

# The Complete Writings



Piet Mondrian

The Complete Writings

*Essays and Notes in Original Versions*

Compiled and edited by Louis Veen

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Veenendaal, April 2017

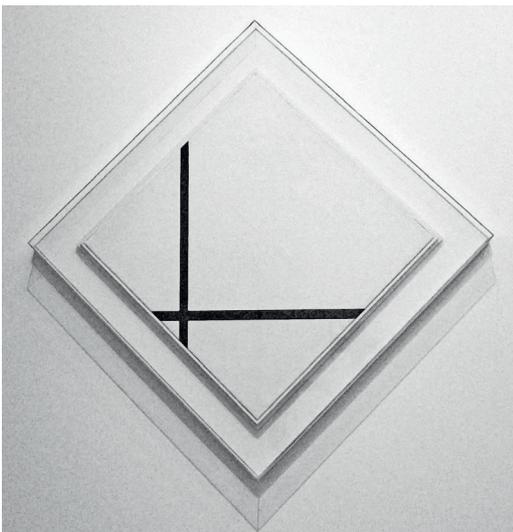


# Introduction

## Prelude

It was not one of the painter's texts that first aroused my interest in the writings of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), but a painting, *Composition with two lines*, in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The work, a white square measuring 80 x 80 cm and tilted 45 degrees, shows two straight, black intersecting lines. Mondrian signed it in red at the bottom of the vertical line, "PM 31", and 'framed' it with thin wooden slats, likewise painted white. It is one of his 17 so-called Lozenge or Diamond Compositions.<sup>2</sup> The museum had it mounted onto another white square and put into a display case. Every time I visit the Stedelijk Museum, this work draws me like a magnet. Its stark simplicity intrigues and fascinates me. At a certain point I asked if I could have a closer look. The museum kindly took the trouble to have the painting taken from its case, and gave me the opportunity to study it in the conservation studio.<sup>3</sup>

What struck me immediately is that the black lines were not just painted onto the white background. Close scrutiny of the painting on the basis of an eye-witness's remark has



1 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with two lines*, 1931. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam)

- 1 Joosten 1998: II 360-362, B229.
- 2 Carmean 1979.
- 3 This 'close-viewing' (with IRR camera, microscope, special lighting, and x-rays) took place on 17 February 2004.

resulted in the following reconstruction of Mondrian's working method.<sup>4</sup> First he attached two strips of paper (28 mm vertical, 32 mm horizontal) to the canvas, probably with cleaning gum. He subsequently moved the strips around until the result satisfied him, all the time stepping back to look at the 'composition' from a distance. He then attached the strips more firmly and started filling in the white planes in a criss-cross manner with the canvas lying on a table in front of him. Having applied several layers of white paint in this way, he let the canvas dry. Then he carefully removed the strips of paper and painted in the two lines with a single layer of a somewhat liquid black. Because the white planes consist of several layers, the black lines are slightly deeper. When the canvas was dry again, Mondrian applied a layer of glossy varnish to the black lines, but left the white parts matt. The black lines are taught and crisp, but there is no indication whatsoever that Mondrian used a ruler, a piece of cardboard, or some kind of masking tape.<sup>5</sup> It is highly likely that Mondrian made many of his abstract compositions in this way.

The 'depiction' of two narrow black lines on a white 'background' reminds us of Mies van der Rohe's "Less is more."<sup>6</sup> This is not a traditional painting: the lozenge shape, the image itself – it is all extraordinary. In my view *Composition with two lines* is not a painting, but a statement, a visual declaration, a summary of Mondrian's ideas about painting. Moreover, the work is an homage to universal beauty, not because the image is pleasing, but because it appeals to our intuitive (universal) sense of proportion. The interaction of lines, planes and borders is peaceful and calming.

My close encounter with this exceptional painting made me want to know if the painter ever spoke or wrote about it. The internet taught me that Mondrian was a prolific writer, and I even found a book called *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the book did not include a discussion of *Composition with two lines*, but it did have a text dating from the same year: 'The New Art – The New Life' (Mondrian's original title: 'L'art nouveau – la vie nouvelle'). The discrepancy between the complexity of the language and the simplicity of the image is striking. It is hard to imagine that the painting and the text were created by the same person in the same year. Close investigation of the relationship between the two, however, reveals that, although Mondrian saw word and image as two separate domains, they are at the same time highly interdependent.<sup>8</sup> The image cannot do without the word; the word cannot exist without the image.

From the beginning of 1914 until his death in 1944, Mondrian wrote more than a hundred essays on the subject of art and society – some brief, some very extensive. He wrote in Dutch, French and English, his choice of language often depending on his place of residence: Laren (the Netherlands), Paris, London, New York. For the American *Collected Writings* mentioned above, however, the Dutch and French texts had been translated, and the English writings had been edited and 'polished.' Nevertheless, browsing through this book, I soon realised that all of Mondrian's writings proclaim his conviction that art paves the way to a better society. Mondrian was, of course, not

4 Seuphor 1956a: 207, "[...] He was a poor mathematician, and used only the most primitive tools – a ruler and strips of white paper. [...]".

5 Masking tape was first manufactured by the 3M Company in 1930 and marketed as Scotch Tape. I do not know if Scotch Tape was available in Paris in 1931.

6 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), German-American architect and designer.

7 Holtzman and James 1986.

8 Veen 2003.

the first to dream of a better world. What is new, however, is his idea that his own Neoplasticism could play a significant role. In his paintings Mondrian visualises equivalent proportions, that may serve as a model for everyday life. In this way, art becomes a mediator to straighten out society's crookedness and inequality, and this is what Mondrian, time and again, brings forward in his writings. Structuring daily life according to the basic principles of Neoplasticism will increase moral and physical wellbeing, and bring about a limpid, harmonious society. This art-based ideology is not only a unique form of art theory, but also an exceptional social one.

I became fascinated by Mondrian's idea of abstract art as a guide for humanity, and immersed myself in his writings. I decided to avoid translations and edited texts (i.e. the interpretations of others), and to try to read the painter's words as he wrote them. For lack of a reference work presenting the writings in their original language, I embarked on a search for the original manuscripts.

The majority of Mondrian's manuscripts are kept in the so-called Holtzman Deposit of the Beinecke Library at Yale University.<sup>9</sup> The American artist Harry Holtzman (1912-1987) met Mondrian in Paris in 1934, and despite an age difference of 40 years they became intimate friends. In 1940, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Harry helped Piet to leave Europe, and arranged an apartment-cum-studio for him in New York. Mondrian arrived in the US with two chests, one with (rolled) paintings, and one with documents. Just before his death on 1 February 1944, Mondrian officially designated Holtzman as his heir. The American not only inherited several dozens of paintings, but also all of Mondrian's manuscripts, typescripts, books, and personal papers. Between 1983 and 1985, Holtzman bequeathed Mondrian's paper heritage to the Beinecke Library.

During my visits to New Haven it quickly became clear that the Holtzman Deposit did not include all original manuscripts, so I continued my search, both physically and electronically, with varying degrees of success; some archives were inaccessible, several manuscripts remain untraceable.

I have tried to locate the original source of every text. Whenever this proved impossible, I settled for 'second best'; sometimes a photocopy remains, sometimes a published translation. These have been included, whenever I felt they were crucial for a complete edition of Mondrian's writings.

The result of my quest is the present edition of Mondrian's original writings. I hope this collection will not only be a contribution to Mondrian research, but also a repository of knowledge regarding a small but essential part of our international heritage.

## Why does a painter write?

Mondrian's abstract paintings are quite well known, but not many people are aware that the painter was also a prolific writer. Most of his writings can be dated between 1914 and 1944, which means he only started writing in earnest when he was over 42. But why did he take up the pen in the first place? Why does a painter write?

9 Piet Mondrian Papers, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, call number: GEN MSS 1102.

In a letter to a female friend Mondrian writes:

Dear Willy, [...] I've had a bit of a hard time, but things are better now [...] I'm getting on well with my work again, and writing is a great way of expressing myself [...] Most cordially, Piet.<sup>10</sup>

This fragment makes it clear that Mondrian saw writing as a kind of safety valve. Expressing his thoughts and feelings in this way, apparently gave him much satisfaction. Somewhere else he wrote, "I [...] always have thoughts inside my head [...]."<sup>11</sup> And, given his many essays, it is evident that he did not mean to keep these thoughts to himself; he wanted to share his ideas about painting as a guide for mankind, and was convinced that his writings could contribute to the good of man and society. In a letter to his friends Ella and Louk Hoijack, he states, "I hope it [i.e. his writing] is of help to humanity."<sup>12</sup> Speaking about Mondrian's writings, Bert van den Briel,<sup>13</sup> one of his best friends, stated:

Mondrian was deeply convinced that this was a role he had to fulfil, and it was completely in accordance with his personality to be utterly dedicated to it.<sup>14</sup> I have several times (also at Raspail)<sup>15</sup> spoken to M. about his writing, which always fatigued him, often irritated him, and many times disturbed his routine and unbalanced him. His writing originally came from a sense of duty [...].<sup>16</sup>

We may conclude from van den Briel's words that the painter felt a strong urge to write, almost a sacred calling. An awareness of this sense of duty is a first step towards answering the question why Mondrian wrote, but we should next ask ourselves where this inner motivation, this ambition, came from.

Mondrian envisaged a future society based on Neoplasticism, his own style within abstract art. In his view, the principles of Neoplasticism were not just applicable to the art of painting, but also to society as a whole. In brief, Mondrian was absolutely convinced that the transmission of the visible simplicity and the tangible balance of his Neoplastic paintings to everyday life would result in an enhanced moral and physical wellbeing.

That being said, Mondrian was well aware that his ideas about art and society could not simply be deduced from his paintings – they needed to be explained in words, and the ambition to clarify the meaning of his paintings was the driving force

10 "Beste Willy, [...] Ik heb een beetje moeilijke tijd gehad, nu gaat 't al beter. [...] Ik ben nu weer goed in mijn werk en 't schrijven is een groote uiting voor me. [...] Veel hartelijks van Piet." Letter from Paris, 6 September 1919, to Willy (Willemina) Wentholt (1886-1957), who taught French in Amsterdam.

11 See text 043.

12 "Ik hoop dat het de menschheid iets helpt." Letter of 7 June 1930 to Ella en Louk Hoijack. Louis (Louk) Hoyack (Hoijack) (1893-1967), Dutch writer, social critic, and philosopher.

13 Albert P. van den Briel (1881-1971), Dutch forestry expert. Henkels 1988b: 49 and 50.

14 "Mondriaan had de innerlijke overtuiging, dat hij ook op die wijze een rol te vervullen had, en het kwam geheel met zijn persoonlijkheid overeen, zich daarvoor met grote toewijding in te zetten." Henkels 1988b: 50.

15 From 20 March 1936 until 26 September 1938 Mondrian lived at 278 Boulevard Raspail, Paris.

16 "Ik heb meermalen (ook nog op Raspail) met M. gesproken over zijn geschrift, dat hem altijd vermoeide, dikwijls irriteerde, hem vele malen uit zijn gewone doen en evenwicht bracht. Het schrijven was oorspronkelijk een uitloei van plicht [...]." Henkels 1988b: 68.

behind his writings. In an interview Mondrian stated:

It is hard to explain the intention of my paintings. In the works themselves I have expressed things as well as I could [...] The reverse side, what remains unspoken, can be better set forth in an article.<sup>17</sup>

This fragment makes it clear that Mondrian was of the opinion that the ideas behind his paintings could best be expressed in words. Striving to articulate the meaning and role of his paintings, Mondrian not only became a passionate advocate of his visions, but also a unique social theorist. He came to see the dissemination of his social ideals as a vocation.

In Mondrian's view, human misery and social injustice were the result of inequality, not only socio-economical but also psychological. He felt that man suffered from an inner imbalance caused by a lack of equality between the material and the spiritual – the female and the male. In order to characterise the inequalities he perceived everywhere, he uses the terms 'tragic' and 'tragedy' (Dutch: 'tragiek'):

Tragedy exists in both the social and the inner life. The main form of tragedy is the original (unequal) duality of spirit and nature, but there is also tragedy in social life. Because of a mutual imbalance, there is tragedy between the male and the female, between society and the individual.<sup>18</sup>

In 'De Zuiver Abstracte Kunst' (Pure Abstract Art), he phrases it somewhat differently:

Inequality within this duality, *within the relationship between man and nature*, is the cause of all trouble that exists and has existed. The fact that the one dominates the other has so far resulted in manifold misery.<sup>19</sup>

Mondrian's concern regarding inequality is at the centre of his art theory. He wants to reach out to the world, offer a helping hand; we should keep in mind that many of his ideas were conceived at the time of the Great War.

In later texts, Mondrian contends that inequality results from both internal and external factors. Physical and moral factors lead to internal imbalance; externally, the individual is put off balance by political, economical, as well as social rules and regulations. Many of the latter are unwritten, for instance rules of conduct within the family or the local community. These internal and external factors put great pressure on the equality of

17 "t Is moeilijk, uit te leggen, wat ik met mijn schilderijen bedoel. Daarin zelf heb ik het zoo goed mogelijk uitgedrukt. [...] Den achterkant, die ongezegd blijft, kan je beter in een artikel laten uitkomen." [H. van Loon] 'Bij Piet Mondriaan', in: *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, Thursday 23 March 1922, evening edition B.

18 "Tragiek bestaat in het innerlijke zoowel als het uiterlijke leven. Bestaat de grootste tragiek in de eigene (ongelijke) dualiteit van geest en natuur, ook in het uiterlijke leven is tragiek. Door onderling onevenwichtige verhouding is er tragiek tusschen het mannelijke en het vrouwelijke, en tusschen maatschappij en enkeling." P. Mondriaan. 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst'. *De Stijl* 1, no. 9 (July 1918): 105 (Text 010).

19 "Ongelijkwaardigheid in de verhouding dezer tweeheid, in de verhouding van mensch en natuur, is de oorzaak van alle ellende, die bestaan heeft of bestaat. Het domineeren van het een over het ander of van den een over den ander heeft tot op heden tot velerlei wantoestanden geleid." Piet Mondrian, 'De Zuiver Abstracte Kunst' (1929) (Text 045).

relationships inside and outside the individual. However, Mondrian maintains that in abstract art a harmonious composition is always possible, irrespective of size, colour, and means of expression. The elements that make up such a composition may not be equal, as long as they are equivalent. In this way, Mondrian says, art shows life how things can be:

Plastic art shows that real freedom is not mutual equality but mutual equivalence. In art, forms and colors have different dimension and position, but are equal in value. In the same way, through greater mutual equivalence of individual elements, our life can be better than it is now. By its freedom, art always creates a certain mutual equivalence of its composing forms, and shows the need for this freedom in human life.<sup>20</sup>

According to Mondrian, there are two distinct stages within the elimination of inequality through abstract art. First, art will liberate itself from its shackles, which creates the possibility of showing equivalent relations in a clear and undiluted manner. Second, the pure relationships of ‘liberated’ art will be transferred to man and social life.

Mondrian is convinced that, as a first step towards equivalence, traditional art should do away with all kinds of redundancies. ‘Old’ art is full of forms with specific meanings – symbolic and figurative references to something outside the painting. In addition, there are conventions, such as the rules of perspective, and the suggestion of plasticity through light and shadow. By doing away with subjective, symbolic, and narrative elements, as well as with artistic ‘tricks’, liberated art will be able to show us equivalent compositions, which may serve as a blueprint for a new society. In Mondrian’s view, Neoplasticism, his own form of abstract art, is the realisation of this first stage.

The next step involves the propagation of the equivalent relations of liberated art, as demonstrated by Neoplasticism. For these to reach the human psyche as well as society, they should be integrated into every aspect of human culture – architecture, music, dance, theatre, film, and literature. In this way, every individual will be surrounded by the pure, equivalent relations of Neoplasticism, which will enhance the equivalence of the human psyche as well as human *dasein*. The ‘new man’ will use his inner peace to create moral, relational, economic, and political equivalence.

The realisation of equivalent relationships is of supreme importance for human life. Socially and economically, unity, peace, happiness, and prosperity can only be attained through equivalent relationships.<sup>21</sup>

According to Mondrian, this second stage is yet to be realised, and “the culture of pure relationships” is still far away. This is why he dedicates his pamphlet *Le Néo-Plasticisme* (Text 016) to future man (“Aux hommes futurs”). Mondrian’s idea to use art as a blueprint and guide for a new society gives him a unique position not only within the history of art, but also among the utopian thinkers.

Unfortunately, many of Mondrian’s attempts to explain and clarify may have had quite the opposite effect, since he often got bogged down in complex formulae and unusual

20 Piet Mondrian, ‘Art and Life Towards the Liberation from Oppression’ (1942) (Text 096).

21 “Het realiseeren van evenwaardige verhouding is voor het leven van het hoogste belang. Door evenwaardige verhouding alleen kan, maatschappelijk en economies eenheid, vrede, geluk, welvaart benaderd worden.” Piet Mondrian, ‘De Zuiver Abstracte Kunst’ (1929) (Text 045).

terms. His texts can be opaque and tiresome – on the other hand one might contend that his contemporaries were not ready for his idealistic theories. This may have been the reason that in several instances Mondrian was unable to find a publisher. His important article ‘L’art nouveau – la vie nouvelle’,<sup>22</sup> for instance, was not published during his lifetime, which was a matter of grave disappointment to him.

The many deletions and additions in Mondrian’s manuscripts are evidence that his words often failed to satisfy him. Like a teacher trying to find new ways to present the subject matter, Mondrian was always looking for new terms and phrases to express his ideas about life and art. In an interview he states, “I write very carefully. I keep reworking things.”<sup>23</sup> Incidentally, Mondrian had the same approach to painting; here, too, he was forever changing and adapting.

## Mondrian’s sources

Mondrian was a highly original thinker and writer, but, needless to say, he also used the writings of others. His letters and texts tell us that he read Aristotle, the Dutch philosophers Mathieu Schoenmaekers and Gerard Bolland, and the esoteric writer Helena Blavatsky. However, according to the painter himself, the most profound influence came from the ideas of members of the Cubist movement, active in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. His article ‘Le cubisme et la néoplastique’ is devoted to this subject.<sup>24</sup>

Mondrian’s first published text, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’ (New Imaging in painting),<sup>25</sup> provides a valuable insight into the sources he used in developing his own theories. In my view this series of articles forms the basis of Mondrian’s ideas about art and society.

### ARISTOTLE

I have not been able to find the exact source for Aristotle’s influence on Mondrian. It is quite possible he read the volume on Aristotle from the series *Groote Denkers* (*Major thinkers*) by the Dutch philosopher Julius de Boer.<sup>26</sup> In the first *De Stijl* article Mondrian discusses aspects of Aristotle’s ontology, an important part of the Greek philosopher’s metaphysics, dealing with the characteristics and various forms of ‘reality’. Mondrian writes:

Pure observation causes us to see this fundamental unity as the permanent force of all things; it makes us aware that this force is what all things have in common. Aristotle designated this profound common force as substance, as the essence of a thing, the thing in itself, as that which exists in itself, independent of accidentals such as size, form, properties; these are merely appearances through which substance reveals itself. This outward form only presents itself to us through the force of substance.

22 Text 056.

23 “Ik schrijf erg zorgvuldig. Telkens werk ik het om.” See note 17.

24 Text 051.

25 Published in the magazine *De Stijl* between October 1917 and October 1918 (Text 010).

26 J. de Boer, *Groote Denkers (Wijsbegeerte der oudheid)*, [Baarn], s.a. [ca. 1910]. The series includes Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Philo of Alexandria, and Plotinus.

If substance is the permanent force, the direct representation [‘beelding’] of what is universal (i.e. the direct revelation of substance) is not only justified, but even required, because what is valuable is the permanent force.

Since substance cannot be discerned by the senses, nature cannot do without the accidentals of substance – size, form properties. Nature demands form (corporeity); within nature, everything exists through form, expressing itself in (natural) colour. Thus, nature deludes us into thinking that form is also necessary in art; nature makes us forget that substance presents itself through what is universal and appears by way of form and colour.<sup>27</sup>

Mondrian uses two keywords from Aristotle’s ontological theories: ‘substance’ and ‘accidentals’, terms Aristotle employed to distinguish between inner and outer aspects of the material world.<sup>28</sup> We cannot discern substance; what we see are these so-called accidentals (size, form, colour). According to Aristotle, substance equals the essence of things (that which is determined), whereas the accidentals represent the inessential (that which is undetermined). The painter adopts these notions, but neither takes into account Aristotle’s distinction between primary and secondary substance nor his further categorisation of various substances. Mondrian simplifies Aristotle’s ideas and merely uses the term ‘substance’ to designate ‘the essential’: the things around us are what they are because of their immutable, immaterial essence. In this context, Mondrian also uses the terms ‘universal’ and ‘individual’ to refer to substance and accidentals respectively. ‘Substance’ and ‘accidentals’ were the only concepts Mondrian took from Aristotle’s extensive oeuvre, but they were of far-reaching influence on his vision of reality and his ideas about the art of painting. In his view, we should not represent the outer form of things, but their essence – ‘real reality’, the permanent force of substance. Mondrian is of the opinion that it is useless to paint nature and objects as they present themselves to us. We cannot emulate nature. In one of his *De Stijl* articles he writes:

The natural aspect is more beautiful and stronger than anything we can depict. In order to fully express nature, we are, therefore, compelled to use other means of imaging [‘beelding’]. We cast aside the natural aspect, for the sake of nature and reality.<sup>29</sup>

27 “Zuivere waarneming doet ons die oorspronkelijke eenheid als de blijvende kracht in alle dingen zien: zij doet ons beseffen dat deze kracht datgene is, wat alle dingen gemeen hebben. Dit diepst algemeene is door Aristoteles aangeduid als substantie, als dat wat iets is, als het ding op-zich-zelf, als dat wat op-zich-zelf bestaat onafhankelijk van de accidenten grootte, vorm, eigenschappen, welke slechts het uiterlijke vormen, waardoor de substantie zich openbaart. Dit uiterlijke is dus slechts uit kracht der substantie dat, wat het voor ons is. Als de substantie de blijvende kracht is, is de directe beelding van het universeele (d.i. de directe openbaring der substantie) niet alleen gerechtvaardigd maar geëischt. Want de blijvende kracht is het waardevolle. In de natuur kunnen de accidenten der substantie – grootte, vorm, eigenschappen – niet gemist worden, daar de substantie niet rechtstreeks zinnelijk waarneembaar is. In de natuur is vorm (lichamelijkheid) noodzakelijk: in de natuur bestaat alles voor ons door vorm, die zich beeldt door (natuurlijke) kleur. Zoo brengt de natuur ons in den waan dat ook in kunst vorm noodzakelijk is: de natuur doet ons vergeten dat de substantie zich inderdaad beeldt door het universeele, dat aan den vorm en doòr de kleur verschijnt.” P. Mondriaan, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, *De Stijl* 1, no. 8 (June 1918): 88-89 (Text 010).

28 My source for the present discussion of Aristotle’s ontology is K. Algra, ‘Aristoteles’ theoretische filosofie’, in *Inleiding in de filosofie*, Open University, Heerlen 1994: 116-120.

29 “De natuurlijke verschijning is veel schooner en sterker dan welke afbeelding ook: zoo zijn wij gedwongen tot andere beelding, willen we de natuur ten volle vertolken. Juist ter wille van de

Mondrian frequently uses the words ‘beelden’ (literally ‘to image’) and ‘beelding’ (‘imaging’), terms which are also rather unusual in Dutch, to stress that his new art goes beyond mere representation. In brief, his ‘Nieuwe Beelding’ (‘new imaging’, i.e. Neoplasticism) is about the representation of concepts.

In Mondrian’s view, the new art of painting cannot but depict that which is universal, because what is permanent is more valuable than what is transient. Moreover, he feels that the abstract form is the only correct form for it:

The new imaging may be called abstract, not only because this is the direct imaging of what is universal, but also because it excludes the imaging of the individual (the natural and concrete).<sup>30</sup>

In order to visualise what is permanent (substance), determined, as well as of universal and eternal value, the Neoplasticist should reject representation of the impermanent (the accidentals), and look for different means to construct his image (‘beeldingsmiddelen’). In this context, Mondrian introduces four fundamental elements which, in his view, constitute a painting: line, colour, space, and ‘movement’ (or ‘rhythm’, see below). Neoplastic composition only uses straight lines, the straight line being, in Mondrian’s view, “the final inference” of the concept ‘line’. Colouration is likewise reduced to its essence: the Neoplastic painter only uses plain, primary colours. The Nieuwe Beelding rejects the ‘tricks’ of perspective, and replaces them with the idea of a ‘foldout’, the principles of a cardboard model of a building or structure. Rhythm is achieved by the interplay of horizontal and vertical lines, which Mondrian describes as “movement and countermovement.” These lines, however, should only touch or intersect at a 90 degrees angle, which Mondrian regards as an ideal contrast – another “final inference.” Through this purification of the means of imaging, Mondrian contends, the four fundamental elements of painting will be freed from redundant, distractive, inhibiting, subjective, transient accidentals, and substance can be expressed (fig. 2).

In his ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’ Mondrian devotes only a few paragraphs to Aristotle, but the Greek philosopher’s ideas about material reality are essential for Mondrian’s Neoplastic theories.

#### GERARD BOLLAND

We can be sure that Mondrian knew *Zuivere Rede en hare Werkelijkheid* (*Pure Reason and its Reality*, 1912) by the Leiden philosopher Gerard Bolland (1854-1922, figs 3 and 4), who was a follower of Hegel.<sup>31</sup>

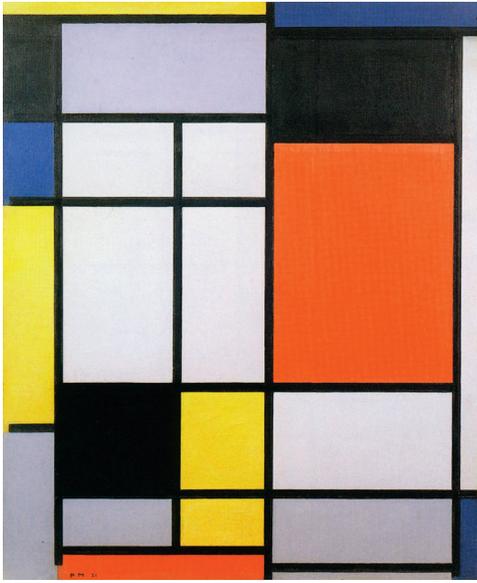
It is highly unlikely, however, that he actually read this hefty, 1300-page volume; according to his biographer, Michel Seuphor, Mondrian was “not a book lover.”<sup>32</sup> Bolland’s book offered Mondrian two concepts he used in the development of his theories, the value of ‘relations’ and the idea of ‘opposites’.

natuur, van de realiteit, vermijden wij hare natuurlijke verschijning.” P. Mondriaan, ‘Dialogo over de Nieuwe Beelding’, *De Stijl* 2, no. 5 (March 1919): 50 (Text 012).

30 “De nieuwe beelding is abstract te noemen, niet alleen omdat zij de directe beelding is van het universele, maar ook omdat zij in de beelding het individuele (natuurlijk concrete) uitsluit.” P. Mondriaan, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, *De Stijl* 1, no. 3 (January 1918): 29 (Text 010).

31 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher.

32 Seuphor 1956a: 57.



2 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with yellow, blue, black, red, and gray*, 1921. (Collection Stephen Mazoh & Co. Inc., New York)

Bolland’s proposal that beauty is a matter of relationships between components, greatly appealed to Mondrian, who felt that this tied in with what he wanted his paintings to achieve. He quotes Bolland’s *Zuivere Rede* in an instalment of his ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’:

Perception of beauty means perception of relations, perception of aesthetic relations, of visibly harmonious and therefore noticeably satisfying relationships; it is, thus, not a matter of definition or numeration as such, but of the measurability of diversity in relation or ratio – as the relationships between colours have already shown, beauty is perceived through satisfying proportions.<sup>33</sup>

In order to highlight Bolland’s proposal, Mondrian refers to a similar remark made by the French painter Paul Cézanne (1839-1906):

[...] that beauty in a work of art is not brought about by the objects depicted, but by the relationships of lines and colours.<sup>34</sup>

The awareness of a connection between beauty and relations is the reason Mondrian speaks of his paintings as “representations of relations” (“verhoudingsbeeldingen”) or “exact imaging of nothing but relations” (“exacte beelding van enkel verhouding”). He

33 “Het begrip van schoonheid is verhoudingsbegrip, begrip van aesthetische verhoudingen, van waarneembaar overeenstemmende en zoo dan voelbaar bevredigende verhoudingen, en dus niet begrip van noem- of telbaarheid zonder meer, maar meetbaarheid in verscheidenheid van verhoudingen of reden, schoonheid wordt men in bevredigende maatverhoudingen gewaar, gelijk reeds aan de kleurverhoudingen gebleken is.” P. Mondriaan, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, *De Stijl* 1, no. 9 (July 1918): 103. Bolland 1912: 554.

34 “[...] dat het niet de dingen zelve zijn, welke de schoonheid in het kunstwerk te weeg brengen, maar de verhoudingen van lijn en kleur.” Idem, no. 11 (September 1918): 129.



3 Gerard Bolland (1854-1922).

4 Title page of *Zuivere Rede en hare Werkelijkheid* by Gerard Bolland.

wants his works to show nothing but relations, without disruptive elements such as forms, imagery, and perspective. Only then, pure beauty can be shown and experienced. The second concept Mondrian derived from Gerard Bolland's *Zuivere Rede* is the idea of 'opposites' ('tegendelen'). In a footnote Bolland mentions what the philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50 CE) wrote about this concept:

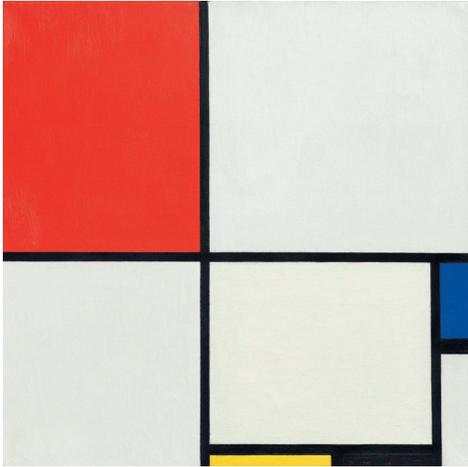
Because, in any case, things are best recognised through their opposites [...] Everyone knows that nothing in this world is conceivable in and from itself, but can only be judged through comparison with its opposite.<sup>35</sup>

Again the painter finds that a philosopher manages to find words for something that occupies his own mind. He clearly feels that this is exactly what he needs, since the passage is quoted verbatim in his 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst':

This very truth, a truth for all times, has already been phrased in various ways in Antiquity, and among these expressions of wisdom there is one, which perfectly describes the true meaning of art: in any case, things are best recognised through their opposites. Everyone knows that nothing in this world is conceivable in and from itself, but can only be judged through comparison with its opposite.<sup>36</sup>

35 "Want door het tegendeel worden de tegendeelen, hoe dan ook, het beste gekend. [...] Ieder weet, dat om zoo te zeggen niets ter wereld uit zichzelf en op zichzelf denkbaar is, maar beoordeeld wordt door vergelijking met zijn tegendeel." Bolland 1912: 338.

36 "Diè waarheid, door alle tijden heen waar, is reeds in de oudheid op verschillende wijzen geformuleerd, en onder deze uitdrukkingen der wijsheid is er één, welke de ware beteekenis der kunst volkomen omschrijft: door het tegendeel worden de tegendeelen, hoe dan ook, het beste gekend. Ieder weet, dat om zoo te zeggen niets ter wereld uit zich zelf en op zich zelf denkbaar is, maar beoordeeld wordt door vergelijking met zijn tegendeel." P. Mondriaan, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst', *De Stijl* 1, no. 7 (May 1918): 73.



5 Piet Mondrian, *Composition with red, black, blue, and yellow*, 1928. (Wilhelm Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen)

The original source of the ‘doctrine of opposites’ is the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 540-c. 480 BC). Heraclitus sees the world as a continuous interplay of opposites: there can be no day without night, no white without black, no good without evil. His ideas are similar to the ancient Chinese principle of Yin and Yang.

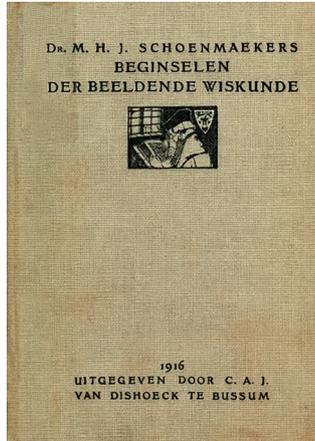
The doctrine of opposites has an enormous appeal for Mondrian, and his writings show numerous examples of the use of opposite concepts, such as universal-individual, inner-outer, nature-spirit, matter-spirit, temporality-perpetuity, determined-undetermined, boundlessness-limitation, objective-subjective, colour-‘non-colour’, horizontal-vertical, relative-absolute, male-female.

An important aspect of the doctrine of opposites – one that is of particular significance in the case of Mondrian – is the idea that everything is in constant motion: everything flows. The relationship between opposites is not a static one, but one of interaction. In this context Mondrian often speaks of mutuality or reciprocity – “the mutual interaction of opposites” (“de wederkerige werking der tegendeelen”). In his later English-language texts he also uses the terms ‘dynamic equilibrium’ and ‘dynamic movement’ to refer to this particular interaction. The idea of a dynamic equilibrium, however, also holds good for his paintings. Here, too, Mondrian strove to avoid stasis and symmetry, and aimed for a dynamic equilibrium between opposites within a composition. The “means of imaging” he employed to achieve this are: horizontal lines vs vertical ones; colour planes (red, yellow, blue) vs non-colour ones (black, white, grey); squares vs rectangles; glossy lines vs matte planes (fig. 5).

It is more than likely that Mondrian read Bolland’s chapter on Helena Blavatsky, in which the Leiden philosopher makes it very clear that he has no great opinion of theosophy.<sup>37</sup> However, I have not found any reference to this chapter in Mondrian’s essays and letters.

To sum up, it is safe to presume that Gerard Bolland’s *Zuivere Rede* provided the basis for three important aspects of Mondrian’s theories: first, that beauty is a matter of relationships; second, that things are only conceivable by virtue of their opposites; and third, that the relationship between opposites is one of interaction.

37 ‘De wijsheid van Adyar. (Mevrouw Blavatsky en hare “theosofie”); in: Bolland 1912: 801-939.



6 E. van Beever, *Portrait of Mathieu Schoenmaekers (1875-1944)*. (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague)

7 Title page of *Beginselen der Beeldende Wiskunde (1916)* by Mathieu Schoenmaekers.

### MATHIEU SCHOENMAEKERS

Another book Mondrian was familiar with is *Beginselen der Beeldende Wiskunde (Fundamentals of Plastic Mathematics)* written by the Dutch philosopher Mathieu Schoenmaekers (1875-1944, figs 6 and 7) and published in 1916. Mondrian mentions Schoenmaekers' book in a letter to his friend, Theo van Doesburg.<sup>38</sup>

Mathieu Schoenmaekers – a former Roman Catholic priest – developed his own mixture of theosophy and Christianity, initially calling it 'christosophy' and later 'positive mysticism.' When Mondrian moved to Laren at the beginning of 1915, Schoenmaekers had been living there for two years. They often met at a local farm house, where they had their hot meals. It is more than likely that the painter and the sage discussed their opinions and ideas at the table. However, a letter from Mondrian to van Doesburg makes it clear that by May 1917 they had had some kind of falling-out.

Dear Does, [...] I am angry with Schoenmakers [*sic*]. He is not the right kind of fellow after all [...] Warmest greetings, your friend Piet.<sup>39</sup>

Mondrian does not mention why he had quarrelled with Schoenmaekers.

Schoenmaekers' philosophy is based on the idea of a fundamental truth underlying all systems of thought, religion, and science.<sup>40</sup> In his view, the sensual (outer) and the spiritual (inner) are one, despite the fact that they are essentially different and incomparable.<sup>41</sup> This notion of what he calls 'universal opposition' is a central concept in his work.<sup>42</sup> Schoenmaekers sees reality as an interrelation of opposites, the coexistence of unity and diversity.<sup>43</sup> Incidentally, like the Dutch-Portuguese thinker,

38 Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), Dutch artist, writer, and editor of *De Stijl*; he was a friend of Mondrian until 1924.

39 "Beste Does, [...] Met Schoenmakers ben ik kwaad hij is toch de rechte broeder niet. [...] hartelijk gegroet van je vriend Piet." Letter to Theo van Doesburg of 16 May 1917. MCP-RKD, Fol. 25-28.

40 Jager and Matthes (eds) 1992: 33.

41 Idem: 52.

42 Idem: 49.

43 Idem: 64.

Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677), Schoenmaekers is of the opinion that philosophical argumentation should be based on mathematics.<sup>44</sup>

The element ‘plastic mathematics’ (‘beeldende wiskunde’) in the title of Schoenmaekers’ book must have had a special appeal for Mondrian. I found ten indirect references to *Beginnselen der Beeldende Wiskunde* in Mondrian’s ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’. Let me present an example:

Schoenmaekers:

A line is essentially ‘horizontal’; a radius is essentially ‘vertical’. Horizontality and verticality are not characterised by direction, but by essence [...] Horizontality is characteristically ‘line’; flexible, yielding, reclining, extending, passive line. Verticality is characteristically ‘radius’; rigid, hard, standing, ascending, active radius. The relationship between line and radius is as the relationship between external and internal. This is a plastic relationship: internal radius exteriorises itself as line – line is exteriorised radius.<sup>45</sup>

Mondrian:

In order to understand New Imaging, it is necessary to consider the exact representation of relations as the (exteriorised) opposite of the natural image. This is possible because the internal – that which remains hidden in the image – takes a certain shape. (The radius, for instance, is internal and in fact invisible, but in the image it appears as a vertical line.)<sup>46</sup>

This example illustrates how Mondrian uses concepts from *Beginnselen der Beeldende Wiskunde* without actually quoting it. He takes suitable elements from Schoenmaekers’ book and integrates them into his own theories. This, incidentally, is how Mondrian generally used his sources.

Mondrian also read or perused another work by Mathieu Schoenmaekers, *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld (The New Image of the World)*, published in 1915; he mentions it in his ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst.’

If yellow and blue are the most internal of the three primary colours, and red (the unanimity of blue and yellow, see Dr H. Schoemaekers [*sic*] ‘Het nieuwe wereldbeeld’) is more external, it follows that an image in just yellow and blue is more internal than one in all three of the primary colours.<sup>47</sup>

44 Idem: 37.

45 “De lijn is ‘horizontaal’ in wezen. De straal is ‘verticaal’ in wezen. Horizontaliteit en verticaliteit worden gekarakteriseerd, nièt door richting, maar door wezen [...]. Het horizontale is karakteristiek lijn: lenige, wijkende, liggende, voortgaande, passieve lijn. Het verticale is karakteristiek straal: strakke, harde, staande, opgaand-uitbreidende, actieve straal. De verhouding van lijn en straal is een verhouding van uiterlijkheid en innerlijkheid. Zij is beeldende verhouding: de innerlijke straal veruiterlijkt zich tot lijn, of: lijn is veruiterlijkte straal.” Schoenmaekers 1916: 35.

46 “Om de Nieuwe beelding te verstaan, is het noodig de exacte verhoudingsbeelding als (veruiterlijkt) tegendeel van de natuurlijke beelding te beschouwen. En dit is mogelijk, omdat het innerlijke, dat niet verschijnt in de beelding, een gestalte aanneemt. (Zoo is ook de straal, die innerlijk is en dus eigenlijk niet verschijnt, in beelding de vertikale lijn).” P. Mondriaan, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, *De Stijl* 1, no. 7 (May 1918): 75 (Text 010).

47 “Zijn, van de drie primaire kleuren, geel en blauw de meest innerlijke, is rood (de ineenparing

There can be little doubt that the aim of this book, as formulated in its Preface, greatly appealed to Mondrian:

We strive to comprehend nature in such a way that we perceive the inner construction of reality.<sup>48</sup>

He must also have been fascinated by its chapter on ‘tegendeelen’ (in this case best translated as ‘counterparts’).<sup>49</sup> This was a topic he knew from Gerard Bolland’s book, but Schoenmaekers phrases things somewhat differently:

Relationships between ‘counterparts’ can always be reduced to the relationship between activity and passivity: ‘male’ and ‘female’, for instance, are not opposites, but counterparts.<sup>50</sup>

Speaking of the sexes, the male represents the vertical – what is taut, productive, giving; the female is the horizontal – what is flexible, reproductive, receiving.<sup>51</sup>

Mondrian includes Schoenmaekers’ concepts of ‘male’ and ‘female’ in his own theories:

The extreme elements visualised through Abstract Realism [i.e. the ‘Nieuwe Beelding’] may be conceived as external and internal, as nature and spirit, as individual and universal, and also as male and female.<sup>52</sup>

We perceive the duality of the straight line in the way it is placed. In its duality, the straight line may be the one extreme as well as the other: the natural (female) as well as the spiritual (male) element.<sup>53</sup>

van blauw en geel; zie Dr. H. Schoenmaekers ‘Het nieuwe wereldbeeld’) meer uiterlijk; zoo zou eene beelding in enkel geel en blauw meer innerlijk zijn dan eene in de drie primaire kleuren.” Schoenmaekers 1915: 223-226.

48 “We willen de natuur doorzien, zóó, dat de innerlijke constructie der werkelijkheid ons openbaar wordt.” Schoenmaekers 1915: 3.

49 In his French- and English-language texts, Mondrian himself did not recognise the distinction between ‘counterpart’, ‘opposite’, and ‘opposition.’ In French he only used the word ‘opposition(s)’, in English he used ‘opposition(s)’, even when ‘opposite(s)’ would have been the better term, and sometimes ‘polarit(y)(ies).’

50 “‘Tegendeelen’ staan altijd tot elkaar in verhoudingen, die kunnen teruggebracht worden tot de verhouding van activiteit en passiviteit: ‘mannelijkheid’ en ‘vrouwelijkheid’ b.v., zijn tegendeelen, geen tegenovergesteldheden.” Schoenmaekers 1915: 40.

51 “Het mannelijke is het verticale in de geslachten, het strakke, oorspronkelijke, gevende. Het vrouwelijke het horizontale in de geslachten, het lenige, voortplantende, ontvangende.” Schoenmaekers 1916: 233.

52 “Het uiterste ééne en het uiterste ándere, dat in de Abstract Reëele Schilderkunst [de Nieuwe Beelding] tot beelding komt [...], kunnen we zien als uiterlijkheid en innerlijkheid, als natuur en geest, als het individueele en het universeele, maar ook als het vrouwelijk en mannelijk element.” P. Mondriaan, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, *De Stijl* 1, no. 12 (October 1918): 140.

53 “Want we zien de tweeheid in stand van het rechte juist elkaar tegenovergesteld: we zien de tweeheid van het rechte als het uiterste eene en het uiterste andere: als het natuurlijke (vrouwelijke) en het geestelijke (mannelijke) element.” Idem, no. 10 (August 1918): 122.

Accordingly, we may conclude that in Mondrian's paintings the horizontal line represents 'the female element', and the vertical line 'the male element' (see fig. 1). It should be added that after December 1931 the terms male (*masculin*) and female (*féminin*) no longer occur in his writings.

Another interesting aspect of Schoenmaekers' book is his use of the term 'motion'.<sup>54</sup> Schoenmaekers defines it as follows:

In the context of this work [*Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld*] 'motion' means movement in a limited sense [...], i.e. the real, or active, or living relationship between counterparts. Naturally, this relationship is, directly or indirectly, imaginal or plastic.<sup>55</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Mondrian speaks of "the mutual interaction of opposites" or "dynamic movement." From time to time, however, he also uses the term 'rhythm' to refer to this interaction. In his view, rhythm is what constitutes the individual element of a composition, because it is a matter of personal choice. It is the painter who selects the number of lines, and colour and non-colour planes, and, through the width and placement of the lines determines the size of the planes. Mondrian's view of rhythm has much to do with variety and, therefore, differs from traditional definitions of the term, which are usually based on systematic repetition and symmetry.

In brief, Schoenmaekers' writings inspired Mondrian's ideas about 'opposites', and the effect of primary colours, as well as his aim of revealing the inner construction of reality. Aristotle, Gerard Bolland, and Mathieu Schoenmaekers thus provided Mondrian with tools to help him explain in words what he strove to achieve in painting – in Mondrian's case, practice always preceded theory.

Let us now move to the fourth thinker who is said to have had great influence on Mondrian's thought and writings, Helena Blavatsky.

#### HELENA BLAVATSKY

The Russian-American Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891, fig. 8), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, wrote extensively on the subject of theosophy. Her best-known work, *The Secret Doctrine*, was translated into Dutch in 1907 (*De Geheime Leer*, fig. 9). According to Blavatsky, the aim of theosophy is

[...] to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities.<sup>56</sup>

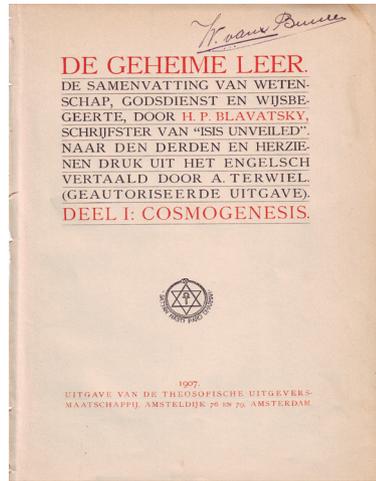
Mondrian felt great sympathy for the theosophical movement. It is likely that as early as the 1890s he was looking for something to replace the Calvinist world view he grew up with. He attended theosophical meetings in Amsterdam and Laren, and became a member of the Dutch Section of the Theosophical Society (Theosofische Vereeniging in Nederland) in 1909.

Bert van den Briel, who met Mondrian in 1898 and became a life-long friend, was an

54 In his English texts, Mondrian consistently uses 'movement.'

55 "Als ik in dit werk [*Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld*] van 'beweging' spreek, bedoel ik beweging in strikten zin [...], d.i. werkelijke of werkende of levende verhouding van tegendeelen. Deze verhouding is uiteraard direct of indirect beeldend of plastisch." Schoenmaekers 1915: 52.

56 H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, online edition.



8 Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). Image from the archives of the Theosophical Society in America. Photograph by Sarony, New York, c. 1876-1877.

9 Title page of the Dutch translation of Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1907).

important source of information for Michel Seuphor, Mondrian's first biographer.<sup>57</sup> Seuphor himself met Mondrian in Paris in 1924 and they were friends until Seuphor moved to Provence in 1934.<sup>58</sup> On 13 August 1951 van den Briel wrote the following in a letter to Seuphor:

In order to escape the stifling Calvinist atmosphere, Piet looked for a wider religious principle, and believed to have found it in theosophy. He was attracted by its universal way of thinking, but always remained critical, and was skeptical about the superficial enthusiasms of 'theosophical young ladies.' Theosophy's general outlook appealed to him and struck a sympathetic note, but he never subscribed to or accepted its principles. He was, above all, an artist, and refused to be tied down, but he responded to the general outlook. He didn't really study it either. But he did read a lot about it, and retained what suited his personality and his convictions, what agreed with his feelings and his work [...] From the above it will be clear that the ties between Piet and theosophy were not, in fact, strong at all.<sup>59</sup>

The sentence "[...] and retained what suited his personality and his convictions [...]" supports my contention that, far from being a dogmatic follower of one specific philosophy or ideology (apart from his own), Mondrian scraped together his theories from all kinds of sources.

57 Michel Seuphor (pseudonym of Fernant Berckelaers), 1901-1999, Belgian-French artist. Seuphor 1956a.

58 Henkels 1976: 173.

59 "Om uit de enge Calvinistische sfeer te komen, zocht Piet naar een ruimer godsdienstig beginsel, en meende dit in de Theosofie te vinden. De universele gedachte daarin trok hem aan, maar hij bleef kritisch en was sceptisch t.o.v. het oppervlakkig gedoe van 'theosofische juffrouwen'. De grote gedachte der Theosofie trok hem aan en vond weerklank in hem, maar de Theosofische beginselen heeft hij nooit onderschreven of aanvaard. Hij was voor alles kunstenaar, liet zich niet binden, maar voelde er voor alles de grote gedachte in. Hij heeft ook weinig er in gestudeerd. Wel nog al wat van gelezen, en hij zocht er dan steeds dat uit, wat bij zijn persoon en opvattingen paste, en wat in overeenstemming was met zijn gevoelens en zijn werk. [...] Uit 't bovenstaande zal blijken, dat de band van Piet met, en de verhouding tot de Theosofie, inderdaad los is geweest." Henkels 1988b: 23 en 28.

The Dutch translation of *The Secret Doctrine* consists of three hefty volumes of some 800 pages each. It seems safe to assume that Mondrian did not read them, but leafed through them, as he must have done with Bolland's book. Madame Blavatsky herself gave the following directions for the study of the Secret Doctrine:

Reading the Secret Doctrine page by page as one reads any other book [...] will only end us in confusion. The first thing to do, even if it takes years, is to get some grasp of the 'Three Fundamental Principles' given in the Proem.<sup>60</sup>

This is probably just what Mondrian did. It is not clear from his correspondence or comparable primary sources that he actually owned the volumes, and we do not find them in the Holtzman Deposit. When he was writing 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst', Mondrian lived in Laren (from early 1915 until June 1919), and he probably borrowed Blavatsky's book from the library of the local theosophical lodge, or consulted it there.<sup>61</sup> He may also have been a regular visitor of the library of the Dutch Theosophical Society in Amsterdam, where he could easily travel by public transport. In several places 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst' shows the influence of theosophy. We find for example:

Blavatsky:

On the Cosmic, it [Fohat]<sup>62</sup> is present in the constructive power that carries out, in the formation of things [...] the plan in the mind of nature, or in the Divine Thought, with regard to the development and growth of that special thing.<sup>63</sup>

Mondrian:

Through growth, adhesion, construction etc., expansion – an exteriorisation of the active primeval force – brings about corporeality, form. Form comes into being when expansion restricts itself.<sup>64</sup>

Again, Mondrian does not quote his source, but only presents his own interpretation. In February 1918 Mondrian wrote to Theo van Doesburg:

Dear Does, [...] I have made quite a study of theosophy. The Secret Doctrine is a true foundation for all things [...] Bye Does and Lena, warmest greetings from Piet.

60 R. Bowen, *Madame Blavatsky on How to Study Theosophy*, online edition.

61 The local lodge was founded in 1907 by theosophists from Laren and nearby Blaricum; from 1915 the lodge met in hotel Hamdorff in Laren. The lodge's secretary, Miss D. Bekouw, who lived on the Eemnesserweg in Laren, ran an extensive theosophical library. See 'De Theosofische Beweging' ('The Theosophical Movement'), supplement of *Theosophia*, the journal of the Dutch Section of the Theosophical Society (Theosofische Vereeniging in Nederland), the years 1915, 1916 and 1917.

62 "Fohat (Tib.) [...] The essence of cosmic electricity. [...] and in the universe of manifestation the ever-present electrical energy and ceaseless destructive and formative power." H.P. Blavatsky. *The Theosophical Glossary*, online edition.

63 H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, online edition.

64 "Uitbreiding – een veruiterlijking van de actieve oerkracht – doet door groei, aanhechting, bouw, enz. het lichamelijke, vorm, ontstaan. Vorm ontstaat wanneer de uitbreiding zich begrenst." P. Mondriaan, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst', *De Stijl* 1, no. 4 (February 1918): 42 (Text 010).

A few months later, in May 1918, he confesses:

Dear Does, [...] I got it all from the Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky), not from Schoenmaekers, although he says the same things [...] Bye Does, your friend Piet.

As all of this suggests that Mondrian was, indeed, much influenced by *The Secret Doctrine*, it is remarkable that none of his writings, not even the autobiographical texts he wrote at the end of his life, mentions either Helena Blavatsky or the title of her book.<sup>65</sup> In the 128 texts and notes, the term ‘theosophy’ occurs only three times: in the so-called Domburg sketchbook from 1914,<sup>66</sup> in a footnote in an instalment of ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’,<sup>67</sup> and in a text from 1922.<sup>68</sup>

In his fundamental ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’ Mondrian refers to 19 individuals: Aristotle (twice), Bolland (four times), Cézanne (thrice), Goethe (once), van Gogh (once), Hegel (twice), Humbert de Superville (once), Kandinsky (seven times), Léger (once), Mantegna (once), Metzinger (once), Philo of Alexandria (once), Picasso (seven times), Rembrandt (once), Schoenmaekers (once), Schopenhauer (once), Spinoza (once), Steiner (once), Voltaire (once). Helena Blavatsky is completely absent from this important work. I very much doubt the painter’s own words (“I got it all from the Secret Doctrine”), because he never mentions Blavatsky or *The Secret Doctrine* as a source. Despite Mondrian’s high praise in his two letters, I am inclined to think that *The Secret Doctrine* may not have been of such importance after all. In any case, its impact was not large enough to justify mention of the work. It may be added that the number of theosophically-inspired terms decreases as Mondrian’s career as a writer progresses; they completely disappear from his English-language texts.

In the literature on Mondrian it is often said that his writings represent a ‘theosophical theory of art’, with his first text, ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, presenting its basic structure.<sup>69</sup> I subscribe to the opinion that this particular text forms the basis of Mondrian’s theoretical outlook, and it is evident that his essays contain theosophical elements. However, labelling Mondrian’s ideas as ‘theosophical’ is, in my view, taking things too far. In characterising these ideas as a theosophical theory of art, one overlooks the important fact that Mondrian was, first and foremost, an artist and not a theorist of theosophy. His writings originate in and reflect the practicalities of painting, not the theosophical world view, as is apparent from Mondrian’s use of (non-theosophical) concepts such as ‘the universal means of imaging’ and ‘the imaging of relationships’, and the doctrine of opposites, as well as his rejection of three-dimensionality and plasticity. More importantly, however, theosophy plays no role whatsoever in Mondrian’s main point of departure: Neoplasticism as a model for humanity. More than ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’, his later essays highlight his social ideals in which his paintings provide a blueprint for the construction of a new society.

All in all, in order to understand Mondrian’s paintings and the writings that stemmed from them, it is more useful to immerse oneself in Cubism than to study Aristotle, Bolland, Schoenmaekers, or theosophy.

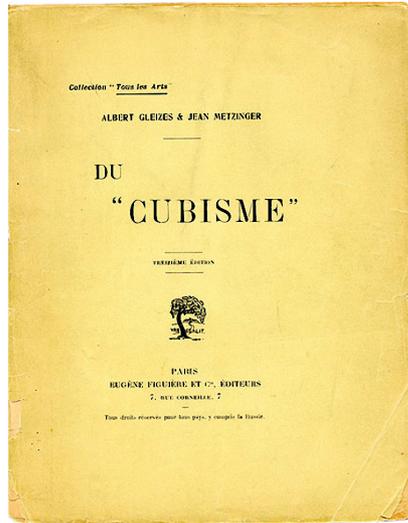
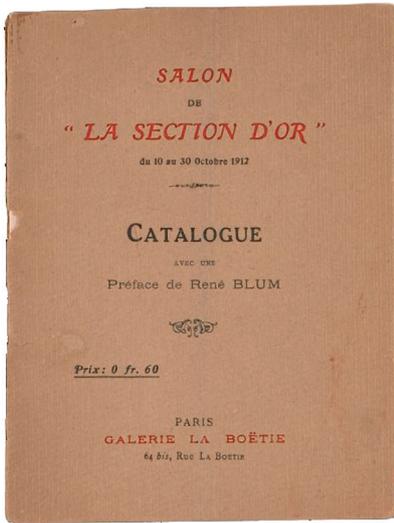
65 Veer 2013b: 61-85.

66 Text 008.

67 Idem (note 3): no. 5 (March 1918): 54.

68 P. Mondriaan. ‘De realisering van het Neo-Plasticisme in verre toekomst en in de huidige architectuur.’ *De Stijl* 5, no. 1-2 (January and February 1922): 46. (Text 019).

69 Bax 2006: 268, Welsh 1971a: 35-51.



10 Catalogue of the Cubist exhibition at the Galerie de la Boétie, October 1912.

11 Front cover of *Du Cubisme* by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger (1912).

### THE CUBIST MOVEMENT IN PARIS

Mondrian himself describes the influence of the Paris Cubists on his development as an artist:

That time (about 1910) I came in Paris I did like very much Matisse, Van Dongen, and others, but soon I preferred [*sic*] the Cubists, especially Picasso and Leger. I found the way which the Cubists took the most right amid the then living abstractions (Kandinsky, Futurism, etc.), and was for a time influenced by them.<sup>70</sup>

During his first stay in Paris (from early 1912 until the middle of 1914) Mondrian familiarised himself with the work of Cubists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Albert Gleizes, and Jean Metzinger (fig. 10). He probably also read Gleizes and Metzinger's *Du Cubisme* (October 1912, fig. 11), because Metzinger is quoted in 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst'.<sup>71</sup>

Mondrian subsequently began to apply Cubist principles, using the grid as a basis for his compositions,<sup>72</sup> merging the objects in the background, discarding perspective, and limiting his palette (figs 12 and 13).<sup>73</sup> The Cubists, in their turn, were influenced by the work of Paul Cézanne, who famously stated that the painter could rely on a limited number of basic forms and "[...] deal with nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone [...]."<sup>74</sup>

70 P. Mondrian, [Born in Holland]. (Text 076.)

71 P. Mondriaan, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst', *De Stijl* 1, no. 11 (September 1918): 133 (note 14) (Text 010).

72 Golding 1959: 25.

73 Idem: 10, 62.

74 Idem: 59.



12 Piet Mondrian, *The large nude*, 1912. (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague)

13 Piet Mondrian, *Still life with gingerpot 2*, 1912. (Gemeentemuseum, The Hague)

Under Cubist influence Mondrian began to explore the oval format. Most Cubists actually used oval canvases for their oval compositions (figs 14-16). Mondrian, however, painted sharply delineated oval compositions on rectangular canvases – somewhat later he would, in such instances, ‘fade out’ the composition’s boundary lines (figs 17 and 18). In his ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’ he writes:

Cubist imaging is no longer naturally plastic [i.e. three dimensional]. However, it does seek *plastique* [i.e. the representation of space] more than anything, but in a different way. Cubism still depicts the individual object, but without the use of traditional perspective. It interrupts, partially omits, or adds forms or lines. It introduces straight lines where they are absent from the actual object. Cubism moulds shapes into a more particular, more individual mode of expression; more than the old art, it directly represents composition, already directly represents relationships. In this way, Cubism truly creates a work of art that springs from the human mind and, therefore, unifies art and man. Cubism broke the enclosing line of contour which limits the specific, but it also shows this rupture and thus lacks pure unity. Breaking the form must therefore be replaced by interiorisation of form, which is the straight line. Nevertheless, this could only be achieved within Abstract Realism [i.e. Nieuwe Beelding] by way of Cubism: through abstraction of the natural form.<sup>75</sup>

75 “De Cubistische is geen natuurlijk-plastische beelding meer: zij zoekt wel plastiek, en vóór alles plastiek, maar op een geheel andere wijze. Het Cubisme beeldt nog wel het afzonderlijke, maar niet in de traditioneel-perspectievische verschijning. Zij onderbreekt den vorm, laat dien gedeeltelijk weg en brengt andere vormen of lijnen aan: zij introduceert zelfs de rechte lijn ook daar, waar zij niet in het geziene direct aanwezig is. Het Cubisme brengt vorm tot meer bepaalde, tot eigene uitdrukking: het beeldt reeds veel meer dan de oude kunst rechtstreeks compositie, reeds veel meer rechtstreeks verhouding. Zoo doet het Cubisme het kunstwerk

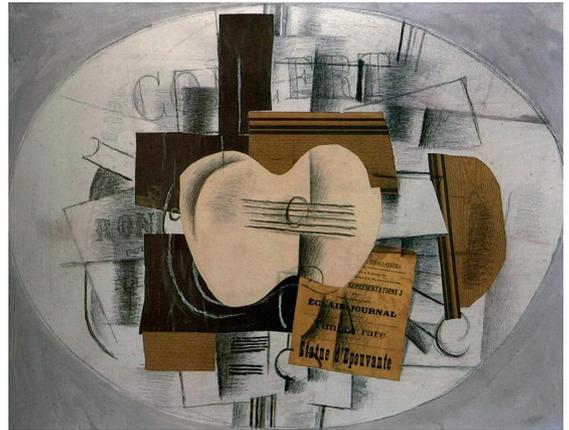


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14 Pablo Picasso, *Violin*, 1912. (Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo)

15 Pablo Picasso, *Still life with chair caning*, 1912. (Musée Picasso, Paris)

16 Piet Mondrian, *Tableau III, composition in oval*, 1914. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam)

17 Georges Braque, *La guitare, statue d'épouvante*, 1913. (Musée Picasso, Paris)

18 Piet Mondrian, *Tableau no. 3, composition in oval*, 1913. (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam)



18

In a text from 1920 – a conversation between three persons – Mondrian even speaks of his *Nieuwe Beelding* ('New Imaging', Neoplasticism) as 'Neo-Cubism':

Neo-Cubist is rather a good way of putting it, because New Imaging is a consequence of Cubism; the name is quite apt – Cubism is better known than New Imaging, and the term Neo-Cubist points people in the right direction!<sup>76</sup>

Mondrian's texts often remind us that Neoplasticism emerged from Cubism. In another text, from 1922, he wrote: "Cubism simplified the imaging of the natural form, and in this way laid the foundation for the pure imaging of Neoplasticism."<sup>77</sup> In other words, the geometric-abstract approach of Neoplasticism went further than Cubism: it meant genuine abstract painting.

However distorted, a Cubist depiction is always recognisable. Mondrian's paintings, however, became completely non-figurative. In Mondrian's view, recognisable representations distract from the essence of the matter, which is to present nothing but relationships, to show pure beauty – the figurative image only disguises real beauty. In 1914 Mondrian writes in one of his notebooks:

In order to bring spirituality into art, one should avoid reality as much as possible, because reality is the opposite of spirituality. It is, therefore, logical that one uses the basic forms. And because these are abstract, they result in abstract art.<sup>78</sup>

The main thing is that the Paris Cubists showed Mondrian the way towards 'direct' composition, made him realise that a work of art could be autonomous, a reflection of the human mind, without necessarily referring to something outside the painting. Mondrian would take this approach to the extreme. His Neoplastic paintings are completely self-contained.

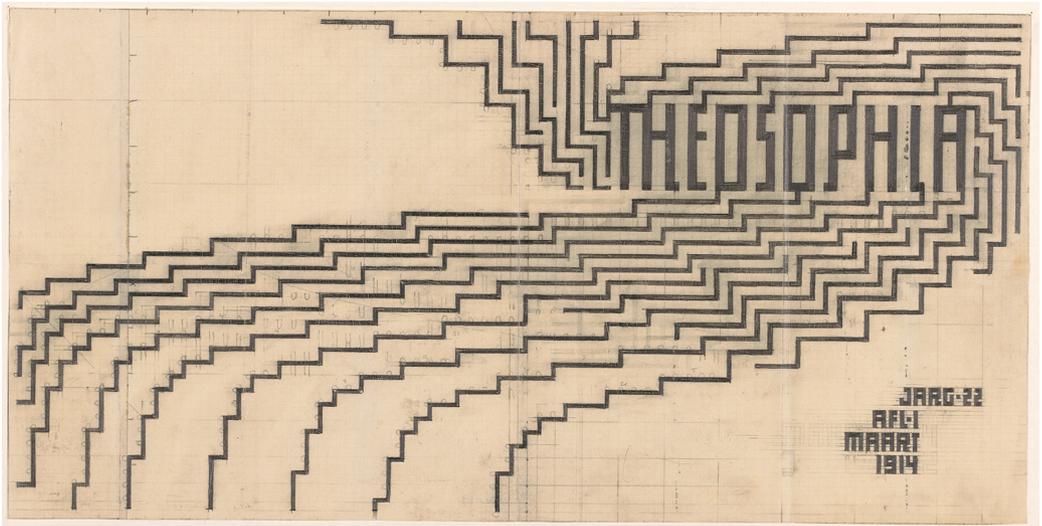
Summarising this chapter on the origins of Mondrian's ideas, we can conclude that his writings are an amalgam of elements from the work of four individuals: Aristotle, Bolland, Schoenmaekers and Blavatsky. The painter adapted these sources to his own

inderdaad een verschijning worden, die uit den menschelijken geest gegroeid en dus een is met den mensch. Het Cubisme verbrak de gesloten lijn, de contour, welke als begrenzing tot het individueele optreedt, maar hierdoor beeldt het ook de verbreking, mist het zuivere eenheid. Verbreking van vorm moest vervangen worden door verinnerlijking van vorm tot de rechte lijn. Toch moest de Abstracte Reële Schilderkunst [= Nieuwe Beelding] hiertoe komen langs den weg door het Cubisme gevolgd: door abstraheering van den natuurlijken verschijningsvorm." P. Mondriaan, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst', *De Stijl* 1, no. 11 (September 1918): 130-131 (Text 010).

76 "Neo-Cubistisch dat is niet kwaad gezegd, want de Nieuwe Beelding is een consequentie van het Cubisme; het is geen ongeschikte naam: de menschen kennen het Cubisme reeds beter dan de Nieuwe Beelding, dus geeft Neo-Cubistisch hun de richting aan in welke zij moeten zoeken!" P. Mondriaan, 'Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit', *De Stijl* 3, no. 7 (May 1920): 58 (Text 013).

77 "Het Cubisme reduceerde de natuurlijke verschijning in de beelding en legde zoo den grond tot het zuiver beeldende van het Neoplasticisme." P. Mondrian, 'De realiseering van het Neoplasticisme in verre toekomst en in de huidige Architectuur', *De Stijl* 5 (March 1922): 46 (Text 019).

78 "Om 't geestelijke te benaderen in kunst, neemt men zoo min mogelijk realiteit, omdat realiteit tegenover 't geestelijke staat. Zoo is 't logisch verklaart dat men neemt de grondvormen. Daar deze abstract zijn, ontstaat er een abstracte kunst." Welsh and Joosten 1969: 53 (Text 005).



19 M. Lauweriks, Design for front cover of *Theosophia*, March 1914. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

ideas and supplemented them with issues from painting practice – the characteristics of Cubism, the use of primary colours, the rejection of perspective. His thoughts on the leading social role of art are completely his own.

Throughout his career as a writer, Mondrian remained faithful to the foundations of his theories as laid down in ‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’ from 1914-1918. However, in the long run the role of Neoplasticism for both the inner self and the organisation of society acquired an ever greater significance.

## Thirty years of writing about art and society

A letter to his colleague and friend, Lodewijk Schelfhout, makes it clear that Mondrian’s career as a writer began in the early months of 1914.<sup>79</sup> On 12 June 1914 he wrote from Paris:

Dear Loe, [...] During the winter I have been working on a long article on art and theosophy for a theosophical journal, but they thought it too revolutionary and rejected it. Well, perhaps we should see it as praise for my piece. [...] Warmest greetings to both of you from Piet.<sup>80</sup>

The fact that the editors deemed the article “too revolutionary” is, of course, telling. Mondrian’s essay could not be found in the archives of the journal in question, *Theosophia* (fig. 19).<sup>81</sup> It is evident from the archival material, however, that the editorial

79 Lodewijk (Loe) Schelfhout (1881-1943), Dutch painter. Veen 2016a.

80 “Beste Loe, [...] Ik heb van den winter een groot artikel over Kunst en Theosofie geschreven voor een Theosofisch blad, maar ’t was de lui te revolutionair: ze hebben ’t niet willen plaatsen. Dat pleit misschien voor ’t stuk. [...] Veel hartelijks aan je beiden van Piet.” MCP-RKD, Fol. 73.

81 Library of the Dutch Theosophical Society, Amsterdam.