence of the waves'.

However, a closer analysis of the distinction between the terms 'rhythm' (ῥυθμός) and 'schema' (σχημα) indicates how it was that the two terms developed. Benveniste dates the beginning of the modern use of 'rhythm' as occurring after the middle of the fifth century B. C. Plato assigned the notion of 'rhythm' to its 'new' usage, which differs from prior, traditional views of 'rhythm': that is, 'rhythm' in music and dance or in the flow of time.

In the context of analysis of the neoplastic notion of rhythm, which is referred to by Mondrian as 'equilibrated movements', it is notable that Plato gives it a similar definition, in which he refers to ῥυθμός as a 'balanced state' between the oppositions ("between opulence and poverty" — *Laws* 728e) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284), which is followed by Hegel (see Chap. 1). I will trace the way in which Plato's ideas about 'rhythm' developed from Attic understanding of rhythm (ῥυθμός) as schema (σχημα) to rhythm (ῥυθμός) as kinetic rhythm or movement, and from 'static' form to 'kinetic' recurrence of things, like waves in the sea, which is the common metaphor of rhythm in our current use of the term.

In the *Philebus.* (17d), Plato refers to "the movements of the body, which are numerically regulated and which must be called *rhythms* and *measures* (ῥυθμός χαι μέτρα)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284) In the *Laws* (665a): "This order in the movement has been given the name *rhythm*, while the order in the voice in which high and low combine is called *harmony*, and the union of the two is called the "*choral art*" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 284) (For the meaning of *chora* in Plato, see Chap. 1, p. 43). However, Plato holds to the traditional sense of ῥυθμός: distinctive form, disposition, proportion (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 287). His innovation

[2] Aristotle cited Democritus and explained three different sets of meaning of things in terms of ρυσμου, σιαθιγη, and γροπη. Benveniste translates Aristotle:

> Things are differentiated by ρυσμου, by σιαθιγη, and by γροπη; the ρυσμου is the σχημα ('form'), the σιαθιγη ('contact') is the ταξισ ('order'), and the γροπη ('turn') is the θεσισ ('position') (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 282).

was to connect ῥυθμός to the form of movement which the body makes when dancing, and in art whereby the arrangement of figures make for a balance: thus movement is finally resolved into balance or equilibrium in Plato's thinking. The cardinal point of Plato's notion of rhythm (ῥυθμός) is its association with measure or metre (μετρον), which is bound by the law of numbers. That is, for Plato, rhythmic form is determined by 'metre' (or 'measure') and is, therefore, numerically regulated within the Pythagorean integer system**,** which was later problematised by Aristoxenus of Taras (born probably around 379 BC), but recuperated by Aristides Quintilianus, who followed Aristoxenus's empirical theoria, but modified or idealised the meaning of rhythm according to Pythagorean tradition (for biographical notes on Aristoxenus, see Chap. 2, n.10).

The problem with the Pythagorean system, especially in its implication for notions of rhythm, becomes clear once the Aristoxenusian conception of rhythm is brought into the discussion. In Aristoxenus (influenced by his teacher Aristotle) the concept of rhythm engages with the notion of time, in which the arrangement of movement is organised. From here the correlation between rhythm (as structure or form) and repetition (in wave -form, steps in dance, and musical notes) is a reasonable assumption. The appreciation of the 'flow' of time to definitions of rhythm is the conceptual watershed of the philological development of the term. The Attic meaning of rhythm as schema is thereafter transformed into the indication of rhythm as a kinetic body in music, and specifically in dance. Moreover, the introduction of the *arsis/thesis* conception relating to the dual combination of metre in Aristoxenus' definition of rhythm represents a turning away from Attic thinking, toward a conception that is more in line with the modern usage of the term.

The discourse on rhythm as expressed by various thinkers is confused by discrepancies in the use of the terms 'rhythm' and 'metre'. 'Regulation', 'repetition', 'movement', or even 'energy' are often collapsed into general ideas about 'rhythm'. Similarly, 'tempo', 'beat', or 'accent' have been ambiguously applied to the idea of metre. This confusion is the result of there being a plethora of interpretations of the classical interpretation of rhythm. As far as the appropriated versions of rhythm of our time are concerned, it is Aristoxenus[3] who provides the classical model for a discourse on rhythm.

5.3 What Is Rhythm in Aristoxenus' Theory of Poetry?

Early Greek thinkers, especially Aristoxenus, argued that an understanding of rhythm should come first and that its counterpart, physical reaction, would follow. Lionel Pearson wrote in his essay "The Greek Theory of Rhythm; Aristoxenus and Others":

[3] Aristoxenus's text does not survive in complete form. He is said to have written two volumes of a theory of rhythm but only volume II survives. However, later scholars refer to Aristoxenus's interpretation of rhythm, which seems to include the missing volume I (Pearson 1990, xi-xxii).

> There must be some regularity in which we can trust, some logic of movement that we can understand, before we feel invited to respond to a series of sounds by making some movement ourselves with feet, hands, or head (Pearson 1990, xxiii).

With its origins in ancient Greek epistemology, the Western tradition of rhythm theory consists of a strong association between both physical and intellectual notions of rhythm. The Aristoxenusian theory of rhythm is concerned with there being a perceptible shape of time-lengths accompanied by an anticipated physical aspect. Aristoxenus depicts this in the form of one set of regular movements (*arsis* and *thesis*) which, being a foundation of its perception, underlies the understanding of the logic of rhythm's movement. Thus Aristoxenus' theory of rhythm consists of both somatic and intellectual aspects.

In the very earliest part at the start of *Elementa Rhythmica*, Aristoxenus claims that there is a division between rhythm itself and the medium which is to be 'rhythmisable' (which he called *rhythmizomenon*):

> We must recognize rhythm [ῥυθμός] and the rhythmizable medium (*rhythmizomenon)* as separate notions and separate natures, related to one another in the same kind of way as shape [σχημα] and shapable material (Pearson 1990, 3).

Rhythmizomenon and *schematizomena* are analogous to a lump of clay or other material capable of being 'shaped' (schematised) into a cup or figure or other such object. They are like the random words and phrases,[4] which, when ordered correctly, comprise a sentence. Another example is musical notes on paper: these do not become rhythmical or even musical until spoken or played, and their *chronoi* are arranged in order. In their 'raw state' the lump of clay, words or notes on paper, are neither rhythmic nor arrhythmic. Rhythm and schema are not concrete things**:** they necessitate 'material', a means or medium by which rhythm and schema can be activated, or shaped into rhythmic form, which is to be rhythmised or shaped ("Shape and rhythm resemble one another in that they do not exist by themselves") (Pearson 1990, §5,6). Rhythm and schema are ways to establish order or to form an arrangement. For the viewer or listener of the work, this is a mental act. In other words, there must be a willing participant or agent, without whom rhythm or schema cannot be observed, for as Aristoxenus says: "[R]hythm cannot occur unless there is something to be rhythmised and someone or something to divide the time, because time does not divide itself, as we have already pointed out, but needs an agent to divide it" (Pearson 1990, §5,6).

Rhythmising, therefore, will not change the 'nature' of the *rhythmizomenon*; but the rhythmic form will vary according to the 'nature' of the rhythm adopted. For a more concrete example, we can refer to the arrangement of 'feet' in poetry (Pearson 1990, 49). Aristoxenus wrote: "[R]hythm occurs when the division of *chronoi* takes on some particular arrangement" (Pearson 1990, 5). As we see above, the term 'feet' is taken from dancing and marching. A 'foot' corresponds to a pace, and 'up' and 'down' (*arsis* and *thesis*) are time-divisions of the pace (Pearson 1990, 50).

[4] Aristoxenus referred to this as the *lexis* (Pearson 1990, §4).

Speech, melody and bodily movement are material to be rhythmised, and each of these specific parts (letters, syllables, words, notes, silent intervals, signals, positions and so on) is an element which divides time into rhythmic form in its own way. Aristoxenus' position is unique on this issue since he introduces the division of time itself and subordinates syllables as part of rhythmizomena: rhythmizomena are autonomous in their relationship to rhythmising syllables ("[T]here cannot be a foot without division of time") (Pearson 1990, 9). Aristoxenus was the first theorist of poetry and music in ancient Greek thought, and the first to insist that rhythm was an order of time: "[R]hythms are not to be identified with means of creating rhythm" (Pearson 1990, 9). Moreover, Aristoxenus states clearly that rhythms are to be "measured by time-units" (Pearson 1990, 245-6).

The Aristoxenusian definition of rhythm (ῥυθμός) relates to a sense of *flowing* movement "such as the word 'rhythm' implies, derived as it is from the Greek root *rhu/rheu*, 'flow'" (Pearson 1990, xxiii). Thus, Aristoxenus treats a foot as "the means by which we mark the rhythm and make it recognizable to the senses" (Pearson 1990, 29).

Empirical experience of rhythm is grounded in the relationship of *arsis* and *thesis*, on the basis of which it is not (humanly, somatically) possible to divide the foot into more than four parts: to do so would be to engage a rhythm which would not be possible (for a dancer, for instance) to follow or perform. For Aristoxenus, rhythm is always a property perceivable by an agent or perceiver, and must always be sensible to the human mind. The foot divides the flow of time empirically, while metre, especially in our understanding, is more mathematical. At what point in the history of poetry and music was the empirical foot replaced by metre, given that in our time the foot is limited to poetry? This question relates to the emergence of music independent of poetry. In fact, it was not until medieval times that the *genre* of music was established. In ancient Greece, as we see above, there was no such *genre* of music, since music was not considered to be separate from poetry and dancing (Keuls 1978, 105-7).[5] In the course of the development of the *genre* of music, the organic form of *arsis/thesis* combinations was replaced by a more artificial, mathematical order.

The discrimination between rhythm and metre is not clear in the writing of Aristoxenus, and things are hazier still because Aristoxenus does not actually use the term 'metre' in his writings (Tosaki 1999). It is necessary to interpret the writing of Aristoxenus by contextualising it in terms of how it deviates from Plato (and the Pythagorean-mathematical convention), and, by contrast, how well it meets the demands of modern and contemporary music theory of rhythm.

M. L. West wrote, "There is an obvious analogy between these 'feet', as Greek writers call them, with their *arsis* and *thesis*, and the 'bars' with up-beats and down-beats by which most Western music of recent centuries is conventionally measured out." If in our thinking we can manage to confine our conceptions of 'metre' to the

[5] Interestingly, Keuls notes that "classical Greek had no word for music, a fact which is in itself significant. *Mousike* means art of the Muses and, apparently, did not become narrowed down to mean 'music' until the end of the Hellenic age, at the earliest" (Keuls 1978, 106).

division into ‘bars’, as in the musical score of our time, or to ‘notes’ (a term which Aristoxenus himself did use), then it is possible to understand ‘feet’ in ancient Greek thought as metre. However, the meaning of Greek metre remains dissimilar to ‘bars’ as we would commonly understand the term. Plato had already discriminated between the two concepts. In *Republic*, he wrote about the “principle governing rhythm [ῥυθμός],”

> which will be, not to aim at a great variety of metres, but to discover the rhythms appropriate to a life of courage and self-control (Plato and Cornford 1941, 88).

The passage continues, and Plato, no doubt paraphrasing his own views in the fictional dialogue, observes that:

> there are three fundamental types of rhythm to which all metres may be reduced, just as there are four intervals at the base of all the modes…
> …[but one cannot say] which metres are expressive of meanness, insolence, frenzy, and other such evils, and which rhythms we must retain to express their opposites. It would take a long time to settle all that (Plato and Cornford 1941, 88).

For Plato, music and other art forms pertain to ethical and educational issues. The theory of rhythm and metre are an inherent part of Plato’s thesis, although this is not the place to investigate Plato’s ideas further. But it is worth noting that Plato uses the term “metre” and clearly discriminates between the terms “rhythm” and “metre.” To Plato rhythm is an expression of life and metre is a regulator of rhythm. Plato recognizes three types of rhythm, as does Aristoxenus. For Plato metre is a variety of the combination of feet, and rhythm is the ‘good’ choice of order among the combinations of feet**.**

5.4 The Birth of Metre: The Development of the Aristoxenusian Theory of Rhythm and Metre

The development of the concept of rhythm (ῥυθμός) and its relation to schema (σχημα) and metre (μετρον) in ancient Greek thought after Plato led to the rigidly mathematical concept of ‘metre’ which arose in the middle ages. This tendency has dominated concepts of rhythm ever since, and has its origins in the growth of the concept of metre as a separate element from rhythm in thinkers such as Plato, Damon, Aristotle, Aristoxenus and Aristides Quintilianus. This observation raises a somewhat polemical point concerning the relationship between Aristoxenus’ theory of rhythm and Pythagorean mathematics, which is recognized (among scholars of ancient Greek thought) as Aristoxenus’s “irreconcilable opponent” (Crocker 1978, 96).

For Plato, as we saw above, rhythm is the order of movement (Plato and Saunders 1970, #665). While this is rather general, it is at the same time a comprehensive definition since it covers both the somatic and psychic acquisition (or practice) of rhythm and its extension into the spatio-temporal realm. As one of many representatives of the generation of thinkers following Plato, Aristoxenus does not reiterate Plato’s point of view, but instead concentrates on time itself: For Aristoxenus, rhythm is the

order not of movement, but of *time*. Aristoxenus states in his Elementa Rhythmica[6] that "rhythm is concerned with time-lengths (*chronoi*) and the perception of them" (Pearson 1990, 3). He also thought that rhythm (gυθμός) relates to 'shape' or schema (σχημα). In ancient Greece, as is well-known, the recital of poetry was accompanied by bodily movements (dance) and singing. Aristoxenus' theory of rhythm (mainly in poetry) closely relates to movement in dance: that is, to the concept of *arsis* and *thesis. Arsis* refers to the position of the foot in the air, and *thesis* to the point when it touches the ground. Aristoxenus articulated rhythm in terms of the function of the 'rational' combination of these two actions.

At this point, however, we turn to Aristides Quintilianus, a follower of Aristoxenus. Aristides appears to have been the first writer and theorist of rhythm to attempt to accommodate metre with rhythm in a systematic way.

M. L. West, for example, argues that the discrimination between rhythm and metre becomes polemical after Aristoxenus:

> Post-Aristoxenusian writers do not seem to have added much of significance to the theory of rhythm. Definitions of rhythm by one Leophantus and by Didynus and Nicomachus, cited by Bacchius, are mere variations on Aristoxenus. Aristides Quintilianus, after expounding rhythm on Aristoxenusian lines, describes the approach of others who made a clearer separation between rhythm and metre. They analyzed rhythmic structures purely in terms of numerical ratios without, apparently, using terms such as 'dactylic' and 'iambic', which were shared with metrics. For the rest, while they differed from Aristoxenus over some details, their concepts seem generally to have been in accord with his (West 1992, 245).

The fundamentals of Aristoxenusian theory of rhythm are elaborated in the writing of Aristides, albeit with some alteration. Aristides' treatment of metre is that "while rhythm has its being in *arsis* and *thesis*, that of metre lies in syllables and their dissimilarity" (Quintilianus 1989, 450). The basis of metrical analysis in Aristides is again confined to syllables as theorists had determined before Aristoxenus. In this sense Aristides did not follow Aristoxenus' delineation of rhythm as time form. He seems to have returned to the conventional categorization of the combination of feet in syllables.

Aristides defines 'metre' in terms of 'feet' in *De Musica*: "Out of feet are constructed metres. A metre is a combination [*σψστεμα*], extending to a well-balanced length of feet which are constituted out of dissimilar syllables." For Aristides, 'metre' belongs to syllables, and is derived from 'feet'. Feet are the combination of *arsis* and *thesis*, so metre in Aristides concerns the arrangement of *arsis* and *thesis* within the property of syllables. This is akin to the Aristoxenusian conception of *rhythmopoiia* as being "a way of 'using' *rhythmizomenon*." This is one way in which the respective attitudes toward rhythm of Aristoxenus and Aristides might be differentiated. Aristoxenus places rhythm and the 'rational' combination of *arsis*

[6] The papyrus fragment of "Elementa Rhythmica" was first published in London in 1898 as P. Oxy. 9, edited by B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, in The Oxyrhynchus Papyri I. Subsequently, more pieces of the papyrus were discovered, filling in some gaps in the text, and it was republished in London in 1968, as P. Oxy. 2687, edited by John Rea, in The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XXXIV, with includes an excellent photograph (Pearson 1990, xx).

and *thesis* beyond syllables, while in Aristides *arsis* and *thesis* are subjugated by syllables. In this sense Aristides is again closer to Plato.

Aristides' treatment of the combination of parts of feet is also closer to Pythagorus, since Aristides attempts to set up nine combinations of feet regardless of Aristoxenus' painstaking elucidation of three, i.e. dactylic, iambic, and paeonic, based on Aristotle's somewhat far-fetched empiricism.[7] Aristides describes the difference between rhythm and metre:

> while rhythm has its being in arsis and thesis, that of metre lies in syllables and their dissimilarity. Thus rhythm may be constituted even out of equal syllables or antithetical feet, whereas a metre is never constituted out of syllables which are all equal, and seldom out of antithetical feet. There are nine simple and fundamental metres: dactylic, anapaetic, iambic, trochaic, choriambic, antispastic, two ionics, paeonic (Quintilianus 1989, 450).

Here, the etymology of the term 'metre' (μετρον) is significant: it derives from the meaning 'to divide'. Thus, the term 'metre' has the function of a transitive verb. 'Metre' divides feet into a different unit of combination based on the ratios among permutations of 'up' and 'down': dactylic, anapaetic, iambic, and so on.

The binary unit of *arsis/thesis* is not a direct property of metre, which belongs purely to rhythm, especially in Aristoxenus' empiricism. As West states above, Post-Aristoxenusian scholars analysed rhythmic structures "purely in terms of numerical ratios", which is quite in contrast to Aristoxenus' ideas about rhythm, because Aristoxenus wrote:

> We must distinguish that which is rational in accordance with the nature of rhythm from that which is rational only in accordance with numerical reckoning (Pearson 1990, 15).

Aristoxenus was resolute in maintaining an empirical attitude toward rhythm, believing that it should be viewed as distinct from the purely numerical system of Pythagorus.

Aristides, unlike most post-Aristoxenusians, maintained a Pythagorean arithmetic methodology, but was nevertheless concerned with the implications of the term 'rhythm' in the context of post-Pythagorean mathematics. Aristides defines rhythm as "a *systema* of durations put together in some kind of order" (Pearson 1990, 433). Here, the term 'duration' is a translation of '*chronos*' (lit. 'time'). Thus the definition of rhythm used by Aristides is in essence the same as Aristoxenus': i.e., "rhythm is concerned with time-lengths (*chronoi*) and the perception of them." In addition, Aristides introduced a systematic point of view which sets metre apart from rhythm, where the subject as observer of rhythm is erased.[8] It can also be said that in

[7] Mondrian mentions Aristotle in his essay The New Plastic in Painting (1917): "Aristotle already identified the abstract with the mathematical" (Mondrian 1986, 35). Here Mondrian's reference to Aristotle's mathematical ideas is mainly in the context of an explanation of the inevitable course of painting in history, from representation to abstraction. Mondrian's emphasis concerns Aristotle's empirical abstraction of the mathematical features of a universality hidden from the natural appearance of things.

[8] This is an interesting point in relation to Mondrian. Early Neo-plasticism concerns a more systematic model of rhythm, while late Neo-plasticism is more concerned with the observer's point of view (see Chap. 2).

Aristides' theorem, rhythm becomes more independent of bodily movement,[9] which testifies to the successful acknowledgment of rhythm by an agent. This propensity towards a systematic treatment of metre as a separate entity from rhythm is carried on by later generations, during the middle ages and the Renaissance. Accordingly, Aristoxenus' empiricism came to be forgotten until the end of the nineteenth century, when German scholars rediscovered his ideas.[10] The anti-metrical, empirical aspect of rhythm gradually faded from the Western musical sphere, and a measurable Pythagorean tradition gradually gained status throughout the Renaissance, Medieval and Romantic periods. Aristides' theoria more or less continues to present times, where rhythm becomes more identical with metre and even tempo.[11]

Mondrian was against the concept of metre being thought of as a regular sequence of musical notes, and against its mathematical implications. Mondrian discarded the regular grid immediately after the two 'checkerboard' canvases of 1919, and rejected any evaluation of his painting by way of measurement or mathematical method. Mondrian was an empiricist; his rhythm was not constituted in mathematical or metrical regulation. Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm is schematic rhythm, or rhythm as structure, based on intuition. Although Mondrian rejected the time sense in his conception of rhythm, in his empirical approach to rhythm, and his denial of objective mathematical measurement, he was an Aristoxenusian.

5.5 Application of the Theory of Rhythm to the Visual Field: Rhythm (ῥυθμός) and Schema (σχημα)

Aristoxenus is said to have written a theory of visual rhythm in addition to a theory of rhythm in poetry, dance and music. In the fragment which remains of "Elementa Rhythmica II", this is evident to some degree in the comparison he makes between poetic rhythm (ῥυθμός, and *rhythmizomenon*) and visual rhythm or *schema* (σχημα, and *schematizomena*). Aristoxenus' terminology is useful for analysing visual

[9] The development of rhythm as something independent of bodily movement occurs in parallel with the emergence of 'music' as something independent from poetry and the other arts. However, there is no scope in this book to investigate issues concerning the history of music.

[10] For example, Paul Marquard, *Die harmonischen Fragmente des Aristoxenus … mit einem Anhang die rhythmischen Fragmente des Aristoxenus enthaltend* (Berlin 1968), and Rudolf Westphal, *Aristoxenos von Tarent: Melik und Rhythmik des classischen Hellenentums* (Leipzig 1883-91, repr. Hildesheim 1965). According to Pearson, Westphal was the first to publish a *magnum opus* which referenced both Aristoxenus's theory of rhythm in the original Ancient Greek, and Marquard's version of the *Rhythmica*. Many passages in Westphal's *Aristoxenos von Tarent* were translated into French by F. A. Gevaert, *Histoire et Théorie de la musique de l'antiquité,* ii (Ghent 1881). Before Marquard, several German scholars published work on Aristoxenus's theory of rhythm. However, these were not based on the manuscripts themselves, but on Giacomo Morelli's *Aristidis Oratio adv. Leptinem, Libanii Dexlamatio pro Socrate, Aristoxeni Rhythmicorum Fragmenta* (Venice 1785).

[11] Typical example of the identification of tempo with rhythm can be seen in Klages's investigation of rhythm (Klages 1923).

rhythm, since it is routinely used to account for rhythm in a variety of art forms: poetry, dance, music, sculpture and painting.

Aristides Quintilianus wrote in *De Musica,* "Rhythm in general is perceived by three senses, which are these: sight, as in dancing; hearing, as in melody[12]; and touch, by which we perceive, for instance, the pulsations of the arteries" (Quintilianus 1989, 434). In ancient Greek thought, rhythm in poetry and music[13] is not only restricted to occurrences within musical or auditory phenomena, but is integrated into other forms of physical or bodily reception: seeing, gesture (especially the feet) and feeling. Hölderlin may be considered to be the Romantic era's disciple of Aristides, and similarly accommodates Aristoxenus. In his first conversations with Sinclair (probably dating from 1804), Hölderlin reveals a deep concern about rhythm:

> When rhythm has become the sole and unique mode of thought's expression, it is then only that there is poetry. In order for mind to become poetry, it must bear in itself the mystery of an innate rhythm. It is in this rhythm alone that it can live and become visible. And every work of art is but one and the same rhythm. Everything is simply rhythm. The destiny of man is a single celestial rhythm, as every work of art is a unique rhythm (Blanchot 1982, 225).[14]

In his tendency toward a metaphysical, essentialist idea of rhythm, Hölderlin goes beyond Aristoxenusian empiricism, and even Aristides' idealism. Among the modern thinkers in our age, Giorgio Agamben traces Hölderlin's understanding of rhythm to its Aristotelian origins, and to the sophist Antiphon, according to whom the essence of nature is "that which is in itself shapeless and without structure, inarticulate matter subtended to any shape and mutation…" Agamben outlines Aristotle's attempts to define rhythm, and by doing so, contextualises Hölderlin's view. Agamben notes, however, that Aristotle "does not directly use the word rhythm (ρυθμοζ)", although he "employs the private expression to πρυτον αρρνθμιστον, meaning that which in itself lacks rhythm":

> ρυθμοζ is what adds itself to this immutable substratum and, by adding itself to it, composes and shapes it, giving it *structure*. In this sense, rhythm is *structure,* scheme, in opposition to elemental, inarticulate nature.
> Understood from this perspective, Hölderlin's sentence would mean that every work of art is one structure, and would therefore imply an interpretation of the original being of the work of art as ρυθμοζ, structure (Agamben 1999, 95).

---

[12] Andrew Barker describes oppositional concepts between melody and rhythm in ancient Greek:

> Some of the ancients described rhythm as male, melody as female, on the grounds that melody is inactive and without form, playing the part of matter because of its capacity for opposite qualifications, while rhythm moulds it and moves it in a determinate order, playing the part of the maker inrelation to the thing made (Quintilianus 1989, 445).

Whether Mondrian knew of this oppositional pair (directly or indirectly) is unknown.

[13] In Plato's period the term 'music' was not the indication of music as we understand it now, nor was music recognized as an independent art form (Keuls 1978).

[14] Giorgio Agamben also cites the same passage by Hölderlin, "Everything is rhythm, the entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm, just as every work of art is one rhythm, and everything swings from the poetizing lips of the god" (Agamben 1999, 94).

Agamben brings us back to the ancient Greek notion of 'rhythm' and 'schema' in which rhythm is defined as form, arrangement and proportion. Thus Agamben assigns the definition of rhythm (ρυθμοζ) to schema/form/shape/or structure (σχημα), from which the notion of rhythm as structure stems.

According to Agamben, 'structure' for Aristotle is not a mere aggregate, but a unity, in other words a whole which is more than the simple combination of its elements (Agamben 1999, 96). Such a concept of structure works against the Pythagorean notion of numbers. Moreover, in Aristotle's view, a whole is not an aggregation of numbers either (which are, for the Pythagoreans, the underlying principle of all things) but requires "something else": but that extra something which might bring forth the whole as more than the sum of its parts "had to be something radically other" (Agamben 1999, 96). That is, Aristotle takes structure not as number, but as rhythm. Rhythm is "the principle of presence that opens and maintains the work of art in its original space" (Agamben 1999, 98). The 'original space' is a space in which rhythm as structure or arrangement is a force which affords the faculty of flow. The term original space is ambiguous, but is the receptacle of energy or force. In this sense, 'original space' is similar to Plato's *chora*. It is that which causes the work of art to be what it is. In this "original space", rhythm brings eternal flow (ῥοία) to the wholeness in the artwork. Thus, Agamben describes how, "in a musical piece, although it is somehow in time, we perceive rhythm as something that escapes the incessant flight of instants and appears almost as the presence of an atemporal dimension in time" and "in the same way, when we are before a work of art …, we perceive a stop in time, as though we were suddenly thrown into a more original time" (Agamben 1999, 99). It is a 'stop', which comes from the future, and sinks into the past. For Hölderlin, *poiesis* can be found within this original space of the human subject's world, which is by definition embodied in the subject's relationship with the work of art. This relationship is 'man's' highest engagement, it "keeps him in the truth and grants to his dwelling on earth its original status. This rhythmic structure of a work of art is original *ecstasy* in which man can experience freedom and alienation, historical consciousness and loss in time, truth and error" (Agamben 1999, 100). In this ecstatic structure of rhythm, rhythm is not a mere *Gestalt* or number (or measure — metre), instead it opens up the very structure of the subject's *being-in-the-world*.

Thus, according to Agamben, the understanding of rhythm is brought back to before and beyond what we might call the 'Aristoxenusian doctrine': to rhythm as form (σχημα) or structure, which constitutes an emphatically static image rather than a kinetic image. The static image is not an inert, inanimated image, but, on the contrary, constitutes a force field. Here we recall Auguste Rodin's well-known remark about movement differing between the statue and the photograph: "Instantaneous glimpses, unstable attitudes petrify movement, as is shown by so many photographs in which an athlete-in-motion is forever frozen."[15] Rodin demonstrates his fidelity to time, reminiscent of Aristoxenus, in his discussion of

[15] Originally appeared in Rodin, *L'art.* Interviews collected by Paul Gsell, Paris, 1911 (Merleau-Ponty et al. 1993, 144).

'schema'[16]: "It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph lies; for, in reality, time never stops" (Pearson 1990, 145). Artworks based on the concept of rhythm as *schema* are a minority in the current age of kinetic movement and rhythm. However, there are some works, notably Mondrian's neoplastic canvases, which provide the strongest testimony to this concept. S. K. Langer's understanding of rhythm can be said to inherit the forgotten tradition of Aristoxenus.

5.6 General Understandings of Musical Rhythm in Modern Times

Since the late nineteenth century musical rhythm has been defined by such notable thinkers of rhythm as Ludwig Klages, Curt Sacs, Gisèle Brelet, Susanne K Langer, Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard Meyer, and Jonathan Kramer, among others.

Roughly, there are two heterogeneous theories of rhythm. One is the theory which attempts to amalgamate rhythm with metre. The other clearly discriminates between rhythm and metre, regarding them as inherently oppositional and incommensurable. The former includes Klages and Brelet. The latter, Cooper and Meyer, Kramer: a theory which aligns rhythm with metre, would typically posit the example of the experience of rhythm of a passenger in a train, an experience characterised by periodical repetition and regular tempo. Examples of the latter might include Gregorian chant, and Japanese music, both of which presuppose an organic sense of intervals (mutual consensus of timing) or 'space' with an indiscernible tempo.

To Klages, rhythm is the form of order to which the senses necessarily give 'the time' and recurrence of similarity. Cooper and Meyer maintain that rhythm is a grouping around a conspicuous accented beat. In the course of the flow of time in the appreciation of music, each grouping relates to another. This results in a bottom-up hierarchical system, in which structure is built from the ground up, by way of permutations of groups within groups around a multiple of accented beats. They also note that "to experience rhythm is to group separate sounds into structured patterns" (Cooper and Meyer 1960, 1). A listener (or viewer) organises separate sounds or painterly elements into structure through the experience of rhythm. For Cooper and Meyer, in contrast with Brelet, rhythm is independent of metre in two different senses:

> First, rhythm can exist without there being a regular metre, as it does in the case of Gregorian chant or recitativo secco. … Second, rhythm is independent of metre in the sense that any one of the rhythmic groupings given above [iamb, anapest, trochee, dactyl, and amphibrach] can occur in duple or triple metre (Cooper and Meyer 1960, 6).

Kramer basically agrees with Cooper and Meyer about the grouping theory of rhythm, but maintains that "Rhythm and metre are … interdependent but conceptually distinct musical structures" (Kramer 1988, 82). This means that rhythm and metre are conceptually different, but on the empirical level they are inseparable.

[16] Aristoxenus's writing on 'schema' has not survived. We can only surmise what he wrote about 'schema' through what appears in volume II of "Elementa Rhythmica" (Pearson 1990, pxi-xxii).

Thus the question remains: if there is no metre at all, is there anything that can be called 'rhythm'? That is, does every structure of rhythm (including visual rhythm) have to, without exception, accompany metre in either an explicit or implicit manner? Further, if a non-metre type of rhythm were to be perceived or recognised, then the question arises as to whether or not an alternative or arbitrary metre would necessarily be generated within subjectivity, or in the mind of the observer. This question is crucial, since in the majority of forms of culture, the origin of rhythm relates to dancing or bodily movement, which necessitates the cognition of pace, in other words, an expectation of recurrent units of sound or shapes in order to respond to the rhythm by systematic movements of the limbs.

Gisèle Brelet is a major advocate for metre as intrinsic to musical rhythm. To Brelet, rhythm is the form of order to which the senses necessarily give 'the time' and the recurrence of similarity. Rhythm is also defined as a form of energy which necessitates 'the metre'. Confronting 'the metre', the flow of energy of rhythm strives to overcome the resistance of metre, while at the same time flexes itself to fit that constraint. Brelet recognizes 'metre' as intrinsic to rhythm. Rhythm can be established by dint of the rigidness of 'the metre'.

To Brelet, the existence of 'the time' is the arbitrary value ascribed to an aesthetic formation of Time, which is necessarily given by our senses. We have time which is given to us as an inherent part of being human, and the truth of time which is given to us through the activities of the human psyche, regulating time and being human itself. In order to regulate time, our senses utilize 'metre' as an impetus for cultivating the future. 'The metre' is the pulse which generates the impetus from time, which is the source of genesis and extinction. Paul Creston defines 'metre' thus: "Metre is the grouping of pulses within a single measure or a frame of two or more measures" (Creston 1961, 3).[17] Within this definition, Creston includes the irregular patterns of metre, which change in duration and are not listed in the conventional table of metres. Creston calls this "the aspect of metre as duration", and states that this type of metre is "nonetheless perfectly valid" (Creston 1961, 38).

'Metre' consists of repetition, especially in the case of music which follows a certain tempo. It is not only calculated reflectively, but also provides the premise for free creativity (Brelet 1958, 1986). This 'sense' constructs the rhythmic form by spontaneously controlling the driving force of 'the metre'. 'The metre', as it were, forces the quantity, which the human mind 'calculates', in accord with the quality of energy in rhythm.

In this concept of calculation, metre can be transposed into space — in music, into a score, in visual art as regulated lengths of lines or stretches of coloured fields; or 'the grid'. If the metre is destroyed, rhythm can no longer be constructed. If the metre remains outside our perception, rhythm cannot be generated in our mind. The 'ticks' of a metronome, for example, cannot be taken as rhythm as long as the metre generated by the fixed tempo of the metronome is considered to occur outside the mind. To apprehend rhythm, 'the metre' must be internalised. While musicians are playing a piece of music with a rhythmic form, they should possess within themselves their own arbitrarily internalized 'metre'.

[17] This definition of metre as pulse-group is also used by Emile Jacque-Dalcroze and Villa-Lobos.

Susanne K. Langer puts forward several important ideas about rhythm for our discussion of static rhythm. For instance, she states that the essence of rhythm is the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one (Langer 1953, 126). Langer also argues that a musical performer holds a matrix or "composition" in mind when performing a piece of music, and that this is "the basic form of the picture, which is to be developed, and by which every line and every accent is controlled" (Langer 1953, 121). We can extend Langer's point and argue that in a sense the completed painting can be taken as a kind of 'matrix' to generate 'energy', and that if rhythm exists in a visual form as well as an auditory one at all, then this internalization of 'the metre' or its equivalent is crucial for the creator of a picture as well as for the viewer.

In visual art, which is normally regarded as spatial rather than temporal, 'the metre' in a painting could only be recognized in the form of certain manifestations of its pictorial elements: in Mondrian's case for instance, as regularly configured lines or stretches of coloured fields. This might mean, then, that a certain kind of painter operates according to what we could refer to as an internalized 'metre' and 'tempo'. But the question remains whether there is, in fact, anything comparable to 'metre' or 'tempo' in visual art beyond the merely speculative points so far put forward. More importantly, perhaps, what we should ask is what kind of terminology and precepts are best utilised in answering this question.

Brelet argues that in the mind of a performer and listener, rhythm is "internalised metre." If Mondrian was preoccupied with the embodiment of a rhythmic sense in his painting, then the question arises: did metre function in his mind while he was working, or 'performing', intentionally or otherwise? Could rhythm therefore be said to reside in Mondrian's painting at some level? The possible answers to this question require at least four discrete approaches: an ontological (or general) understanding of the nature of rhythm; the pedagogical analysis of rhythm in music and the visual arts; a cognitive description of the acquisition of rhythm in music and visual art; and an approach which considers the actual reading of visual rhythm in Mondrian's canvases.

5.7 The Sense of Rhythm Sensed

A definition of rhythm is elusive because the term 'rhythm' is so widely used in music, dance, visual arts, architecture, poetry and literature, biology, religion and philosophy. Rhythm is a kind of metaphor, but is arguably overused or misused because of the 'poverty' of language. As Rudolf Escher, a nephew of the artist M. C. Escher, commented: "There is not the slightest affinity between the visual arts — architecture and music. All those comparisons rest on a confusion of terms which is in turn largely the result of the poverty of language" (Schönberger 1985).[18]

[18] Goethe also states that: "Color and sound do not admit of being directly compared together in any way, but both are referable to a universal formula, both are derivable, although each for itself, from this higher law" (von Goethe and Eastlake 1967, 298-9).

However, since the ancient Greeks, through the medieval and Renaissance ages, and up to the early part of the twentieth century, rhythm had been theorised as an entity which manifests by way of the intellect. C. F. Abdy Williams wrote in "The Rhythm of Modern Music" (1909):

> The art of music consists, therefore, of combining pleasant sounds in a way that appeals to the ear, and regulating them through Rhythm in a way that makes them appeal to the intellect. The pleasure we derive from mere musical sound is elementary and external: it is a sensation only. The satisfaction that is given us when musical sound is allied to Rhythm is intellectual (Williams 1909, 4).

Furthermore, contemporary cognitive science insists that cognition of rhythm is a response to the inbuilt biological system. Carl E. Seashore says in *Psychology of Music* (1938):

> There are two fundamental factors in the perception of rhythm: an instinctive tendency to group impressions in hearing and a capacity for doing this with precision in time and stress. The subjective tendency is so deeply ingrained, because of its biological service, that we irresistibly group uniform successions of sound, such as the tick of a clock, into rhythmic measure (Seashore 1938, 138).[19]

This propensity is so strong that even a metronomic pulse, lacking any attributes which would otherwise emphasize vitality within its repetition, can provide the basis on which to construct more elaborate complexities within and around its basic monotonous tick. A good example of this is the way marching soldiers have a tendency to add elaborations to their footwork that vitalises an otherwise mechanical way of walking, and this could also be said of 'house' or 'techno' music which is composed of two layers - a techno-beat which sets the pulse or metre, and an instrumental layer that works around and within it. This category of perception of rhythm suggests that the body, or the nervous system itself, knows how to articulate and regulate the flow of the pulse. This objective recognition of rhythm via the 'intelligence' of the nervous system can be projected beyond the purely physical responses of muscle and reflex.

Although Seashore's 'instinctive theory' of rhythm is disputed by other scientists because "training can improve rhythmic 'potential'" (or "capacity" as Seashore preferred) (Radocy and Boyle 1997, 122), he nonetheless demonstrates our strong propensity toward rhythmising.

Roger Scruton, on the other hand, emphasises the listener's arbitrary participation in the cognition of rhythm. He rejects those defining premises of rhythm, which propose that it "exists when sounds occur in regular succession, with accents that divide the sequence into definite measures" (Scruton 1997, 22), arguing that the

[19] Curt Sachs also describes this tendency among humans:

> Man does not listen to the seconds of his watch or the jolts of his railway car without decomposing the endless sequence of unform beats into an alternation of accented and unaccented beats. He organizes the monotonous *tick-tick* into a sequence of *tick-tock* periods and would even unite every two of these periods to form a higher unit: *tick-a tock-a* (Sachs 1943, 46).

mere expectation of "the repeated emphasis" is inadequate for the recognition of rhythm for a variety of reasons:

> First we often hear these regular and self-repeating sequences of sound, without hearing them as rhythm. For example, the clicking wheels of a railway carriage emit sounds that are 'organized' in just this way. Yet it is only by a special effort of attention that we begin to hear rhythms in them. We must imagine the musical context which transforms the sounds into tones (Scruton 1997, 22).

Using the example of the mechanised hammers in a factory, with regular blows and repeated accents, Scruton argues that these are insufficient for the recognition of rhythm. To hear them as rhythm, he claims, "we must hear something else." What he suggests is the necessity of a 'musical ear', with which, he further contends, rhythm can be recognised and, because of which, even regularity is not required, such as in the 'Sacrificial Dance' in *Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky.

These different observations of rhythm raise several questions about the various definitions of rhythm, and their application to visual rhythm, especially the non-repetitive type of rhythm of Neo-plasticism. First, according to Brelet's theory, if there can be no rhythm without the cognition of metre, we must ask how the sense of metre in the visual field is to be recognised. And especially in the non-repetition-oriented canvases that typify Neo-plasticism, how can a sense of metre be generated?

Second, if the sense of rhythm is possible without the cognition of metre (in, for example, grouping theory), how does the generation of a sense of rhythm in the visual field, especially in painting, function? S. K. Langer, in the light of this question, is noteworthy in her attempt to situate the concept of rhythm as the central issue of art forms.

5.8 S. K. Langer's Theory of Rhythm

For Langer, the relation between a dynamic and static form is crucial to the concept of "living form" in art. Langer sees rhythm at the core of the living form: "The reason why so complex a network of events as the life of an individual can possibly go on and on in a continuous dynamic pattern is, that this pattern of events is rhythmic" (Scruton 1997, 50). Langer uses the term 'form' in both its common(sense?) meaning, i.e., as the shape of a thing, as well as something more abstract, i.e., to mean "structure, articulation, a whole resulting from the relation of mutually dependent factors, or more precisely, the way that whole is put together" (Langer 1957, 16). Using the image of a waterfall as an example, Langer explains the phenomenon of 'permanent' dynamic form:

> A waterfall seems to hang from the cliff, waving streamers of foam. Actually, of course, nothing stays there in mid-air; the water is always passing; but there is more and more water taking the same paths, so we have a lasting shape made and maintained by its passage — a permanent dynamic form (Langer 1957, 18).

The slow-moving river and its river bed, whose shape is 'static', presents another good example: "it *express[es]* the dynamic form of the river" (Langer 1957, 19). 'Flow' in the waterfall and river present a very different model of movement from that of the repetitive (or metrical) movement associated with waves or breathing. If we see rhythm in terms of this 'permanent dynamic' form, as in the waterfall or river, then, as we saw in Benveniste's philological definition of rhythm, what we are seeing is *schematic* rather than *kinetic* rhythm.

For Langer, the essence of rhythm is the preparation for a new event by the ending of a previous one (Langer 1957, 16). She sees rhythm not only in the common sense of it, i.e., rhythm as periodic succession, but in the arbitrary pattern of action and reaction (as with a tennis player): "A rhythmic pattern arises whenever the completion of one distinct event appears as the beginning of another" (Langer 1957, 51). Langer's understanding of rhythm wavers between physiological and artistic rhythm. The perfect example of physiological rhythm is breathing:

> In breathing, the process starts all the time throughout the whole body; as the oxygen of a breath is used up, it builds up the imperative need of oxygen that is really the beginning of the new breath. This sort of mutual conditioning is the law of organic function; the more closely you look into the entire physiological process that constitutes the dynamic form we call "life," the more minutely, diversely, and elaborately rhythmic it proves to be. … The rhythmic interaction is incredible (Langer 1957, 52).

In other words, rhythm is "the setting-up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones" (Langer 1957, 52). The principle of rhythmic continuity is, for Langer, the basis of organic unity such as the heartbeat and respiration, as we saw above, which are 'vital' rhythms. What models of actual rhythm would exemplify artistic rhythm, so as to distinguish the latter from physiological rhythms?

Music, Langer contends, is "a symbolic presentation of the highest organic response" (Langer 1957, 126). However, "rhythm as a relation between tensions" does not limit the human mind to this biological continuity; rhythm, rather than being limited to "a matter of equal divisions of time (i.e. meter)", "makes it quite comprehensible that harmonic progressions, resolutions of dissonances, directions of 'running' passages, and 'tendency tones' in melody all serve as rhythmic agents" (Langer 1957, 129). Langer further contests that "everything that prepares a future creates rhythm; everything that begets or intensifies expectation, including the expectation of sheer continuity, prepares future (regular "beats" are an obvious and important source of rhythmic organisation); and everything that fulfills the promised future, in ways foreseen or unforeseen, articulates the symbol of feeling." (Langer 1957, 129).

When the concept of the dialectical function of rhythm (rhythm as equilibrium between oppositions) is introduced into Langer's theory of rhythm without repetition, her theory of rhythm comes close to Mondrian's and Benveniste's understanding of rhythm (rhythm as stasis, schema or arrangement):

> Dialectic is the basis of rhythm, which consequently is more than sheer periodicity, or evenly spaced repetition of any occurrence. A rhythmic phenomenon may even involve no exact repetition, but is always a dialectical pattern in which the resolution of tensions sets up new tensions; the recession of one color brings its complementary to the fore, our close

> attention to the latter exhausts its domination and lets the former advance again; in a good composition of volumes, every boundary of a form is also a conjunction of forms, the surrounding spaces taking their gestalt from the volumes they limit (Langer 1967, 205).

Rhythm as a dialectical process is not limited to the repetition of physiological rhythm. Mondrian's theory of structural rhythm comes to the fore here, based as it is on non-repetition and non-sequentiality, and based principally on Hegelian dialectic. It must be acknowledged that repetition is a very important element of empirical (and biological) rhythm, and has a great value in the construction of metre as the agent of reaction to rhythm. However, it is not fundamental to rhythm, although Langer herself acknowledges the power of repetition: "a mere metric rhythm is usually enough to activate the performers … and ecstasy builds up in repetition" (Langer 1953, 203). If rhythm is understood to be limited to a repetitive function, for example in breathing, then the alternative conception of rhythm as schema (σχημα), which is possibly experienced without repetitive parameters, risks being overlooked. Étienne Souriau describes the empirical form of rhythm based on an organic cyclic progression:

> There is no rhythm (if one gives this word a precise meaning but as general as possible) unless there is an organization of a continuous succession through the cyclic repetition of the same basic scheme (which is of course susceptible of [sic.] various concrete forms) (Souriau 1958, 135).

This 'precise' meaning of rhythm is distilled into our empirical use of rhythm in art in an ordinary sense. For Souriau, the biological fact of 'cyclic repetition' is deemed sufficient as a description of rhythm, a view which also reflects the Romantic tradition of musical rhythm, in which it became identified with metre. However, according to a more holistic, philological sense of rhythm as Benveniste demonstrates, such a view lacks the important inclusion of the non-organic component of rhythm. Maintaining the holistic view, which includes the etymological history of the term 'rhythm', Philippe Lacue-Labarthe contends that the phenomenon of rhythm occurs in "the hidden interdependence between subjectivity and images on the one side and death and music on the other" (Aviram 1994, 216) in which case the subjective and imaginal function of rhythm cannot be omitted.

Breathing is an unequivocal sign of living, constituted by the reciprocal exchange between internalisation and externalisation. Each half-cycle of breathing incorporates a threshold between inhalation and exhalation, tension and release. This threshold composes the cycle of breathing itself as a form of rhythm. Comprising two beats per unit, breathing exemplifies one of the simplest functions of the boundary, and the simplest metre of rhythm. But rhythm formed around an organic or pathological structure is only one of a range of rhythms that can occur both in nature and in art. When we look at rhythm as schema or structure, and include the faculty of the agent, then our understanding and experience of rhythm can expand, from a somewhat simplistic biological form, to the complex artistic form in music and visual art, particularly in the twentieth century.

The concept of boundary, for example, between tension and release, is an important issue for determining the principle features of rhythm. It functions as articula-

tion and punctuation, especially in the visual field. However, in the rhythmic activity of grouping, which can be regarded as one of the most reliable current theories of rhythm, the boundary cannot be counted as the core of any particular grouping. Beats and accents are critical factors in articulating rhythm, and they are the core of the operation of groupings. But they are a psychological entity generated by the subject, and are not identical with the visual borderline, or, in the case of music, with the metrical boundary on the score itself. In Neo-plasticism, the black belt functions as a boundary, and also carries out the abstract function of the construction of rhythm on the canvas.

5.9 Rhythm and Composition

Langer also observes the relation between rhythm and composition (or matrix) as it occurs in music:

> The matrix, in music the fundamental movement of melody or harmonic progression, which establishes the greatest rhythm of the piece and dictates its scope, is born of the composer's thought and feeling, but as soon as he recognizes it as an individual symbol and sets forth its outline it becomes the expression of an impressional Idea, and opens, to him and others, a deep mine of musical resource (Langer 1953, 122-3).

Langer argues that each performer has a matrix or "composition" in mind when performing a piece of music, and that this is "the basic form of the picture, which is to be developed, and by which every line and every accent is controlled" (Langer 1953, 121). Langer talks about the first appearance of a harmonic set in a piece of music and within an episode of rhythm: "Some characteristic *way* of unfolding the tonal potentialities of the first harmonies is really the generative principle of a composition, and this may be implicit in a rhythmic figure" (Langer 1953, 124). The extreme rendition of this harmonic matrix is van Domselaer's "Proeven van Stijlkunst."

It might normally be assumed that composers and musical performers are those who know best the essence of the theme. However, Langer's conception of 'composition' ('theme' in Schoenmaekers's thinking) can be applied more broadly, and be understood to inhabit the mind of any listener. This way, Langer's conception of 'composition' becomes an inherent condition of aural or musical sensibility and subjectivity, rather than something external that issues from a certain type of musical or aural-rhythmic output. Langer wrote: "the greater entity we call a composition is not merely produced by mixture, like a new color made by mixed paints, but is *articulated*, i.e., its internal structure is given to our perception" (Langer 1953, 31). Typically 'theme' as matrix in the composition can be heard in the development of European music, especially in Romanticism. As Langer argues, 'composition' can be "the protagonists of so-called 'representational' painting" (Langer 1953, 124).

'Composition' is a dynamic structure which "can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey" (Langer 1953, 32). Langer sees this dynamic structure in African music (especially drumming): "The voice, in such

performances, serves essentially to contrast with the steady tone of the drum — to wander and rise and fall where the purely rhythmic element goes on like Fate" (Langer 1953, 125). This composition or system of African music differs markedly from the representational system of tradition European classical music and painting. Thus Langer concludes that "the essence of all composition — tonal, atonal, vocal or instrumental, even purely percussive, if you will — is the semblance of *organic* movement, the illusion of an individual whole" (Langer 1953, 126).

This concept of 'composition' is close to that of rhythm as schema, in which rhythm is understood as 'form', 'structure, or 'arrangement'. When the linearity of metre incorporates 'composition' or 'structure' it becomes kinetic rhythm within the flow of time. When the energy of 'completion' (Langer) is fixed onto the 'composition', the flow of time is suspended, and non-linear arrangement, that is, schematic rhythm, appears. We can extend Langer's point and argue that, in a sense, the completed painting can be taken as a kind of 'matrix' which generates energy. We can also argue that if rhythm exists in a visual form as well as an auditory one, then it appears as a holistic unity, as 'composition'. However, if rhythm is to be experienced, this internalisation of 'the metre', or its equivalent, is crucial for the creator of a picture as well as for the viewer.

Drawing from his experiences when viewing Byzantine art, John Ruskin commented that "the arrangement of colours and lines is an art analogous to the composition of music, and entirely independent of the representation of facts. Good colouring does not necessarily convey the image of anything but itself. It consists in certain proportions and arrangements of rays of light" (Sypher 1960, 144-5). Ruskin's idea that musical 'composition' is analogous to visual composition, and his description of the visual effect of plastic elements ("colours and lines") going beyond the iconographic reading of the image, and thus operating outside the terrain of semantics, is echoed in Langer's understanding of composition, and is central to our problem of articulating visual rhythm. The question here is how the conception of composition, as we have derived it from Langer's sense of it, relates to metre and the experience of visual rhythm, and how metre is 'internalised' from Brelet's point of view.

Langer, as we might expect in the light of her conception of 'composition', sees movement in static design. For example, she sees rhythm in ornamental borders, noting that the "'movement' of the [ornamental] border is not really movement in the scientific sense, change of place; it is the semblance of rhythm" (Langer 1953, 63). She emphasises that this effect of movement comes "directly from the design, and from nothing else" and that it is, thus, "inherent in its construction" (Langer 1953, 63). Thus, Langer sees rhythm and movement in structure itself. This observation of movement across a two dimensional surface is shared by Hans Hofmann. However, it is interesting that Hofmann sees movement in terms of balance: of *push* and *pull*:

> The forces of *push and pull* function three dimensionally without destroying other forces functioning two dimensionally. … To create the phenomenon of *push and pull* on a flat surface, one has to understand that by nature the picture plane reacts automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process (Hofmann et al. 1967, 44).

A high sensitivity is required to see this *push* and *pull* counter movement in a static, two-dimensional design. Thus, Hofmann counts on the artist's empathy towards the intrinsic qualities of the medium of expression (Hofmann et al. 1967, 46). Artistic faculty can be developed through understanding, and Hofmann concludes that through such qualities "the medium comes to life and varies plastically as an idea develops" (Hofmann et al. 1967, 46). Hofmann sees such qualities in Mondrian's abstract canvases:

> The phenomenon of plastic movement determines whether or not a work belongs in the category of the fine arts or in the category of the applied arts. It is the greatest injustice done to Mondrian that people who are plastically blind see only decorative design instead of the plastic perfection which characterized his work (Hofmann et al. 1967, 47).

Mondrian's "plastic perfection" manifests in his manipulation of the equilibrated points of static rhythm, which, like Hofmann's balloon analogy, is based on the function of opposition (*push* and *pull*). Thus the surface tension in Mondrian's neo-plastic painting, "breathe[s] the inner life of a form; the spatial tension is the life of the plastic unit" (Hofmann et al. 1967, 52). Hofmann traces the source of Mondrian's terminology "movement and counter-movement": "It is the intensity of movement and counter-movement which differentiates one tension from another and which, in the end, creates the rhythmic play in which a plastic work exists" (Hofmann et al. 1967, 52). Hofmann's comment is almost identical with Mondrian's: "Opposing forces function within the limits of the static and the dynamic. The dynamic is resolved into ultimate static. Thus a plastic work exists, powerful, limited in space, as the result of a multitude of opposing functions, and in this way summarizes time as a simultaneous experience" (Hofmann et al. 1967, 66).[20] Hofmann sees the dynamic in the static beyond the limitation of space and time. It is transcendental movement and rhythm, which take place in the viewer's mind, but there is a reality for the experienced viewer such as Hofmann and Mondrian.

Langer also sees this trait of the dynamic in the static in the 'pure' decorative design:

> Pure decorative design is a direct projection of vital feeling into visible shape and color. Decoration may be highly diversified, or it may be very simple; but it always has what geometric form, for instance a specimen illustration in Euclid, does not have — motion and rest, rhythmic unity, wholeness (Langer 1953, 63).

Mondrian's works in my view exemplify the rhythmic force of 'pure' design of which Langer writes, and which according to Hofmann, convey a visual sense of *push* and *pull*. Mondrian's own terminology, of course, is also well-suited to articulating the visual effects which occur on the surface of the canvas: i.e., "movement and counter-movement." Langer's comments succeed in demonstrating certain fundamental traits of visual rhythm. Langer nominates Roger Sessions as the "only person, so far as I know, who has clearly recognized this characteristic of plastic

[20] Hofmann's vision — to discern the dynamic within the static — emerges as a scattered theme in his writings; e.g.: "We recognize the static as the sum total of the dynamic" (Hofmann et al. 1967, 66).

space"; she notes pertinently that he "is not a painter but a musician" (Langer 1953, 67). In *The Intent of the Artist,* Sessions writes:

> The visual arts govern a world of space, and it seems to me that perhaps the profoundest sensation which we derive from space is not so much that of extension as of permanence. On the most primitive level we feel space to be something permanent, fundamentally unchangeable; when movement is apprehended through the eye it takes place, so to speak, within the static framework, and the psychological impact of this framework is much more powerful than that of the vibrations which occur within its limits (Langer 1953, 67).

Thus Langer concludes: "This duality of motion-in-permanence is, indeed, what effects the abstraction of pure dynamism and creates the semblance of life, or activity maintaining its form" (Langer 1953, 67).

Rhythm functions through the voluntary perceiver who attempts to overcome temporal succession and stasis. When the relation between the artworks and the perceiver is established and the dynamic element in static design is activated, the work becomes breathing and flow itself. Thus static rhythm is activated through consciousness, intention, memory (recollection, retention), understanding, recuperation, grouping, and flow in time and space.

E. H. Gombrich's description of "internalized structure" helps us to understand the generation of 'metre' within our selves. Using the example of someone riding a horse through its different paces, Gombrich states that the rider "must build a parallel internalized structure of innervations to match the regularities of the external movement", and proposes "to describe this adjustment as 'forward matching'" (Gombrich 1979, 9-10). Gombrich stresses the importance of 'forward matching' in his explanation of rhythm, using an example which perfectly illustrates what is involved in the experience and understanding of following a rhythm: We dance to music, and we could not do so unless we had the capacity to grasp and predict the rhythm of the piece (Gombrich 1979, 289). The activation of internalised structure in visual art is a special type of experience of time and, especially in terms of rhythm as sturucture, requires us to reconsider time in visual art.

Étienne Souriau's description of "artistic time" in the plastic arts embraces the idea of an "intrinsic time" ingrained in the work of art and follows a line of reasoning similar to Gombrich's above:

> There is no longer a question of a simple *psychological* time of contemplation, but of an artistic time inherent in the texture itself of a picture or a statue, in their composition, in their aesthetic arrangement. Methodologically the distinction is basic, and we come here (notably with Rodin's remark) to what we must call the *intrinsic time* of the work of art (Souriau 1958, 127).

Recalling Brelet's performative understanding of rhythm as internalised metre, it is clear that this conception is not compatible with Souriau's "intrinsic time" in the work of art. The difference between them arises from the fact that while Brelet's "internalised metre" is generated within the mind of a music performer or listener, Souriau's "intrinsic time" resides in the artifact itself. In Souriau's case, the appreciator of the artwork is an armchair observer, not a voluntary perceiver who generates the 'event'. In our view, it is the perceiver who has the capacity to unfold "intrinsic time" from within the work of art, and not the work itself.

Souriau's "intrinsic time" therefore, while interesting in itself, is not useful to our investigation, especially concerning schematic rhythm in painting. The concept of "intrinsic time" cannot relate to the foundation of the production of rhythm in visual art, nor to Langer's generative function of the "composition," which is conceived and activated within the mind of the viewer. The production of rhythm in painting, especially in the case of schematic rhythm in the static image, is the role of the viewer, and it is the viewer who activates "intrinsic time." The task which we must now attend to concerns investigating how we can 'internalise' time (or 'metre' in Brelet's sense) in the process of reading Mondrian's ostensibly static and structured neoplastic geometric paintings. This task will be intricate and evokes philosophical questions regarding the premises of painting, and the various relationships which it serves: surface both as concept and physicality, pictorial space and time, and the participation of a viewer.

Jean-Paul Sartre elicits the viewer's willing observation of visual rhythm. The passage might be read as an overture for the more intricate and unmapped terrain concerning visual rhythm from the point of view of phenomenology and ontology:

> The act is purely aesthetic but, to the very degree that we remain aloof, the Whole infiltrates each visual synthesis, shaping it and giving it strength. *We* must rediscover the paths outlined for us by the painter and try to follow them. *We* must reconstruct these abrupt splotches of color, these distilled units of matter. *We* must revive echoes and rhythms. Only then does a presence, intuition denied, come to the rescue. By regulating our choice it keeps us moving along the right paths. To *construct* requires only the establishing of visible relations; to guarantee a construction and save it from total absurdity requires a transcendental unity. This unity insures that the viewer's eyes will never cease their movement, and the perpetual movement of the eyes accounts for the permanence of the invisible unity. We keep on looking, for if we ever stopped, everything would disintegrate (Sartre 1963, 76-7).

Here, Sartre advocates grouping by the actions of the eye, but not necessarily just an optical eye: rather, this is an eye with *conception*, which follows, like a trail, the shadow — the image — of the object. The viewer's voluntary articulation of grouping is crucial for the activation of the internalised rhythm or rhythm as stasis.

5.10 Visual Rhythm as A Function of Grouping

As we saw above, Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard B. Meyer define the essence of musical rhythm in this way: "To experience rhythm is to group separate sounds into structured patterns." Elsewhere in the book they write: "Rhythmic grouping is a mental fact, not a physical one. There are no hard and fast rules for calculating what in any particular instance the grouping is" (Cooper and Meyer 1960, 9).

When we exchange sounds for pictorial elements, this definition may apply to certain works of visual art. Especially in the case of Mondrian's neoplastic painting, the applicability of musical grouping theory to the visual field and its possibility of grouping each set of pictorial elements can be examined. However, there remain certain problems.

First, Mondrian himself was reluctant to recognise the independent shape of rectangles apart from straight lines. Actually Mondrian uses the word "rectangle" in his writings, but, as we see above, in a special way: the rectangle is the area surrounded by straight lines, and the patch is severed by the "sudden stop" function of straight lines. In this sense we should be careful to treat 'rectangle' as a form which is delineated by straight lines. 'Rectangle' in Neo-plasticism is not 'form', but 'field',[21] which has a sense of space but a sense of expansion (or centrifugal extension) and is the open area where intensity of energy or power functions. Donald Judd is perceptive in his observation of these traits in relation to Mondrian's rectangles and straight lines in his mature neoplastic canvases. Judd wrote:

> The white in Mondrian's paintings seems space, the bars objects. The white, if regarded as a fine texture, can seem a surface. This double function is obviously ambiguous, and is naturalistic (Judd 1981, 250).

Judd's comment on ambiguity in Mondrian's surface correlates with Husserl's "image-object."[22] Interestingly, as a literal minimalist, Judd describes this 'ambiguity' as "naturalistic" as Husserl observed the image-object in the conventional image of a print by Dürer**.** To Judd, Mondrian's ambivalent surface state is still part of a conventional European representational system of painting. Like Wittgenstein's notion of "picture-duck-rabbit,"[23] after a certain time's exposure the image becomes an iconic image which is part of representation. In Judd's observation there is another interesting aspect: that is, his description of the bars as object, and the white (rectangles) as space. Judd obviously notices the function of planes in neoplastic canvases as non-physical entities: space and emptiness, that is, 'field'. The rectangles are ambivalent parameters of variants (while the black belts, or bars, are fixed parameters of invariants).

Owing to the way in which 'rectangles' can be recognised in the 'field' through the parameter of variants, there are innumerable possibilities for combining and contrasting them. Using as an analogy the alternating pulse of an electric current, these rectangles can be switched back and forth continually, attraction and repulsion, stretching and shrinking, protruding and retreating. If, following Judd, we read Mondrian's rectangles as space as well as surface, this observation is possible only when the bars (or black belts) are recognised as delineators (or in Judd's terminology "objects"). The bars are an independent element of the composition: they are *not* contour lines attached to the rectangular shapes, but a generator of a 'field'. Mondrian's treatment of the black bars (or "straight lines") is at the core of understanding neoplastic composition.

---

[21] Victor Grauer writes of this observation concerning the 'field' (Grauer 1993). Thanks to Dr Grauer, by way of our numerous exchanges via email, I have developed a more workable understanding of the notion of 'field'.

[22] The "image-object" is one of three which Husserl discusses in his threefold picture analysis. Its status is ambiguous, however, because although it is crucial for visual perception, it exists only within the conflict between the physicality of the canvas (or paper, etc.) itself, and the subjective (or iconographic) reading of the image in the picture. Thus, Husserl states, it is ontologically "nothing." For a more detailed discussion of this concept, see Chap. 6.

[23] For more on the "picture-duck-rabbit" diagramme see Chap. 7.

In relation to this function of 'field', the concept of 'straight line' is no more taken as 'boundary', but 'frontier' in J. R. V. Prescott's sense. Prescott mentions that "*Boundary* refers to a line, while *frontier* refers to a zone" (Prescot 1978, 31). 'Boundary' is, according to Prescott, the line which is fixed (politically), non-negotiable, and at the meta-level of territorialization, while the concept of 'frontier' is the product of the conflict between two parties across the frontier line, or the result of negotiation, and the temporal limit of the expansion of the power field. Ratzel, a German geographer at the end of the nineteenth century, described 'border' in a very stimulating way. Ratzel wrote in 1897, "The border fringe is the reality and the border line the abstraction thereof" (Prescot 1978, 14). For Ratzel, "borders were a factor influencing [central] state power" (Prescot 1978, 15). 'Border' is not akin to 'boundary' but to 'frontier' in Prescott's thinking.

Mondrian had a similar observation about boundary and frontier in terms of Neoplasticism and internationalization, writing in 1931 that:

> In neoplastic there are, in fact, very definite boundaries. But these boundaries are not really closed; the straight lines in rectangular opposition constantly intersect, so that their rhythm continues throughout the whole work. In the same way, in the international order of the future the different countries, while being mutually equivalent, will have their unique and different value. There will be just frontiers, proportionate to the value of each country in relationship to the whole federation. These frontiers will be clearly defined but not "closed"; there will be no customs, no work permits. "Foreigners" will not be viewed as aliens (Mondrian 1986, 268).

Mondrian suggests that the neoplastic boundaries of rectangles are not closed, but "constantly intersect." These localised intersections afford a constant oppositional dynamism affecting the whole work, which in turn affects the way the intersections operate. According to Mondrian, it is this continuous oppositional intersection across the locality and the whole which generates rhythm. Straight lines which reside in an un-form condition within rectangles, are not 'boundaries' but 'frontiers', comparable to those between nation states, which are "clearly defined but not 'closed'." Mondrian's 'frontier' is abstract, understood in terms of "the product of the conflict between two parties across the frontier line, or the result of negotiation, and the temporal limit of the expansion of the power field." Boundaries reside at the "meta-level of territorialization" and are beyond time sense, while frontiers are temporal and 'imaginary' lines, connoting the "limit of the expansion of the power field" in which rhythm is activated. How does the temporality of the straight lines relate to visual rhythm and metre? I will examine the issue of time in visual art and how the straight line can relate to time in the following section.

5.11 Visual Rhythm and Time

Étienne Souriau contends in *Time in the Plastic Arts* that "certainly the successive themes of visual perception can be organized rhythmically in time" (Souriau 1958, 136). Here the problem is, in addition to our criticism of Souriau's "intrinsic time",

whether or not an articulated time sense with a certain duration, that is, a 'metre', can be established not only on the surface of a canvas, but in the mind of the viewer. The cognition of 'metre' is crucial to grappling with the sense of rhythm, especially in the cognition of it in the human mind as we see earlier in this chapter.

Carl E. Seashore proposes a physiological model of establishment of sonic rhythm which he calls "the attention wave." He writes:

> Genetically, the ordinary measure in poetry and music is determined by what is known as the attention wave. Our attention is periodic. All our mental life works rhythmically, that is, by periodic pulsation of effort or achievement with unnoticed intermittence of blanks (Seashore 1938, 140).

He describes one exercise which uses a watch[24] to demonstrate the operation of an "attention wave" which occurs periodically in our nervous system, and comments: "This periodicity is primarily one of attention and reaches out into all our mental processes, being one of nature's contrivances in the interest of the conservation of nervous energy" (Seashore 1938, 141).

To economise energy in our body systems, the function of conservation works on the sensitive platform as well. Seashore goes on to say:

> The rhythmic measure [in our terminology, 'metre'], then, is simply taking advantage of nature's supply of pulsating efforts of attention.[25] And when the measure [metre] fits the attention wave, it gives us a restful feeling of satisfaction and ease (Seashore 1938, 141).

After the nervous system is exposed to stimuli for a certain time, dampening our sensitivity, the human mind tends to take a kind of "pleasure in repose" towards the element of stability (Souriau 1958, 136). This relates to the interaction between 'flickering and memorizing.' 'Flickering' is the incessant stimuli causing a physiological reaction, which, mainly for reasons of energy conservation, leads to grouping and periodising of the influx of visual data. 'Memorizing', by contrast, is the function of mind to process the 'flickering' effect as a mental act by articulation, organisation and expectation of the recurrence. It can also be acknowledged that 'memorizing' and 'repose' have a close relationship, since 'repose' can be taken as the product of articulation in the process of the grouping and patternisation, and by memorising the apparent/imaginary pattern, the sense of gestalt, which is delineated by 'repose' to support 'good gestalt', appears.

Thus, while we are well able to process a simple-looking geometrical configuration such as Mondrian's neoplastic abstract painting as outer stimuli, we tend to memorise a distinctive pattern in preparation for the expected reception of the memorised

---

[24] "This is easily observed in an elemental process such as hearing ability. To demonstrate it in a simple way, proceed as follows: hold a watch a distance from the ear, and then move it toward the ear till you can just hear it; then keep it in this position for two or three minutes, and observe that you hear it only intermittently. To check this, raise your finger when you hear the sound and lower your finger when you do not hear it. Do not be influenced by any theory, but act with the keenest attention for every second. You will then find the hearing and silence periods alternate with fair regularity, the periods varying from 2 to 8 or 10 s in the extreme" (Seashore 1938, 140).

[25] For example, in the electrical current which lights our lamps and which pulses, usually in cycles of about one- sixtieth of a second, we are given an impression of continuous illumination (Seashore 1938, 141).

pattern delineated by 'rest', which the fatigued retinal nerve and pleasure principle are seeking. The geometrical design of Mondrian's painting as a whole provides innumerable combinations or groupings among the pictorial elements on the surface of the canvas. Processing new combinations of 'good gestalt' and even 'bad gestalt' in a flickering moment is another challenge for the brain and for memory, but after a short interval of intense stimulation, 'repose' is forced upon our perception. The articulation of 'repose' also links to the conservation of the retinal nervous system. Our mind utilizes the 'repose' for the structure of the memory/expectation. Thus, Mondrian's painting as a unity functions as both a stable medium of repose and a home for the recurrence of to and fro movement between the canvas as the field of the intensity of pictorial elements unfolding (on the one hand?), and our intentionality to delineate and articulate them through the dynamic action-reaction exchange (on the other?).

Wittgenstein describes this changing aspect of seeing in the observation of the same image:

> I observe this patch. "Now it's like *so*" — and simultaneously I point to e. g. a picture. I may constantly *observe* the same thing and what I *see* may then remain the same, or it may change. What I observe and what I see do not have the same (kind of) identity. Because the words "this patch", for example, do not allow us to recognize the (kind of) identity I mean (Wittgenstein 1977, 59e § 318).

When we observe Mondrian's neoplastic canvas, in the viewer's mind, 'this image' on the canvas, that is, "what I see" keeps changing[26] and what is observed (the painting on canvas) cannot be identified with what is seen (the image on canvas). Wittgenstein's notion of 'noticing an aspect' is pertinent here: "I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently" (Wittgenstein 1977, 59e § 318). We will further investigate the relation between 'changing aspect' and the creation of metre in rhythm.[27]

If Mondrian intends to call this incessant exchange of action-reaction 'rhythm', then we should further investigate how the sense of 'metre' is generated in this process in the viewer's mind, since rhythm without (internalised) metre cannot be observable in our grammar of (visual) rhythm in Neo-plasticism.

5.12 Metre and Rhythm

As discussed earlier in this Chapter, rhythm is an (internailsed or dynamic) structure or composition (*schema*). As such, the activation of the structure of rhythm is metre. The provenance of metre is the pattern of combinations of *arsis* and *thesis*, which

[26] "What I see" can be the same, as Wittgenstein suggests. In this case we can think of Mark Rothko's meditative canvas in the late 1950s, which have the effect of suggesting that the contents of what is seen keep changing. The impression of a painting, which at first sight seems 'empty', continues to change through the mental activity of the viewer, which continues to recompose an arbitrary image. Roger Lipsey writes of the participation of a viewer and changing impressions of Rothko's canvas (Lipsey 1988, 314-6).

[27] Wittgenstein's 'aspectival seeing' is fully investigated Chap. 7 where I have applied it in the examination of the neoplastic canvas.

are named, for example, iamb, spondee, anapest, and dactyl. These are composed of the combination of one and a half, or the accented and the unaccented. Metre is based on an integer system, which has less flexibility, and a hiatus between each count is inevitable. In this sense metre is similar to a grid.

Rhythm changes according to tempo. Tempo and metre differ in that the former is the measurement of flow of time in speed internally and externally, while the latter is the combination of pulses (in ancient Greek, *arsis*/*thesis*) and the linear arrangement of grouped notes structured hierarchically.

Typical external tempo is a metronome or clock. Inner tempo is processed time and its cognition. Tempo can be measured by 'absolute' time (S. K. Langer) or clock time, but be sensed differently in each receiver's mind. Clock time is different from internalised tempo. Clock time has a rigid structure while the internalised internalised tempo has an elastic structure. The former is similar to a grid structure, but the latter is not.

A mechanised series of pulses (produced by a metronome, clock or other such device) is an exaggerated example of outer or objectified metre. Marching band music also has a pulsated metre so marchers can more easily keep in time with one another. The weakest metre (that is, a more 'internalised' metre) can be found in Japanese *Noh* theater music, and in Gregorian chant, both of which presuppose a tacit sense of timing among the singers (instrument players, dancers). Here, rather than an objective, external source of regular metre, there is instead a sense of grouping and 'flow', which is composed as a form of rhythm akin to 'breathing' (or 'waveform') in the listener's mind. The effect of being swayed by the wave of the weaker metre, is in musicological terms 'agogic' accented rhythm.[28] As far as rhythmisation is concerned, when metre is articulated (as in marching band music), the structure of rhythm is akin to a grid and is 'externalised'. By contrast, when metre is tacit, and not objectively regulated, it becomes arbitrary and 'internalised'. In the latter case, by way of human cognition, a series of sounds and visual stimuli can be grouped arbitrarily by a receiver. But the act of grouping alone cannot generate the sense of rhythm: there have to be hierarchical strata. It is the imbrication of hierarchical strata, Cooper and Meyer advocate, which generates the sense of metre.

We have investigated the relationship between rhythm and metre, and conclude that for the empirical sense of rhythm, metre is the core issue in both manifest and internalised rhythm. In the neoplastic doctrine especially, rhythm can be experienced by the voluntary generation of metre by the viewer through a process of internalisation. Metre relates to pulse (whether articulated or indistinct) and to regulation and repetition. As we know, Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm does not allow for repetition. Thus, we need to reexamine the way Mondrian avoids repetition in the appreciation of 'static' rhythm, since in the experience of rhythm, the necessity of metre inevitably evokes a sense of 'repetition'. When we closely examine Mondrian's rejection of repetition, we realise that Mondrian specifically rejected a 'serialised' repetition, and not necessarily 'creative' repetition.

[28] An agogic accent arises when the time-value of the note is lengthened.

5.13 Repetition and Metre, or Matrix and Metre

Mondrian himself alludes to the process of 'internalised' metre and its generation. Importantly, however, as we saw, this process is not one of "repetition", which Mondrian rejected, as far back as his earliest published writing, as an element of "naturalistic" rhythm. He insistently returns to a non-repetition basis in his theory of composition. In *Realization in Music and in Future Theater* (1922), Mondrian evaluates "repeating sounds in different relationships," then goes on to acknowledge the possibility of applying the "different relationships" in sound to neoplastic painting, which has limited elements of relationships: primary colours and non-colours, planes and straight lines. Mondrian uses these primary relationships as the fundamental means for further picture reading in terms of duration and repetition:

> Although of brief duration, the composition will allow the formation of an "image." It is just as when in painting, we look at a neoplastic work and perceive successive relationships; after the first general impression our glance goes from one plane to its oppositions, and from these back to the plane. In this way, avoiding traditional repetition, we continually perceive new relationships which produce the total impression (Mondrian 1986, 162).

In this passage he proposes a correlation between time and image, suggesting that viewing a painting for a certain amount of time allows viewers to constitute "images" in their minds. Also, Mondrian suggests how a viewer can avoid "repetition" in neoplastic painting. His grasp of methodology is activated through his own experience and intuition as a painter. He mentions an incessant switching from locality to totality, and vice versa: one plane to its oppositions and, from these, back to the plane. He uses the plane in a way that reminds us of S. K. Langer's "composition." For Langer, as we saw above, the "composition" is the matrix of music from which all linear concatenations of music radiate. Mondrian's neoplastic canvas as a whole functions as a timeless matrix, which generates an instantaneous moment of endless relationships of differently coloured planes.[29] In this sense the timeless matrix of concept of "composition" generates a time-sensitised concatenation of a linear impression of sounds. Applying this to the visual field, it could be said that Mondrian's neoplastic canvas as a whole functions as a timeless matrix (or in Langer's terminology, "composition") which generates endless relationships of primary coloured planes, the process of which unfolds in the actual time while reading a picture.

Mondrian wrote in 1917, "*Movement* is expressed by movement and countermovement in one." All is worked out in the process of making the picture and "Nothing is accidental" (Mondrian 1986, 352).

As early as 1921 Mondrian had already attempted to work out the dynamics of exchange between invariant (Langer's "composition") and variant:

---

[29] This observation of Mondrian's Neo-plastic canvases is shared by Max Bill:

> The principle merit of this picture seems to be that Mondrian has achieved a combination of actual appearance — with its absolute restrictions — and a freedom of imaginative potentialities, for which, like the well-defined rules of a game, only the nucleus was defined (Bill 1971, 76).

> In composition, the invariant (the spiritual) is expressed by *straight line and planes of non-color (white, black, and gray),* while the variable (the natural) is expressed by *color planes and by rhythm* (Mondrian 1986, 150).

Mondrian allocated straight lines and non-colour (white, black and grey) planes for the invariant, colour planes and rhythm for the variant. In 1921, rhythm is one of the elements of composition and not given a higher level above pictorial composition. Rhythm is the function within composition and rhythm is allocated, strangely enough, to the naturalistic element accompanied by colour planes, for which straight lines and non-colour are "the invariant" and "the spiritual." However, even in this early stage of mature Neoplasticism, rhythm is a tangible feature of the appreciation of neoplastic painting, even at an empirical level. Metre can be generated in the process of an unfolding 'composition' which is carried out by the mind-eye, which composes 'groupings' between invariants and variants, and invariants in invariants, variants in variants. Mondrian's neoplastic canvasses constitute a tensional field, which consists in the narrowly equilibrated relationships within the seemingly static composition. Composition as tensional field generates further tensions between the composition itself and the physical surface of the canvas. The complexity of relationships and tensions is not completed within the painting itself, but rather, the viewer is the agent who completes it.

This chapter sought to assemble various allied theories of static rhythm or rhythm as structure. Aristoxenus's theory of rhythm was the first such theory in Western music history to introduce the entity of time to the concept of rhythm. This became a model for the theorists of rhythm who followed up until the Romantic period, and the modern music scene. Aristoxenus's empirical aspect of rhythm, which draws on the combination of *arsis* and *thesis* necessitates an 'agent' in order that rhythm is activated. Aristoxenus' understanding of metre entailed a more organic conception than that of those influenced by Aristoxenus who came later, but who ultimately identified rhythm with metre or even tempo. Mondrian was clearly against this tendency, seizing upon the concept of rhythm as structure or composition, which, interestingly, can be traced back to ancient Greek thought before Plato. However, on the basis of his Hegelian aestheticism, Mondrian's attempt to realise static rhythm seems to have been dismissed as idealism, or as an overly cerebral conceptualisation. This, however, is counter to my own observations: I contend that Mondrian did perceive rhythm in his early mature neoplastic canvases. Moreover, Mondrian's later confession, in his New York period, of the failure of his early mature neoplastic expression of rhythm, is counter to my own observations. Mondrian stated in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney in 1943:

> Many appreciate in my former work just what I did not want to express, but which was produced by an incapacity to express what I wanted to express — dynamic movement in equilibrium. But a continuous struggle for this statement brought me nearer. This is what I am attempting in Victory Boogie-Woogie (Mondrian 1986, 357).

In my view, Mondrian's claim to having failed to express visual rhythm in these early mature neoplastic works was, rather, the result of him too readily dismissing this work in the interest of maintaining the heuristic disposition of a progressive artist: in short,

Mondrian ought to have pursued his rigorous Neo-plasticism in the early mature neoplastic period, rather than seek to make it ostensible. His affiliation with the flamboyance of Boogie Woogie jazz may also have contributed to this compromise.

Although this compromise propelled Mondrian into an ever more furious level of the struggle between the opposing forces of theory and expression, and prompted him to produce the two Boogie Woogie canvases, his comment should not be taken literally: as was his usual predisposition, Mondrian was proving the seriousness of his engagement with what he was then working on, and of what he proposed to do next. In this way, he sought to distance himself from what he had already done.

It is a common view that the static rhythm of the early mature neoplastic canvases lacks dynamism and is not sufficiently expressive to enable the viewer to experience the ostensive energy of these canvases. The Boogie Woogie paintings appear to possess dynamic or kinetic rhythm, that is, rhythm which manifests optically because the paintings produce a flickering effect by way of the multitudes of small segments of primary coloured squares. In my view, Mondrian's static rhythm in the early mature neoplastic canvases (1921-1932) was a genuine contribution to Western painting. The dynamism of the Boogie Woogie paintings is a result of Mondrian's attempt to express 'dynamic', *manifest* equilibrium between static (schematic) rhythm and naturalistic (kinetic) rhythm: the latter paintings constitute an uncompromising battlefield between these two incommensurable rhythms. This battle involving the tension between the (re-)installment of expressive dynamic rhythm, and the earlier principle of neoplastic rhythm as stasis, cannot be fully understood unless one understands, fully, the internalised dynamism of Mondrian's earlier static rhythm. The extent to which he denied naturalistic elements, such as repetition and the sequence of time, attests to my assertion. I argue that static (schematic) rhythm, although undervalued by recent theorists, more fully engages with the principles of Neo-plasticism than do the Boogie Woogie works. The radicalness of Mondrian's early theory of neoplastic rhythm is a valuable but, to the disadvantage of analyses of his work, forgotten aspect of the investigation of the visual event as it occurs on the surface of the canvas.

The concept of composition is crucial for the appreciation of static rhythm. S. K. Langer's understanding of composition provides theoretical support for this investigation. The task in determining how static rhythm can be appreciated as another way of expressing rhythm required a rethinking of the concept of image, surface, meaning and time in visual art. I conclude that the participation of the viewer is crucial. As Brelet advocates, the establishment of internalised metre is one of the most important points of reference for the experience of rhythm, for both static and naturalistic rhythm. In the following chapter, I will investigate how static visual rhythm can be experienced in the neoplastic canvas, and how metre is internalised in the appreciation of static rhythm. This investigation has only just begun, and a more cogent argument requires further perceptual description of rhythm in the static image of early mature neoplastic canvases. This engagement is crucial to prepare the ground for understanding not only Mondrian's static visual rhythm in the earlier stage of Neoplasticism, but the entire Neoplastic period.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *The Man Without Content*. Trans. G. Albert. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Aviram, Amittai F. 1994. *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Benveniste, Emile. 1971. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Trans. M.E. Meek. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press.

Bill, Max. 1971. 'Composition I with Blue and Yellow.' 1925, by Piet Mondrian. In *Piet Mondrian: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1982. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. A. Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Brelet, Gisèle. 1958. *Reflections on Art*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

———. 1986. *Musical Aesthetics: A Historical Reader, Volume III: The Twentieth Century*. New York: Pendragon Press.

Cooper, Grosvenor, and Leonard B. Meyer. 1960. *The Rhythmic Structure of Music*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Creston, Paul. 1961. *Principles of Rhythm*. New York: Franco Colombo Inc.

Crocker, Richard L. 1978. Aristoxenus and Greek Mathematics. In *Aspects of Medieval and Renaissance Music*, ed. Jan LaRue. New York: Pendragon Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

Gombrich, E.H. 1979. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.

Grauer, Victor A. 1993. Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts. *Seminotica* 94 (3–4).

Hofmann, Hans, Sara T. Weeks, Bartlett H. Hayes, and Addison Gallery of American Art. 1967. *Search for the Real, and Other Essays*, Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Judd, Donald. 1981. Two Contemporary Artists Comment. *Art Journal* 41 (Fall): 248–250.

Keuls, Eva C. 1978. *Plato and Greek Painting, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition Vol. V*. New York: Leiden E. J. Brill.

Klages, Ludwig. 1923. *Vom Wesen Des Rhythmus*. Trans. M. Sugiura. Tokyo: Musuzu Shobo.

Kramer, Jonathan D. 1988. *The Time of Music: New Meanings New Temporalities New Listening Strategies*. New York: Schirmer Books.

Langer, Susanne K. 1953. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art, Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

———. 1957. *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

———. 1967. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Vol. 1. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lipsey, Roger. 1988. *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. Boston/Shaftesbury: Shambhala.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Michael B. Smith, and Galen A. Johnson. 1993. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Mondrian, Piet. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.

Pearson, Lionel. 1990. *Aristoxenus Elementa Rhythmica: The Fragment of Book II and the Additional Evidence for Aristoxenean Rhythmic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Plato, and Francis Macdonald Cornford. 1941. *The Republic of Plato*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Plato, and Trevor J. Saunders. 1970. *The Laws, Penguin Classics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Prescot, J.R.V. 1978. *Boundaries and Frontiers*. London: Croom Helm.

Quintilianus, Aristides. 1989. The De Musica. In *Greek Musical Writings II: Harmonic and Acoustic Theory*, ed. Andrew Barker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Radocy, Rudolf E., and J. David Boyle. 1997. *Psychological Foundation of Musical Behaviour*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Sachs, Curt. 1943. *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World: East and West*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Trans. W. Baskin. London: Peter Owen.
Schönberger, Elmer. 1985. Analogies between Music and Visual Art: Rudolf Escher and M. C. Escher, an Interchange by Correspondence. *Key Notes* 21 (1): 12–15.
Scruton, Roger. 1997. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Seashore, Carl E. 1938. *Psychology of Music*. New York: Dover Publications.
Souriau, Étienne. 1958. Time in the Plastic Arts. In *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writing by Artists*, ed. Susanne K. Langer. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.
Sypher, Wylie. 1960. *Rococo to Cubism: In Art and Literature*. New York: A Vintage Book.
Tosaki, Eiichi. 1999. The Birth of Metre: Aristoxenus' Theory of Rhythm. *Scriptum* 3 Classical Studies: 1–11.
von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, and Charles Lock Eastlake. 1967. *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, 1st ed, *Cass Library of Science Classics*. London: Cass.
West, M.L. 1992. *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Williams, C., and F. Andy. 1909. *The Rhythm of Modern Music*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1977. *Remarks on Colour*. Trans. L.L. McAlister and M. Schättle. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G.E.M. Anscombe, and G.H. von Wright. 1980. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. 2*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Chapter 6
Appreciation of Visual Rhythm: Husserl's 'Image-Object' and Wittgenstein's 'Seeing-as'

> *Music, with its few notes & rhythms, seems to some people a primitive art. But only its surface is simple, while the body which makes possible the interpretation of this manifest content has all the infinite complexity that is suggested in the external forms of other art & which music conceals. In a certain sense it is the most sophisticated art of all.*
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein et al. 1998, 11e)

> *In painting, it is always the rhythm of color and line that makes us experience reality.*
>
> – Piet Mondrian (Mondrian 1986, 87)

6.1 Visual Rhythm: Composition and Schema

Mondrian's concept of rhythm is itself somewhat idiosyncratic, and notably at odds with that of common Western thinking in modern times. In Mondrian's view, rhythm was based on non-sequence and non-repetition. This occurred in the configuration of the 'plastic means' (planes, primary colours and non-colours, and straight lines), which carried over to his conception of 'composition' on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. Rhythm was to be regarded as the equilibrated point or stasis, consisting of a coalescence of tensions and containing great energy and movement. As such, this notion of rhythm closely relates to Mondrian's understanding of composition in both the auditory and visual arts.

Particularly with regard to Mondrian's neoplastic painting, the conception of visual rhythm as composition (or as 'schema') that I am proposing in this book necessitates an understanding of rhythm in terms not only of composition and the canvas as the site of composition, but also an understanding of the necessity for the subject's (viewer's) arbitrary engagement. That is, a conception which emphasises the process of appreciation (in Mondrian's term 'internalization') through cognition and experience.

In the previous chapters, my arguments dealt with aspects of rhythm in poetry, music, painting and other forms of art, which presuppose that the domain of rhythm

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_6

be placed beyond the semantic field. If there is a function of appreciation of painting that is exclusive to the domain of image perception, i.e., independent of that of the symbolic or representative system of language, then its establishment would allow discussion of visual rhythm as stasis to proceed other than by way of the semantic level of meaning. Rather, one can instead investigate 'meaning' in image and perception exclusively in terms of what appears on the surface of a painting. On that basis, painting could be investigated exclusively from the point of view of image-perception, which in turn would bring the discussion back to the canvas. But this necessitates a rethinking of image, surface and meaning in non-figurative art, and especially how these aspects manifest in Mondrian's early neoplastic canvases.

6.2 Image: Painting-Game

Where image perception is concerned, the examination of how an element is *used* in the painting's image provides the means to distinguish its use here from that of semantic in language. Thus, when a painter handles, for example, a red apple in a still-life painting, the colour 'red' can be cognised without reference to the common linguistic meaning of 'red'. Red on the canvas, in either the painter's or spectator's view, cannot be regarded as an independent entity, i.e., as autonomous 'redness': the value of its hue and intensity is contingent upon surrounding and contiguous colours, and is subject to the influence of other pictorial elements as well as of external or ambient factors. A realist painter does not see or use red as a singular entity separate from the apple's surroundings. A percipient painter can be said to paint *relations* between objects, an object and its surroundings, and so on, rather than merely try to match the colour of the objects themselves. Conventional European painting is based on the system of linear perspective, and the observation of apparent tonalities and harmonies of colour, employing the pictorial device known as "chiaroscuro."[1] C. L. Hardin calls the chiaroscuro method the "aperture mode" in contrast to "surface mode", in which all the pictorial elements manifest, explaining that:

> an observer can abstract from the informational richness of the surface mode toward the poverty of the aperture mode. Skilled painters of the realist persuasion must learn to do this as a matter of course, to represent objects seen in nonuniform illuminations by a picture to be seen in uniform illumination. … They select pigments according to the aperture mode so that their audiences may enjoy scenes in the surface mode (Hardin 1988, 86).

[1] "Chiaroscuro" is the technique in painting by which a painter reduces the hue of each colour on canvas into an imagined grey scale, thereby emphasising the modelling of form through the dramatic interplay of illumination and shadow. Clement Greenberg explains the difference between "values" and "chiaroscuro":

> "Value" is a literal translation of the French *valeurs,* which means, among many other things, the gradations of light and dark pigment by which surfaces are modeled or shaded into the illusion of volume, mass, and even depth. *Chiaroscuro*, from the Italian, tends more to mean light and dark in the sense of degrees of illumination rather than of color (Greenberg 1993, 293).

The issue here concerns the capacity to discern what appears on the surface of the canvas, beyond the determinations of pictorial devices (such as 'chiaroscuro', volumetric rendering of forms, and so on), which otherwise constitute the picture's contents. Arguably, it is not possible to appreciate a painting without being aware, perhaps even subconsciously, of certain 'rules', including those pertaining to a generic idea of what 'painting' is. A painter uses specific and predetermined methods to translate the referential or conceptual model into an appropriate painterly vocabulary, using such devices as modification, assimilation, elimination, and duplication. The complexities and subtleties of the rules by which an appreciation of painting is engendered do not necessarily arise as a matter of course: some 'entrainment' or particular way of seeing is presupposed, particularly in the appreciation of Mondrian's early mature neoplastic painting. Methodology and experience enable both painter and viewer to participate in the 'game' (as in Wittgenstein's 'language-game') of painting appreciation. The painter draws upon a multiplicity of mental activities, experiences and methods, the rules of which reference both traditional and contemporary practices, and a diverse pictorial vocabulary. Acquired through experience and learning, this building up of rules applies to both painter and viewer alike. Both are called upon to deal with the voluntary heuristic activity of *understanding* painting on the surface of the canvas. Attention ultimately turns upon the viewer, in the context of reading neoplastic rhythm on canvas, regarding her or his progression to a level of understanding on par with that of the painter, such that the viewer might recognise the painting's vocabulary and rules, and thereby participate in the events which unfold, in this case, on the neoplastic surface. The argument here ultimately concerns reading neoplastic rhythm in Mondrian's painting. Thus some point of common reference needs to be found between Mondrian's own intentions, the 'rules of grammar' inherent to the neoplastic canvas, and the viewer's capacity to read these canvases appropriately.

The 'appreciation' of an artwork requires a different parameter of 'meaning' from Wittgenstein's definition, i.e., that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, 20e § 43).[2] If we were to maintain that the meaning of the image in non-referential painting lies outside of the semantic field, but, following the argument in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, still maintain that the 'image' is a property of language, then a different understanding of 'meaning' in the function of language would need to be employed. This would be necessary in order to address the difference between image in the ordinary sense, and its use in painting, especially with regard to non-referential painting within the range of language which Wittgenstein has in mind. Wittgenstein's definition of meaning suggests that we consider another way of reading painting, and this would be especially pertinent

[2] Wittgenstein's utilitarian definition of meaning is specifically limited to language performance. Wittgenstein is clearly aware of the necessity of a philosophy of mind and psychology to address the problem of vision and visual perception. While Wittgenstein never elucidated his ideas about ethics or application of art works in his writings, he did make occasional comments about art and music, which are dispersed among his writings including his two major works *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. These are found mainly in posthumous publications and in the extensive notes taken by his students (Wittgenstein et al. 1969, 1981, 1998; Wittgenstein 1966).

where abstract and neoplastic painting are concerned, since there is no recourse to the referential claim of reality, nor to the power of metaphor, or "iconic augmentation", which according to Paul Ricoeur's definition, draws on the power of reference through the techniques of abbreviation, articulation, and condensation (Ricoeur 1991b, 174–6). According to Mondrian, the essence of abstract art resides already within the realm of (disguised) naturalistic gesture. I will take Mondrian's argument further, and assert the viability of a non-referential 'force' in painting: that is, a form of abstract painterly energy which does not draw this energy from 'iconic augmentation' – such as 'a perlocutionary effect' (Tirrell 1991, 154) – but from 'field' in composition. Conceptually speaking, a 'field' connotes the region where force is enacted on the surface of a terrain. If such a domain of effective force can be established, then rhythm would be the source of generation of that force. "Iconic augmentation" performs within the semantic or linguistic field: what the force of rhythm in painting would do is traverse this field. But what is the constitution of such a field in which rhythm, specifically, would function? And how would this field be conceived to be facilitated on the surface of the neoplastic canvas? Such questions require a philosophical and empirical reconsideration of the surface of painting.

There is a certain limitation to reading the image in iconic organization and in the semantic analysis of the surface of a non-referential canvas. First, the non-referential canvas does not necessarily presuppose interpretation or thought. Second, apart from semantic reading, it requires analytic reflection upon painting's primary elements (physical canvas, colour pigments, shapes and configurations, and the surface of the canvas itself). The appreciation of rhythm and its implications reside more in bare perception than in interpretation. However, as far as 'image' is concerned, it is worth following, at least to some extent, the arguments and analyses of phenomenology. By employing the concerns of phenomenologists, the problems of reading rhythm within the field of 'representation' will be given due attention. Edmund Husserl, whose analysis of image consciousness is investigated below, provides a limited but valuable model based on the focused observation of the interrelationships between the primary elements in pictures (notably in figurative engravings and paintings). Husserl's analysis elicits a concept crucial to the major arguments which I have developed concerning the neoplastic canvas: the concept of 'image-object' is notoriously ambiguous in Husserl's analysis, but provides a useful notion by which to problematise the reading of non-referential canvases within the representational vocabulary. If we consider Wittgenstein as another phenomenologist, as Jaakko Hintikka does, and admit that there is a difference in the meaning of phenomenology between Husserl and Wittgenstein, then the scope of phenomenological investigation is, accordingly, broadened (Hintikka 1996, 55–77).[3] This enables our investigation of visual rhythm in non-referential painting to take on the issue of a threefold image analysis which Wittgenstein's argument would not permit. For Wittgenstein, Husserl's phenomenological analysis and his reductionism is compromised by the problem of metaphysical philosophy, a problem which resides in Husserl's misuse of 'words' in the language. The word *hyle* (matter), especially, is

[3] Hintikka states: "Wittgenstein is a far purer phenomenologist than Husserl" (Hintikka 1996, 65).

of no use to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein sees the phenomenological problems in Husserl's analysis, which necessitates the concept of 'object' as an a priori 'given'. For Wittgenstein, there is no room for the objectification of 'image': 'image' is always according to the subject's will, thus Husserl's threefold analysis of picture perception, as discussed below, makes no sense in terms of the immediate perception of an image in an ordinary manner. Wittgenstein concedes that on certain occasions we see a painting as a picture, image, physical thing, or as something in our imagination. However, it does not make sense, in Wittgenstein's thinking, (as Husserl would have it), that physicality, objectivity and subjectivity do always arise in conjunction with each other. Our attempt to investigate 'meaning' in non-referential painting may lie outside Wittgenstein's pragmatic definition of the meaning of a word: for our assessment of Mondrian's 'unusual' rhythm, however, Husserl's analytical observation of the representational 'image' in painting does, despite these limitations, contribute in the sense that it brings us back to the 'pre-experienced' condition of the appreciation of a painting.

As Wittgenstein states, "one *trusts* something" to make the language-game possible (Wittgenstein et al. 1969, 66e § 509). We have to "trust something" to make sense of Mondrian's visual rhythm as stasis. Similarly, in Aristoxenus's model of rhythm, "There must be some regularity in which we can trust, some logic of movement that we can understand, before we feel invited to respond to a series of sounds by making some movement ourselves with feet, hands, or head" (Pearson 1990, xxiii). Through the mode of trust, the subject anticipates a series of feet in variation, which become rhythm. Once trust is anchored to the *rhythmizomenon* (Aristoxenus' term for the medium which is 'rhythmisable' or 'to be rhythmised') through 'understanding', the subject can engage in the process of organising the rhythm *within*, shaping an "(inner-) composition" (for which we must refer to S. K. Langer's sense of composition).

Husserl's analysis is, as it were, an examination of the process of trust, when the commonsense notion of the trusted meaning of a word (in our case 'rhythm) is abnormalised. Investigation of the 'ladder' is required in order to reach the stage of 'immediate' experience of neoplastic rhythm. Husserl equips our investigation with the process by which we can examine the ladder itself. Once we 'experience', that is, learn or master the skill of perceiving, the ladder may then be discarded.

6.3 Husserl's Image-Object

Husserl proposes a phenomenological analysis of the surface of graphic works. Husserl's 'threefold' analysis of image consciousness, consists of the "image-thing", the "image-object", and the "image-subject". Among them, "image-object" pertains to the non-material and non-signifying aspects of a given painting. It is the "image-object" which is of interest to the discussion here.[4]

[4] Edmund Husserl's *Phantasie, Bildbewußtsein, Erinnerung*, (*Fantasy, Image-Consciousness, Memory*) volume XXIII in the *Husserliana* series, was written during the period 1898 to 1925. It

Threefold image-consciousness (which Husserl variously calls "physical-imagination", "perceptual re-presentation", or "perceptual phantasy") is quite clearly mapped out at the nominal level. For example, first, "the '*engraved print*' is nominated as a *thing*", which is the "physical-thing" (*das physische Bild*) ("image-thing": or "image-thing"—paper and ink). Second, "perceptive consciousness", which is the "image-object" (*das Bildobjekt*), and third, "aesthetic observation", which is the "image-subject" (*das Bildsubjekt*). It should be emphasised that Husserl did not intend to confer an independent status upon each of these three parts of the image. Rather, each layer (or more correctly, 'fold') is to be conceived as inseparable from the others. However, because of the different means or aspect by which each 'fold' asserts its own presence within the image during perception of a picture, a particular relationship among all three, characterised by dynamic conflict, is thereby presupposed.

The "image-thing" consists of physical matter, which may converge to form a certain pictorial image, and as such does not belong to the imaginary elements of the depicted representative figures and forms. These physical properties, of wall, paper, canvas, frame, line of toner, etc. do, however, "actually exist … and can be given as such in perception" (Brough 1992, 242). In its physical status, the image-thing is "actually existing in the perceptual present" (Brough 1997, 151). As such, the interrelations between the image-thing and the physicality of the environment (the actual room as a concrete reality among other things occupying the same space), are all presented in real time. That is, the image-thing assumes the status of physically existing things that have an unequivocal autonomous existence in the present.

According to John Brough's reading of Husserl's analysis, those physical things referenced by the image-thing are, in fact, *extraordinary* physical things (i.e., paint, ink, paper, etc.), because they make depiction possible (Brough 1997, 151). In spite of its status in relation to the image, the image-thing does not itself represent or depict anything. However, one's experience of the image-thing is such that it

---

was published posthumously in 1980, and contains lecture notes and sketches, or what Husserl called his "meditations," which reflected on questions associated with depiction and art. Husserl's analysis of the image and painting cannot be said to have been well discussed, mainly because his writing on aesthetics and theories of picture analysis were never published, and when finally published through his disciples (for example, Roman Ingarden among others), Husserl's own ideas about art were not disseminated among scholars. However, Husserl's continued interest and devotion to visual art (albeit not exclusively through these periods) amounts to a definite contribution to the image analysis with which we are engaged here: visual rhythm in painting. As the title suggests, the general theme of the book concerns the nature and forms of what Husserl called intuitive 're-presentation' (*anschauliche Vergegenwäritigung*), what John Brough defines as that "genus of conscious acts that do not posit their objects as present and actual, as perceptions do, but rather set them before us in some other intuitive way, as do memory and phantasy and image-consciousness" (Brough 1992, 251).

Husserl's phenomenological description of consciousness as it occurs in the observation of images which depict something (in a painting, sculpture, or photograph) does not necessarily add a new aspect regarding the observation of the work of art. Husserl's carefully delineated phenomenological description does, however, contribute to our investigation of the phenomena on the surface of the canvas and of visual rhythm.

"'awakens', 'offers', 'excites', or serves as a 'substrate' for an image-object that does depict" (Brough 1997, 151). Looking at a painting of a landscape in his study, Husserl wrote: "This Grecian landscape, in which I immerse myself visually, surely stands before me differently from these books on my desk, which in genuine perceiving I have before my eyes as actualities" (Brough 1992, 242). Immediately after figures or shapes on the surface of the canvas are recognized, the "image-thing" cancels out its status as a physical property or "actuality", receding in status to the function of support for the image-object. Within the act of representational recognition, the image-thing completely gives up its status as a thing by supporting, instead, the agent-subject's act by which the image-subject is 'presenced'. That is, once the act of representational recognition has passed, the image-thing as actual physical thing is irretrievably lost, except perhaps to memory (Brough 1997, 42).

The image-subject is the domain of the subjective cognition of depicted figures, forms, and so on in representation, and as such is independent of its evident physical support. Typically, following Husserl, in iconographic readings of the signification of depicted forms and figures, the viewer's gaze is to be held by the image-subject. As long as a viewer sees figuration (a sign) on the canvas, the image-subject holds the viewer's attention within the representational field, in which the 'mind's eye' remains attentive to the possibility of figurative or iconic signification according to the semantic (or Gestalt) field. In the case of neoplastic painting the image-object should function in the major role. According to Husserlian phenomenological analysis, the image-subject depicts 'nothing' for the viewer (Brough 1992, 253). The viewer's eye, confronted by the non-referential image with which it is unfamiliar, turns instead to the image-subject. Thus, the viewer seeks refuge in the field of semantics. As a result of the predominance of image-subject signification, the viewer may not engage with the non-referential (or non Gestalt) image, despite its being there as potentiality associated with, and constitutive of, non-referential abstraction. Although Husserl does not discuss abstract pictures in this (or any other) context, Husserl does suggest a possible means to bypass the image-subject:

> When I contemplate a picture and do not take it simply as a sign, my interest is directed towards the image-object itself, just as it represents the image-subject (Brough 1997, 56).

What does Husserl see directly in the image-object representing as image-subject? The sensuous aspects of colour, surface texture, brushwork, and so on? Aside from the constructive elements of painting, such as formal and plastic configuration (i.e., composition itself), might Husserl also see rhythm and movement? The concept of image-object suggests this possibility, even within a 'conventional' viewing of a picture. My point here is that, especially in the case of Mondrian's neoplastic painting, in directly viewing the image-object, the image is seen outside of the representational semantic field.

Richard Wollheim discriminates representation from figuration, stating that the latter is "a specific form of representation, in which we identify the thing we see in front of something else as, say, a man, a horse, a bowl of fruit, the sky, the death of an animal" (Wollheim 1987, 21). Wollheim delineates representation, stating that: "All that representation requires is that we see in the marked surface things three-dimensionally related" (Wollheim 1987, 21). If we follow Wollheim's reasoning,

Malevich's "Black Square", Josef Albers' colour charts, and the non-figurative shapes of Kandinsky and Miró are suitable candidates for the category of representational image, and thus "image-subject". But what of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases? As an advocate of 'complete' flatness, Mondrian was against form and any semblance of a background-foreground dichotomy. Thus, Mondrian's neoplastic canvasses do not seem to fit Wollheim's definition of representation.

We know already that, according to Husserl, neither the image-thing nor the image-object "attempts to cancel out the other; they exist as an inseparable pair" (Brough 1997, 31). However, Husserl contends in an almost esoteric manner that the image-object does, and at the same time does not, reside in the terrain of the physical and the conceptual, or representational. Husserl asserts that the image-object "truly does not exist, which means not only that it has no existence inside my consciousness; it has no existence at all" (Brough 1997, 31). According to Husserl, in an ontological sense, it is non-existential: "the image-object is a non-material and non-significant entity, that is, 'a nothing' or 'a nullity'" (Brough 1997, 31). In terms of image-object, Husserl himself sets the limitation of the ontological analysis of the image. Thus he has to conclude ambiguously that the image (-object) "may be 'nothing' in comparison with the actuality of canvas or paint, or with other physical items in the real world, but it does 'directly and genuinely' appear" (Brough 1997, 31). The appearance of materiality can be only recognized through the faculty of intuition.[5] That is, the presence (i.e., existence as such) of the image-object is a status which can only be intuited, that is, the image-object resides in the domain of 'intuitive presentation', which remains outside the domain of signification or gestalt cognition to which (conceptual) presentations belong.

Husserl's analysis is, in an important sense, circumstantial, in that it was illustrated in his writing only by reference to Dürer's engravings and other conventional figurative pictures (Husserl 1931, § 111, 311). Thus, when Husserl elucidates the threefoldness of image-consciousness, he arrives at a phenomenological analysis of picturing in which the relationship between image-object and image-subject remains problematic. And while Husserl did not himself explore the terrain of non-referential painting, we can extend his line of reasoning here, and propose that the image-object would find its ideal terrain within this realm. Non-referential painting is, ideally, totally lacking the image-subject with which the image-object must normally maintain a fundamental relationship. Without it, however, the image-object, though seemingly free to assume the status of an autonomous entity, is never activated, and loses its tension with the image-thing, a tension which the neoplastic canvas never loses.

[5] As for intuitive presentations, Husserl nominates three: perceptual presentations, physical-pictorial presentations, and phantasy presentations (presentations of memory and expectation) (Brough 1997, 31).

Husserl contrasts *intuitive acts* with "the conceptual presentations belonging to the domain of the significations. … In contrast with the consciousness of signification, in which an object or a state of affairs is *signified*, it is generally characteristic of intuitional presentations that in them 'an object appears, and this is either the presented object *itself* or a *picture* [*Bild*] of the latter [object]'" (Brough 1997, 141).

The Cubist 'papiers collés' is an example of the way the image-object can be emphasized, in such a manner that one's attention is drawn to the function and extensive rendition of the image-object in conflict with the image-thing. As a 'papiers collés' work by Picasso shows, a strip of newspaper can be recognized as both a piece of actual newspaper (the print is still legible) and at the same time, as an image of a vase (image-subject). However, here the iconic meaning of the 'vase' image does not imply much since Picasso uses the shape as a generic element within the 'still life' genre. The vase is over-used historically, and is hence denied being taken as a rendering of any specific vase which might otherwise open itself up to a subjective reading of the image. Deprived of the quality of iconic meaning, the shape of the vase functions more as an image (or image-object) itself than as an image-subject. In this instance, the status of the piece of newspaper within the context of the image is one of conflict: between appearing as a piece of torn newspaper (image-thing), and, as a property of the image (image-object) itself. Roman Ingarden's observation is pertinent here, that in Cubist paintings, the artist "forgoes the reconstruction of aspects to a considerable degree and does this for the benefit of what is presented" (Ingarden 1989, 177–8). "What is presented" is a vase-shaped image inseparable from the entity of the physical matter of the newspaper. This relationship between image-thing and image-object is more conspicuous in non-figurative paintings, where, for example, the meaning of shapes such as a 'square', 'rectangle', or 'circle' does not carry semantic implication. In any case, it is the relationships themselves which are the focal point of Neoplasticism, including those between shapes, pictorial elements and physicality and image.

The image-object is the entity through which both physicality (image-thing) and interpretation (image-subject) flow, since the image-object is, according to Husserl, the inevitable mediator between the two: "Only through the 'image-object', can a viewer access the image-thing or image-subject" (Ingarden 1989, 177–8). Basically, for Husserl, the property which inheres in or is attached to the image-object is the "appearance-thing" (*Scheinding*), which presents itself by way of the perception of colour and form, and so on. The significance in marking the distinction between the image-object and the image-thing stems not from the different interpretations of cognition of a thing but from the fact that the sensory contents which reside in both images are the same. In this sense Husserl wrote:

> A bronze statuette. It postulates a life-size human figure. The statuette is recognized as such as it is (just like the way a child recognizes a doll). It appears as such as it is there in existence, but actually the thing which is in front of you is a mere bronze statuette. Thus image-object indicates something else (Kanata 1990, 103).

My reason for referring to Husserl is that through his attention to the image-object, the concept of 'flatness' on the pictorial surface can be separated from that to which the physical surface might otherwise be reduced: namely, that variously coloured and textured material object which we call 'the canvas'. Constituting the physical surface, the textured weave of the fabric, brushstrokes, and the variations in thickness of oil pigments disrupt the concept of 'planarity' on the canvas. In the image-object, however, the concept of 'planar surface' is accessible, and its status as half-subjective and half-physical is maintained by the mind's eye of the viewer. The image-object thus concerns the cognitive domain of the structure of painting, in

contrast to the image-subject which, as we know, concerns the semantic realm and pertains to the iconographical reading of painting. Husserl left no comments in his analysis about how his conceptions of image-consciousness would operate with regard to non-figurative paintings, such as those by Kandinsky, Malevich, or Mondrian (although he may have had the opportunity to see such works before he died in 1938), having developed his conceptions primarily on the basis of his observations of the Dürer print. This raises questions concerning the context in which the image-object would or could become conspicuous, since Husserl did not provide definitive examples in which the image-object assumes an emphatic role in a painting. However, Husserl's analysis and description of the image-object is yet to meet the requirements of our enquiry: the Husserlian model of image-consciousness seems an unfinished project — Husserl's conception might be criticised for not having taken into account the consequences of his image-object analysis.[6] The important point is that he recognized the necessity of the image-object,[7] which derived from his ontological commitment, although acknowledgment of the image-object itself undermines ontological foundations altogether. This radical stance against ontology, and the significance of Husserl's work in the investigation of his emphatic inclusion of the image-object within image-consciousness, should be stressed. The conception of the image-object is evocative because it prepares the ground for a focused description of non-referential painting. This is especially pertinent, in the investigations in this thesis, from the point of view of rhythm and *static* movement.

Both in figurative and non-figurative painting, one takes part in the act of perception and cognition of the image as an inseparable whole, a point which brings us to reexamine the condition of abstract art. In (non-referential) abstract art, especially in the investigation of visual rhythm, image-subject analysis (in contrast with image-object and image-thing) loses its positive value. Also the delineation of difference between physical and non-physical premises of the image itself is a misguided endeavour. In Mondrian's neoplastic paintings, physicality and image are an inseparable and inter-dependent pair. It is this particular constitution of Mondrian's painting which requires that the investigation go beyond both iconic reading and the semantic premises of picture analysis.

6.4 Mirror of Reality: Image-Object and Non-referential Painting

In non-figurative painting, especially geometrical abstract works, reading according to representational meaning or the iconographical way of searching for the signified is inappropriate, or at best provisional, since in truly abstract painting, there is a

[6] For example, Robert Denoon Cumming attributes the reason for the incomplete elucidation of Husserl's image consciousness analysis to Husserl's own contention that "the problem of the constitution of the matter has largely to be left to a causal explanation in empirical psychology" (Cumming 1992, 130).

[7] Husserl meditated on this issue for a long period (Hua XXIII, Kanata 1990, 84).

veritable void in place of anything that can be recognized as iconographic. In neoplastic painting, even the recognition of shapes is problematic, with Mondrian asserting, for example, that there are no squares or rectangles (or any form) in his painting. In the non-referential canvas, composition itself is autonomous. Because composition predominates, the stability and status of representational meaning remains undetermined. Mondrian, aware of this problem and the importance of the composition itself, recommends that viewers of his non-figurative canvases attune their vision towards a purely *plastic* 'image' in the image-object. In "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919) A (a painter) replies to B's (a singer's?) question about meaning in non-referential work:

> In painting you must first try to see *composition, color, and line* and not the representation *as representation.* Then you will finally come to feel the subject matter a hindrance (Mondrian 1986, 76).

Despite this denial of referential subject matter, Mondrian nonetheless insisted on the condition of 'reality' in his abstract canvases (recall that he referred to his canvases as 'abstract-real'), a condition of reality that is in stark contrast to the European convention of perspectival reality, with its origins in the Renaissance, and its semiotic and symbolic affiliation with the metaphor of 'the mirror', or with the notion of something seen as through a window.

Mondrian's assertion that "in plastic art the laws of reality are established by the force of intuition" and that therefore "art is the true mirror of reality" (Mondrian 1986, 388)[8] sets up an interesting contradiction to Leonardo's conception of the role of the mirror:

> When you wish to see whether your whole picture accords with what you have portrayed from nature take a mirror and reflect the actual object in it. …You should take the mirror as your master, that is a flat mirror, because on its surface things in many ways bear a resemblance to a painting (da Vinci et al. 1989, 202).

Thus, for Leonardo the mirror is the 'true' reflection of reality. The surface of the mirror, however, does not itself belong to reality, nor does it contribute to the generation of reality: the manifestation of the surface of the mirror is a hindrance to establishing a reality in the picture image. The mirror, in Leonardo's example, directly reflects, or in other words 'resembles' external reality, quite literally, for the benefit of the painter who strives to interpret it that way. This literal interpretation is made possible by the function of transparency, that is, the invisibility of the physical substance of the (flat) mirror itself. The mirror's value, in Leonardo's view, lies in its capacity for literally translating outer reality into an 'image'. The canvas which depicts, say, a portrait or landscape has its own value as the reflected reality of an external reality, but unlike the mirror, it is accompanied by its own ineffaceable

[8] Henry McBride, who was Mondrian's acquaintance, also described his and the audience's surprise regarding Mondrian's seriousness in pursuing 'reality' in his non-figurative painting:

> Mondrian is the most modern of painters. He deals in rectangles boldly constructed by unrelentingly black lines crossing upon a white ground and with patches of pure color enclosed sparingly here and there. This, you may be surprised to know, is the artist's attempt 'toward the true vision of reality' (McBride 1942, 1997, 386).

physical materiality, which must, by definition, always remain visible. Thus Leonardo teaches the young painter to minimise, to the extreme, the physical traits of the painterly surface: the surface is to be seen as nothing, and constituted by complete transparency. Ultimately, in Leonardo's thinking, the pictorial surface should be a seamless continuum between external (reflected) reality, and its depiction (reflection).

By contrast, Mondrian's 'mirror' is not a reflection of any outer reality. It reflects no tangible objects in nature; it is the 'living' reality of abstract painting on its own terms. Mondrian's mirror lacks the glassy, perfect (because invisible) surface, and operates instead more in the manner of a 'screen' (or 'picture-screen'): it is opaque, and manifests its own materiality *as surface*, onto which a 'conceptual reality' is projected by the viewer. For 'picture-screen', I am thinking of the screen painting of China and Japan, not of the cinematographic screen, in which the physical condition of surface is supposed to be ignored, and is so constructed that the projected cinematic image is the only 'object' of attention.

The painting of fish is a very common practice in Chinese and Japanese paintings. For example, in the picture *Fish* (Fig. 6.1), the fish are depicted as they are. There is no depiction of the reflection of the surface of the water or its depth. The depiction of the fish themselves through the energetic movement of the brush work generates a sense of movement, and insinuates the existence of water. Notably, the fish themselves cannot be recognised as inseparable from the physicality of the texture of the surface (silk or paper). In contrast, in conventional Western painting, the depiction of

Fig. 6.1 Pa – Ta Shan – Jen, *Flower, Rock and Two Fish*, China

fish occurs within a phenomenological description of all available or plausible referents to external reality: surface reflections on the water, effects of light and shadow, etc. The scene with the fish is a depiction akin to Leonardo's image as reflected in the mirror. Conventional Western painting is appreciated through a direct objective observation of the scene, where the participation of the viewer is indirect and more like that of a mediator. In Chinese or Japanese paintings of fish, the participation of the viewer as 'agent' is requisite: without the viewer's arbitrary participation – in other words, the projection of the image by the viewer in terms of mind's eye cognition, the putative 'reality' of the depicted scene (fish) cannot occur.

"Art is the true mirror of reality." This is true in the East as much as in the West. However, the usage of the noun 'mirror' used in explanation of the reality in Japanese fish painting contains the element of a verb. The phrase can be paraphrased into "art is faithfully mirroring reality." For Mondrian, then, using the mirror with volition, a person can transform themselves consciously: from individual into universal. Leonardo's mirror is scientific, a tool for observation and comparison: for identification. The condition of 'reality' in Japanese fish painting is thrown into relief when compared with European conventional perspectival (scientific) reality, which originated via Leonardo da Vinci in the Renaissance, through the metaphor of 'mirror'. Leonardo's comment about the mirror:

> When you wish to see whether your whole picture accords with what you have portrayed from nature take a mirror and reflect the actual object in it. …You should take the mirror as your master, that is a flat mirror, because on its surface things in many ways bear a resemblance to a painting (da Vinci et al. 1989, 202).

For Leonardo the mirror is the 'true' reflection of reality, but the surface of the mirror itself does not belong to reality, nor does it contribute to the generation of reality: the existence of the surface of the mirror liternally hinders translating outer reality. The canvas which depicts, say, a portrait or landscape has its own value as the reflected reality of an external reality, but unlike the mirror, it is accompanied by its own ineffaceable physical materiality; canvas and paint, (and perhaps brush work too), which must always remain visible. Leonardo teaches young painters to minimise the physical traits of the painterly surface to the extremity of complete transparency.

As the function of the literal 'reflection of reality', the mirror can be a teacher even for the painter, who deals with physical or imaginary reality as depicted on the painting surface, which has its own physically real field. The combining value between mirrored and depicted image onto the surface of the physical canvas is the figurative painter's practice. It is for this reason that Leonardo recommends the comparison between mirrored reality and that which is depicted. Ultimately, in Leonardo's thinking, the pictorial surface should be a seamless continuum between external reality, its reflection, and its depiction. For Leonardo, reality in comparison with mirrored reflection is inherently related to the literal referential capacity of the mirror. Leonardo's reality has to 'flow' between depicted image and outer reality.

By contrast, the 'mirror' of Japanese painting is not a reflection of any outer reality. It reflects no literally identical natural scene; it reflects only the 'reality' of painting in its own right. In other words, the mirror of Japanese painting lacks the glassy, perfect

surface; instead, it is like a 'screen', which is opaque and manifests its own materiality on the surface, and onto which a 'conceptual reality' can be projected by the viewer. Thus the term 'mirror' in Japanese painting becomes a verb rather than a noun. 'Mirror' as verb denotes the voluntary act of 'mirroring', or of projecting something onto the screen as the fish painting manifests its own specific material substance. The screen itself insists upon its own physical reality, but this physicality is to be annihilated by the opposition of conflicting pictorial elements: the brush work of the Japanese ink is absorbed into the surface of the silk material. The screen of Japanese fish painting cannot be identified with the physical existence of the silk screen itself, nor with the depicted shapes, which the viewer cognises through a subjective reading of what appears on the surface of the canvas. In this sense the mirror/screen of Japanese fish painting resides, conceptually speaking, somewhere between physicality and subjectivity. The fish are lifelike without, quite, being realistic in a Western sense of 'realistic'.

In Western classical paintings on canvas, there are abundant examples, such as those by Mantegna (Fig. 6.2), which are exquisitely thinly painted on such fine, silk-like canvas, that the depicted figures are only discerned through the manifestation of the fine physical net of warp and weft of the canvas. One sees at the same time the physical support and subjectively recognised representations of figures, landscape or other items. In this case the picture is read through the physical surface of the canvas and the image on the surface, but the "aesthetic" observation of the figures in the image is perpetually hindered by the presentation of physical surface of the canvas. In Mantegna's canvas, physicality appears as the fine silky lattice of warp and weft.

Fig. 6.2 Andrea Mantegna, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1465-70, James Simon, Berlin

To the viewer the 'surface' of the canvas ostensibly appears and is ineffaceable during the observation of the depicted figures. The image appears in incessant conflict with physicality like a small bell that keeps ringing while one is listening to musical sound.

In such paintings as works by Rembrandt, Velázquez, and the Impressionists, the emphasis on the physicality of the paint (its actual substance, for example, oil pigment, tempera, gouache, etc.) is manifest. Then those canvases engender complexity, since the pigments themselves insist on their apparent existence, character, and aesthetic entity apart from the depicted images of the figures themselves. However, once the viewer has recognised the figures, landscape, or other representative contents, the (once distinct) physicality of the pigments evanesce and are subsumed by the coded representational sign (the signified). In this case the viewer deals with the image itself, which substitutes mere physical traits of its physicality, and the image on the physical surface ostensibly stays there and does not utterly vanish from the viewer's mind, even when the depicted figures are recognised.

There are, of course, other crucial differences between Western conventional painting and Chinese and Japanese painting. First, the understanding of 'emptiness': the Europeans' dealing with nothingness belongs to a metaphysical tradition of 'space'. Second, in Van Gogh's painting for instance, line is still subordinate to the composition, while the line in Chinese-Japanese picture (especially Zen Buddhist calligraphic drawing) has its own idiosyncrasy and dominates the composition. In contrast to Japanese or Chinese depitions, in conventional Western painting, the depiction of fish tends to occur within a phenomenological description of all available or plausible referents to external reality: surface reflections on the water, effects of light and shadows, etc., resulting in a depiction akin to Leonardo's mirror-image. Conventional Western painting is appreciated precisely for its direct objective observation of the scene, in which the participation of the viewer is indirect.

Mondrian's 'picture-screen' surface is closer to traditional 'flat' Chinese and Japanese painting than to conventional European perspectival painting, which draws upon a Renaissance and Classical world view. Between the work of Mondrian and these Chinese and Japanese paintings, one of the differences relates to understandings of 'emptiness': Mondrian belongs to the European metaphysical tradition where 'space' is concerned (as discussed above in relation to Taoism). Second, the linework in Mondrian's painting is still subordinate to the composition, while the line in Chinese-Japanese pictorial representation (especially Zen Buddhist calligraphic drawing) is autonomous, idiosyncratic, and is the dominant structural force of composition.

But Mondrian's reality does manifest an abstract 'living' reality not based on tangible form. For this reason, he called this reality 'superreality':

> It is … "to create" a reality that is concrete and living for our sense, although detached from the transitory reality of form. That is why I would prefer to define Neo-Plastic as Superrealism, in opposition to Realism and Surrealism (Mondrian 1986, 239).

Neoplastic reality ("superreality") differs from Surrealism in that the former no longer relies on "the transitory reality of form". In spite of Surrealism's going beyond actual reality through the use of imagery which transcends tangible nature, Surrealism nonetheless remains within the realm of natural reality through its dependence upon

conventional form. Mondrian's neo-plastic painting on the other hand constructs its own reality, projected onto an 'opaque' screen. It is a catalyst, which generates an abstract reality, as a mental construct, through the participation of the viewer. Mondrian's screen manifests its own specific material substance, and insists upon its own autonomous physical reality. This physicality is, however, at the same time to be annihilated by the extreme opposition of conflicting pictorial elements: for example, in his use of shiny concave black strips in opposition to opaque impasto planes. Mondrian's screen cannot be directly or completely identified with the physical existence of the canvas itself, nor with the image-subject (insofar as it is 'depicted' by way of shapes, colour planes, and so on). In this sense, Mondrian's picture-screen resides in the 'image', that is, in perception itself, and as such voids any vestige of representational iconography. It constitutes the structure of the painting itself in its own right without recourse to the status of the subjective semantic field.

In my view, Mondrian's picture-screen can be characterised by distinguishing it from Husserl's 'image-object'. This cannot be successfully argued without some modification of Husserl's treatment of the concept of a threefold complexion underlying image-consciousness: the image-object in Mondrian's neoplastic canvas inhabits the same realm as the image-thing, but not that of the image-subject (Brough 1997, 56). The dynamism of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism resides in the fierce conflict between the image, or what Mondrian calls the 'plastic means', and the physical or 'geological' surface devoid of image-subject. In Mondrian's image-object (composition), there is an exchange among the painting's aspects (or 'dimensions' as Mondrian termed them), which establishes a special relationship between the plastic means, the image-thing (physical canvas itself), and the image-object (form or figures with representational meaning).

Mantegna painted upon fine, silk-like canvas, such that the depicted figures are discerned along with the fine texture of the canvas. One sees at the same time the physical support as well as the subjectively recognized representation of figures, landscape and other items. In the case of Mantegna, the picture is read through and, thus, according to both the image-thing layer and the image-subject layer. "Aesthetic" contemplation of the figures (image-subject) is perpetually hindered by the presentation of the image-object, i.e., not the physical-actual surface, but the conceptual 'surface' of the canvas. Mantegna's painting presents us with an example of Western representational painting in which the relationship between image-object and image-thing appears to be one of incessant conflict: one can liken this to a situation in which a tiny bell or other such noise (image-thing) continues 'sounding' while one is trying to listen to music (image-object). In such paintings as those by Turner, the Impressionists and the Fauves, the emphasis on the physicality of paint as an actual substance is manifest.[9] These canvases convey a particular kind of complex-

[9]We can include pre-modern conventional European painters as well, such as Rembrandt, Velazquez and other Spanish masters. However, there is an important difference, in the physicality of the surface of painting, between conventional and modernist painters. When the conventionalists' canvas is seen at the proper distance (so that depicted figures are recognized as such), the physicality (or physical 'noise') on the surface of the canvas is almost completely absorbed into the

ity: the pigments themselves assert an evident existence, as aesthetic entities independent from the depicted figures.

It is only through the screen, or more correctly, the conception of *painting-as-screen*, that the viewer's gaze can recognise the physical entity of the canvas, as well as construct a subjective reading of the shapes, lines, etcon the surface. The viewer's gaze unites both image-thing and image-object by means of the picture-screen. Through the voluntary participation of the viewer (and painter) and perception of the 'force of structure', it is possible that the "abstract-real" can be attained as a particular reality which combines physicality and image. Rhythm is that 'force' of the structure in the image which unifies both physical substance (the canvas itself) and the viewer's subjective participation in constituting the painting as an image: 'force' because it constitutes a process of dynamic interchange between two inseparable parts of a single entity, a single act. In Neo-plasticism the picture/mirror belongs to structure or composition itself, and the perception of the force of structure, as rhythm, permeates both physicality and depicted-image on the surface of the canvas. The specificity of the 'picture-screen' condition (the physio-optical 'flat' surface of painting) of the neoplastic canvas becomes more apparent as an inherent feature of these paintings when an original canvas is compared (even hypothetically) with its reproduction.

6.5 Hapticity and Reproduction

Mondrian occasionally talked about reproductions in *De Stijl* with van Doesburg, expressing his satisfaction with the results of printed reproductions.[10] This is partly because the limitations of printing were known beforehand (at that time only black and white reproductions were possible anyway). In any case, Mondrian was well

---

figuration. On the other hand, the figures on the surface of the modern (figurative-painting) masters such as Monet, the Impressionists, Symbolists and Fauves cannot be seen without also noting the physicality of oil pigment and the woven texture of the canvas.

[10] For example, in his letter to van Doesburg on April 18, 1919, Mondrian wrote:

> Many thanks for the reproduction and your letter. … When I compare that work of mine you reproduced in De Stijl with, say, the rhomboids which you (and I) prefer. I clearly see that doesn't bother me. It took me a long time to discover this method, as you can plainly see in the photo I sent you last year; the one you have just reproduced in fact forms the transition to regular arrangement (Henkels 1987, 202).

Interestingly, Mondrian mentioned the touch-up of the photographic reproduction in his letter to van Doesburg on August 1, 1919:

> Here at last is the copy; the photo will follow soon. You know I thought it might be a good idea to accompany this article with a reproduction of the last thing I showed you, or put it in the next number if necessary, because it was prompted by a starry sky. I believe it would be better to touch up the print with chalk. Anyhow, you know my intentions because we discussed them and I showed you a poor reproduction (Henkels 1987, 202).

aware that the effects on canvas would be completely different from those in reproductions, and his expectations were no doubt geared accordingly. Mondrian's concern about the physical condition of the actual canvas, as discussed above, shows itself in his various comments regarding the frame, his studio, colour, light and shade, and in the canvases themselves: thickly painted matte white and coloured planes, varnished black belts thinly painted, and his intentionally left brush strokes. Those physical characteristics which are crucial to the idea of neoplastic painting as 'picture-screen' are basically unreproducible in reproductions. The condition of 'picture-screen' closely relates to that of the surface of the canvas: to the conditions which give rise to neoplastic 'flatness'.

Let us remain with the issue of reproduction for a moment. In the reproduction, the image-thing can be easily ignored (since it is effectively made redundant by the very fact of appearing *as* a reproduction). Except in cases where a detail of the canvas is shown in extreme close-up, the reproduction of the image-thing is more a matter of technical or archaeological inspection. Reproduction of the image-object, however, is deeply problematic. Considered hypothetically, successful reproduction of the image-object may elicit the effect of visual 'flatness' (annihilation of background-foreground dichotomy) which Mondrian had generally aimed to achieve. What the reproduction cannot provide, though, is that condition which gives rise to the moment of intensity in which the viewer experiences the switch among image-thing, image-subject and image-object. This moment in which the switching between modes of image-consciousness occurs, is peculiar to the apprehension of an actual painted (engraved, etc.) surface, and is particularly pertinent where the viewer's gaze is drawn into the equilibrated tension of oppositions within the dialectical system of Neo-plasticism: between shape and non-shape; physicality and non-physicality; three- and two-dimensionality; geometric design and the physical thickness of impasto; the subtle control of hues within the primary colours and 'non-colours'; shallow black belts which are varnished and glossy, in contrast to dense, matt, opaque planes. At the surface of Mondrian's neoplastic canvas, one engages in the interplay of similarity and dissimilarity, or difference. In terms of how the painting as a neoplastic surface or 'field' is apprehended, the impasto planes are so physically presented that the canvas reads as a physically complex entity, as a 'tiled' surface: yet it also presents itself as a conceptual entity, as a surface beyond the limitations of physicality, as a 'field'. Mondrian intentionally complicates things with the use of a white painted wooden frame set back about one centimetre from the canvas surface itself. In reproductions, this tension between opposing elements and their possible readings is inevitably minimised or even lost altogether.

How much detail ought to be reproduced is an issue: the inclusion of too much runs the risk of dispersing the wholeness or unity of the canvas. Too little may entail deterioration of the hapticity of the canvas—one's sense that it is a tactile physical object. Totality and hapticity need to be balanced, and the most successful reproduction would thus be one which enables both image-thing and image-subject to be seen, thereby making it possible to seize upon the image-object and more importantly constitute the image in terms of picture-screen.

The status of 'flatness' is also contingent on various factors which determine how opposing elements on the canvas are presented. Mondrian's repeated attempts to realize 'flatness'[11] through the complex thickness of the surface may attest to the instability of the neoplastic canvas surface, which was influenced by any number of variables such as lighting, ambience, context, and so on. Acknowledging the contingency which underlies the appearance of his paintings, Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg in 1917 that the light in Suasso (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) "seems to change the color values", adding that in his "—too small—studio the effect was different… [M]y feeling is that my work had to be made on the scene and in connection with the scene itself" (Joosten 1998, 258).

6.6 Against Iconic Reading: Mondrian and Kandinsky2

In modernist painters' attempts from Manet, the Impressionists, the Nabis and Cubists, from Neo-plasticism to American Minimalism, all efforts converge on the problem of surface and flatness. The meaning of flatness beneath or in some sense implicit in modern painting, arises through genealogical and analytic understandings of the surface on the canvas. The Husserlian concept of threefold image consciousness is a useful means by which to differentiate 'non-figurative'[12] images among a diversity of painters. The non-figurative canvases of both Kandinsky and Mondrian have become 'modern classics' of abstract painting, at the inception of which they shared the mutual problems intrinsic to non-figurative painting (and art in general), but their respective attitudes toward non-figurativeness, and what it entails, differ fundamentally. As an abstract painter, Mondrian succeeded Kandinsky, and was strongly influenced by Kandinsky's work, both texts and canvases, and had read *Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. However, in the sense that both struggled to establish the meaning and status of abstract painting in early twentieth century Modern Art, their work is associated with the dawn of abstract painting.

Both theoretically and practically, the difference between Mondrian and Kandinsky resides in the initial motivation towards abstract painting. Mondrian started from 'reality' (that is, the evidence on canvas), while Kandinsky started from 'allegory' (Overy 1969), a concern with the content of iconic meaning in painting. Mondrian was deeply influenced by and absorbed the methodology of Cubism according to his own ideas. Kandinsky's major influence were the Fauves, and as a consequence, Kandinsky developed an expressive colour scheme endowed with symbolic significations.[13]

[11] Mondrian's concern with the 'flat' surface first arises in a letter to Bremmer dated January 29, 1914: "I construct lines and color combinations on a flat surface, in order to express *general beauty* with the utmost awareness" (Joosten 1998, 105).

[12] Here the adjectival term 'non-figurative' is used for non-conventional figurative painting as well, and thus is not necessarily restricted to non-referential in the strict sense.

[13] Kandinsky saw the work of Matisse and the Fauves in Paris while he and Gabriele Münter rented a house in Sèvre from May 1906 to June 1907 (Kandinsky et al. 1982b, 17, Overy 1969, 61). In his letter to a Russian magazine *Apollon* in April 1910, Kandinsky reported: "Much of the work con-

The difference between Mondrian and Kandinsky is more conspicuous where the concept and actuality of painterly 'surface' are concerned. As modern artists, both dealt with the 'surface' of the canvas, but very differently, as Mondrian notes in this first writing about Kandinsky in his first published essay "New Plastic in Painting" (1917–18):

> Kandinsky too broke the closed line that describes the broad contour of objects, but as he did not sufficiently tense the natural contour, his work remained predominantly an expression of natural feeling. Comparing the works of Picasso and Kandinsky …, one sees clearly how important are the tension of curved line and use of the straight. Kandinsky's generalized expression, like Picasso's, came about through the abstraction of naturalistic form and color: but in Kandinsky line still remains a *vestige* of the contour of objects, whereas Picasso introduces the free straight line. Although Picasso still uses fragments of the contour of things, he carries them to determination, whereas Kandinsky leaves somewhat intact the confluence of line and color found in nature (Mondrian 1986, 64).

Mondrian's reservations about Kandinsky's 'natural feeling' are understandable. Kandinsky was less concerned with the attempt to achieve a completely flat surface by the destruction of background-foreground dichotomy, than with what should be expressed on canvas through forms. Kandinsky's canvases still yield iconographic readings, and despite being 'abstractions', his work does not prohibit reading meaning according to the representational image (the image-subject). Thus, pictorial composition, which in non-referential painting is much closer to the image-object than to the image-subject, is not emphasized as a *reality* (in Mondrian's sense: that is, as 'picture-screen'). As Mondrian demonstrates, this can be attained through emphasising the conflict between the composition and the painting's physical elements.

---

sists of miraculous painting. But among them, only Matisse has gone beyond the "accidental forms of nature"—or, better expressed, only he has succeeded in entirely discarding the inessential (negative) as part of these forms, replacing it with, so to speak, his own forms (positive element)" (Kandinsky et al. 1982a, 68). Kandinsky also read Matisse's *Notes D'un Peintre* (1908) in German translation, which was published in 1909, and mentioned it in his *On the Spiritual in Art* (Kandinsky et al. 1982a, 151). In contrast, Kandinsky did not mention Picasso until 1910 (Kandinsky et al. 1982b, 876 n.35, 1982a, 79). Kandinsky discusses the influence of Matisse:

> In 1906 I saw for the first time Matisse's early pictures, which were also highly controversial—for the same reason as those of the Impressionists in Moscow. Much encouraged, I asked myself once again the question whether one might not simply reduce or "distort" objects, but do away with them altogether. So I went over to abstract painting, by way of "Expressionism"—Slowly, as a result of endless experiments, doubts, hopes, and discoveries (Kandinsky et al. 1982b, 806).

Kandinsky states his minor interest in Cubism: "As you see, I never had anything to do with Cubism. When I first saw photos of Picasso's Cubist paintings (1912), my first abstract picture was already painted" (Kandinsky et al. 1982b, 807).

George Rickey describes the influence of Mondrian and Kandinsky on Abstract Expressionism in the US in the late 1940s: "There were two forms of abstraction available: geometric, typified by Mondrian, with memorial exhibitions (1945–47) in New York, Amsterdam, and Basel; and expressionist, typified by Kandinsky, with memorial exhibitions (1945–48) in New York, Pittsburg, and several Dutch cities" (Rickey 1967, 53–4).

Mondrian's neoplastic painting explicitly and inherently counters iconographic readings, for which reason Mondrian did not highly value Kandinsky's abstract style, commenting that "of all the abstractionists (Kandinsky and the Futurists), I felt that only the Cubists had discovered the right path; and, for a time, I was much influenced by them" (Mondrian 1986, 338). Mondrian was preoccupied with the annihilation of any space which might arise from a background-foreground dichotomy, and avoided all reference to perspective pictorial space, pictorial form, and the elaboration of colours beyond their purely plastic means, emphasising only the field of the composition and the picture-screen as it arises in conflict with the physical surface.

Mondrian employed the Cubist tradition more literally than did Kandinsky. Maurice Denis, understanding Cézanne's inheritance in terms of "plastic equivalence" with nature, elucidates the point at which the Cubists move beyond the Symbolist practice. In his *Nouvelles Théories* Denis writes that "according to Cézanne" the painter "ought not to try to reproduce nature but to represent it by equivalents—plastic equivalents …". Denis continues:

> The aim in art being not any longer the direct and immediate reproduction of the objects, [but instead] all the elements of a pictorial language—lines, planes, shadows, lights, colours—become abstract elements that can be combined, rarefied, exaggerated, distorted according to their expressive power to attain that major end of the work: the projection of the idea, the dream, the mind (Sypher 1960, 222).

Mondrian elaborated upon this inheritance of Cézanne's "plastic equivalence" as far as possible within the ambit of his own Cubism, as Guillaume Apollinaire noted on the occasion of the 29th *The Salon des Indépendants* exhibition in Paris (1913) in which Mondrian had submitted three works: *Arbre*, *Arbre en fleurs* and *Femme* (Joosten 1998, 104). Mondrian acknowledged his own Cubist inheritance, however, writing that "neoplastic is neither decorative painting nor geometric painting. It only has that appearance. To explain this, we must show how neoplastic arose from Cubism" (Mondrian 1986, 237).[14] He also wrote: "But it is only in *Cubism* that we find this built into a system. In Cubism, the tragic plastic lost most of its domination power through *opposition of pure color and abstraction of natural form*" (Mondrian 1986, 237). It is worth noting Paul Overy's comment that, in comparison with Mondrian, the "influence of Cubism on Kandinsky's work is negligible" (Overy 1969, 16).

In his letter to H. P. Bremmer in 1914, Mondrian did not hesitate to highlight Picasso's influence on his own works, but also emphasized the difference between them: "I must add that I underwent an influence from work by Picasso which I saw and which I admire *greatly*. … And, this debt notwithstanding, I know that I am

[14] "But it is only in *Cubism* that we find this built into a system. In Cubism, the tragic plastic lost most of its domination power through *opposition of pure color and abstraction of natural form*" (Mondrian 1986, 136). In 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City)' (1919–20), Mondrian mentions 'Neo-Cubist' as a possible alternative to 'Neo-plasticist', stating: "'Neo-Cubist' is not a bad term, for the New Plastic is a consequence of Cubism: the term is not inappropriate because Cubism is more widely known today than the New Plastic, and 'Neo-Cubist' provides a useful clue" (Mondrian 1986, 111). It is worth noting Paul Overy's comment that, in comparison with Mondrian, the "influence of Cubism on Kandinsky's work is negligible" (Overy 1969, 16).

quite different from Picasso, as is generally recognized" (Joosten 1971, 61). Later in his New York period, he wrote in his sketchbook:

> [Cubism] has not seen that mobility of view[point] [,which] enables [us] to dissolve volume. To the contrary, Cubism tried to express volume and [thus] remained naturalistic. Pure abstract dissolves the volume and its corporeal expression. Therefore it is abstract (Mondrian 1986, 390).

The emphasis on cubist painting, as Roman Ingarden asserts, concerns 'how' more than 'what' (Ingarden 1989, 176). Mondrian's main concern had been how to dissolve volume and depart from naturalistic expression, in an attempt to obtain flatness in his painting. For Mondrian, the only admissible content of painting is structure or composition, and, perhaps more importantly, the energy which arises from within the tensions of this explicitly limited means of painting. Mondrian believed that to be engaged with structure and its implied force is to deal fully with the Modernist condition of painting, both within the practice of painting as well as in the living atmosphere of his own studio (and, more extensively, with the broad themes of Modern society itself).

Thus, Mondrian's visual rhythm is the product of the elaboration and obliteration of the *aspect*. In music (mainly European classical music), rhythm and harmony relate to the structure and composition of the music itself, while melody and symphonic orchestration relate to its content, as discussed in Chap. 5. Mondrian pursues the former, and Kandinsky pursues the latter. The difference in respective attitudes toward melody can be stated simply: Mondrian abhorred it, Kandinsky adhered to it. Mondrian's composition resists generating melody and linear orchestration; rather, it compels the perceiver to activate its structure as flow (according to Langer's conception of 'composition'). It is provoked by conflict, equivalent to that between the physical sounds of the musical instruments (akin to the physicality of canvas and oil pigments) and harmony, regularity and irregularity, locality and the whole, grouping and detachment.

6.7 Phenomenology of Visual Rhythm in the Neoplastic Canvas

Mondrian's neoplastic canvas transports the viewer from the activity of reading via the representational image, back to the composition, and beyond that to engage with the physicality of the surface itself, to the condition of the picture-screen, with which a subjective reading of meaning cannot be identified. The property of Mondrian's neoplastic canvas which is crucial to the argument here, is that which resides in the composition, and which entails conflict between physicality and image or concept on the surface of the canvas. In the argument below, surface (or 'surfaceness') presupposes a conception which emphasises its complexity as a surface to be understood as an identifiable and autonomous entity in itself.

As Chap. 5 argues in its discussion of the meaning of rhythm, rhythm is half physical and half conceptual, and resists being read in terms of meaning and representation, reaching instead beyond the semantic field. Rhythm relates to the order of time and draws upon the listener-viewer's own volition to enact it. The *tellus* of visual rhythm is the domain of the picture-screen, where understanding and the mental activity of grouping (and detachment) take place.

Mondrian intentionally left traces of brushwork on many of his neoplastic canvases. This emphasises the physicality of the surface, despite his aim being to consummate complete 'flatness'. Mondrian's seemingly self-contradictory practice gains cogency as attention is given to what occurs on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. The canvas as picture-screen (half physical and half imaginary) constitutes a field where visual rhythm can manifest in full force, and in neoplastic painting this converges on the dialectical conflict of oppositional relationships between imagery 'flatness' and physical 'thickness'.

Here, arguments about colour and 'seeing-as' in Wittgenstein's late philosophy,[15] and Wollheim's 'seeing-in' as a critical model will be the basis of this reexamination

[15] There is a common view that Wittgenstein rejects phenomenology. Wittgenstein's main point regarding phenomenology appears in *Philosophical Remarks*:

> The very expression 'I can perceive *x*' is itself taken from the idioms of physics, and *x* ought to be a physical object—e.g. a body—here. Things have already gone wrong if this expression is used in phenomenology, where *x* must refer to a datum. For then 'I' and 'perceiver' also cannot have their previous senses (Wittgenstein et al. 1975, 88).

Here Wittgenstein criticizes phenomenology's modification of the objectively secure 'I' on the grounds that in phenomenology it deals only with external data, instead of a physical object. Wittgenstein prefers the objective physical body as represented in physics, to the modification of the object into analytical 'data' in phenomenology. The physicists' privileged 'I' is preferred, since here the 'I' represents an agent whose concern is with the 'use' of an object. Thus he writes: "The essential thing is that the representation of visual space is the representation of an object and contains no suggestion of a subject" (Wittgenstein et al. 1975, 100). However, Wittgenstein's criticism cuts both ways. He states:

> We are not analysing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. that of thinking), and therefore the use of a word. So it may look as if what we were doing were Nominalism (Wittgenstein 1958, § 383, 118e).

Thus, Wittgenstein's concern is not 'thought' as 'I' interprets external data, but 'thinking', which deals with a concept or, for Wittgenstein, 'the use of a word' (in Wittgenstein's thought, 'thinking' is separate from 'thought', which was suggested by Dr Alan Hazen in our conversation). However, 'thinking' is not a Nominalists' non-contextual description of the meaning of words as names. 'Thinking' deals with the actual use of a word in ordinary language. For Wittgenstein, problems of philosophy are caused by hearing the voices of an inner 'I', and by not being reduced to the pragmatic use of a word in the actual context. Hearing the voice of the phenomenological 'I' or 'transcendental ego' in Husserl's terminology can let the words take on new meanings. This seems, for Wittgenstein, to open up the possibility of rising above ordinary experience, which he rejected.

Wittgenstein's rejection of phenomenology resulted from his general thesis about the limits of language (Reeder 1984, 140). However, when we consider Wittgenstein's late works, especially in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein deals with a 'smaller' case of perceptival description (to which a 'larger' case of the definition of meaning based on ordinary use of language does not apply), we see Wittgenstein deal with phenomena in which an image or picture

of abstraction, and the further investigation of the concept of the picture-screen as it pertains to analyses of the neo-plastic canvas. Wollheim elucidates the inseparability of image-object and image-thing in his argument about 'seeing-in', which is essentially, according to Wollheim, a modified version of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as'. Both Wollheim's 'seeing-in' (as well as Husserl's image-consciousness) will be found to converge on Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning' arguments, which actually occur within the concept of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as'. Wollheim's 'seeing-in' does not address the 'pure' image analysis or Husserlian 'image-object' argument, and Wittgenstein is not concerned about the physical condition of the image (Wittgenstein does not problematise the distinction between physicality and image). Arguments concerning rhythm and movement are especially emphasised in abstract art, and are significantly enhanced by an examination of the physicality of the image alongside the concept of 'image-object'.

6.8 Wittgenstein's 'Seeing-as'

Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' argument contributes to the description of Mondrian's 'static' rhythm (or rhythm as composition) in two ways. First, the condition of seeing-as reveals the underlying condition of seeing itself, which suggests that one cannot but seek meanings in seeing, beyond those which arise via readings of iconographic signs in painting. The second is that seeing-as (accompanied by Wittgenstein's investigation of aspectival perception) shows that *concept* is inevitably involved in picture reading, and that the 'mind's eye' condition may open up possibilities of reading rhythm or movement in the 'static geometry' of Mondrian's canvases. With the function of memory, facilitated by the 'mind's eye', the structural or compositional level of a painting's surface unfolds its potentiality (its dynamics) in perception and consciousness. This constitutes a level of seeing which resides in half matter and half concept, which we observed in the picture-screen condition of the neoplastic canvas. This interpretation of the picture surface allows the examination of the agonistic relationship, implicit in neoplastic painting, between physical thickness and the non-physical, or 'mental' reading of the surface of the canvas.

Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' is an exemplary reflection of meaning which relates to the conditions under which meaning is generated in seeing. It connotes a situation in

---

presents itself to us. Wittgenstein attempts to make ad-hoc descriptions of the phenomenon according to ordinary observation, while Husserl clings to conventional theory in order to explain phenomena. In this sense Joseph J. Kockelmans is correct in stating that:

> Husserl does not realize that the self-presentation of a being encompasses more than the presentation of that same being in and through man's theoretical knowledge. As far as its ontological possibility is concerned, man's knowledge is grounded in the general Being of things for other things. Husserl's phenomenology sees intentionality purely as relationship of knowledge. This ties in with the fact that he practically always interprets substance as subject, as has generally been done in the metaphysical tradition since Descartes and Leibnitz (Kockelmans 1967, 230–1).

which a specific meaning is based on the contextual condition of one specific aspect at one specific moment. This suggests, then, that according to a different context or aspect, meaning may be completely changed. Wittgenstein's notion of 'seeing-as' also suggests that sense data are not, and cannot be, *pure* sense data, a notion advocated by Cartesian conventionalists, on which, according to this view, our cognitive processing is said to take place. Rather, sense data (insofar as they 'exist' at all) must inevitably be accompanied by concept, or thinking (Genova 1995, 15).

In this context, Wollheim's understanding of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' is tenable:

> The fundamental point in Wittgenstein's argument, which remains, is that, when I see *x* as *f*, *f* permeates or mixes into the perception: the concept does not stand outside the perception, expressing an opinion or conjecture on my part about *x*, and which the perception may be said to support to this or that degree (Wollheim 1980, 220).

Wollheim's definition of seeing-as lacks Wittgenstein's more insightful elucidation of this concept. What Wollheim neglects to point out is that, according to Wittgenstein, perception is always contextual. It cannot stand outside of conception nor, Wittgenstein suggests, even imagination, but does, however, insinuate the possibility of standing outside of the representational system (although such an insinuation rests significantly on one's definition of the term 'representation').

The concept of 'seeing-as' is perhaps more important and challenging than Wollheim's above interpretation suggests, since it posits that (quoting here from Wittgenstein): "the concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us and it earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things" (Wittgenstein 1958, § 122). Our very way of seeing is entrapped by the representational cognitive system, which poses questions as to whether or not one can escape the concept of representation in an analysis such as the one we are attempting here.

Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' also implicates the faculty of conception that finds a 'sudden' similarity among and between entities. 'Seeing-as' concerns the threshold between the semantic and non-semantic fields, and suggests that 'seeing-as' may occur on the very surface level of seeing (or hearing, or other faculties of sensory experience). 'Seeing-as' is immanent in human cognition, occurring so suddenly that it can be reduced to the liminal moment in which only the exclamation "Here is a rabbit!" can reside (i.e., the moment which does not, for example, relate the rabbit to the duck in Jastrow's puzzle, in terms of a metaphorical or relational connection to something else).

Mondrian's neoplastic canvases lack the power of metaphor, that is, a function of metaphor related to Aristotle's theory of the "mimetic" function, which links poetry to the "mythical" structure of the fable constructed by the poet (Ricœur 1991a, b, 176). Fiction provides the viewer with an image depicting a new reality by means of a referential claim, and elicits the power of "fictive representation" through the heuristic involvement of viewer or reader (Ricœur 1991a, b, 176). Neoplastic painting, by contrast, constitutes 'reality' via non-representation, even though the coded eye empowered by "iconic augmentation" is inclined to do its work within the representational system.

6.9 Wollheim's 'Seeing-in' and Wittgenstein's 'Seeing-as'

Wollheim, as he contends, develops Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' in his analysis of the nature of picturing, and proposes an amended version, which he calls 'seeing-in'.[16] 'Seeing-as' is the view in which, in an immediate experience of an image, a recognition of its reference is always coded, and therefore biased by the familiar concept in one's memory. Wollheim suggests that, rather than picturing constituting just our seeing of something *as* something, what also occurs empirically in representational seeing, is that we see something *in* a depiction: that is, in the various pictorial elements and their expressive media. Seeing-in accounts for the presence of, and viewer's attention to, *all* the visual data that appear simultaneously: the picture (painting, photograph) as an object, the physical surface, the configuration of plastic and formal elements on that surface, the depicted object, as well as aesthetic qualities that arise. Wollheim emphasises seeing-in over seeing-as, concluding that 'what the representation is seen as is never the same as what is seen in the representation' (Wollheim 1980, 226).

Wollheim's observations emphasise the importance of attending to how objects are represented according to mixed modalities in 'static' rhythm. Wollheim's observations on simultaneous pictorial elements and their support of seeing-in harbour certain elements of the Husserlian distinction between image-object and image-subject. Wollheim draws on the distinction between "paintings that represent particular objects-or-events" and "paintings that represent object-or-events that are *merely* of a particular kind" (Wollheim 1987, 69). The latter category includes, for example, genre paintings such as those by Manet, which do not necessarily depict a particular, i.e., *existing* man or woman. The former is exemplified by the portrait. To explain this distinction, Wollheim draws attention to the difference between the 'sitter', who is a particular person, and the 'model', who models a particular kind of person. According to Husserlian thinking, both would belong to the image-subject, in the sense that both can have an existential reality, regardless of whether it be within the picture or beyond it. However, there is still the possibility that the 'model' can belong to the image-object, by way of its indirect reference to a living person, that is, as constituted by 'phantasie' in the mind of the viewer. Wollheim states that this sitter/model distinction "holds for painting, [but] does not hold for photographs" (Wollheim 1980, 208), since in the photograph the sitter is identical with the model in the photo.[17] Wollheim calls this observation of sitter/model distinction, specifically in painting, "representational seeing." With this conception of "representational seeing" in mind, Wollheim

[16] Wollheim had developed his concept of 'seeing-as' from ideas Wittgenstein elaborated in *Philosophical Investigations* (1952). In *Art and its Objects* however, Wollheim points out the limitations of this earlier conception of 'seeing-as', to develop instead the concept of 'seeing-in' which more adequately problematise the issue of elucidating what occurs in 'representational seeing' (Wollheim 1980, 209).

[17] I do not agree with this observation. For example, a photo of pedestrians in a large city can be taken as a 'model' of the city-landscape.

draws attention to the shortcomings of 'seeing-as' (which, it should be emphasised, is not the same as Wittgenstein's own 'seeing-as'):

> Where previously I would have said that representational seeing is a matter of seeing *x* (= the medium or representation) as *y* (= the object, or what is represented), I would now say that it is, for the same values of the variables, a matter of seeing *y* in *x* (Wollheim 1980, 209).

In addition to seeing *y* 'in' *x,* which is the depictive function of the image-subject, a Husserlian reading would suggest seeing *y* 'with' image *x*, which is the symbolising function of the image-subject. The image-subject constitutes both a depictive ('in' the image) and an externally representing ('with' the image) function. It thus seems that Wollheim's seeing-in, which takes place strictly in 'representational seeing', appears to deal only with the image-subject, ignoring the image-object completely. The image-object can constitute a pre-real condition of the image, which may be non-existential or pure fantasy. By contrast, both sitter and model, as pictured, constitute respective realities, regardless of whether either reality refers to the actual world or merely to the categorical (painterly) generalization of the figure. However, Wollheim's definition of 'representation' is itself problematic in our analysis, since it appears at times in a strict sense, and at others in a broader and more general sense.

Acknowledging (elsewhere) that the concept of resemblance is "notoriously elliptical" (Wollheim 1980, 18), Wollheim delineates his usage of 'representation' and 'seeing-as':

> 'Representation' … I am using in an extended sense: so that, for example, the figure that occurs, in an ordinary textbook of geometry, at the head of Theorem XI of Euclid could be described as a configuration of intersecting lines, but it could also be thought of as a representation of a triangle. By contrast, I use the phrase 'seeing as' narrowly: uniquely, in the context of representation. In other words, I want to exclude from discussion here such miscellaneous cases as when we see the moon as no bigger than a sixpence (Wollheim 1980, 17).

Here, Wollheim's (general) use of representation concerns visual schema, which incorporates both concept and image.[18] Wollheim's 'seeing-as' (but not Wittgenstein's), in a strict sense of representation, excludes illusion and imagination, but not resemblance.

'Conventional' seeing-as, according to Wollheim, "draws upon no special perceptual capacity over and above straightforward perception" (Wollheim 1980, 219). "Straightforward perception", according to Wollheim, means "the capacity that we humans and other animals have of perceiving things present to the senses" (Wollheim 1980, 217). Thus, seeing-in is the special perceptual capacity, which goes over and above "straightforward perception." Seeing-in can be performed by the learned mind's eye, which deals with the way "visions of things not present now come about through looking at things present" (Wollheim 1980, 218). Thus, the mind's eye

[18] Wollheim's interpretation of representation is in line with the Aristotlean tradition, whereby when we understand a word or any other 'sign', we associate that word with a 'concept'. Hilary Putnam calls this representation "mental representation," since "the idea that concepts are just that—*representation in the mind*—is itself an essential part of the picture" (Putnam 1993, 597).

equipped for seeing-in is a mnemonic (or recorded) and not an 'espial' eye, which keeps any new aspect on the surface of the canvas unfolding in the present.

Wollheim's distinction between a narrower definition of representation (the sitter/model distinction) and a more general definition suggests inconsistencies which seem to derive from his having not included the impact of the pre-real stage of image-consciousness: that is, Wollheim's distinction, and the definitions it gives rise to, fails to take into account the function of the image-object, and, in the case of neoplastic painting, composition itself. The value and validity of the concept of image-object by any other name in any attempt to elucidate non-referential painting, renders it (in my mind) conspicuously absent from Wollheim's analysis. Given that Wollheim asserts that "seeing-in permits unlimited simultaneous attention to what is seen and to the features of the medium" (Wollheim 1980, 212), this neglect of the image-object (or its equivalent according to a different term) comes across as an unfortunate omission from his investigation of non-referential painting.

'Seeing-in' is, as it were, a 'thick description' of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as', accompanied by the faculty of memory or acquired concept, since the accrual of the different models of 'seeing-as' composes 'seeing-in', suggesting a twofoldness between the physical surface of the canvas (image-thing) and the representative image on the canvas (image-subject). Further, Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' can accommodate the features of things present, when his notion of 'aspect-dawning' is also considered.

In our investigation of visual rhythm, 'seeing-in' is nevertheless valid since this property of seeing accounts for the 'thick' layers of the surface of Mondrian's neoplastic paintings as picture-screen. Moreover, our analysis is further substantiated by incorporating Wittgenstein's seeing-as and aspect-dawning arguments with Wollheim's seeing-in. That is, seeing-in can be rendered to function as a bridge between Husserl's threefold image analysis and Wittgenstein's seeing-as and aspect-dawning arguments.

6.10 Between Things in Presence (Surface) and Pictorial Space

Dated earlier than the publication of Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects*, George Kubler describes a peculiar experience of the simultaneous twofold view of the relationships between the physical surface and pictorial space in a depicted image in painting:

> A fine painting also issues a self-signal. Its colours and their distribution on the plane of the framed canvas signal that by making certain optical concessions the viewer will enjoy the simultaneous experience of real surfaces blended with illusions of deep space occupied by solid shapes. The reciprocal relation of the real surface and deep illusion is apparently inexhaustible. Part of the self-signal is that thousands of years of painting still have not exhausted the possibilities of such an apparently simple category of sensation (Kubler 1962, 24, Osborne 1970, 287).

Kubler's observation is interesting since he notes the inseparability of the planarity of the physical surface (image-thing) and the illusion of space in the picture-screen. He distinguishes the 'self-signal', which is "the mute existential declaration of things" from 'adherent-signals', which compose "an intricate message in the symbolic order rather than in an existential dimension" (Kubler 1962, 24–5). Kubler argues for the inseparability of the existential aspects of works of art (image-thing and image-object) and their iconographical readings (image-subject) in the appreciation of the inexhaustible richness of works of art:

> The existential value of the work of art, as a declaration about being, cannot be extracted from the adherent signals alone, nor from the self-signals alone. The self-signals taken alone prove only existence; adherent signals taken in isolation prove only the presence of meaning. But existence without meaning seems terrible in the same degree as meaning without existence seems trivial (Kubler 1962, 25).

Kubler does not sufficiently develop the importance of the independent value of the (albeit agonistic) image-object in analyses of pictures. However, his thesis is important in that it alerts us to what is missing from the canons of art history, especially in twentieth century art scholarship, which emphatically stands on the iconographical interpretation of works of art. Wollheim's 'seeing-in' alludes to this 'missing part' of art history, but his thesis develops the realm of representation and as a consequence is more biased toward the image-subject. Kubler's twofoldness of the painterly surface ('self-signal'), as he himself insinuates,[19] can be discussed in terms of non-referential painting, while Wollheim's twofoldness, which he calls "the twofold thesis" (Wollheim 1980, 213), is discussed in relation to representational canvases, and, in its broadest sense, representation itself.

The difference between 'seeing-as' and 'seeing-in' resides in the former's contextually coded view and the latter's faculty for viewing different aspects at the same time (including specific aspects of the physical support of an image). But when 'seeing-as' is understood as a restricted term within the (visual-)language world, and is accompanied at the same time by attempts to incorporate Wittgenstein's "aspect-dawning" arguments, Wollheim's argument overrides the subtleties of Wittgenstein's original arguments concerning the precise meaning of the term.

Wittgenstein originally set out the fundamentals for the concept of 'seeing-as', as an argument concerning the two different aspects of seeing: the representative and associative. Wollheim's point centres on evidence extracted from the viewing of painting, and on that premise he criticizes the self-limitedness of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as', arguing that it is not enough to account for and describe what actually occurs on the canvas: i.e., that a viewer can see the subjective image (or, using Husserl's terminology, the 'image-subject') within and by way of the materiality of canvas and pigments. Wollheim claims that 'seeing-as' deals only with the function of reading the subject in the image, and does not deal with the physical conditions on canvas from which this image-subject is, rightly, inseparable. In this light, Wollheim would appear to take a stance similar to Husserl's, regarding observations about image-

[19] "Recent movements in artistic practice stress self-signal alone, as in abstract expressionism" (Kubler 1962, 25).

consciousness in painting. When we consider Husserl's 'image-object' as a supplement to Wollheim's arguments, and see the difference between Husserl's (and Wollheim's) and Wittgenstein's respective points of view, it will become clear that 'seeing-as' would withstand a more rigorous analysis than 'seeing-in' were both types of seeing to be applied to the cognition of an image on canvas. Seeing-in is a synthetic version of seeing-as, maintaining as a consequence, a rather 'static' vision of image-consciousness. Seeing-in's twofoldness (image-thing and image-subject) lacks dynamism, since appreciation of dynamism here is arguably only by way of the analytical tools afforded by the conceptions of 'picture-screen' (image-object) and aspect-dawning. Recall that rhythm as static movement is a conception which opposes the model of strobographical sequence (such as in the metricised time image which is aligned to representational signification). Wittgenstein's concept of 'aspect-dawning' suggests a way beyond the representational system, so that we can elucidate and articulate the multivalent of a painting's surface: it is precisely here where rhythm as static movement can manifest and thereby avail itself for further analysis.

Aristoxenus's empirical model of rhythm, which accommodates a dancer or a listener reacting to rhythm, can be applied to the appreciation of rhythm on the painterly surface. The relationship between painting and viewer is crucial to the viewer's participation in the unfolding of static rhythm on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. Here the composition itself prepares the viewer to engage, voluntarily, with its covert rhythm. This thesis asserts that the specific observations concerning visual rhythm do not function according to representational (or iconographic) semantic reading. Visual rhythm *as composition* (or *stasis*) can be activated within the subtle terrain, where a subjective reading of meaning (via the image-subject) is minimised or, ideally, obviated altogether. The manifest physicality of the canvas itself, in terms of the painted surface as a thing, also affects the acquisition of visual rhythm. The physicality of the surface is the key factor in the neoplastic image (or, in Husserl's terminology, the 'image-object'), a relationship which imbues the image with tension or force. This tension, or force, cannot attain a degree of autonomous reality, in the semantic field, without the presence of the image-subject. However, in its status as 'picture-screen', Mondrian's neoplastic canvas can obtain a specific 'reality' within that conflict. Empirically speaking, the physicality of the painterly surface and image are inseparable. However, by way of its non-existence, the image itself inevitably eludes physicality. Mondrian's neoplastic canvas is, thus, among the more cogent examples of this inherent conflict between image and physicality.

Wollheim's 'seeing-in' appears to deal with this relationship, but the subtlety of the conflict is dismissed by a rather expedient switching between image and physical surface, or through Wollheim's having corroborated both aspects completely under the representational view of the painting. Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as', by comparison, presents a more radical case against representational significations. It can accommodate the subtle and enigmatic conflict between the image and the physical surface of the canvas, maintaining rather than defusing this very important conflict. The concept of 'aspect-dawning' consolidates the condition by which our analysis can remain in the subtle terrain of picture-screen, where static rhythm as composi-

tion arises in a viewer's mind. With this in mind we should proceed to investigate the specific entailments of aspect-dawning as it occurs on the neoplastic canvas. Accordingly, Wittgenstein's investigation of aspectival perception will shape the enquiry which follows.

References

Brough, John B. 1992. Some Husserlian Comments on Depiction and Art. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXVI (2): 241–259.

———. 1997. Image and Artistic Value. In *Phenomenology of Value and Valuing*, ed. James G. Hart and Lester Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Cumming, Robert Denoon. 1992. *Phenomenology and Deconstruction, Volume Two: Method and Imagination*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

da Vinci, Leonardo, Martin Kemp, and Margaret Walker. 1989. *Leonardo on Painting: An Anthology of Writings*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Genova, Judith. 1995. *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing*. New York/London: Routledge.

Greenberg, Clement. 1993. *The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol. 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950–1956*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Hardin, C.L. 1988. *Color for Philosophers: Unweaving the Rainbow*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Henkels, Herbert. 1987. *Mondrian: From Figuration to Abstraction*. Tokyo: The Tokyo Shimbun.

Hintikka, Jaakko. 1996. The Idea of Phenomenology in Wittgenstein and Husserl. In *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half-Truths*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Husserl, Edmund. 1931. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. *The Muirhead Library of Philosophy*. London/New York: Allen & Unwin and Humanities Press.

Ingarden, Roman. 1989. *Ontology of the Work of Art: The Musical Work, the Picture, the Architectural Work, the Film*. Trans. R. Meyer and J.T. Goldthwait. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Joosten, Joop. 1971. Mondrian: Between Cubism and Abstraction. In *Piet Mondrian: Centennial Exhibition*. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.

Kanata, Susumu. 1990. *Geijutu Sakuhin no Gensho Gaku (Phenomenology of the Work of Art)*. Tokyo: Sekai Shoin.

Kandinsky, Wassily, Kenneth Clement Lindsay, and Peter Vergo. 1982a. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 1 (1901–1921)*, 2 vols. London: Faber.

———. 1982b. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 2 (1922–1943)*, 2 vols. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.

Kockelmans, Joseph J. 1967. *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation*. New York: Anchor Books.

Kubler, George. 1962. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

McBride, Henry. 1942. Mondrian's First One-Man Show. *The New York Sun*, January 23.

———. 1997. *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticism*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Mondrian, Piet. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.

Osborne, Harold. 1970. *The Art of Appreciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Overy, Paul. 1969. *Kandinsky: The Language of the Eye*. London: Elek Books Ltd.

Pearson, Lionel. 1990. *Aristoxenus Elementa Rhythmica: The Fragment of Book II and the Additional Evidence for Aristoxenean Rhythmic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Putnam, Hilary. 1993. Meaning, Other People, and the World (1988). In *Reading in Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, ed. Alvin I. Goldman. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Reeder, Harry. 1984. *Language and Experience: Descriptions of Living Language in Husserl and Wittgenstein*. Washington, DC: The Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America.
Rickey, George. 1967. *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*. London: Studio Vista.
Ricœur, Paul. 1991a. *From Text to Action, Essays in Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
———. 1991b. Imagination in Discourse and in Action. In *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*. London: The Athlone Press.
Sypher, Wylie. 1960. *Rococo to Cubism: In Art and Literature*. New York: A Vintage Book.
Tirrell, Lynne. 1991. Seeing Metaphor as Seeing-as: Remarks on Davidson's Positive View of Metaphor. *Philosophical Investigations* 14 (2): 143–154.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
———. 1966. *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford: B. Blackwell.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G.H. von Wright, G.E.M. Anscombe, and Denis Paul. 1969. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Rush Rhees, Raymond Hargreaves, and Roger White. 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G. H. von Wright, and G. E. M. Anscombe. 1981. *Zettel*, 2nd ed, *Open University Set Book*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G. H. von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler. 1998. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, Rev. 2nd ed. Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
Wollheim, Richard. 1980. *Art and Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays*. 2nd ed. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
———. 1987. *Painting as an Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Chapter 7
Cognitive Approach to Reading Visual Rhythm: Wittgenstein's 'Aspect-Dawning': Painting Surface and Rhythm

> *The difficult thing here is not to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground.*
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1980b, VI, §31)

In painting, all occurrences of rhythm by definition happen on the surface of the canvas. But where is the surface of a painting, and what are its limitations? The surface of painting can be understood to be a property of both the semantic field and the physical object. Material evidence constituted by the physical buildup of paint, brush marks, and other effects related to the actual canvas itself, naturally stands in the way of recognition of the *surface as surface*: the more closely we examine the surface of the canvas physically, the more elusive recognition of the surface becomes—the more it presents itself as a physical thing among other things around us. The alternative, a semantic reading of the surface of the canvas, inserts something which distances us from the sense of its manifestation, via perception, as a physical surface: according to the semantic reading we experience the canvas in terms of discursive meaning, but in the process we risk losing the perceptual awareness of the surface *as* surface.

Thus, the meaning of the term 'surface' is unstable in both its perceptual and semantic senses. If the surface is deemed illusory or a semantic entity, then the perceptual ground by which to enact seeing as *thereness* is lost. Cognition of visual rhythm occurs on the physical and metaphysical surface of the canvas: it includes both understanding and experience. Cognition of visual rhythm raises the question of 'surface' itself. Without an investigation of the surface of painting, especially non-referential painting, it is not possible to proceed to any discussion of the deliberate tension Mondrian confronts us with, between the 'thick' impasto on the one hand and ideal 'flatness' of the neoplastic canvas on the other. Yet it is precisely here, within such tensions of contradiction, that static rhythm takes place: but only under certain conditions. Detailed investigation of Mondrian's work is therefore

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0_7

necessary in order to understand both how 'static' visual rhythm occurs, and how it is activated in the eye of the viewer.

Early non-referential painters (like Mondrian, Kandinsky and Malevich) open the terrain of sensory perception in the non-referential image to careful consideration. For if this perceptual opening-up is generated by an emphasis on the condition of the surface in painting, then we must ask whether painting as painting, whether representational or non-referential, constitutes and is dependent upon its own specific kind of surface. We should also ask what this entails in the case of the neoplastic canvas, which is definitive in its constitution of 'flatness' and brings to mind the notion of the 'picture-screen'. Mondrian's neoplastic canvases problematise the terrain of the surface by confronting viewer and theorist-critic alike with a surface that manifests in accord with the ideal of pure two-dimensionality and 'flatness', yet obtains this ideal state by way of, or in spite of, a physical surface which is so manifestly layered and texturally complex.

This conundrum in defining the meaning and limitation of surface returns us to the central question about visual rhythm. The place where the sense of rhythm occurs in painting is surely, one would think, on the flat surface of the canvas. In an analysis of how the neoplastic canvas functions, such an understanding of surface is particularly useful. In painting everything occurs on the surface of the canvas, and while nothing is hidden there, certain aspects nonetheless go unnoticed. Wittgenstein's 'rough-ground' metaphor closely relates to the problem of the surface of the canvas in non-referential painting, and concerning the nature of the neoplastic canvas in particular, 'rough ground' proves to be very pertinent.

7.1 'Rough Ground' and Surface: From Wittgenstein's Point of View

If one wants to consider what 'rough ground' implies for an investigation of Mondrian's painting it is productive to follow Wittgenstein's line of reasoning. Through Wittgenstein's argument, it is possible in this context to develop a more cogent understanding of 'surface', in both its conceptual and perceptual senses. For this reason it is also worth delving into the polemics of Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' and 'aspect-dawning arguments. While Wittgenstein's arguments require considerable explanation, the points they raise will provide the solid ground for seeing Mondrian's neoplastic canvases from a 'rhythm-sighted' point of view, which is, essentially, the aim of this book.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein made his famous remark "Back to the rough ground!" (Wittgenstein 1958, §107, 46e) in response to what he saw as a problem inherent in the metaphysical tendencies of Western philosophy. Wittgenstein believed that it was necessary to bring philosophical discourse back onto the surface of the 'rough ground', which, metaphorically speaking, denotes the friction necessary for 'walking'. Wittgenstein urged a return to the phenomena of everyday lan-

guage: thus, his concept of 'rough-ground' declares the need to retrieve meaning in everyday language from the grip of European metaphysics: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use" (Wittgenstein 1958, §116). What is needed is for those parts which have become 'slippery' (due to metaphysical analyses) to be treated, i.e., made *concrete* ('rough'), such that the grounds for the communicative act of everyday language can be retrieved. In the tradition of western art historical discourse (e.g., Heinrich Wölfflin, John Ruskin, Conrad Feidler and others), the theory of painting is drawn from an analysis of the canvas itself. To escape from 'discourse for discourse's sake', to evade the essentialist's tendency to pursue an ontology of aesthetics, and, thereby, to (re-)locate art historical discourse on concrete ground, it is necessary to return to the facts as they unfold on the surface of the canvas.

In painting, the 'rough ground' is analogous—it may be argued—to the objective 'surface' of the canvas as opposed to the subjective 'contents' of the expression. Prior to being able to account for or indicate what might be 'sensed', activated or experienced in perception and cognition, we must first account for what occur as phenomena on the 'surface'. Visual fact on canvas is perceived in an act of willed cognition on the part of the viewer: I reject the notion of raw visual sense data constituting the appearance of 'things' in themselves existing outside of perception. Following Wittgenstein, an understanding of perception, or the cognitive process of acknowledging 'things', one rejects outright the notion of pure visual data. The perception of the phenomenon of the surface of a painting implies instead 'understanding' of the concept of *image,* and of the appearance of facts on the surface.

To elaborate the idea of concept within perception, let's turn to an argument of Wittgenstein's in which he notes that the problem of the meaning of 'red' resides in the appearance of the word 'red' in both of the following sentences: "Here is a red patch" and "Here there isn't a red patch" (Wittgenstein 1958, §443, 130e). The use of the same word is markedly different in each case: in the former, its use is referential, while in the latter its use is conceptual. The problem is that even when one points to a red patch and says "this is red", the word 'red' used in that sentence evokes the entire conceptual spectrum of 'red', including what is implied when one says "this is not red". Whenever we recognize an object as something (as a colour, as a chair and so on) we recognise it as already including its own relationships of similarity, difference and contrast. The concept, which incorporates such relationships, is always included, so Wittgenstein argues, in one's 'positive' or what might be termed 'normal' perception of the object (Wittgenstein 1958, 196–7e). Wittgenstein further suggests that a 'different' condition ensues, however, when we consider the exclamatory case "Now I see red!" which accompanies the sudden 'understanding' and noticing of the colour red after having puzzled over one's observation of, say, a coloured field in a work of Mark Rothko's or James Turrel's. Wittgenstein called this sudden cognition of understanding—or 'fitting'—, "aspect-dawning."

According to Wittgenstein, *thought* is the expression of a confidence in the language form (as opposed to other means—for example, visual or auditory forms) which attempts to describe a *concept*. *Concept* connotes the intellectual faculty of

'regard-as', as in, to regard this patch of colour as 'red'. The 'red' in this instance is the conceptual 'red', and once recognised as such becomes *representational* through interpretation.[1]

According to this argument, the widest conceptual spectrum relating to 'surface' would include such concepts as 'thickness', as well as its negative connotations (e.g. 'under' the surface). However, if the negative and extensive connotations arise in the ostensive signification of the word 'surface', then ambiguity results where, for example, both 'surface' and 'thickness' (as with skin or fur) are implicated, or where the subsurface is visible (i.e., on glazed or varnished objects, and in the semi-translucent lustre of certain materials such as varnished wood and some plastics). In this case it becomes difficult to determine the concept according to the term's own semantic definition. This is exemplified in the dictionary definition of surface, which is general and given as, for example, the "outermost limiting part of a material body, immediately adjacent to empty space or to another body", or the "upper layer or top of the ground…", "the top of a body of liquid", and "a magnitude or continuous extent having only two dimensions (length and breadth, without thickness), whether plane or curved, finite or infinite" (from the *New Shorter OED*).

The idea that 'surface' can be conceptualised to incorporate 'thickness' 'depth' or even 'hidden appearance' would seem self-contradictory. Yet this contradiction is reflected in the problem encountered in analyses of non-referential or abstract art. For example, the more 'flatness' (as an ideal aspect) is deemed to manifest at the surface of the canvas, so the more that surface manifests its physical materiality: that is, the more the surface comes to be constituted by 'thickness' and to employ 'complex' texture or '*facture'*, the more ambiguous the definition of the word 'surface' becomes.[2] Here we see a correlation between 'surface' and Wittgenstein's 'rough ground.'

The pre-modern tradition and incumbent theory of painting is voiced in Maurice Denis' comment that a painting is "essentially a plane surface covered with colours arranged in a certain design" (Denis 1968, 94). Especially within the non-figurative genre in modern art, the problem that has been pursued most seriously converges on a single basic principle: *back to the surface.* If there is some meaning in this, we might ask whether modernist painting's attempts have been successful; i.e., the attempt to annihilate illusionistic pictorial space (notably Alberti's perspectival 'window'), and thereby keep the mind-eye turned toward the evidence or facts on the 'flat' surface of the canvas. Problems such as these relate our discussion of painting—of flatness and surface—to Wittgenstein's command "back to the rough ground". Here, we can examine Wittgenstein's 'rough ground' by way of an empirical cognitive process, one that presupposes reading the neoplastic canvas as model

[1] Wittgenstein wrote: "How do I know that this colour is red?—It would be an answer to say: 'I have learnt English'" (Wittgenstein 1958, § 381).

[2] For example, J. L. Austin contends that there are no 'pure' sense data, and goes to the extent of denying the ontological basis of a sense of surface. Austin states in *Sense and Sensibilia*: "Not only is it wantonly wrong to say that what we see of a thing is always its surface; it is also wrong to imply that everything has a surface" (Austin 1962, 100).

of *non-metaphysical* surface friction: for this is how we encounter Mondrian's neoplasticism. For the everyday language user, who is already treading on the 'rough ground', the meaning of a word is understood without any 'entanglement', despite the fact that certain aspects of things within it are normally overlooked or go unnoticed. The task of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is to turn our attention to this unnoticed aspect in language:

> We want to establish an order in our language of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order. To this end we shall constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it look as if we saw it as our task to reform language.
>
> … [and then] ?
>
> The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work (Wittgenstein 1975, §132).

Wittgenstein's task of re-establishing an order and drawing our attention to the 'overlooked' aspect of ordinary language is not to be confused with that of seeking for an essence, or interpreting hidden meanings in language. Wittgenstein rejects seeing under the surface or digging out the *essence* in the 'thickness' of the complexity of the surface, recognising this as a metaphysical enterprise, against which he warns that:

> [Metaphysicians] see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis digs out.
>
> '*The essence is hidden from us*': this is the form our problem now assumes (Wittgenstein 1975, §92).

For Wittgenstein, the problem for philosophy occurs when the metaphysical concept of *essence* is sought. Metaphysical answers to the basic questions are inclined to be at a distance from the experience and pragmatic definition of meaning, which seeks to apply answers to everyday use. Wittgenstein's arguments about the fundamental problems in philosophy converge on finding rules (grammar) and ascertaining the conditions for both their application as well as their contradiction: "This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand (i.e. get a clear view of)" (Wittgenstein 1975, §125). When we reflect on the general conception of 'surfaceness' (perhaps beyond its dictionary meaning) we need to ask whether or not 'rules', both in the practical and abstract sense, unproblematically reside on the surface. This "entangled" question between practicality and essence can also draw one into metaphysical philosophy, which, as Wittgenstein cautions, is neither helpful nor relevant to conceptions of surface or 'rough ground'. Wittgenstein continues:

> [This entanglement in our rules] throws light on our concept of *meaning* something. For in those cases things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen [*sic*]. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: "I didn't mean it like that."
>
> The civil status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life: there is the philosophical problem (Wittgenstein 1975, §125).

Philosophical problems arise when contradiction appears on the surface level of 'civil life', that is, in everyday language practice, but answers to this 'entangled' problem become metaphysical once essence-seeking reasoning, for example, is entered into. Wittgenstein's point here is that before such *philosophical* entanglements emerge, one has seemingly been following certain rules (of language) blindly, that is, *unproblematically*; unaware of whether rules are being followed or not. One is not in the least interested in the concept of rule or grammar while an act of everyday life is taking place smoothly. 'Rules' seem concealed, buried, remaining (rightly) beneath the surface of the smooth and unproblematic operations of normal everyday life: rules do not seem to belong to the surface, which operates according to practical and ostensive needs. Once excavated, and once some plausible explanation is given, the metaphysical approach may claim its status in the context of the perceived need to *analyze* 'civil' life. Analysing and pursuing life are two entirely different enterprises: the former serves no purpose for the latter. "What is hidden … is of no interest to us," Wittgenstein contends, but what goes *unnoticed* is of interest (Wittgenstein 1975, §126). We can *learn* to notice overlooked significations, or be guided towards the awareness of unnoticed aspects in particular cases of living language. However, "getting a clear view" of the rules of the language-game may still result in entanglement. All possible answers to the contradiction, or the resolving of 'entanglements' about how to follow the rules are plausible, since any rule allows a diversity of interpretations: and Wittgenstein makes the important point that interpretation, which always looks under the 'surface' of each individual act, does not entail any verification that one has followed a rule:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord or conflict here. … What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases (Wittgenstein 1975, §201).

Here Wittgenstein suggests that we grasp a rule in a manner that "obeying the rule" (or "going against" it) discloses that rule to us in a manifest sense. But how can unnoticed aspects be brought to awareness? What interests us here are the "actual cases" in which we can examine the paradoxical concept of surfaceness from the point of view by which things appearing on a surface—i.e., in Mondrian's neoplastic canvas—can be said to go 'unnoticed'. Wittgenstein argues that

> [t]he aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes) (Wittgenstein 1975, §129).

Since everything is there on the surface in painting, the problem lies in the difficulty for the viewer to *notice* "the aspects of things" which already appear there. In this sense, the term 'hidden' as used in the above citation should be understood to mean 'unnoticed' in the present context. Wittgenstein reminds us that we "want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some

sense not to understand" (Wittgenstein 1975, §89). But here, the notion of 'aspect' itself and 'seeing-aspect'[3] denotes the thing which "we want to *understand*".

In painting one finds visual coherence "in its surface texture, in its unobtrusive composition, in its subtle harmony of colour, in its pattern of light and shade" (Cone 1972, 57). All these are by definition there for viewing. All that is required for the appreciation of a 'work' is for the (mental and physical) events on the surface to be perceived. All possible experiences relating to the painting are to be drawn from what is manifestly present. However, a reading of the manifest appearance of the canvas is not by any means a straightforward enterprise, nor can it be fully resolved through understanding in terms of representation. In the context of language, Wittgenstein ponders the ability of sentences to 'represent' anything, and suggests that for the question, "How do sentences manage to represent?":

> —the answer might be: "Don't you know? You certainly see it, when you use [sentences]." For nothing is concealed (Wittgenstein 1958, §435).

In the case of the visual image and its 'coherence' on the surface, the condition under which a picture "manages to represent" something is far more difficult to determine: pictures do present something, but in the case of normal ("civil") life, what is represented pictorially in art works is not put to 'use', at least in a manner equivalent to that of normal life or language. The everyday language user may not encounter the 'use' of an image on the surface of the canvas at a vernacular level: but an important part of the argument regarding the reading of any neoplastic painting is that such a reading or 'understanding' can be *learned*. In language, according to Wittgenstein, the use of a word is closely related to (its) meaning, but how can the 'use' of an image, especially in non-referential painting, relate to meaning in this way, that is, semantic meaning?

Wittgenstein states in the well-known Section 43 of Philosophical Investigations, that "For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we use the word 'meaning', it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, §43). What, then, is the *other* (small) class of cases, to which the above definition of 'meaning', by inference, *cannot* be applied? As long as the facts on the surface of the canvas are made available for a viewer, according to the conventions or grammar of picturing (that is, in accord with the 'painting-language game'), and, as long as they are to be explained in words (such as those employed by art critics and historians), then Wittgenstein's pragmatic (use-value) definition of meaning is appropriate. In this case painting will be deemed to belong to that "larger class of cases", and engagement with a painting would thus afford some 'meaning' for the viewer.

If, because unnoticed, some events on the surface of the canvas, (and in neoplastic painting they are *typically* unnoticed), are not available, that is, not available to

[3] The point of seeing aspects … lies in its being the place where we expand our experience of the ordinary and the familiar without, as it were, turning our backs on it; the place where we strengthen our bonds with the world by renewing them; and the place where we go beyond habitual ways and established routes without giving up on intelligibility (Baz 2000, 99).

one's vocabulary or language, are those events then deemed to reside outside of the "larger class" in terms of meaning or signification? If so, do the events on the surface of a painting (as neoplastic canvas would present them) then belong to that exceptional case, to that 'small class of cases' which Wittgenstein alludes to, for which the pragmatic definition of meaning does not apply? Wittgenstein considers cases which cannot apply to the use-value definition of meaning when he asks:

> But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another?—Of course, if the meaning is the *use* we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such 'fitting.' But we *understand* the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time! (Wittgenstein 1958, §138)

"The 'use' which is extended in time" is the experienced use of a word and of knowledge, which is distinct from grasping such use "in a flash."[4] This 'grasping in a flash', Wittgenstein suggests, is something different from the meaning that arises from established use-value. The aptitude toward 'fitting' and 'grasping' in a flash, in which one can in no time 'understand' and properly use a word or an image in a context, is fundamentally connected to everyday language use. However, this aptitude for 'fitting' and 'grasping' normally passes unnoticed, but is closely related to Wittgenstein's concept of 'aspect' perception and the concept of 'aspect-dawning.' 'Aspect-dawning' is, in this sense, a "small class of cases" of 'seeing-as.' Moreover, consideration of the concept of 'aspect-dawning' presupposes consideration of the *small* class of cases of fitting meaning, instantly, according to a *particular* use.

If we intend to follow Wittgenstein's approach, an approach prescribed in terms of the limitations of the pragmatic semantic-terrain of language, and further our analysis and appreciation of 'coherent' visual evidence which unfolds on the surface of a canvas, then it is worth considering how Wittgenstein deals with visual awareness and cognition.

[4] In this context, Avner Baz criticised Stephen Mulhall and Paul Johnston in relation to their reading of the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect: "And I must distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect" (Wittgenstein 1958, 194e). Baz points out that 'continuous seeing of an aspect' is "simply a report of perception" and "nothing other than an account of what you *know* to lie in front of you", instead of 'continuous aspect perception' as Mulhall and Johnston understand it. Baz's view is that 'continuous seeing' here relates to the faculty of 'knowing' (what we term 'thought') instead of 'perceiving' or 'seeing' (what we term 'thinking'). However, my reading of Mulhall is slightly different from Baz's. When we see other passages by Mulhall (for example, 20), he obviously recognises 'continuous aspect perception' as 'a simple perceptual report'. Mulhall's emphasis is the delineation of the difference between seeing-as ('continuous aspect perception') and 'knowing'. I use the concept 'continually seeing aspects' differently from Mulhall, Johnston and Baz, applying the concept to non-referential neoplastic painting (Baz 2000, 112, Mullhall 1980).

7.2 A Small Class of Cases

For Wittgenstein, at the language level, the word "cube" can mean something to the viewer, but other possible uses of the word remain undisclosed:

> When someone says the word "cube" to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in this way?
>
> Well, but on the other hand isn't the meaning of the word also determined by this use? And can these ways of determining meaning conflict? Can what we grasp *in a flash* accord with a use, fit or fail to fit it? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before our mind in an instant, fit a *use*?
>
> What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word?—Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture? (Wittgenstein 1958, §139)

If no conflict arises regarding the use of a word (e.g., the word 'red' versus 'non-red'), then, according to Locke and St. Augustine, there can be no determination, or securing, of meaning. But if the use of a word (or picture) avoids conflict with its alternate or contradictory uses, but *does* still maintain some meaning, then this posits a language-game that is at odds with the conventional, deterministic understanding of meaning. Moreover, in such a case, its use would remain within the bounds of ordinary everyday language which operates by way of 'fitting' and 'grasping'. In the passage above, Wittgenstein states that the *understanding* of a word can be "something like a picture" before our mind, which determines its 'use' in language. But he also suggests that it can be something other than a picture, which is unopposed with regard to its use. This 'something' seems to reside somewhere between 'general' and 'particular' use.

In the picture-language game, when we 'understand' a picture, the use of that picture is in a sense 'fixed.' The sundry other uses to which that picture can be put are always present; however, these simply do not occur to us or concern us. The difficulty in ascribing meaning or determining its parameters is a question as to whether meaning is taken in terms of a *general* or a *particular* use. When a *general* use meaning of a word (such as 'cube') occurs to us, the diversity of *particular* uses are omittable. In the neoplastic picture-language game, while a general use meaning of 'rectangle' is fixed for us, some other use of 'rectangle' is always also present and available as a latent possible use. Thus, by way of the faculty of imagination, a 'rectangle' can be something other than the way it is determined by its general use. Could 'something else' operate outside of the 'picture-rectangle', or further, outside of 'a picture' in *general*? This 'something' would be 'rhythm' or 'movement' or 'relationship', and would occur in *particular* uses of a picture-rectangle. Does Wittgenstein refer here to the case of 'different' meanings graspable only through *understanding* but not by a fixed *use*, "extended in time"? That is, does he insinuate that a (particular) meaning occurs when "a *large* class of cases" fails to fit, and in which case "a *small* class of cases" fits instead? The answer hinges on the terms 'understanding' and 'use'.

For Wittgenstein, 'understanding', as we saw in the previous Chapter, involves a 'feeling' or 'estimation' in relation to proper place or arrangement. 'Use' is for

Wittgenstein a pragmatic employment of a word (or a picture) within the context of a practical act in which a word (or picture) makes sense to us; that is, we can use the same word (or picture) in a similar context at will. The point is that the use of a word *can* correspond to a meaning, but the meaning of a word does not necessarily correspond to its use. If one 'understands' a word or a picture, but does not know how to use it (or how to *fail* to use it), the word or picture becomes, by definition, meaningless.

The issue converges on the difference between "what we grasp in a flash [which] accords with use", and, "what is present to us in an instant" (or "what comes before our mind in an instant"), when one sees a 'picture'. Although here the term 'picture' entails vagueness in terms of its meaning (similar to 'scheme' or 'image'), Wittgenstein does contend that even if a picture does occur in the mind, there are always sundry usages: "The picture of the cube did indeed *suggest* a certain use to us, but it was possible for me to use it differently" (Wittgenstein 1958, §139). How does one "use it differently"? When we see "what is present to us in an instant" and 'understand' it, then "what we grasp in a flash [which] accords with use" can be fixed and become knowledge, or thought: in other words, it becomes "the use which is extended in time." When we see "what we grasp in a flash [which] accords with use" and 'understand' it differently (without conflict with another use), can "what is present to us in an instant" be used differently? This question seems to touch on the "small class of cases," since here use will accord with a particular case, rather than a general one.

A 'picture' is an object which has multiple meanings and uses and can have a general meaning among a particular community in which all members participate in the same language-game. But it nevertheless allows a particular understanding, since each case in the 'small class of cases' allows the viewer to 'understand', not necessarily semantically, but pragmatically (as with making exact, arbitrary adjustments to the water temperature in the shower, or finding the best placement for a picture on the wall). The behaviour of a picture in a viewer's mind is not like that of a word: a viewer sees concepts, designs, arrangements (and relationships, balance, movement and rhythm) on the surface of the picture, none of which is necessarily reducible to the 'large' class condition in the picture language-game. What Wittgenstein suggests here, is that in order to multiply the uses to which a picture might be put, 'experience' is involved, and in some cases 'imagination' is necessary.

If we see a 'cube' in a picture, we are unlikely to ask "what is the use of this cube?" Certainly, there might be a diversity of possible usages as regards the depicted cube (a box, a measure of a part of pictorial space, or for fabricating a geometric atmosphere, etc.). A 'picture' ("what is present to us in an instant") indicates something other than general use or signification in language: however, this is our use of the term 'appreciation' in a picture. In 'appreciating' we see, or in other words, 'use' something *other* than its general use in language and interpretation. The 'appreciation' of a picture *is* one's reading of an 'image', an act which necessarily draws upon the faculties of one's imagination, upon concept, thought, and understanding: a picuture is something one has to work out.

A specific use (working out) of the depicted cube does not in any case necessarily fix its meaning, which depends on the arbitrary imaginative reading of the viewer. The meaning of a word in language is public, consensual, but the under-

standing of a picture can be private, arbitrary and change over time. Certainly, there seems to be something outside the public consensus of the pragmatic definition of meaning in painting. However, Wittgenstein's fundamental definition of meaning *in language* cannot necessarily be applied to the 'picture' surface in painting.

The 'appreciation' of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism is the principle concern here, and my application of Wittgenstein's observation about meaning to the 'surface' *of painting* necessitates that we determine what the notion "back to the rough ground" would imply for the philosopher of art regarding the appreciation of a picture.[5]

This makes the appreciation of a neoplastic picture a cogent example of the 'small class of cases' discussed so far. Here, by following the rule blindly, but with *understanding*, one observes something in the picture: yet this is unaccompanied by *interpretation*, for neither semantic nor representational meaning would arise here. This observation can occur outside the "large class of cases" in the language or picture language-game, because the 'something' might be an arrangement, composition or configuration (structure), or dynamism and movement. As a test for "rough ground," we should, therefore, examine at which point the rule-bound explanations of the meaning of painting would become metaphysical arguments according to Wittgenstein, and thereby meaningless (or at least deeply problematic). Wittgenstein's 'aspectival perception' arguments provide us with a method, since the subject of these arguments, as we saw in the case of the cube, occur outside of the pragmatic definition of meaning; that is, outside of the semantic terrain in the strict sense of the word: In this sense, *aspectival perception* drives the argument for the 'picture-screen' conception of visual rhythm as composition (or stasis), as set out in this book.

Returning to the 'red' arguments: when we carry out an obviously referential activity like 'pointing' and saying 'red', the word "red" in this example can nonetheless still have a hidden meaning (i.e., conceptual content). Within ordinary language use, the surface remains 'surface', but with implications of an unnoticed property that contains something else (similar to the concept of the negation of 'red'). Here, the cognition of 'picture' on the surface has become remote from us (that is, become a 'use' in language) as well as secretive (becoming metaphysical).

[5] Wittgenstein's epigrammatic comment still attracts art historians, since a metaphysical level of discourse does seem to flourish in explanations of paintings. Considering this more, it is interesting to note Yve-Alain Bois' essay 'Resisting Blackmail', (also *Painting as Model*) in which he warns that art historical discourse has become the side-business of (metaphysical) philosophers, and suggests that art historical discourse be brought back to the description of what occurs on the canvas itself (Bois 1990, 245–57). In art historical discourse, there seems also to be many 'metaphysicians' who do not investigate the artwork itself on the basis of what is there to see, but engage instead with layers of discourse. Thus language, normally a means by which to explain the meaning of an artwork, becomes a trap, a net of established or establishing theories. Wittgenstein was aware of the danger even for himself, and asks: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (Wittgenstein 1958, §309). Metaphysical arguments among art historians should also be about showing the way out of the "fly-bottle" in which metaphysical discourse is entrapped. To determine the way out we should start by asking what is meant by 'the rough ground' as it applies to art.

The subtlety of this problem suggests a special approach, or a certain degree of learning or preparation on the part of the viewer.

As long as we are symbolic language users, concepts are inevitable. Moreover, it is unlikely that one can escape this binding relationship between meaning and language. However, one can at least try to occupy the terrain of the manifest, non-interpretational vision of the surface for as long as possible. To notice previously unnoticed aspects of seeing, and attend to what Wittgenstein says about 'noticing aspects', necessitates a methodology, and the undergoing of experiences. The vision-oriented surface manifests in geometric abstract art, within Mondrian's neoplastic canvases, and those of his followers: these paintings exemplify how 'appreciation' of surface (beyond the pragmatic definition) can elicit a sense of visual rhythm.

I have used Wittgenstein's 'everyday language' arguments as a model for resolving the problem where vigorous empirical argument is at risk of becoming entangled in metaphysical reflection. If "rough ground" provides the terrain for Wittgenstein to return to in order to restore an enlivened language-game, then the manifest view of the 'surface' of painting is, in a similar sense, that to which art historians must return, in order to enact a non-metaphysical painting-game. However, recuperation of a purely sensory empirical terrain for painting is not an easy task: rule-bound reading of a picture requires the interpretation of the rule and its application to one's own way of seeing. "To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state" (Wittgenstein 1958, 212e). Has the argument so far failed to distinguish interpretation from seeing as a "state"? On closer examination, it becomes evident that 'noticing an aspect' is another way of seeing. Moreover, it offers a means to avoid the interpretative-representational terrain of painting discourse.

7.3 Surface and "Seeing-as"

The problem of visual rhythm in Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvases sheds light on an overlooked feature of abstract art: visual movement in the static image. My contention is that the property of rhythm remains outside the semantic (or representational) field, and that visual rhythm can be appreciated in terms of 'image' on the surface of the canvas (equivalent to Wittgenstein's "rough ground"). If this contention holds true, then the nature of 'image' and 'seeing' implicates further and more subtle arguments regarding the observation of rhythm on the static design on the canvas, because both 'image' and 'seeing' involve understanding, concept, and rule-following. One can learn how to 'see' things and experience a wider range of phenomena through the development of certain skills, and thereby broaden one's understanding of those things. Certain rules must be learned regarding the 'picture-viewing game' for instance: but in order to activate these rules and participate in the game, one needs to *experience* something about pictures. Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as' arguments, show how 'concept' is involved in the act of 'seeing'.

In the arguments developed below, Wittgenstein's concepts of 'aspect-blindness' and 'aspect-dawning', which derive from his insightful 'seeing-as' arguments, provide

a powerful methodology for a 'new' experience of seeing on the surface. The discussion revolves around the possibility of a simultaneous (ambivalent) view of "picture-duck-rabbit" in Jastrow's famous diagram, known as 'the duck-rabbit' (below).[6]

In his later work, *The Philosophy of Psychology*, in which the experience of meaning is investigated, Wittgenstein proposes an experiment about which he termed "meaning-blindness". After investigating the natural implications of colour-blindness in *Remarks on Colour* (Wittgenstein 1980b, 36–54e, 1980a, 100b),[7] he asks what it would be like not to be able to experience meaning (Zemach 1995).[8] In "Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology" Wittgenstein says:

> When I supposed the case of a 'meaning-blind' man, this was because the experience of meaning seems to have no importance in the *use* of language. And so because it looks as if the meaning-blind could not lose much. But it conflicts with this, that we sometimes say that some word in a communication meant one thing to us until we saw that it meant something else. First, however, we don't feel in this case that the experience of the meaning took place while we *were hearing the word*. Secondly, here one might speak of an experience rather of the sense of the sentence, than of the meaning of a word (Wittgenstein 1980a, b, §202, 41e).

Wittgenstein suggests that the meaning of a word is not fixed until the context of the sentence on which the meaning of the word relies is fixed. This observation is useful for investigating meaning in the visual field. It also provides the grounds for an investigation of "aspect-blindness" in the context of Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvases.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein uses Jastrow's "duck-rabbit" diagram. In this image, it is possible to recognize the depicted head as either a rabbit's or a duck's: the two aspects of the figure are an interchangeable pair. Hypothetically, however, the first-time viewer may not necessarily make the switch between the two images or 'aspects', unless directed to do so. In this context, where there is some problem or difficulty in noticing that there are two interchangeable aspects, Wittgenstein raises the concept of 'aspect-blindness':

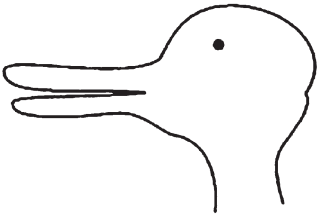
---

[6] If the aspect-dawning of rhythm does occur outside of the semantic field, then the duck-rabbit picture may be inappropriate for our investigation, since it relies on recognition grounded in representation. For this reason, a different, though similarly ambiguous kind of pictorial diagramme, such as the 'double-cross', would be appropriate for the further investigation of 'seeing-as'. However, a good example of a non-representative image is already at hand: Mondrian's early mature neoplastic canvas.

[7] In *Remarks on Colour*, Wittgenstein states:

> We speak of "colour-blindness" and call it a *defect.* But there could easily be several differing abilities, none of which is clearly inferior to the others.—And remember, too, that a man may go through life without his colour-blindness being noticed, until some special occasion brings it to light (Wittgenstein 1977, 21e III–§31).

[8] This essay confuses the difference between 'meaning-blindness' and 'aspect-blindness'. Zemach writes: "The terms 'meaning-blind' and 'aspect-blind' are, for Wittgenstein, interchangeable" (Zemach 1995, 491). Dr. Graeme Marshall (Department of Philosophy, Melbourne University) pointed out the difference between "meaning-blind" and "aspect-blind", and more has been written on this by Osamu Fukumoto (Fukumoto 2006–13).



> What sort of consequences would it have? – Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness or to not having absolute pitch? – We will call it "aspect-blindness" – and will next consider what might be meant by this. (A conceptual investigation.) The aspect-blind man is supposed not to see the aspects A change. (Wittgenstein 1958, IIxi, 213e)

Wittgenstein asserts that "aspect-blindness is akin to the lack of a 'musical-ear' (Wittgenstein 1980a, 214e).[9] 'Aspect-blindness' could thus be described as symptomatic of a person who cannot see the potential availability of contextual choices in the configurations of shapes, colours, sounds, or other sensory experiences. In aspect-blindness, the person must be instructed to see the other image, and only then can such a switch between aspects be made. It is worth noting that aspect-blindness is not necessarily an uncommon 'condition' among people with otherwise seemingly normal perceptions. In fact, aspect-blindness can be used in a neutral or even positive sense: that is, to connote the sense in which, as a prerequisite for pursuing everyday life untroubled by problems of interpretation, the meaning of something (i.e., attention to an aspect) among members of a common language group, is derived from agreement of the group, about the consensually fixed meanings; of words, gestures, various types of communal signals, and so on. However, in the context of visual art, music and literature, the value of an artifact in many cases is at odds with or pointedly opposed to socially established premises (of value and meaning). In this context, awareness of aspect-blindness provides a conceptual basis for recuperating ambiguous aspects or meanings in our interpretations of such works. In an analysis of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases, it is the unnoticed aspects which warrant description and definition.

Wittgenstein, in a discussion of the significance of aspect-blindness, draws attention to what is implied in 'following the rule.' In everyday life (and here the context of everyday life is language and language-games) it is taken for granted that one will tacitly follow a rule (more or less blindly), more so when the rule is fixed in a public or social context. One must keep in mind that transgressors are so named in view of their relation to a *rule*, and not to the act which 'broke' that rule. However, the transgressor may, through their actions in relation to a rule, reveal to us the degree to which we are all "aspect-blind" within a fixed context.

Wittgenstein posits the following example: Take the following series "2, 4, 6, 8, …," for instance. In the context in which the expected or correct answer is "10", (in a school classroom for instance) almost all students will continue the series (by add-

[9] For Wittgenstein, 'Aspect-blindness' is not a tenuous case of 'meaning-blindness'.

ing 2), and will continue to do so even after reaching larger numbers such as 1000, 1002, 1004, … and so on. But if a student thereafter continues the series 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012, …, he or she will no doubt be corrected. And yet, so Wittgenstein would contend, there is no prescribed regulation that "after 1000 you should continue like this ….". Thus, the student who continues "1000, 1004, 1008, …" cannot actually be refuted, at least from the philosophical point of view. Wittgenstein points out that we generally do automatically continue "1000, 1002, 1004, and so on", tending to cling to one solution and maintaining it like automatons, or nonsensical machines. The automaton state of being is very efficient in specific contexts, such as carrying out a job or other communal enterprise. It contributes to the saving of one's own and the group's collective mental energy. However, such efficiency is often a mere habit, necessarily accompanied by deficiency, which, in the context of the discussion here, is akin to a 'blind spot'. More importantly though, the blind following of the rule in effect 'rules out' the possibility of experiencing 'new' aspects: such openness of process is fundamental to the appreciation of art works. Thus, the problem here concerns how one does experience a "new" aspect in the process of reading an art work. What exactly is the catalyst by which one can move beyond 'aspect-blindness' when confronted by such densely coded works? Automatic following of a rule is a symptom of aspect-blindness. But when a student suddenly experiences a 'new' solution, (in the previous example, where the student continues 1000, 1004, … etc. rather than 1000, 1002, …) this is an experience of a 'new aspect', or an 'aspect-dawning.' This experience is marked by a flash of recognition as the solution is suddenly apprehended, a moment which can be understood as the moment of 'experiencing the meaning' (in the case of meaning-blindness) or the unnoticed aspect (in the case of aspect-blindness).

For Wittgenstein, the case in which a rule is subscribed to uncritically is also an instance of meaning-blindness because the thinker, or viewer ('follower'), does not seek an alternative. They simply or 'blindly'—that is, unintentionally—act within the rules, an effect analogous to a horse race in which, as a rule, "the horses generally run as fast as they can" (Wittgenstein 1980a, IIxi, 227e). Regarding the 'experience' of the meaning of a word, Wittgenstein again uses the concept of 'aspect-blindness' to elaborate his argument:

> The importance of this concept [of aspect-blindness] lies in the connection between the concepts of 'seeing an aspect' and 'experiencing the meaning of a word'. For we want to ask "What would you be missing if you did not *experience* the meaning of a word?"
>
> What would you be missing, for instance, if you did not understand the request to pronounce the word "till" and to mean it as verb,—or if you did not feel that a word lost its meaning and became a mere sound if it was represented ten times over? (Wittgenstein 1958, IIxi, 214e)

It is disconcerting to hear a word represented ten times over. [10] Jastrow's diagram is similarly disconcerting, since one is required (if instructed to see the other aspect) to see/perceive according to a completely unfamiliar way of representation.

[10] Kandinsky makes a similar observation: "[F]requent repetition of a word (a favorite game of children, forgotten in later life) deprives the word of its external reference" (Kandinsky 1947, 34).

Something else is at stake here, since one already 'knows' a particular meaning (that is, a particular 'use of a word'), but is required to stop meaning it that way. When one repeats the known word with the intention of experiencing a different 'meaning' or a 'null-meaning' it seems that the 'blind-spot', or 'zero-experienced' space—the liminal zone between representational or symbolic meaning and word-as-mere-sound (a sensory 'meaning') for example—becomes more evident. As a result, one's sense of null-experience becomes a source of disquiet, as the repeated word becomes not merely a sound, but rather, becomes the sound (metaphorically speaking) of one's own self-contradiction, or the contravention of one's own cognition.

Not until we are instructed or otherwise able to seek an alternative—and experience the 'switching'—do we realize that we are pursuing only one of the variety of options when interpreting a given rule. How, then, can one learn to elicit a 'new' aspect and overcome 'aspect-blindness'? This is a special task, since overcoming aspect-blindness is normally not required in the pursuit of everyday life. However, it is also true that once experienced, the 'new' aspect becomes integrated into everyday life (and the process can be very rewarding). If the experience of a new aspect (or new meaning) is an important means for the appreciation of neoplastic painting, how does one overcome the problem of aspect-blindness, to experience aspect-dawning and thereby become 'aspect-sighted'?

Wittgenstein suggests that there is an answer to this question—again "through '*experience*'", which he contrasts against the process of being taught "better knowledge". Whether or not one can learn this knowledge is less the issue than is the question of how it is learned:

> Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through *'experience'*.—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.—This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right (Wittgenstein 1958, IIxi, 227e).

Wittgenstein notes that "[g]rammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfill its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs" (Wittgenstein 1958, §496). For Wittgenstein, grammar is the logistic centre of meaning, and is an intrinsic way of governing the (grammatical) rules. It does not answer to the direct generation of meaning, but rules the ways in which rules are to be performed. Grammar cannot be described or exemplified by any use of words in language, but it does describe the way meaning, i.e., the use of words, is generated. All we can do is follow a rule blindly: but a bundle of rules does not bring about experience. We need to understand a rule, but its application is only possible through experience, that is, through the way it is learned; in the case of painting, through the way the experience of seeing 'surface' is learned.

The problem of determining how a 'new' aspect is learned can be tackled by examining how Wittgenstein elaborates the difference between the 'report' and the 'exclamation'. A statement is a report of experienced perception, while an exclamation, rather than the report of a perception, is an expression of the dawn of that

perception. Both statement and exclamation are descriptions of a perception, and relate to experience, but must be differentiated carefully. Thus, Wittgenstein contends that the experience of a new aspect is executed in the form of an exclamation, not in the form of a report or statement:

> I looked at an animal and am asked: "What do you see?" I answer: "A rabbit".—I see a landscape; suddenly a rabbit runs past. I exclaim "A rabbit!"
>
> Both things, both the report and the exclamation, are experiences of perception and of visual experience. But the exclamation is so in a different sense from the report: it is forced from us.—It is related to the experience as a cry is to pain.
>
> But since it is the description of a perception, it can also be called the expression of thought.—If you are looking at the object, you need not think of it; but if you are having the visual experience expressed by the exclamation, you are also *thinking* of what you see.
>
> Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought (Wittgenstein 1958, II xi, 197e).

It is here that Wittgenstein discriminates 'thought' from 'thinking'. 'In the earlier part of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote: "We are not analysing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. that of thinking), and therefore the use of a word" (Wittgenstein 1958, §383, 118e). Here, 'thought' relates to stored understandings in memory, while 'thinking' pertains to an actual or 'lived' timespan during which a person is being exposed to possible 'new' aspects of a thing (and is suddenly 'understanding' it). 'Thought' presupposes interpreting external data by a subject with a fixed idea, while 'thinking' is the experience of understanding what is seen by a perceiver, as the use of a word is understood by a language user in a sentence. For Wittgenstein, understanding perception from the point of view of 'thought' and interpretation is a mistake, since experiencing visual evidence, as with the case of "Now I see red!", cannot necessarily presuppose the application of formally fixed ideas, which is the case in "This is red." The 'thinking' of a contextual application of the use of a word to report visual evidence to a listener is an act which occurs within the language-game and, therefore, presents no obstacle to the language user. Thus the experience of visual evidence for the perceiver is an act of *ad hoc* understanding (thinking) of what is going on on the surface of a canvas within the picture-language-game.

In perceiving something, perception and concept (including 'thought') cannot exclude each other so easily. An exclamation is not reducible to a concept-less and merely sensory experience, but "can also be called the expression of thought": thus, 'thinking' can constitute the dawn of an experience, which causes us to exclaim something as if it were forced from us, while a 'thought' cannot be defined as a new aspect of experience. Rather, 'thought' always accompanies the condition of signification (i.e., calling an animal a 'rabbit'), and 'thinking' or seeing a new aspect seems to include both experience and thought. Thus Wittgenstein notes:

> Now when the aspect dawns can I separate a visual experience from a *thought-experience*? (And what does that mean?) If you separate them then the aspect is lost (Wittgenstein 1982, 15e).

Following Wittgenstein, what does it mean when a visual experience or the experience of a new meaning is separate from "thought-experience", and does this

actually happen? When you have a visual experience, "you are also *thinking* of what you see." If you do not know beforehand what a rabbit or duck is, you cannot see a rabbit or duck in either aspect. However, in the case of the "double-cross" in the diagram below, preliminary knowledge seems not to be necessary.

This is because in the 'double-cross', we are not interested in the typical Gestalt condition, i.e., seeing it "as a white cross on a black ground and as a black cross on a white ground" (Wittgenstein 1958, 207e). Rather, what interests us is the pre-symbolic stage of recognition of meaning in the diagram:

> Those two aspects of the double cross (I shall call them the aspects A) might be reported simply by pointing alternately to an isolated white and an isolated black cross.
>
> One could quite well imagine this as a primitive reaction in a child even before it could talk. (Thus in reporting the aspects A we point to a part of the double cross.—The duck and rabbit aspects could not be described in an analogous way) (Wittgenstein 1958, 207e).

To see aspects *A* does not necessitate memory or preliminary knowledge, but merely the capacity to point to *this* or *this* alternately, which presupposes a way of seeing other than by way of identification, such as when identifying (seeing) a face as intended in a drawing. It belongs to another way of seeing: seeing likeness (and contrast) in the two figures without interpretation. Aspects *A*, then, seem not to be thought-full, but are to be taken as some sort of 'optical' perception. Wittgenstein does not concern himself with this distinction, since it can be described either way. The thing which does matter in the double cross diagram is that "the concept of seeing is modified by it [the changing of aspects]" (Wittgenstein 1980b, 71e §386). This modification does not belong to the picture itself, however, as "the black cross in the double cross" might imply (Wittgenstein 1980b, 90e §496). Aspect is not a property of an object or a picture, nor of memory, thought, or fixed meaning. A viewer who can change aspects freely suggests a viewer who is "capable of making all sorts of applications of the figure quite freely" (Wittgenstein 1980b, 87e §484, 1958, 208e). One such application of a figure (or of aspect) can, according to Wittgenstein, be called 'aspects of organization'. A significant fact of this change of 'organization' is that "when the aspect changes parts of the picture go together which before did not" (Wittgenstein 1958, 208e). This modification is a dynamic function of the power of attention, and it is this power which imbues the 'static' image of a picture with movement or rhythm, thereby providing a reading beyond signification within the semantic field. Thus Wittgenstein writes:

> Attention is dynamic, not static—one would like to say. I begin by comparing attention to gazing but that is not what I call attention; and now I want to say that I find it is *impossible* that one should attend statically (Wittgenstein 1980b, 92e §512).

The attention to which Wittgenstein is referring here constitutes the 'thinking' of a perceiver, not hir 'thought'. Such dynamism does not belong to the object of semantic meaning, but to the field where meaning is absent. For example, in the case of 'meaning blindness', the use of the word 'till' as a preposition ('until') is its normal use. According to such a condition, its use as a verb does not occur to the language user. When the use of the word 'till' as a verb ('to till the soil') does occur to a language user in the non-meaning-blind condition however, the dawn of meaning occurs in the semantic field (thought). On the other hand, in the case of 'aspect blindness', pronouncing "till", however many times, is always accompanied by 'thought' because we do not so easily step aside from representational meaning. However, such repetition, because it can *approach* meaninglessness, can thereby evoke the dawn of a new aspect relating to the word-sound "till". If this is the case, then the repetition is no longer drawing upon a thought (about what is known), but begins to be characterised by 'thinking' and the experience of the dynamism of a repeated sound.

'Thinking' relates to the process of 'understanding' an object, and to the concept of a new experience. It is a transitional stage in the dawning of a new experience. Thus, if a catalyst for 'aspect-dawning' does inhere in the neoplastic canvas, then this is because it relates to 'thinking' rather than to 'thought'. The point can be summarised in the context of the major argument in this way: that we are better off pronouncing "till" ten times more and wait for the dawning of an aspect, than draw upon the condition of signification, and call the neoplastic painting "a geometric configuration".

The exclamation "Now I see red!" evinces the *experience* of the statement, in which the 'red' contains half *experience* and half *concept*: that is, *dawning aspects.* In the context of neoplasticism, these are conceived as 'dawning dimensions'. The moment of "aspect-dawning" cannot be retrieved. To experience *representation* is to experience *meaning*. Meaning, in a conventional context, is constituted by the combined schematic judgements agreed within a certain group of people.[11] In this sense *meaning* derives from what remains, once the redundancy of the repetitive judgement (in constituting redundancy) no longer requires attention, and agreement is reached regarding the configuration or form.

'Aspect-dawning' is anti-form. 'Composition' is the intention of a configuration towards taking a certain 'shape'. In the neoplastic composition, Mondrian sees 'shape' (such as squares and rectangles) as 'non-shapes'. This concept of composition is similar to Aristoxenus's concept of 'shape': "shape… is not to be identified with an object that is given shape, but is the result of the position and condition of

[11] In this context Hilary Putnam draws attention to the communal use of words in the acquisition of 'new' (or "sophisticated") meaning:

> Meanings are not objects in a museum, to which words somehow get attached; to say that two words have "the same meaning" (and/or "the same reference") is just to say that it is good interpretative practice to equate their meanings (or their reference). But sophisticated interpretive practice presupposes a sophisticated understanding of the way words are used by the community whose words one is interpreting (Putnam 1991, 119).

parts of an object (not their shape)."[12] Aspect-dawning is the catalyst for the activation of composition within that configuration. While the composition itself triggers the attention of the viewer, who seeks settlement according to shape recognition ('Good Gestalt'), in neo-plastic painting, where the viewer is confronted by null-meaning in terms of the recognition of depicted objects as shapes, intentions engage instead with the dissolving of shapes and with the reciprocal (re-)groupings of ever-new aspects. 'Aspect-dawning' is a procedure, a transitional mode within a particular moment in seeing. In 'normal' seeing (i.e., 'seeing-as') the conclusion or resolution converges on the point at which judgement is expected to settle into meaning or representation. However, the process, or duration of aspect-dawning interests us precisely because settlement fails to occur. This 'trigger' is the dawning of experience. 'Composition' can become experience, if we take 'experience' to be a ready-to-use faculty which can be applied on future occasions. Wittgenstein states: "The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique" (Wittgenstein 1958, 208e) and "it is only if someone *can do*, has learned, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *this* experience" (Wittgenstein 1958, 209e). Thus, Wittgenstein's understanding of *experience* relates to the mastering of a skill, and a skill is in some sense definable as experience projected or directed toward the future, to meet the potential for recurrent use in the future. According to this pragmatic sense, *having experienced* comes very close to the condition of *meaning* according to Wittgenstein's seminal definition: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, §43). Ultimately, 'aspect-dawning' is the experience of composition in the sense in which Suzanne Langer conveys it, where composition is the 'trigger' or force which can cause 'rhythm' to manifest, both in the visual and auditory arts.

Wittgenstein's aspect-dawning relates to the first mark of recognition of the link between a thing and its naming. In this sense, aspect-dawning is the dawn of the recognition of meaning, and is analogous to the dawning moment of the recognition of a specific, or 'good' gestalt ('duck', 'rabbit', or 'duck-rabbit'—i.e., "seeing-as"). The moment before the settlement of meaning (the signified) or shape in the semantic field occurs is characterised by unfixed or unsettled signifiers, or 'bad' gestalt: this pre-signified stage is the requisite condition (or "visual-world") for aspect-dawning.

These unfixed, unsettled or 'floating' signifiers, and their subsequent 'bad' gestalt, reside not in the 'mirror' of the European signification-identification system, which originated in Ancient Greek tradition, but in the 'screen': only through a viewer's arbitrary intention with regard to reading can the projected signifier be arranged in a specific way. The mirror as symbolic metaphor (or, according to Leonardo, an actual tool to evaluate referential value) functions as identification, transparency, representation, linearity, negation and subjectivity, while the 'screen' relates to balance, opacity, association, falsification, and projection.

Among other comparative factors, the mirror model facilitates its use as the criterion of 'objectivity'. The 'screen' model, by contrast, facilitates the 'arbitrary'

[12] Pearson 1990, 50.

participation of the viewer. Aspect-dawning relates to composition and the conception of 'screen' as defined in Chap. 6. It occurs without interpretation, and resides in the non-Gestalt field. However, implied in the arguments above, a clearer and more distinct 'gap' should be established between Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning' and Mondrian's 'annihilation' or 'destructive' movement of forms: that is, the continuation of 'aspect-dawning', beyond the closure of 'seeing-as'. Thus, it becomes possible to see how 'aspect-dawning' does function in Mondrian's early neoplastic canvases, and recognise that a close reading of Mondrian's early neoplastic canvases presupposes a condition of *continuous* aspect-dawning.

7.4 Searching for the New Aspect

Wittgenstein's idea of 'half visual experience, half thought' evokes the 'thinking' which occurs in the dawning of a 'new' aspect, and, as such, is most applicable to the visual and conceptual work required to understand and appreciate Mondrian's Neo-plasticism. The concept of aspect-dawning underlies and facilitates the 'new' rhythm-based reading of Mondrian's neoplastic painting because the experience of the new aspect ("the flashing of an aspect") through perception connotes "half visual experience, half thought". If this is the case, then the spontaneous, optical reaction to various aspects in the course of 'grouping' more likely relates to the experience of rhythm, which arises in the perceiver's understanding, through 'thinking.' In summary: the whole process of experiencing visual rhythm is, in fundamental contrast to 'thought', constituted by 'thinking.' When Wittgenstein attends to what is perceived and what is 'missed' in the act of understanding, we are provided (by extension) with a context in which to define a method for perceiving and experiencing visual rhythm in Mondrian's work, in which these definitions are not limited by adherence to notions that rhythm is experienced primarily in terms of somatic or optic responses.

Theories which locate rhythm outside of the 'semantic field,' as we have seen, argue that rhythm occurs through the medium of understanding and concept. In reply to the (would-be) Wittgensteinian question, "what is missing when one does not experience rhythm?", one could answer that we merely hear sounds or see pattern, repetition (accompanied by fixed 'meaning' in thought), and that this is a state of 'meaning-blindness' with regard to alternative meanings and understandings. I have argued that acquiring a sense of rhythm is a process which occurs beyond the semantic field. The condition by which "we keep on looking" as Sartre puts it takes place through our remaining in this non-semantic field (Sartre 1963b (1961), 76–7). The gist of the argument could be stated in this way: that as long as we keep looking at, i.e., seeing 'rectangles' on Mondrian's canvas (which is an act akin to repeating the word "till"), then we will remain in a state predisposed to experience the moment when the flash of recognition occurs. It is at this point that the canvas can yield to a reading in terms of the plastic qualities of Mondrian's visual rhythm, and the 'rectangles' will cease to appear as rectangles, and instead, operate as purely plastic elements.

Here the difference in cases of aspect-dawning, between Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit and Mondrian's neoplastic canvas respectively, is that the former relates to the recognition of a new 'form' or 'shape', while the latter relates to the acknowledgment of 'no-form' or 'no-shape' in the non-Gestalt field. In this sense, Mondrian's neoplastic canvases do not meet the conditions which are necessary for Wittgenstein's 'seeing-as', which works within the premises of the Gestalt ground, and includes the iconic reading of a picture (picture-as-code), and, most certainly, of 'shapes'. Moreover, Mondrian's Neoplasticism constitutes the partial negation of Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning'. The word 'dawning' itself warrants close inspection, since the original German translation is '*Aufleuchten*', which literally means "to light up", and which, in turn, suggests a brief or momentary 'flash'. Thus, the 'flashing of an aspect' is a more accurate translation of the term, since it does not permit the inclusion in its definition of any sense of duration. Even so, if one considers 'aspect-dawning' in terms of the continual 'flickering' of a new aspect, and not as merely the predisposition toward a new 'seeing-as' experience, which, once settled, becomes 'thought', then it will fit perfectly the pragmatic aspect of Mondrian's neoplastic rhythm. When the neoplastic canvas is to comply with the condition of 'aspect-dawning', it would presuppose a condition determined by inconclusion and openness: the flashing moment keeps happening. The neoplastic canvas, in my analysis, connotes the condition of remaining in 'thinking', or of never being finalised, such that the new 'aspect' keeps dawning.

Here, we might well ask: what would we be gaining by not experiencing the neoplastic rhythm of an image of a painting? This question preempts the next: How does one perceive the sense of rhythm on a canvas without reference to form or shape in the semantic field? I argue that the realm of rhythm can be (partially) dissociated from that of 'thought', and from the narrowest sense of 'seeing-as': that is, dissociated from the realm of the representational system. Wittgenstein's observation is astute because it suggests the condition of aspect-dawning accompanied by an avoidance of the fixing of generic meaning; or, in painting, of the fixing of neoplastic aspects in terms of forms or shapes.

7.5 Beyond "Aspect-Blindness"

Returning to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit issue, and the question as to what it means to experience 'aspect-dawning' and become 'aspect-sighted': as argued above, it does not mean that one delineates in one's mind a rabbit or a duck in a duck-rabbit picture more clearly, or that, when looking at 'rabbit', one is aspect-blind in terms of the 'duck', and vice versa. Here, questions arise regarding the mental state in which the viewer is able to switch between clear images of 'duck' and 'rabbit' quickly, at will. This would seem close to 'aspect-sightedness'. However, unless there is an *experience* of the 'dawning of an aspect', then one remains in a state of aspect-blindness. Once the changing of aspects becomes habitual, the exclamation "Here, there is a rabbit!" is precluded, because the 'experience' of the 'flashing' is

missing. In being 'aspect-blind', what is gained is the cognition or fixed aspect of a picture-duck or -rabbit ('seeing-as'). Avoiding aspect-blindness and remaining in a state of potential 'aspect-sightedness' is not just a matter of switching rapidly between each figure, but must also include readiness toward the 'new' experience, and the ability to remain at the dawn of the aspect stage. Is it possible to see both images at the same time, that is, see a 'duck-rabbit' in Jastrow's diagram?

Wittgenstein says there is a moment in which one can see the drawing as a combination of duck and rabbit: "I see two pictures, with the duck-rabbit surrounded by rabbits in one, by ducks in the other"; he also says: "I *may* say 'It's a duck-rabbit'" (Wittgenstein 1958, 195e). This observation might seem bizarre (although Wittgenstein himself does not particularly emphasize it), especially when one clings to the principles of Gestalt psychology. For example, E. H. Gombrich wrote in *Art and Illusion*, concerning Jastrow's picture, that "we will also 'remember' the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time" (Gombrich 1960, 5). What is notable is that Wittgenstein himself does not say that one can see two aspects together simultaneously: what he *does* say is that the duck-rabbit becomes 'a' duck-rabbit picture. In this sense Wittgenstein and Gombrich emphasise the same point, even if the latter does not see (at least Gombrich does not express the observation of) a simultaneous 'duck-rabbit' image.

W. J. T. Mitchell, however, emphasizes the importance of the possibility of being able to see the duck and rabbit simultaneously, proposing a third term, "an image of both-or-neither". Mitchell remarks that it "makes sense of the original question that accompanied the Duck-Rabbit: "Which animals resemble each other the most?" (Gombrich 1960, 74–5). Although it seems only a technical point, Mitchell's observation is in fact very valuable. It implies a means by which to proceed to a different way of seeing: an associative way of seeing, of seeing similarities, not difference. What Mitchell's observation lacks, however, is the indifferent (or unemphatic) attitude expressed in Wittgenstein's observation.

For Wittgenstein, seeing the duck and rabbit simultaneously in the one image is reducible to an instance where there is a change in the perception of aspect. In his view there is not much difference between seeing a 'duck' (or a 'rabbit') and seeing a 'duck-rabbit'. The issue for Wittgenstein is more radical and provocative, and concerns the difference between categories of the '*object*' of one's seeing. Wittgenstein problematises the difference between seeing or perceiving an aspect (i.e., seeing it as that or another aspect), and what it actually entails perceptually at the moment when and while an aspect changes. Thus Wittgenstein asserts: "I must distinguish between the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect" (Wittgenstein 1958, 194e).

In the early part of section xi in Philosophical Investigations II, Wittgenstein describes two ways of 'seeing':

> Two uses of the word "see".
>
> The one: "What do you see there?"—"I see *this* (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: "I see a likeness between these two faces"—let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

> The importance of this is the difference of category between the two 'objects' of sight (Wittgenstein 1958, 193e).

"I see *this*" is the act of recognition and of identification between the original picture and the copied one. The original picture functions as a contextually fixed meaning, an icon. It is an 'object' (that is, public) and can thereby be transferred to others. In this way, the seeing-this concerns identification and is the semantic way of seeing. The aspect of this image and meaning is continual and long-lived. Moreover, by way of interpretation and identification, meaning is contextually fixed; thus, it resides in 'seeing-as.' Alternatively, "I see a likeness between these two faces" is the associative way of seeing, and is based on similarity. The image of the face itself is also an 'object' (public), but interpretation is not necessarily involved. In this way, it is not 'knowing' and 'recognising' (thought), but perceiving and understanding (thinking). Likeness occurs within perception and cognition, as a certain aspect suddenly occurs to the viewer: *likeness* is seen, and the viewer notices the sudden manifestation of an aspect 'in a flash' as the new aspect dawns.

Wittgenstein suggests that when established after a durational or repetitive experience, the 'semantical' way of seeing thereafter conforms to long-term knowledge or memory[13], which deals with symbols and vocabulary associated with them in the linguistic field. The 'associational' way of seeing, on the other hand, is a definitively short-lived experience, an impression, which relates to the activation of perception and to the process of creative experience. When the duration involved in seeing a resemblance is sufficient for the initial thrill of the recognition of similarity ("Now I see the similarity!") to fade, or for a *new* experience to become established by way of repetitive use or familiarity, this then evolves towards a further semantic way of seeing, and is long-lived.

Kandinsky's unintentional 'discovery' of abstract painting exemplifies the relationship between these ways of seeing. Kandinsky wrote in his *Reminiscences* that one day he came back to his studio at dusk, to be confronted by the spectacle of a mysterious picture leaning against the wall. It turned out to be one of his own paintings, inadvertently placed the wrong way around. Not realising this, however, Kandinsky saw it as "an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow" (Kandinsky et al. 1982, 369), in which all he could discern were "forms and colors" and content which was "incomprehensible". For a while, Kandinsky was in a state of continual 'aspect-dawning', during which his way of seeing was determined by a non-shape, or non-Gestalt condition. However, his non-referential view of the canvas could never be long-term, and, accordingly, the state of 'seeing-as' replaced that of 'aspect-dawning'. Kandinsky wrote about his experience:

[13] The generalised "long-term" and "short-term" types of memory have no particular relevance here. These terms are based on a pathological modelling of brain function and memory in terms of stimuli-responses, and how these relate to the retention of information. Our concern here is more with a metaphorical use of the term 'long-lived' and 'short-lived', that is, a 'long-lived' memory or way of seeing relates to a fixed meaning of representational signs; 'short-lived' refers to the un- and pre-fixed stage of meaning.

> The next day, I tried to re-create my impression of the picture from the previous evening by daylight. I only half succeeded, however; even on its side, I constantly recognized objects, and the fine bloom of dusk was missing. Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures (Kandinsky et al. 1982, 370).

Kandinsky's experience of 'aspect-dawning' was short-lived. The 'alternative'—the recognition of referential objects—became established in his perception of the picture. The spectacle of an ambivalent image in his painting, as he perceived it the previous evening, faded. Kandinsky's seeing of his own painting thus returned him to the 'representational' or conventional referential way of seeing it. It is noteworthy that this experience motivated Kandinsky to paint something which brought him closer to the 'aspect-dawning' condition, and which consequently compelled him to pursue abstract (or non-referential) painting.

'Associative' seeing is short-lived, but what interests us here is that it is constituted in a process of ongoing discovery. It is arguable, then, since the semantical way of seeing is postponed in this state, that something quite specific occurs in a viewer's mind in the process of appreciating a painting. Moreover, this engagement in the experience of viewing provides us with a model for the appreciation of visual rhythm. This is particularly the case with Mondrian's 'static' neoplastic painting, and in fact makes perfect sense since his theory of rhythm cannot be supported without first annihilating all representational or referential meanings. Once any remaining vestige of figuration has been 'destroyed' (to use Mondrian's own terminology), the grounds exist to constitute a non-referential set of associations and relations, that in turn make Neo-plasticism dynamic. What is lost when *meaning is absent*, is gained in noticing new aspects and relationships (similarity and contrast) among painterly elements (in Mondrian's terminology the 'plastic means'—planes, primary colours and non-colours, and straight lines) and composition. Though difficult to quantify, while in a state of *continuous* seeing of 'new' aspects, one remains within the associative way of seeing, and perhaps within a state of continual occurrence of the dawning of an aspect. Neo-plasticism could, then, be described as 'aspectival', as a blueprint for the non-representative or non-Gestalt appreciation of works of art. Though aspectival seeing is short-lived, it opens up the possibility for noticing new relationships within the composition of a 'static' neoplastic painting, which itself is unchanging.

7.6 Static-Dynamic Movement: Aspect and Dimension

Mondrian's strategy for seeing rhythm requires an associative or 'aspectival' way of seeing in the 'visual field'. Although not completely aligned with Wittgenstein's example of 'aspect-dawning', to see rhythm on a static geometric painting and, therefore, become "rhythm-sighted" is akin to experiencing 'aspect-dawning' in Jastrow's "duck and rabbit" diagram (Wittgenstein 1958, 207e).

On a neoplastic canvas one can see dynamism opposed to stasis, or see dynamism and stasis at the same time. The experience of 'aspect-dawning' is momen-

tary, but nevertheless perpetuates a series of discoveries through associative seeing. As Sartre pointed out: "*We* must rediscover the paths outlined for us by the painter and try to follow them. … *We* must revive echoes and rhythms. … We keep on looking, for if we ever stopped, everything would disintegrate" (Sartre 1963a, 76–7). The perceptual arbitrary effort to 'keep looking' is at the heart of T. S. Eliot's description, in "The Dry Salvages", of the incorporation of one's sensibility into music: "That it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts" (Kramer 1988, 17). In the formative years of his ideas of Neo-plasticism, Mondrian notes in his sketchbook (1912–14):

> After having loved surface [appearances] for a long time, one searches for something greater. And yet this is equally present in the surface. By looking beneath the latter, one views the inner (Mondrian 1969, 40).

The passage above indicates that at the age of forty, after a long career as a figurative painter, Mondrian's transitional stage towards seeing a new aspect in his painting had begun for him. Here, Mondrian insinuates that there is another way of looking at the canvas surface, which accommodates the same pictorial elements as the figurative canvas but which opens up 'unnoticed' aspects of the surface. Mondrian thereafter intended his 'new' canvas to attract the viewer directly to another ('inner') aspect of the surface. One requires clues regarding how to proceed with one's perceptions to a point at which the 'unnoticed' levels of a work can be identified, comparable to the search for that 'flashing moment' between aspects discussed above. In order to appreciate Mondrian's mature neoplastic canvases (1921–31), recourse to a concept such as 'aspect' is crucial. This allows a viewer to see dynamism and rhythm in an unmoving, non-repetitive and non-sequential 'composition' on the surface of the painting. Aspect is not a property of the physical canvas, nor does it appear in the 'design' on the surface. Different aspects are seen through the intervention of a viewer who sees them within the same pictorial object. Different aspects can be understood as the various unnoticed elements on the surface: relationships, similarity, contrast, and the subtle differences between painterly elements (colour, spatial ratios, and so on).

Wittgenstein's 'aspect' relates to Mondrian's term 'dimension', and rhythm is closely associated in Mondrian's thinking with the concept of 'dimension': "Through opposition, the relationships of dimension vary continually so that all symmetry can be destroyed" (Mondrian 1986, 305). Recall what Mondrian wrote in "A Trialogue" (1919–20):

> In the New Plastic, rhythm, even though interiorized, continues to exist; it is, moreover, varied through the inequality of the relationships of dimension by which the relationship of position, the primordial relationship, is expressed (Mondrian 1986, 90).

For Mondrian, rhythm derives from the varying dimensions (combined with varying colour values), which relate to length, breadth, thickness, height, depth and placement. When, in the viewer's eye, a 'dimension' is changed in the neoplastic canvas, new relationships within the same composition are continually noticed, and 'aspect-dawning' continually occurs:

> Painting has found this *new* plastic by *reducing the corporeality of objects to a composition of planes that gives the illusion of lying on one plane.*
>
> These planes, by both their dimensions (line) and their values (color), can express space without the use of visual perspective. Space can be expressed in an equilibrated way because the dimensions and values create *pure* relationship: height and breadth oppose each other without foreshortening, and depth is manifested though the different colors of the planes (Mondrian 1986, 38).[14]

Neo-plastic 'space' dispenses with the conventions of depicting space in terms of three-dimensionality, as conveyed through the use of perspective, chiaroscuro and modeling. Instead, space is generated through a 'field' where 'dimension' changes and equilibration is attained.[15] It is the "inequality of the relationships of dimension" and the changes among them that bring about rhythm. Both rhythm and the changes among dimensions occur within composition. In the 1917 article Mondrian wrote: "The *rhythm* of the relationship of color and dimension (in determinate *proportion* and *equilibrium*) permits the absolute to appear within the relativity of time and space" (Mondrian 1986, 31).[16] Mondrian explains in more detail:

---

[14] "The rectangular planes of varying dimensions and colors visibly demonstrate that *internationalism* does not means chaos ruled by monotony but an ordered and clearly divided unity" (Mondrian 1986, 268).

[15] The concept of changing dimension and space beyond three-dimensionality immediately reminds us of the notion of "fourth-dimension", which was very popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mondrian was also very much interested in this concept, writing, for example that:

> [d]espite all relativism, man's eye is not yet free from his body. Vision is inherently bound to our normal position. Only the mind can know anything of the fourth dimension and detach itself from our poor physical body! (Mondrian 1986, 210)

Among the De Stijl group, van Doesburg was a major adovocate of the concept. In the December 1917 letter from Mondrian to Van Doesburg, the issue of the fourth dimension was discussed:

> As to that question of the 4th dimension, perhaps some time in the future you can better write about it than I can. I rather fancy your idea that the negative will be the 4th dimension, but I can't write about it./In my work I do now see it that way. I'm getting more unity in my things, and the balance I'm looking for (Joosten 1998, 113, 261).

Mondrian did not completely agree with the concept of the fourth dimension, however, being more interested instead in the concept of multiple dimensions and n-dimensional space, about which Mm Blavatzky agreed (Tosaki 1998).

[16] Mondrian also wrote in the same article:

> The composition expresses the subjective, the individual, through rhythm—which is formed by the relationships of color and dimensions, even though these are mutually opposed and neutralized (Mondrian 1986, 39).

And further:

> Position and dimension *plastically expressed in multiple relationships* of straight lines and rectangular color planes can still have tragic expression through the rhythm thus created; but neutralizing opposition can make the rhythm more inward and to some extent destroy this tragic (Mondrian 1986, 54).

In the New Plastic we have equivalence of *extreme opposites* and therefore a *distinct duality. Rhythm* is the one and the *constant relationship* is the other; the *changeable relationship of dimension* is the one, and the *immutable relationship of position* is the other (Mondrian 1986, 97).

> In this composition they [the vertical and horizontal lines] express the movement of life, matured by a deeper rhythm arising from relationships of dimension. And since opposition to nature can be achieved only by these relationships, it is in them and them alone that we must seek the culmination of Neo-Plasticism (Mondrian 1986, 210).[17]

In terms of values, nature's counterpart is rhythm, which arises "from relationships of dimension." This rhythm is the deepened or 'internalised' movement of life. For Mondrian, 'dimension' is the key concept to activate the rhythm specific to Neoplasticism: non-repetition and non-sequential rhythm. Rhythm arises from relationships of dimensions, which oppose repetition:

> But this absolute relationship of "position" (height and breadth) achieves a relative and living expression through the secondary relationships: relationships of dimension and of value, always changing. The work never shows repetition of the plastic means but always their constant opposition (Mondrian 1986, 284).

Mondrian explains seeing aspects or dimensions in the "immutable" image on the canvas. Rhythm is the dynamism between the simplicity of the pictorial elements and the variable elements of changing dimensions:

> To express free rhythm, *it is necessary* to use means as simple as straight line and primary color. And the *relationship of position*—the rectangular relationship—is indispensable in order to express the immutable in opposition to the variable character of the *relationships of dimension* (Mondrian 1986, 239).

Mondrian emphasises the binary opposition of changing dimension and stable rectangular position: "Despite its diverse relationships of dimension, Neo-Plastic is based on *the rectangular relationship of position*, which is constant" (Mondrian 1986, 268).[18] We experience "aspect-dawning" and "aspect-change" by way of the opposition between stillness and speed, stasis and dynamic movement, primary colour planes and non-colour planes, between straight lines and planes, within the axis of verticality and horizontality, and within association and contrast. Thus, a threshold of understanding has been reached in our appreciation of Mondrian's neoplastic painting, the other side of which a 'deeper' level of appreciation of visualized rhythm is still to be considered. Occasionally, Mondrian intentionally left the physical traces of his brushstrokes on the surface of his canvases. In itself, physical brushwork is not the focus of this analysis: perhaps it seems an odd accompaniment to the deeper level (or internalized) rhythm which his work implies. However, these physical traces are implicit traits of the concept of 'picture-screen', as I have defined it. Tensions between physicality and concept constitute the definitive characteristics

---

[17] "Line is *straight* and is always placed in its two principal opposite positions, which form *the right angle,* the plastic expression of the constant. And the relationships of dimension are always based upon this principal relationship of position" (Mondrian 1986, 204).

[18] For example, Mondrian wrote:

> Despite its diverse relationships of dimension, Neo-Plastic is based on *the rectangular relationship of position*, which is constant. This suggests that in the future order, despite diverse quantities, there will be constant quality throughout, the basis of complete unity (Mondrian 1986, 343).

of the neo-plastic surface: thus, the physicality of the brushwork is an important factor in my analysis of visual rhythm in the neo-plastic canvas.

Mondrian's uncompromisingly geometric paintings with their bold primary coloured panels, do reveal a minimal but noticeable trace of painterliness. The brushstrokes thereby embody physical movement, but the neo-plastic canvas remains resolutely static. When discussing the way in which Mondrian attempted to depict the sense of movement and rhythm on canvas in his neoplastic paintings, it would be both misleading and unproductive to emphasize the actual brushstrokes as though Mondrian left them there to convey, directly, a sense of rhythm through the action of his brushwork. A sense of movement as suggested by repetitive brushwork is associated with many Impressionist paintings, especially late Cézanne, and with Futurist works. Emphatic repetitive brushwork will produce some sort of visual effect, and may even convey a 'rhythmic' sense through the effects of oscillating contiguous colour or textural values. While there is evidence that Mondrian intentionally left brushstrokes on the canvas (even in the mature neoplastic paintings), this should not be taken as an influential factor in the (direct) perception of rhythm in his work. Rather, the deliberate brushwork should be understood in terms of the way it places emphasis on the surface itself, the reason being to emphasise its necessarily physical-material condition. The surface itself as 'picture-screen', which is fundamentally implicated in the non-semantic image on the neoplastic canvas (such that they are virtually one and the same thing), is the province in which rhythm can occur—not by way of repetitive 'rhythmic' gestures which depict rhythm (de Kooning, Cézanne, Futurism), but in constituting a *field* for dynamic relations among static elements to occur. The neoplastic surface is one which, *as image*, retreats from the realm of the physical-material, but, as painterly *surface-as-screen*, is ineluctably defined by it. Thus, certain conditions or understandings are necessary in order to constitute such a field, as well as both to validate Mondrian's concept of static rhythm, and to appreciate how this rhythm operates in one's experience of viewing his (early mature) neoplastic works: these conditions can be defined as those which assert that the surface of the canvas be declared as such: i.e., not be denied or rendered transparent, as in representational painting, nor be reduced to the physical support that evidences gestural-textural 'movement' or action. The surface, then, is a dynamic field, a liminal and viable (conceptual) 'space' characterised and embodied by the interplay of tensions between physicality on the one hand (brushstrokes, painterly *facture*) and pure visuality (formal relations among elements) on the other. Brushstrokes are not a sign of something else (such as the painter's rhythmic actions) but are an aspect of the surface-screen-image. Their function is to direct attention to themselves in terms of the role they play among the totality of all relations which both constitute, and are contained within, the neoplastic field.

Mondrian's aim in his mature neoplastic painting was to express the rhythmic sense in terms of 'static rhythm'. The experience of 'static rhythm' may resemble that of the simultaneous seeing of the paired elements contained in diagrams such as Jastrow's duck-rabbit picture and in the Necker Cube, the description of which Wittgenstein uses to explain his concepts of 'seeing-as' and 'aspect-dawning'. The simultaneous viewing does not necessarily imply that one can see the duck-rabbit

picture as picture-duck-rabbit after having become familiar with the 'trick' of the duality of the diagram: rather, that the duck-rabbit picture can operate at a certain level, as in a 'bad' Gestalt, as a reciprocal exchange among picture-duck, picture-rabbit, and as a combined picture duck-rabbit.

The point in applying Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit picture to an analysis of the non-referential neo-plastic canvas, is that it is not by means of the figuration in a scene itself (i.e., "two pictures with duck-rabbit surrounded by rabbits in one, by ducks in the other") that a viewer sees dynamism in the 'static' image: rather, it is by means of the 'composition' depicting the 'duck-rabbit' picture as one of the aspectival options.

The composition on the surface further conflicts with the materiality—the 'geology'—of the varied surface and evident brushstrokes: this conflict makes us realise the condition of 'picture-screen'. It is by way of conceptualising Mondrian's canvas as a 'picture-screen', that the flat surface of the neoplastic canvas can be understood and experienced to constitute a 'field' of force. Generally, 'stasis' and 'dynamism' are opposite concepts. What is of interest, then, are the conditions under which the dawn of the change of aspect can occur, where 'stasis' becomes 'dynamism', and vice versa; or, where one experiences a sense of simultaneous 'static-dynamic'. Thus, the problem here is a matter of how, in neoplastic painting, 'aspect-dawning' or 'seeing the change of dimensions' occurs in the static composition of the neo-plastic canvas: we need to establish how the viewer can construct a sense of rhythm which is not limited to *dynamic or manifest* rhythm: that is, in the appreciation of the neo-plastic canvas, the question is one of how the viewer can emerge from a state of 'rhythm-blindness' to one constituted through the (newly learned) faculty of 'rhythm-sightedness'.

7.7 To Become "Aspect-Sighted"

'Aspect-sightedness' draws upon the experience of similarities or associations between aspects, beyond the establishment or settlement implicit in 'seeing-as'. It involves 'seeing a new aspect' beyond representational seeing, and presupposes attention to internal relationships between objects.[19] As Wittgenstein asserts: "[W]hat I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects" (Wittgenstein 1958, 212e). Thus, "aspect-dawning" is not a physiological response, but a mental or psychological mode of perception, which deeply relates to the faculty of 'imagination'. It is a matter of how one perceives or arranges grouping relationships among pictorial elements, to enable the perception of a sense of 'rhythm' on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. It is important to emphasise that 'aspect-blindness' cannot be arbitrarily applied to those who 'fail' to perceive visualized rhythm in Mondrian's work.

[19] In *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein wrote that 'aspects' do not 'teach us something about the external world' (Wittgenstein 1980a, 159e §899).

Rather, what must be emphasised, as Wittgenstein himself would have us note, is that there are certain aspects of a thing which in certain situations may remain (as yet) *unperceived* on the part of the viewer.

Mondrian's paintings with their rigid, static, and seemingly rule-bound pictorial systems compel one to argue the case for 'rule following', acknowledging several alternative options (interpretations) or aspects under the surface grammar of his canvases. In the arguments above, close inspection of Mondrian's painting and writing implicate a visual field in which the rules or grammar which generate symbolic or semantic meaning and subjective reading in painting no longer apply, and where rules of association or of non-semantics are applicable instead. Wittgenstein observed, however, that although "we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, … when we follow the rules" the "fundamental fact" remains that "things do not [necessarily] turn out as we had assumed" (Wittgenstein 1958, 50e §125). Rhythm also has 'rules', but in the neoplastic canvas, unlike in dance or in music, following the rule of visual rhythm is far from being a straightforward response. As we have seen in Chap. 2, Mondrian's conception of rhythm, both in his theory and in its realization on canvas, draws upon a dialectical dualism. His ideas contradict certain general notions about rhythm, particularly those predicated on 'naturalistic' or conventional understandings. Mondrian saw rhythm in the static composition of 'anti-sequential-repetition': his adoption of 'anti-sequential-repetition' as a principal characteristic of rhythm in his mature style neoplastic canvases is a particularly challenging conception. Moreover, the dynamism of neo-plastic visual rhythm contains a sense of 'speed'. This 'speed' traverses the 'picture-screen' surface in which 'dimensions' keeps changing among the relations between painterly elements (or 'plastic means' in his terminology): placement, space, physicality and image. The mind-eye of the viewer, confronted by the conflict between the physicality of the 'thick' surface of the canvas and the changing dimensions of the image, generates this 'speed' as a force which penetrates both 'dimension' and the physicality of the canvas.

7.8 'Stasis' Becomes 'Fast'

As we saw in Chap. 2, Mondrian rejected 'kinetic' rhythm, where the sense of 'speed' is associated with highly varnished black straight lines (or belts). Interestingly, in 1930 Alexander Calder visited Mondrian's studio and was deeply impressed by the room's atmosphere, where walls mounted with primary coloured plates surrounded his canvases. Calder suggested that "perhaps it would be fun to make these rectangles oscillate". Mondrian replied ("with a very serious countenance"): "No, it is not necessary, my painting is already very fast" (Troy 1983, 162).

There are several possible interpretations of Mondrian's comment that might account for what he implied in this claim, a claim that so boldly equates a painted surface—a flat, constrained, and static thing—with its spatio-temporal antithesis: 'speed'. Perceptible oscillation on canvas, especially physical, was completely counter to Mondrian's intention, which was to depict dynamism in the guise of sta-

sis. For Mondrian, stasis is essential to the generation of rhythmic energy. Mondrian's abrupt rejection of Calder's suggestion (perhaps he was unaware of Calder's ideas about the 'mobile') and his assertion that his painting was already "fast" is intriguing, in that Mondrian chose not to give a full length explanation of his ideas of dynamic composition, relying instead on a one-word, comparative adjective relating to *speed*. The curt remark "my painting is already very fast" is perhaps a reflection of Mondrian's resentment towards the inadequacy of conventional painting vocabulary in terms of dealing with his deeply considered ideas about visual rhythm. The word 'speed' might normally indicate a concern with the 'speed' *of* something—a moving object as defined according to the conventions and language of physics. Mondrian's comment nonetheless emphasises his resistance to the notion of physical movement or oscillation as such among pictorial elements. Most importantly, it emphasises his commitment to the mental synthesis of movement in composition. These interpretations of Mondrian's comment to Calder further suggest that there are 'unnoticed' aspects of dynamism: the 'speed' of changing dimensions within the 'static' composition, and the speed of the straight lines traversing the 'thick' physical surface of canvas. More precisely, Mondrian's claim that his painting is 'fast' was not in the sense of a comparative adjective: for him, the term 'fast' meant 'fast' in the *absolute* sense. By definition, the straight line is the shortest distance between two points. By the same token, it conveys the tension between its two endpoints, a tension which the curved or broken line cannot convey with the same force or directness. Conceptually, that is, through the faculty of the 'mind-eye', the static straight line behaves according to means which defy the normal bounds by which we normally define 'speed'. The speed of the straight line can be conceptualised beyond the limitations of *actual* speed, since the latter always denotes something—a body, light, sound waves—moving at a given measurable rate. Since actual speed is the speed *of* something, then even the speed of light (the benchmark conceivable maximum) is constrained by gravity, i.e., the combined factors of space and time. The sense of 'speed' expressed by the straight line, by contrast, connotes a sense which transcends the limitations of physically embodied time and space. It conveys an instantaneous or immeasurable sense of space-time, and thus can be defined as *absolute* speed.[20] Mondrian expresses this sense of 'speed' by contrasting it with that of the Futurists. He was critical of the Futurists' use of the curved line, which in his thinking contradicted their own dictum of 'speed':

> Some ten years ago Marinetti proclaimed the necessity of speed. Since the idea of speed is expressed plastically in "the straight," it is surprising that the Italian Futurists have not rigorously applied this truth either to painting or to music. Absolute speed expresses in time what "straightness" establishes in space. Speed destroys the oppression of time and space and thus the domination of the individual: hence its importance for the pure plastic expression of the universal. That is why *the power of speed can transform music's expression to*

[20] That Mondrian perceived and used the straight line in terms of absolute speed rather than actual length, may be one reason why his canvases were always sized according to what can be seen, as a single unified composition, all at once. If his canvases had been very much larger, some movement of the viewer's head would reduce the absolute speed of the straight line to something spatial, to be measured according to divisible parts, as the eye tracks its length.

> *greater inwardness, not only through measure and tempo but also through composition and the plastic means* (Mondrian 1986, 154–5).[21]

Clearly, only the straight line is associated with "absolute speed", and with the power to destroy "the oppression of time and space". The passage above is also of interest in that it shows how Mondrian applied his idea of "speed" to music, while indicating his antipathy towards (or at least his dissatisfaction with) "measure and tempo", which are similarly constrained by the division of space and time. In Mondrian's neoplastic canvas, then, "absolute speed" is contained, but not diminished, by the overall static construction. In fact, quite the reverse happens: the straight lines, which "annihilate" space and time, provide an unmodulated *force* which is at the same time the composition's *structure*. It is the combined energy of these opposing forces—space, time, speed, stasis—which effects dynamic rhythm in the static construction of the neoplastic canvas.

The application of gloss varnish only to the black belts on the early mature neoplastic canvases is a direct manifestation of a crucial concept: one in which the function of straight lines must be emphasized, since the force of the straight lines themselves is what binds and at the same time dissects the colour and non-colour planes on the canvas. The straight, right-angled black lines convey enormous 'speed' which carries them well beyond the outer edge of the canvas. They imply a division of a space that continues outside the painting itself (indeed, this is one of the fundamentals of Neoplasticism). Rudolf Arnheim observes this trait in the mature neoplastic canvases: "Mondrian opens the various right-angled shapes to vague extensions into the space beyond. Black braces also refuse to stop where the canvas ends" (Arnheim 1986, 293). Straight lines dissect primary-coloured and non-coloured planes to form other subdivided planes beyond the boundaries of the physical canvas, through the effect of differentiated widths of these black belts.

Neo-plastic black lines have manifold dimensions: they are of varying widths and employ the force of the 'absolute speed' of the varnished straight line in contrast with the dormant thickness of coloured and non-coloured *impasti*. The black lines both form rectangles and rupture them, and constitute both intra- and extra-canvas rectangles, run verticality and horizontality, form criss-crossing points and corners, convey the sense of centrifugal and centripetal expansion and contraction of the planes. They read as both interrupting and dissecting elements. They read as independent elements—as black belts and as thick contour lines. Changing aspects among all these dimensions are what the viewer sees in the neoplastic canvas. Mondrian did *see* both rhythm and speed in his painting, but through the very important faculty of the 'mind-eye.'[22] Langer's conception of rhythm as composi-

[21] Mondrian reiterates the same point in his essay Neo-Plasticism (1923): "The straight … is plastic expression of the greatest speed, the greatest power, and so leads to the annihilation of time and space" (Mondrian 1986, 177).

[22] Mondrian's conceptualisations are nonetheless somewhat enigmatic, although, as suggested in the Introduction, a theosophical reading will attest to some aspects of his treatment of visual rhythm. It is preferable, however, to formulate a description of visual rhythm such as the one above concerning the speed of the straight line, which describes Mondrian's compositions in terms of

tion and Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning', are both examples in which an aspect (or dimension) of rhythm is seen on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. In both cases, and in Mondrian's too, the faculty of perception which enables such seeing is one best described as half experience and half thought.

7.9 Against Symmetry: Against Memory

In Mondrian's dialectical system, rhythm occurs by way of the effect, on (mind-eye) perception, of the inherent conflict between oppositions such as those already observed: verticality and horizontality, straight lines and planes, colour and non-colour planes, physicality and pictoriality, form and inform, similarity and representation, 'seeing-as' and continual 'aspect-dawning' ('thought' and 'thinking' in Wittgenstein's conception), and form and changing 'dimensions'. There are other factors of opposition too: simplicity and complexity, symmetry and asymmetry, concatenation in similarity, and tension in contrast, as well as the opposition between the manifest image and the short-term memory image (or according to Mondrian's thinking, "a brief duration" for the image to be formatted in the composition).

This oscillation between apparent simplicity and inherent complexity in structure has an important function in relation to the generation of rhythm. Paul Creston notes that a "repeated pattern is *simple* and a changing pattern is *compound*" (Creston 1961, 37). Repetition and change function, in perception, according to different mental faculties, so that through the function of memory, for example, the repeated pattern (because it constitutes repetition) becomes monotonous, while the changing pattern increases in complexity. The anti-repetitive surface of the neoplastic canvas is a 'field' of this compound changing pattern. The complexity of the neoplastic canvas is not limited to the changing pattern at the image level: change occurs in the composition through the tension implicit in its conflict with physicality of the surface of the canvas. As I have argued, the physically 'thick' surface of Mondrian's canvas is the object of the pictorial 'field' or 'picture-screen' which provides a tangible realm of manifoldness, of presentness, and it provides for a complexity of multiple readings for the composition.

The relations of transition between simplicity and complexity lead us to consider the notion of asymmetry, and the associated function of the viewer's memory, particularly in the case in which a viewer's gaze is exposed to a seemingly simplistic structure. E. H. Gombrich's observation of geometrical simplicity and its relationship to memory is pertinent here. Gombrich writes in *The Sense of Order*:

> If monotony makes it difficult to attend, a surfeit of novelty will overload the system and cause us to give up; we are not tempted to analyze the crazy pavement. It is different with hierarchies which we can master and reconstruct. In these arrangements we can subordinate

---

direct evidence of what occurs on the 'surface' of the canvas. To describe visual rhythm in such terms implies recourse to the more concrete terrain of what is given to perception, thus avoiding the need to seek explanation through mysticism (or other such metaphysical explanations).

> as read while we concentrate on the larger forms. The very ease of reconstruction allows us to go on and to enjoy that unity in complexity that has always appealed to paviours and other pattern-makers (Gombrich 1979, 9).

A series of simple rectangular planes dissected by straight lines is so rare in nature that the viewer will recognize them immediately as a product of manipulation by the human psyche.[23] The disposition of a space dissected into rectangular shapes, for example, tends to be treated as a series of 'simple' shape parts, which, (evoking industrially manufactured items) are interchangeable. Such a series or combination of simple shapes is relatively easy to 'understand' and memorise. Thus, after a prolonged look at a series of simple shapes in a painting, the viewer is motivated, due to the ease of understanding the structure, to begin memorizing the characteristics of the pattern. The inclination is to recognize and memorise a 'simple' composition of spatial units (a region dissected by the straight lines of a grid for example) in terms of the repetition and serialisation of similar units. In the neoplastic canvas, this apparently 'simplistic' reading is the conduit into the true complexity of the neoplastic composition and the important realm of the 'picture-screen.' Mondrian's asymmetrical geometrical compositions reject being read in terms of a memorizable iteration based on repetition and serialisation of similar units. Thus, his tile-like impasto rectangles thwart rather than yield to what Gombrich refers to as the "paviour's delight." In this sense, Mondrian's neoplastic canvas is anti-mnemonic. While seeming to be 'delightfully' simple, Mondrian's canvas overwhelms memory performance. Confronted by an 'unnoticable' complexity, under seemingly simple features of design, the viewer is drawn into the continual 'aspect-dawning' condition: a condition in which a continual change of 'dimensions' arises. In this context it is worth citing Mondrian's comments about paving stones in *Realist and Superrealist Art (Morphoplastic and neoplastic)* (1930):

> [N]eoplastic is as destructive as it is constructive. It is quite wrong to call it "Constructivism." It is a great mistake to think that neoplastic constructs rectangular planes set side by side—like paving stones (Mondrian 1986, 231).

Mondrian rejects seeing the rectangular planes as one would see regular paving stones, and, instead, emphasises the function of the straight line which both cuts through the forms (rectangles) and annihilates them at the same time (an outcome similarly pursued by the Constructivists). The neo-plastic canvas has the same dialectical function as the rectangle: rectangular position or dimension and form, but temporal—that is, never settled as actual 'form'. The rectangular shapes are not forms in their own right: they are shaped by the dissecting straight lines, and it is the latter which have the positive function of giving structure to the compositions. The rectangles are carefully located and configured in asymmetrical relations of tension. The neoplastic canvas appears simple, but this simplicity harbours continual

[23] For instance, the film director Stanley Kubrick is astute in his use of the "Monolith" in 2001, A Space Odyssey's opening scene. The startling image of a geometrical figure is distinguishable as a sign of human intelligence, constituting a stark rectangular shape in contrast to the round planets and complex organic shapes of the natural cosmos.

destructive momentum. This seeming simplicity attracts the faculty of memory but holds it in an anti-mnemonic trap: simplicity is a manifold, containing multiple dimension of simplicities. Thus, neoplastic rectangles or squares are to be read and understood as non-shapes and dimensions, and it is in this sense that they are activated in the non-Gestalt field, which, as we know, deals exclusively with the cognition of forms.

Ironically, in terms of ostensive actuality, Mondrian's 'rectangles' can at times be read as paving stones, in having been produced by way of such thick layers of oil paint: the rectangular planes physically protrude in comparison with the shallower, physically concave black strips which run between them. To the viewer, the rectangular aspect can also elicit visions of a brick wall. Mondrian himself was aware of this, which is why he strongly denies this trait. How can such a reading be avoided, given that physical evidence on the canvas so easily yields to associations with paving-stones and brickwork? How can the viewer enter the dialectical field of reading in which it is viable to read visual rhythm in the neoplastic canvas? The viewer's gaze is held between polarised views: one, the simple, grid structure of 'rectangular tiles', and the other the complex anti-mnemonic structure of neoplasticism. A fundamental and important tension emerges between the emphasised physical condition of tile-like rectangles on the surface, and the transcendent surface constituted by a composition of rectangular 'non-shapes'. The simple structure of paving stones or the regular grid of tiled walls also harbour an underlying symmetry, which Mondrian rejected because in his view symmetry relates to repetition, and creates fissure in the organic unity of the composition in painting. Mondrian suggested replacing the conventional concept of symmetry with his original concept of 'equilibrium':

> Individuality typically manifests the law of repetition, which is nature's rhythm, as law characterized by *symmetry.* Symmetry or regularity emphasizes the *separateness* of things and therefore has no place in the plastic expression of the *universal as universal.*
>
> Abstract-real plastic has to transform symmetry into equilibrium, which it does by continuous opposition of proportion and position; by plastically expressing relationships that change each opposite into the other (Mondrian 1986, 40).

In neoplastic painting, Mondrian repudiates sequential repetition as being inimical to rhythm, stating clearly here that repetition is also inimical to asymmetricality, a fundamental factor in neoplastic composition. Asymmetry contributes to the reading of rhythm on the neoplastic canvas by thwarting any sense of easy visual balance which might otherwise arise through an equi-measured space and the effect of duplication. Instead, asymmetry brings a viewer into the realm of free associative balance (or equilibration) by perceptive evaluation of the pictorial elements in the composition. It thus hinders an 'easy' memorization of the visual impression of the composition. This is precisely how the paradoxical act ensues: memorization and its rejection compels the mind to enter a state of 'deep' reading of the painting, and thereby to engage in an incessant interaction between changing dimensions and memorizing.

7.10 Reading ‘Rhythm’ on Mondrian’s Early Mature Neoplastic Canvases

When looking at an early mature neoplastic Mondrian canvas for some time, the primary coloured rectangles on the canvas appear to change dimensions: at times protruding and retreating, or expanding and contracting, at times separating and then rejoining, closed and then open, appearing to extend beyond the borders of the canvas but also remaining self-contained within its frame, at once balanced and then unbalanced. Mondrian would no doubt have experienced those effects himself, and perhaps realized that it could express some sense of ‘speed’ and rhythm. Neurobiological evidence, which relates to the so-called ‘eye tracking’ and ‘fatigue theory’, attests to certain crucial points concerning this kind of acquisition of visual rhythm and movement, but is not the only available means of verification (Atkinson 2016, Gneo et al. 2012, 82). First, the function of memory should be considered. Second, rhythm occurs on the terrain of the pre-symbolic and in the mid-field between physicality and subjectivity, as we saw in Husserl’s analysis of painting in Chap. 6. In the linguistically oriented human mind, the pressure of the iconic reading on canvas, that is, the propensity of ‘reading a picture as code’ is ineradicably persuasive. Thus, when linguistically hard-wired thinking is applied to non-referential painting, some conflict will arise between the twin opposing forces: one, the propensity to enact an iconic reading, and the other, the option or need (given the lack of apparent ‘meaning’) to engage in a pre-linguistic reading.[24]

One’s gaze lingers for a while on the modular ‘pattern’ of the geometrical design and enters into the pre-linguistic stage of dimensions of non-form in the neo-plastic composition. The moment of “half visual experience, half concept” is experienced, resembling the switching back and forth between the two interposed images of the rabbit and the duck. However, when we see, say, picture-rabbit, the rabbit functions as the modular, while the duck (or the duck-rabbit) functions as the variation. Conversely, our perception of the neo-plastic composition, which engages in continual aspect-dawning, swings back and forth between variation and the modular pattern of the composition, through which the changing dimensions occur. This continual seeing of dimensions happens within the continual series of flashing moments that constitute enduring aspect-dawning for the viewer and effects the condition by which the mind-eye continues to discover ‘new’ groupings and combinations in the composition of a painting.[25]

---

[24] For example, Julia Kristeva relates this definition to the ‘real’ stage and the place where rhythm can happen (e.g. pre-linguistic stage of a baby talk). The domain of rhythm, in Kristeva’s thought, belongs to the solid actual ground of ‘chora’, which means in ancient greece ‘space’ and Plato’s three components of reality, to the ‘real’, rather than only to the ‘imaginary’ (Kristeva 1980, 24, Plato 1965, 70–1, Pérez-Gómez and Parcell 1994, 8–9).

[25] The viewer’s espial eye (which surveys to find groupings) and the mind-eye’s reciprocal movement between ‘modular’ pattern and various dimensions can be argued as composing the sense of ‘metre’ in the viewer’s mind. However, consolidation of this observation would require investigation beyond the scope of this book.

In the neoplastic canvas, the mind-eye grasps the contrasts and similarities among elements. The neoplastic canvas contains an extreme but intricate tension between these two principal functions: similarity between planes of the same colour is contrasted against their rectangular position, the rectangle 'shape' appears and at the same time is non-existent as such, accompanied by the appearance of dissecting black lines which contain them.

Mondrian's reply to Calder that "my painting is already very fast" finds validation, then, when one has arrived at a more definitive understanding of visual rhythm. Mondrian was half serious and half indignant at Calder's question: "Are you trying to make these rectangles oscillate?". To Mondrian, it was incomprehensible that the effect of his paintings elicit even a hint of physical oscillation of the rectangles. To him, to 'oscillate' meant to treat a painting as a kinetic sculpture, and he was, first and foremost, a painter. Of paramount importance was his aim: to create a state of mind which would evoke a sense of stasis and equilibrium in his neoplastic painting.

The investigation of the visual rhythm in Mondrian's neo-plastic canvases arrives at a point where the 'static' non-referential composition of Mondrian's early mature neo-plastic canvas can be said to have 'rhythm'. Rhythm encompasses many sets of contrasting and oppositional pairs. It encompasses, for example, both the natural and human, relates to both time and space, has both modern and ancient roots, connotes both dynamism and stasis, duration and segmentation, passiveness and voluntariness, physical and conceptual, linear and non-linear, personal and public, mathematical and emotional, and arithmetic and geometric. Because of this chimerical characteristic of rhythm, its multi dualistic character escapes definition and eludes meaning which might otherwise accord with commonsense understandings: In short, the cognition of rhythm occurs beyond representational signification. As soon as rhythm is established in one's mind, the ladder of understanding which links the semantic field and the physical field (or the terrain of action or becoming) is abandoned. Rhythm, once understood, is indifferent to interpretation and semantic meaning. The arguments developed in this book aim to construct the grounds for the condition of 'trust' necessary for the experience of a 'new' meaning for visual rhythm. As we saw earlier, Wittgenstein wrote:

> I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say "can trust something") (Wittgenstein 1969, §509, 66e).

The difference between "trusts something" and "can trust something" is provocative because 'can trust' implies a moment of query, a need to 'test the water' so to speak, before mastering a skill to experience 'something': skepticism is brought into the disposition of trust. On the contrary, to 'trust something' leaves no room for skepticism. Wittgenstein posits this when he notes that once the function of 'trust' operates uncritically, a language-game is possible. It is certain that Mondrian's engagement with Neo-plasticism was facilitated in part by his uncritical trust in 'static' rhythm.

7.11 Conclusion

According to Maurice Blanchot, it is to be deemed worthy of the name "work", if a work of art is "not the deadened unity of repose." Rather, it is

> the intimacy and the violence of contrary movements which are never reconciled and never appeased—never, at least, as long as the work is a work. The work is the intimate confrontation with itself of an opposition between contraries, neither of which, though they are irreconcilable, has coherence except in the contest that opposes them one to the other (Blanchot 1982, 226).

Following Blanchot's definition of what determines that something is a true "work", if Mondrian's neoplastic canvas constitutes the "passive" unity of stasis (or repose), then it would contradict and diminish the energy and force of contraries among elements, a feature which Mondrian's work as true "work", inherently and purposely constitutes.

Against the view that his early mature neo-plastic works constitute 'insensible' or 'static' rhythmic unity, I have argued that Mondrian's stasis is constituted by the equilibrated energy of repose, or 'inward' rhythm. The problem, however, concerns how the viewer can not only appreciate, but more importantly, energize or in other words, *activate* Mondrian's 'repose'. In order to make the shift into 'rhythm-sightedness' (to make maximum use of the terminological associations with 'blindness') one would have to perceive or conceive of a point through which there could be a release from the 'stasis', which would facilitate the seeing of dynamism as opposed to stasis, or seeing dynamics and stasis at the same time in simultaneous opposition. Mondrian's early neoplastic composition constitutes the matrix of this stasis, the dynamic character of which resides in the dialectic structure of oppositional tension. Through the constitution of this tension, Mondrian's neoplastic canvas functions as an active visual field, which, in denying its status as a picture or 'design', thereby inhibits the possibility of both form (i.e., the seeing of rectangles and squares) as well as a background-foreground Gestalt field. As an active visual field, it expands its equilibrated energy beyond the edges of the canvas. "Wall Works" is a term Harry Holtzman used to describe the interrelations among elements in Mondrian's studio. In the context of his studio, the neoplastic canvas responds to and renders 'noticeable' (according to Wittgenstein's sense of "unnoticed aspects") the neoplastic elements which occur beyond its own boundaries. The canvas functions in the interior space to constitute additional permutations of plastic relations, which it incorporates into itself, and which become integrated into one's reading of its surface. The canvas functions as a matrix, then, for the entire interior real space.

By way of the viewer's participation, the neoplastic canvas can be metaphorised as something which 'breathes', a conception which comes easily to mind when one considers the cycle of 'inhalation' and 'exhalation' which approximates the exchange between the surface of the canvas and the "Wall Works". According to this view, Mondrian's neoplastic canvas resists being read in terms of the conventions of Classical painting, which in incorporating a perspectival system, constitutes an Albertian 'window', a pictorial space which refers one away from its surface as

surface. Emphasis on the physical condition of the neoplastic surface similarly effects an erasure of illusionistic pictorial space. Rather, the surface functions more as a physical 'screen', with an 'opaque' surface, which can be conceptualised as presenting a fundamental contrast to the 'transparent' surface in Leonardo's example of the mirror as a model for painting.

The physical screen presents a challenge to the viewer, who according to convention, will look for shapes and pictorial space on the transparent, invisible surface of the canvas. Moreover, the viewer is required to see the neo-plastic shape as a non-shape, straight lines not as figuration but as abrupt arrest and transcendental, absolute 'speed'. The thickness of the surface, and its 'geological' complexity summon the viewer to understand these conflicting elements as a positive tension between actuality and transcendence: the neoplastic canvas, by design, defies the conventional view of painting itself.

Thus, the neoplastic composition can be described in terms of its function to open up the oppositional conflict between physicality and conceptual image; between what ostensibly appears as shape and what, in neoplastic terms, are non-shapes (colour planes, straight lines); colour and non-colour. S. K. Langer's concept of 'composition' explains the operation of this opening-up function, by way of reference to musical composition as performance. A similar activity occurs in the neoplastic composition: it is a matrix; a flow; a configuration akin to 'breathing' between viewer and canvas: a reciprocal interchange between opening-up and seeing-in.

That the neoplastic canvas resists iconic readings presupposes that the viewer develop a new set of skills or experiences of painting per se. Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" accompanied by "aspect-dawning" provides a model for looking at pictures, in which looking (for meanings, understandings) can operate through the faculty of perception, and thereby avoid recourse to iconic meaning in the Gestalt field.

The aspect-dawning argument equips the enquiry with the grounds for taking into account the perceptual terrain which occupies the threshold between representational and non-representational reading of the canvas. The condition through which one is engaged in continuous aspect-dawning in this manner attests to the viability of this conception, that is, of a terrain in which the conventional or habitual representational reading of form or design in painting is precluded.

Wittgenstein's 'aspect-dawning' arguments describe how aspect-changing occurs in the viewer's mind, and are indicative of the 'energy' implicit in the flickering moment as the change of aspect occurs. This can be defined in terms of the change of 'dimensions' or groupings, based on similarity and contrast, among the pictorial elements on the surface of the neoplastic canvas. Aspect-change occurs in the moment of transposition from one plane to another; from speed to abrupt arrest in the straight lines; from contrast to similarity among permutations of rectangulars; from one straight line to another of different thickness; from the shallowness of the black belts to the thickness of the colour and non-colour planes and from mat opacity to varnished sheen. These complexities play an important role in subverting the 'memorability' of what is seen on the neoplastic surface.

Despite the seeming simplicity of Mondrian's 'designs', the early mature neoplastic canvas works against the tendency towards mnemonics and memorization.

This apparent simplicity seduces the viewer's faculty of memorization, or of "getting it". However, once the mind-eye begins to engage in the phase of aspect-change which the neoplastic surface generates and is held in that state, then the dynamic exchange of the aspects occurs. Of fundamental interest here in the conclusion are aspect-changes (or dimension-changes) that can be metaphorised in terms of 'breathing', between release and arrest, exteriorization and interiorization. Fundamental to its generation is the tension implicit in the twofoldness of image (composition) and the physicality of the canvas surface, which remain always inseparable. These tensions and aspect-exchanges compose the 'flow' of rhythm. In the process of release and arrest, or "push and pull" as Hofmann describes it, the viewer experiences the voluntary articulation of the flow in the exchange between aspects (or dimensions) and the tension between image and physicality (see Hans Hofmann's comments on "push and pull" in Chap. 5). Neoplastic rhythm is the flow which streams from the composition or structure itself, which in turn provides the grounds for continuous 'aspect-dawning'.

Representational elements in painting hinder the possibility for continuous 'aspect-dawning'. One example is the Futurists' strobographical (or chronophotographic) interpretation of time: what results is a representation of the expression of time, which does not elicit the sense of 'flow' which comes from 'aspect-dawning'. The viewer is required to see, as Wittgenstein explained it, "duck-rabbit surrounded by rabbits in one, by ducks in the other", a condition of perceptual overload which was the problem in the early mature neoplastic canvases (1921–31). But it also implies recourse to Hegelian idealism, which Kierkegaard had criticised, in that "everything happens within the head." However, the important point is that in his pursuit as a 'serious' painter, Mondrian composed and experienced rhythm in his 'static' early mature neo-plastic canvas: that is, he saw aspect- (or dimension-) dawning in the 'static' composition of Neo-plasticism. From the point of view of the analyses above, it can be argued that Mondrian's resolution of his own struggle with neoplasticism is the means by which the viewer is able to learn to see this important 'unnoticed' aspect of his canvas.

The surface of the neoplastic canvas is an 'object', according to which its objective physicality is 'public': and in the aspect-exchange game, anyone can participate. Neoplastic visual rhythm is an internalised act of the movement of rhythm, but is actual for the 'experienced' viewer. Mondrian's writing and his early mature neoplastic canvases strongly indicate this degree of sophistication of viewing. However, because of the very complexity of the nature of perception, the direction one must take is necessarily philosophical.

In this book I have traced Mondrian's theory of art mainly by way of his own writing and thinking, maintaining a close inspection of source material in my enquiry. The nature of this material, however, leads to an 'unusual' understanding of visual rhythm: hence, an emphasis on the notion of static rhythm in Mondrian's early mature Neo-plasticism. To see rhythm in those particular canvases involves an appreciation of the 'picture-screen' condition, and I use the example of sino-Japanese calligraphy to demonstrate this. Mondrian's subtle and very complex descriptions of his observations and his painting have brought my inquiry into the

realm of philosophical argument, notably that of Wittgenstein. This book, then, is an attempt to bring the philosophical ideas of a would-be philosopher-artist into the domain of serious philosophical consideration. Mondrian's recondite ideas about visual rhythm have, in this sense, contributed to this aim by the very fact of the difficulties they present to the researcher, in defining them in a way that accords with evidence on the canvas.

References

Arnheim, Rudolph. 1986. The Center Surviving Mondrian. *The American Society for Aesthetics* XLIV (3, Spring): 292–293.

Atkinson, William Walker. 2016. *The Power of Mind: 17 Books Collection*. Prague: e-artnow.

Austin, J.L. 1962. *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baz, Avner. 2000. What's the Point of Seeing Aspects? *Philosophical Investigations* 23 (2 April): 97–122.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1982. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. A. Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Bois, Yve-Alain. 1990. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cone, Edward T. 1972. Music: A View from Delft. In *Perspectives on Contemporary Music Theory*, ed. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc.

Creston, Paul. 1961. *Principles of Rhythm*. New York: Franco Colombo Inc.

Denis, Maurice. 1968. Definition of Neotraditionism. In *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Fukumoto, Osamu. 2006–13. Wittgenstein from/on the Viewpoint of Asperger Syndrome (Japanese). Accessed 30 July. http://home.u02.itscom.net/fukumoto/hp/shyohyo/archives/asperger.html

Gneo, Massimo, Maurizio Schmid, Silvia Conforto, and Tommaso D'Alessio. 2012. A Free Geometry Model-Independent Neural Eye-Gaze Tracking System. *Journal of NeuroEngineering and Rehabilitation* 9 (1): 82.

Gombrich, E.H. 1960. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, Bollingen Series, 35 The A W Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 5*. New York: Pantheon Books.

———. 1979. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited.

Joosten, Joop M. 1998. *Piet Mondrian, Catalogue Raisonné II: Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944*. Blaricum: V+ K Publishing/Inmerc.

Kandinsky, Wassily. 1947. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art, and Painting in Particular, 1912*. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz.

Kandinsky, Wassily, Kenneth Clement Lindsay, and Peter Vergo. 1982. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Vol. 1 (1901–1921)*, 2 vols. London: Faber.

Kramer, Jonathan D. 1988. *The Time of Music: New Meanings New Temporalities New Listening Strategies*. New York: Schirmer Books.

Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, European Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mondrian, Piet. 1969. *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912–1914*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International nv.

———. 1986. *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Trans. H. Holtzman and M.S. James. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co.

Mullhall, Stephen. 1980. *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects*. London: Routledge.
Pérez-Gómez, Alberto, and Stephen Parcell. 1994. *Chora Volume One: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*. Montreal/Kingston/London/Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Plato. 1965. *Timaeus*. Trans. H.D.P. Lee. Hardmonsworth: Penguin Books.
Putnam, Hilary. 1991. *Representations and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963a. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Trans. W. Baskin. London: Peter Owen.
———. 1963b (1961). The Unprivileged Painter: Lapoujade. In *Essays in Aesthetics*. London: Peter Owen.
Tosaki, Eiichi. 1998.
Troy, Nancy. 1983. *The De Stijl Environment*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
———. 1969. *On Certainty*. Trans. G.H. von Wright, G.E.M. Anscombe, and Denis Paul. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
———. 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*. Trans. R. Rhees, R. Hargreaves, and R. White. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
———. 1977. *Remarks on Colour*. Trans. L.L. McAlister and M. Schättle. Berkeley: University of California Press.
———. 1980a. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. 1*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
———. 1980b. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. 2*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Oxford: Blackwell.
———. 1982. *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. II*. Trans. G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman. Oxford: Blackwell.
Zemach, Eddy M. 1995. Meaning, the Experience of Meaning and the Meaning-Blind in Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy. *The Monist* 78 (4): 480–495.

Index

E. Tosaki, *Mondrian's Philosophy of Visual Rhythm*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 23,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-024-1198-0