The romantic elements in De Stijl theory

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to focus on and analyse the romantic aspects of De Stijl theory. It is argued that these romantic aspects have received less detailed analysis than the classicising tendencies within this movement's underlying theory. The terms 'classic' and 'romantic', as used within the context of De Stijl theory, will be clarified for the purposes of this analysis. The article focuses on De Stijl theory, as reflected in the writings of the founding members of the movement, with specific reference to artist Piet Mondrian. Examples of De Stijl art and design are mentioned in order to contextualise certain ideas as formulated by Mondrian in particular, but this article does not focus on a discussion of the artworks themselves. Careful analysis of (as argued here) neglected aspects of De Stijl thought, makes a broader, more inclusive contextual interpretation of De Stijl art and design possible. Whilst acknowledging the existence of Western romantic thought and its influence on early twentieth-century abstract painting, this article focuses on a more specifically Eastern romantic notion of monism and anti-materialism as the basis for the formulation of De Stijl abstraction.

Introduction

The De Stijl movement is an early Modern manifestation. Founded in 1917 in the Netherlands, the movement was an amalgamation of the ideas, beliefs, aims and practices of a small group of Dutch artists, architects and theorists. The most prominent members include painters Piet Mondrian and Bart van der Leck, painter, architect, poet, and publisher Theo van Doesburg, as well as the architect and furniture designer, Gerrit Rietveld. De Stijl art and architecture occupy a central role the history of Modernist art and design. Critic Robert Hughes (1996, 202) is not alone in his view of Mondrian as 'one of the supreme artists of the twentieth century', and, in terms of design, the Schröder House in Utrecht (1924), designed by Gerrit Rietveld, is unparalleled in its preservation of an integrated early Modernist design environment. In the diminutive house the moveable walls of the upper story, the bright, painted squares and rectangles that simultaneously dissolve and integrate the interior space, as well as the furniture (also designed by Rietveld), attest to the original intentions of the architect and his collaborator, owner Truus Schröder. In this way, Rietveld's Red/Blue Chair (1919) conforms to the matrix of the house, in terms of concept as well as form. Acclaimed as an optimally considered object (Burton in Friedman 1982, 134), the Red/Blue Chair is sculptural as well as utilitarian, ergonomic as well as able to evoke contemplation by virtue of its composition.

When writing about art or design, this relationship between form and content (in other words the ability of form to embody, communicate and engender concepts) is sometimes accepted, sometimes ignored, and sometimes denied altogether. For instance, formalist critics, such as the early twentieth century critic Roger Fry, and the mid-twentieth century critic Clement Greenberg, dismiss the role of content in the making or critiquing of art as marginal, or completely refute its existence. For Fry (1961, 180) a response that takes into account form alone, and discounts content, which ‘never claims our attention on its own account’, is not only possible, but indeed preferable. Expressed emotions, narrative or any associated ideas that a work of art might engender, become unimportant in responding to the work. Not only the critic’s, but also the artist’s concern is, according to Fry (1961, 166), exclusively with form, making the artist impervious to ‘melodrama’ and ‘sentimentality’. Similarly, Greenberg (1940, 556) ascribes to the Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, an urge to disentangle themselves from the ‘ideological struggles of society’, an attempt to ‘escape from ideas’ which led to ‘a new and greater emphasis upon form, and ... the assertion of the arts as ... absolutely autonomous’. Thus, the Modernist, formalist critics felt themselves, in some cases, justified in reacting to the abstract paintings they studied as entirely autonomous objects – works that refer to themselves rather than to anything external, and, sometimes, works that refer only to formalist concerns.

When approaching art from the opposite angle, discounting (temporarily) its formal aspects, and focusing on its content, a different interpretation emerges. Such an approach,
which can be called ‘contextual’, is proposed and implemented here, with specific reference to the writings and ideas of Piet Mondrian. Contextual critique of De Stijl art and design does exist, written by, amongst others, Joost Baljeu (1974), Linda Henderson (1983), Carel Blotkamp (1986), Mark C. Taylor (1992), and Hilton Kramer (1995). Yet analysis of the ideology, philosophy and theoretical constructs which can be shown to underlie this movement’s art, is attempted here for the purpose of clarifying specifically Eastern romantic elements of Mondrian’s thought. Neither early twentieth century art in general, nor De Stijl art in particular, forms the main focus of this article, as it is the theoretical underpinning of the art in question that is investigated and analysed.

One possible framework by means of which De Stijl thought could be analysed, is the classic/romantic dichotomy which can be shown to underlie Neoplastic theory. The term ‘classic’ generally refers to the culture, philosophy and art of ancient Greece, and, to an extent, of Rome, but in its wider sense denotes the high esteem accorded to certain qualities, such as harmony, balance and clarity, emphasis on form and underlying structure rather than content, and a respect for tradition. The classicist often regards rationalism as the highest human ability, and a focus on objectivity and materialism can be seen as concomitant to an emphasis on rationalism. A belief in the limitless progress of human knowledge and insight, and the subsequent improvement of society, furthermore marks a classicist approach.1 Classicising aspects of Modernist (and De Stijl) thought, include an insistence on rationality and objectivity, and subscription to the notion of progress, i.e. that each Modernist art movement somehow improves upon the former, and is thereby closer to an ‘ideal’ art.

The term ‘romantic’, by nature less succinctly definable than classicism, manifests in varied (and even opposing) ways. Romanticism, in its narrower sense, refers to the movement in thought, art and politics that occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In its more extended application, the term refers to adherence to qualities regarded as antithetical to classicism. These qualities are multifarious, but central to the notion of romanticism is the rejection of both rationalism (in favour of emotion) and materialism (in favour of notions of spirit, divinity and the animation of nature, for instance).

The range of theories and approaches that can be classified as romantic is vast. Lord A. Quinton (1995, 778) states:

[Romanticism] is not definable in a short formula made up of precisely demarcated terms. Romanticism is a cluster of attitudes and preferences ... The Romantic favours the concrete over the abstract, variety over uniformity, the infinite over the finite, nature over culture, convention and artifice, the organic over the mechanical, freedom over constraint ... it prefers the unique individual to the average man, the free creative genius to the prudent man of good sense, the particular community or nation to humanity at large ... feeling to thought ... intuition to intellect.

In this article, the dismissal in Mondrian’s writings of materialist doctrines as well as the rejection of a Western emphasis on the dual nature of the universe, are specifically emphasised and referred to as the romantic aspects of De Stijl, based on contextual analysis of De Stijl thought.

Ironically, a formalist approach to art, which denies or discounts external influence on the making and viewing of art, is itself not devoid of context. Such context includes influences from the ideological meta-structure and societal bias in which a formalist approach is, or has been, formulated. The formalist approach can be classified as objectivist, based on the assumption that objectivity is possible (and preferable), and materialist, reacting (when, for instance, viewing a painting) only to such aspects as the shape of the frame, the texture of the brush marks, the colour of the pigment, and the placement of compositional elements. This approach is also ultimately classicist – a means of reacting to art, and life, which invariably emphasises rationality.2 The formalist approach, tied here to notions such as objectivity, materialism, classicism and rationality, can be argued to correspond to the greater Western positivist paradigm. Formalism is longer no longer a dominant way of viewing art. Alternatives to formalist critique have been propounded by historiographers such as Wilhelm Worringer (1957, 1967), Erwin Panofsky (1968), and Aby Warburg (1998).
In the Postmodern era, re-interpretations of Modernist art have been based on, amongst others, psycho-analytical, feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist and ecological theories. These interpretations, revisionist as they are, could nevertheless be argued to fall within the same Western paradigm they seek to dismantle. It could be for this reason that theoretical elements not compliant with a Western model have persistently been overlooked, or actively denied when interpreting the abstract compositions of the De Stijl painters.

The appraisal of Mondrian’s ideology (reflected in his writings), as proposed here, is not intended to discount the rationalist (or classical) tendencies of Mondrian’s thought, but to emphasise the artist’s attempts to integrate classic and romantic elements within the theoretical framework he referred to as Neoplasticism. The term romantic, as used here, refers specifically to the non-Western (clarified below), non-materialist and by implication metaphysical aspects of Mondrian’s thought. When analysing Mondrian’s influences and objectives, and De Stijl’s central tenets, an integrative tendency (with, however, an emphasis on romantic preoccupations, as argued here), can be discerned. The classicising tendencies in De Stijl theory can be described as follows. De Stijl came into being in an attempt to heighten awareness of (and thus expedite) a world order that the De Stijl members believed would dominate mankind in the near future. This world system was predicated on an admiration for rationality, objectivity and technology. Paul Overy (1991, 36) comments on De Stijl’s ‘intense fascination and admiration for modern technology and science’ and van Doesburg (1970, 155-156) states: ‘The machine is the supreme example of intellectual discipline ... the only means of bringing about ... social liberation’. Stopping just short of making technology the avatar that Futurism had, the De Stijl artists imbued technology with all manner of redemptive powers, and Mondrian greatly admired modern culture: short hairstyles for women, straighter lines in fashion and even the more articulated movements of the tango, compared to the waltz – in these Mondrian could see signs of the emergence of a new consciousness.

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Based on the emphasis on and admiration of scientific innovation, progress, and objectivity in De Stijl theory, De Stijl could be interpreted as a movement founded principally on the classicist, Western predilection for the rational, the technological and hence the materialistic. Yet, such an interpretation would have to assume that the cultural and technological achievements so celebrated by the movement were admired for their own sake. Contrary to such a reading, it may be argued that the triumphs of technology and culture were for Mondrian a reflection of a perfect, idealised, non-material utopia – a utopia which was Mondrian’s lifelong preoccupation. The way in which the new consciousness, as concretised in technology and modern culture, was seen to afford a glimpse of a diaphanous utopia, immediately conflates Mondrian’s construct of reality with a Platonic, and neo-Platonic, invocation of the transcendental universal essences. It is for this reason that a focus on the ideas recorded in Mondrian’s writings leads to an interpretation of his mature compositions contrary to that afforded by a materialist approach, and indicative of the predominance of Eastern philosophical influences, as clarified below.

This argument, namely that the De Stijl theorists, especially Mondrian, did not subscribe to materialist preoccupations, can be borne out. Materialism as a doctrine was consolidated in the West during the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and culminated in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Nineteenth and twentieth century materialist doctrines include utilitarianism (Jeremy Bentham), historical materialism (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels), pragmatism (John Dewey), positivism (August Comte), empiricism (John Locke and David Hume), logical positivism (Moritz Schlick) and radical materialism (Edward O. Wilson). For materialists, the concretely observable is the touchstone of the verifiable (and hence the true). On the other hand, Mondrian and van Doesburg observed their environment only for the sake of rationally deducing abstract truths regarding their pending utopia. Hence, the De Stijl founders were not materialists. They saw matters concerning the evolution of mankind to be reflected, but not centred, in culture, and pointedly, not in matter.

According to Mondrian (2001a, 285), it is for the sake of ‘reality’ that natural appearance
must be avoided in art. Mondrian’s definition of ‘reality’ does not conform to a materialist, empiricist or positivist approach to the ‘real’. For Mondrian, as for Plato, the ‘real’ resides within the essential and immutable (referred to by Plato as the ‘Forms’ or ‘Ideas’), which underlies the incidental appearance of phenomena. Thus, for Mondrian, the essence of reality (and source of visible or material ‘reality’) is and remains non-material and abstract, and Mondrian’s abstract paintings reveal, like Plato’s Forms, ‘a poetic, religious awareness of an unseen eternal world’ (Flew 1984, 273). In a letter written in 1909 to an art critic, Mondrian’s (in Holtzman & James 1986, 14) first known statement of his goal in art, reads: ‘[A]rt can ... provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm, perhaps erroneously; for I have read that whatever has form is not yet spiritual ... [art] is nonetheless the path of ascension: away from the material’. Curtis (1996, 152) describes Mondrian’s development of abstraction as a search for “thought forms” to match his intuitions of a higher order transcending mere appearances’.

**Only the Whole is real**

Plato, the so-called father of Western philosophy, was not alone in his proscription of the concrete and the visible. Eighteenth-century German Romantic philosopher, Immanuel Kant, insisted on the subjective nature of our experience of the phenomenal. Kant places the emphasis on mind as opposed to matter (Russell 1985, 677), regarding subjectivity as the means by which reality is not so much observed as created. Thus, Kant (1998, 79) claims that ‘reality’ is created (thus subjective), and that objectivity is an illusion. The supremacy of mind over matter is, in philosophical terms, a form of idealism (classified by Russell as ‘subjective idealism’), and is exemplified by Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ regarding the nature of knowledge. The term ‘Copernican revolution’ refers to Copernicus’s assertion in the sixteenth century that the planets and sun do not revolve around the earth, but that the earth and the planets of our solar system revolve around the sun. When used within the context of Kant’s theory, the term refers to the notion that the mind, instead of objectively reflecting on external reality, indeed creates reality, making reality wholly subjective.

Time and space are in this way mental constructs, fabricated so as to supply the concepts by which we order and understand experience (Kuehn in Mautner 2000, 291). Phenomena and events experienced as ‘real’ are similarly only the result of the workings of our mental apparatus. Yet, immutable and permanent truths do exist for Kant –unchanging absolutes referred to as the *noumena*. The *noumena*, or ‘things-in-themselves’, are unfathomable, and we can never experience them directly. They are ‘the external source of experience ... [but] not themselves knowable’ (Flew 1984, 251). To know the ‘thing-in-itself’ would be ‘to know the world as God knows it, with an immediate grasp of its totality, and from no finite point of view’ (Scruton 1997, 196). Thus, phenomena are, like time and space, created by our mind, based on such sensations as we perceive. They are the everyday objects of our experience, constructs of the subjective mind. As subjective beings locked into the confines of our mental apparatus, we are not able to interact with the *noumena*, and can merely speculate about their existence. Kant’s theory on the subjective nature of our knowledge relates to the romantic school of thought in that the sensory world we experience is not taken for the ultimate reality. Kant’s thought is thus transcendentalist (in the sense that the material present is not taken for the embodiment of ultimate reality, which is seen to transcend matter).

Similarly, fellow German Romantic idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedritch Hegel did not value descriptions of the particular or of isolated phenomena in the manner that materialists and scientists do. Hegel in fact rejects the notion that anything valid can be said of individual ‘things’. Russell (1985, 703) explains that according to Hegel, ‘nothing can be really true unless it is about Reality as a whole’ (emphasis added) and furthermore that: ‘Since everything, except the Whole, has relations to outside things, it follows that nothing quite true can be said of separate things, and that in fact, only the Whole is real’. The notion of the Whole, or the Absolute, is predicated on Hegel’s dialectic process whereby the thesis is replaced by its opposite or antithesis, and both are united and superseded by their synthesis. The dialectical process is one of synthesis of oppositional elements. The antithesis reacts upon and seeks to annul the thesis, whereas the synthesis is neither one nor the other, but...
contains elements of both (Singer 2001, 100-102). Thomas Mautner (2000, 141) gives the eloquent example of dialectic as ‘the opposition between being and not being, overcome in its synthesis, becoming’. This process is conceived by Hegel to continue interminably, as the synthesis, in turn, becomes a thesis, generating its own antithesis.

The dialectic is linked to the notion of the Absolute because the logical conclusion of the dialectic process, by its nature ever widening and eventually all encompassing, is the eventual conflation of everything into one, ultimate synthesis. This ‘ultimate synthesis’ is the Whole, or the Absolute, the sum total and transcendence of everything. Thus, the notion (and appearance) of the world as constituted of separate and discreet elements, is an illusion. The reality of separate things consists solely in their relation to the whole. What the empiricists would term objective truth, is for the German idealists partial truth at best. For Hegel, the unfolding of the dialectic, as the evolution of mankind and the events of history, is presided over by Geist, a term translatable as World Spirit.

Mondrian, in his extensive writings, makes the connection between his mature compositions in primary colours, arranged in asymmetrical vertical and horizontal grids, with Platonic, Kantian and Hegelian thought. Mondrian, a Platonist, attempts to give form (in as far as this is possible) to the Whole, a task that can only be achieved by making use of the abstracted essences of natural form and colour. Mondrian deemed it essential to avoid reference to ‘material’ reality in order to approach what he termed the ‘spiritual’ (Kramer, 1995).

Mondrian (in Holtzman & James 1986, 14-17) states:

I want to approach truth as closely as possible; I therefore abstract everything until I attain the essential of things ... In order to approach the spiritual in art, one employs reality as little as possible ... This explains logically why primary forms are employed ... Art must transcend [physical] reality ... Otherwise it would be of no value to man.

As regards the relationship of his work to the notion of the Absolute, Mondrian (1970, 40-49) states: ‘[C]olour and dimension (in determinate proportion and equilibrium) permits the absolute to appear within the relativity of time and space ... The aim of art is to express the absolute’ (artist’s own emphasis). In his Trialogue (1919-1920), Mondrian (1986a, 86) asserts: ‘[A]ll things are part of the whole ... That is why I regard relationship as the principal thing ... Each thing repeats the whole on a smaller scale, according to the sages.’

In this way, Mondrian’s aim, to give form to the Absolute, resulted in his very specific formulation of Neoplasticism. His resulting mature abstract works of the 1920s manifest the outcome of his ‘distillation’ of visible reality. Mondrian was insistent that only primary colours (together with black and white), verticals and horizontal lines meeting at a ninety degree angle, and a non-painterly, non-expressive application of the paint be employed in order to approach Form as closely as possible, or to reflect the Whole or macrocosm in microcosmic form (as art).

Mondrian’s theory and practice conflates Plato’s wholly transcendent Forms, Kant’s notion of the noumena and Hegel’s Geist, which can be seen as a belief in a supermundane, absolute, universal force. Yet there is a further integration of philosophical constructs that may be emphasised here. This universal force, called Geist by Hegel, can be related to the notion of chi in Chinese thought and to the Dao, or ‘Way’ of Daoism. Mondrian is not ignorant of this relationship between Western and Eastern thought, and equates the Absolute with the Chinese notion of chi, or cosmic energy. In the third part of his article, The new plastic in painting, titled Plastic means and composition, Mondrian (1918, 45) contends that the plastic unity created in abstract art reflects more clearly ‘het kosmisch rythme dat door alle dingen vloert’ (the cosmic rhythm that flows through all things), and furthermore, that this ‘cosmic rhythm’ is referred to by ancient Chinese philosophers as the ‘life-fluid’ of the cosmos. In the Dao de jing (The Dao and its Way) the sixth century BC sage Lao Tzu (1997, 11) attempts to describe the Dao as follows: ‘We look at it, and we do not see it, and we name it “the Inaudible” ... it cannot be made the subject of description; and hence we blend [all] together and obtain the One ... this is called the Form of the Formless.’ What these systems of thought have in common is a belief in the trans-personal, a realm of existence beyond the material world,
ideal (perfect) and more real than physical phenomena. These theories furthermore share the conviction that to focus solely on the material is to be misled. (The Buddhist notion of the physical world as an illusion, and the Hindu goddess Maya who weaves a spell of illusion in the form of the physical world, also clearly pertains). Similarly, for Mondrian (in Holtzman & James 1986, 382), ‘deception follows … [when] reckon[ing] only with the senses’. In essence, De Stijl, and Mondrian especially, though appreciative of technology and progress, did not evoke the physical world for its own sake, but saw in it evidence of the unfolding of Geist.

This view of the world, which can collectively be referred to as Platonic, can be contrasted with the empiricist/nominalist view, where concepts or abstractions are regarded as merely remote (or derived) variations of ‘things’, copies of that which, by means of the senses, can be verified to ‘truly’ exist. In empiricist/nominalist thought, the concrete is regarded as primordial (originally existing, that from which all else flows). Conversely, the Platonist believes that universals possess their reality separate from particulars, and are in fact the wellspring of all that exists in the world. The Platonic view, then, is that it is the particular (the manifest world), which has its origin in the universal (Desmond 1986, 25).

The composition of Mondrian’s mature paintings, where the coloured planes are cropped off and the black lines seem to extend beyond the picture plane, are, contrary to a materialist/formalist reading of Mondrian’s mature work, not meant to function as ‘objects in themselves’, autonomously asserting only their own material, delimited existence. Rather, works such as Tableau 1 (1921) (1) encourage thoughtfulness about their role as part of an infinite spatial continuum. This spatial continuum as a manifestation of the Absolute can, once again, be related to Dao. Lao Tzu (1997, 21-30) states: ‘There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone … reaching everywhere and in no danger of being exhausted … All pervading is the Great Tao! It may be found on the left hand and on the right’. Rietveld’s Red/Blue Chair (1919) (2), with its similarly severed black structural elements that do not terminate in a single point but extend beyond their juncture, alludes to much the same potentially infinite spatial continuum. The illusion that they might conceivably extend into infinity is strengthened by the yellow ends. The ends imply a continuous structure which can be imagined rather than seen. About his work in furniture design and architecture, Rietveld (in Romeo, 1985) states: ‘I am constantly concerned … with [the] extraordinary idea

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1 Piet Mondrian, Tableau I (1921). Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 60.5 cm. Museum Ludwig, Köln (Museen in Köln, S.a.).
of the awakening of the consciousness’, whilst Antony Romeo (1985) draws attention to the fact the chair makes the sitter, and the observer, aware of the chair’s, as well as of their own, relation to space. In summary, Mondrian’s paintings, and Rietveld’s compositional elements, interpreted here as attempts to give form to the Whole, as opposed to the fragmented or the particular, can be seen to diverge radically from a Western, classicist paradigm in that they steer away from dichotomy, which manifests at the expense of unity.

In their quest to address the social and philosophical issues of their time (a Europe ravaged by a World War, as much as by the nihilist ennui engendered by an increasingly materialist world view), the De Stijl theorists did not stop at the more metaphysical aspects of Western philosophy, as embodied in the thought of Plato and Hegel, but in addition drew on such occult sources as theosophy. The Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875 in New York, and her seminal tome Isis unveiled (1877) was an exposition on the similarities between early ancient Western thought and Eastern mysticism. Her efforts were assimilated by a generation of nineteenth-century anti-materialists who flocked to join the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky was instrumental in distilling elements of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Eastern thought, the conflation of which was to exert a powerful influence on early Modernist art theory and abstract art. The more esoteric elements in De Stijl theory, as mediated through the influence of theosophical thought, present a problem for some commentators. In an essay titled Annunciation of the new mysticism: Dutch symbolism and early abstraction, Carel Blotkamp argues that the mystical underpinnings of De Stijl ideology have been dismissed, whereas the supposed autonomy of early abstraction has been over-emphasised. Blotkamp (1986, 89) states:

Many art historians have difficulty accepting that such a great artist as Piet Mondrian would have been attracted to something as vague as they perceive Theosophy to be. This opinion is not only based on a certain skepticism regarding the occult, rather common amongst today’s intellectuals, but is representative of a typically modern view of abstract art as something completely autonomous.

Similarly, Freeman (in Galbreath 1986, 367) argues that art criticism from the 1940s through to the early 1970s focused almost exclusively on abstraction as a drive towards non-representation for its own sake. Art critic and historian, Hilton Kramer, in his article Mondrian & mysticism: ‘My long search is
over’ (1995), bewails the approach to an exhibition of Mondrian’s work held by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in October 1995, as well as the reticence surrounding the mystic influence on Mondrian’s work in the accompanying catalogue. Kramer (1995) states of the catalogue that ‘the author seems vaguely embarrassed that an artist of Mondrian’s stature might be seen to be seriously implicated in a system of ideas and beliefs which for most of us cannot claim a very persuasive intellectual provenance’, yet that ‘in the period that saw the genesis of abstract art … what is particularly striking about the artists primarily responsible for creating abstraction is their espousal of occult doctrine’.

In art historical writings Mondrian’s involvement in theosophy is often either interpreted as an unsavoury and unfortunate aberration on the artist’s part, or is so obliquely referred to as to constitute an outright dismissal of its formative role in Neoplastic philosophy.7 In his book The shock of the new, Robert Hughes (1996, 202) concedes Mondrian’s importance as a twentieth-century artist, but proclaims that ‘one difficulty [Mondrian’s] career presents is that he … accepted as truth the woolliest nonsense that Theosophy could offer’. Kandinsky is similarly seen by Hughes (1996, 299) to have ‘applied the kitsch-spiritualism of Madame Blavatsky to his art in quite a literal way’. In her book review of Hughes’s The shock of the new, Ross Fraser (2002) comments on what she feels to be prejudice and unfounded condescension on the part of the critic, stating that Hughes ‘takes little over four hundred pages to patronise just about every genius … in the whole history of the modern movement’. Yet, Ross’s further remarks evidence her own prejudices. Ross (2002) continues: ‘The studied philistinism of his approach is evident in the failure to take seriously the philosophy of men who were thinkers as well as artists, and their confounding with such figures as H.P Blavatsky and [fellow theosophist] Annie Besant. Hughes might, with more justice, have mentioned the names of Hegel, of Goethe … of Rudolf Steiner’ (emphasis added).

In as much as vagueness forms part of readings on the theosophical elements of De Stijl ideology, the writing of Kenneth Frampton can be regarded as representative. In his essay on De Stijl, written in 1968, Frampton (1990, 144) makes one solitary, unexplained reference to the fact that Mondrian was ‘theosophically inclined’, and obliquely and vaguely states in an end-note (1990, 156n6) that a certain Michael Seuphor ‘quotes Albert van den Briel to the effect that Mondrian had been definitely attracted to the Dutch theosophical movement’. Thus, as regards the question of theosophy’s influence on early abstraction, and Mondrian’s thought, commentary, where it exists at all, comprises condescending references to Madame Blavatsky or attempts to substitute mystic influence for the ideas of ‘more respectable thinkers like Goethe or Hegel’ (Kramer, 1995). Yet Mondrian joined the Dutch chapter of the Society in 1909, and felt theosophy to be sufficiently illuminating to substitute mystic influence for the ideas of ‘more respectable thinkers like Goethe or Hegel’ (Kramer, 1995). Yet Mondrian joined the Dutch chapter of the Society in 1909, and felt theosophy to be sufficiently illuminating to state (in Blotkamp 1986, 103-104) to van Doesburg that he ‘got everything from the Secret Doctrine [of Blavatsky],’ and further that ‘[i]t is Neoplasticism that is purely a theosophical art’. In his last studio in America, among the few personal belongings to be found after Mondrian’s death, was a faded portrait of Madame Blavatsky.

In the fusion of seemingly disparate doctrines by the Theosophical Society Mondrian recognised a model for the resolution of conflict and establishment of harmony, on a social as well as universal scale. This establishment of harmony was conceived in terms of the balancing of opposing forces. For her model, Blavatsky drew from such diverse sources as the Vedas (which comprise four manuscripts that are the cornerstone of Hinduism and date as far back as 1500 BC), the Pali books or Jutakâs (accounts of the incarnations of Buddha), the Cabala, Egyptian mythology, the Old Testament, and modern and ancient Western philosophy (particularly neo-Platonism and Hegel). Galtbreath (1986, 388) notes that the primary aim of theosophical teaching is to ‘advance awareness of the relationship between nature and spirit, and thus to enable the individual to achieve direct and intuitive knowledge’ of the interrelatedness and harmonious aspects of the cosmos. Mondrian’s aim in Neoplastic painting corresponds narrowly with that of theosophy, insofar as the purpose of Neoplasticism was to serve as catalyst for consciousness of universal harmony, achieved by means of awareness of the relationship between nature (man) and spirit (the Absolute). For Mondrian, the ‘equilibrated relations’ established in Neoplasticism expressed the unity that could be conceived – and thus
achieved – between nature and spirit, and between man and the Absolute.

**Dualism as monism**

In his mature abstract works, from the early 1920s on, Mondrian expressly chose the ninety degree angle between the vertical and the horizontal as an embodiment of harmony, as harmony was conceived of as the balancing of extreme opposites. As such, the vertical/horizontal compositions can be interpreted as representations of a dualist model of the universe. These elements in Mondrian’s theory are extensively expounded upon in theosophical thought, and Blavatsky, in turn, traces the notion of the universe consisting of opposites back to its earliest known reference, which is ascribed to the Phoenicians. According to Phoenician thought, the dual nature of the cosmos manifests itself as male Essence, or Wisdom, whereas primitive Matter, or chaos, is defined as female (Blavatsky 1893, 61). Paracelsus (in Blavatsky 1893, xxvi) states: ‘Everything is double in nature; magnetism is positive and negative, active and passive, male and female … equilibrium is the resultant of two opposing forces eternally reacting upon each other. The result of this is LIFE.’ Mondrian (1970, 38), seeking a way in which to give form to the notion of universal harmony as a primordial opposition of extremes in a balanced relation, contends:

> In nature, we perceive that all relationship is governed by one relationship above all others: that of extreme opposites. The abstract plastic of relationship expresses this basic relationship determinately – by duality of position, the perpendicular … If we see these two extremes as manifestations of the inward and the outward … we see Neoplastic ... as the reconciliation of the matter mind duality.9

For Mondrian (1970, 38), the vertical line represents the male, mental/spiritual principle, whereas the horizontal, aligned as it is with the earth, represents the female, material principle. The correspondence with ideas noted in Blavatsky’s writings is clear. Blavatsky describes how the alchemists of all ages sought the esoteric truth obscured by the dross of matter, an activity prosaically explained (in order to appeal to the unenlightened imagination) as ‘distilling gold from base material’. Thus, the alchemists ‘sought for the hidden spirit in every inorganic matter’ (Blavatsky 1893, xxvi). Because spirit is resident in matter, hence necessitating alchemical ministrations, the spirit/matter duality can also be seen to conform to a hierarchical structure, in such a way that matter not only opposes spirit (thereby being completely estranged from spirit), but in such a way that matter partakes of spirit. In such a model, spirit is immanent in matter. It is for this reason that Neoplastic painting can succeed at all in its quest for heightening consciousness, for if this world were completely material and devoid of spirit, in other words, if spirit were completely unattainable in the here and now, then all striving to such ends would be futile. Thus, dualism can be placed within an hierarchical construct not doomed to an eternal opposition of extremes.

Thus far, dualism has been described in terms of opposition (of extremes) and in terms of an hierarchal ladder or chain. These structures are compatible with the dominant Western conception of dualism. Yet, the dualist structure can also be seen to conform to, as opposed to contradict, the Hegelian and, more specifically, the Eastern notion of monism. Seventeenth-century German mystical philosopher Jakob Böhme (in Watts 1986, 245) describes the creative principle of dualism as follows: ‘The being of all being is but a single being, yet in giving birth to itself, it divides itself into two principles ... and out of these two eternal beginnings into a third beginning, into the Creation itself as its own love-play’. Roger Ames’s translation (in Henricks & Lock 1998, 15) of The Dao de jing reads: ‘Dao gives rise to one, one to two, two to three, and three to the myriad of things. The myriad of things shoulder yin and embrace yang, and mix the qi to achieve harmony.’ Mondrian (1986c, 48) echoes this precisely: ‘Unity, in its most profound essence, radiates: it is. The radiation of unity’s being wrecks itself upon the physical – and thus gives rise to life and art.’

Interpreted in this way, the principle of balanced duality in Mondrian’s formulation of Neoplasticism has more in common with an Eastern mystical concept of monism than with the irreconcilable material/metaphysical dualism common to Western thought. Mondrian’s compositions, based on a dualistic harmonious balance constituting part of a Whole also have more in common with Russian mystic PD Ouspensky’s (1981, 221-229)
formulation of a ‘transcendental logic’ which reads as follows: ‘A is both A and not A, or Everything is both A and not A, or Everything is All’, a concept identical with the central teaching of the Upanishads, namely Tat tvam asi, or ‘thou art that’.

Concluding remarks

This article has attempted to emphasise the non-materialist aspects of De Stijl theory (as appropriated from both Western and Eastern transcendentalist romanticism), as well as the presence and influence of the specifically Eastern notion of monism. To summarise, Mondrian, in choosing ineffable, universal harmony as his subject matter (and paradigm), took recourse in representing it (or the Whole) in the clearest, most distilled form achievable by visual means. The purpose of the abstract compositions can be interpreted as follows: to invoke an awareness of the Absolute/Whole and to reject the material world in favour of the diaphanous, the unseen and the intangible. Content gave rise to from, as, in his artistic endeavours, Mondrian can be said to have attempted to give pure form to Form, and to have alchemically extracted the essential elements from nature in an attempt to make the ‘universal mind’ (or Geist) visible. In this sense, too, Mondrian’s pure De Stijl works can be read as Western mandalas (abstract, geometric representations of the universe) meant to lead to enlightenment, or arupa-dhyana, a state of being freed from (material) forms and images.

This discussion has attempted to show that De Stijl theory may be more comprehensively read in terms of its fusion of Western and Eastern philosophies, and that this fusion becomes more visible when focusing on the content/context of Mondrian’s thought. Mondrian’s writings comprise a confluence of Daoist principles, Platonic mysticism, Vedic philosophy, Romantic idealism and alchemical and magical practices. In this sense, De Stijl theory is best described as a visionary amalgamation of world philosophies, and Mondrian, a practitioner of jhāna-yoga, the yoga of intellectual pursuit. Far from being an objective, reasoned exercise in formal manipulation for its own sake, devoid of content, a Neoplastic painting, painstakingly conceived and executed, becomes a concretised mantra, evoking the manifestation of the Geist of Dao.

Notes

1 The eras where these notions are regarded as having dominated society include the ancient Greek period, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Tellingly, classically minded Modernists lauded these eras and encouraged emulation of their respective art and thought. For example, a number of Modernist architects (including Louis Sullivan, Peter Behrens, and Le Corbusier), admired Greek Doric temples for their spartan visual sobriety and lack of decoration. As a young architect, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) was awed by the architecture of the Acropolis, visiting and drawing it every day for a month. The Parthenon is said to have given Le Corbusier ‘a glimpse of an elusive absolute which continued to haunt him’ (Curtis 1996, 165), and he was later to conceive of his Villa Savoye (1928-1931) as a ‘Modernist Parthenon’.

2 The term rationalism needs clarification, as its meaning varies depending on the context within which it is used. Thomas Mautner (2000, 470) explains that the term ‘rational’ pertains to the faculty of reason and can be used to designate the opposite of religious revelation, sensory experience or emotion. Rationalism is seen as conditional to objectivity, so that, consequently, subjectivity and rationalism are seen as antithetical. In the philosophical sense, the term is used to designate the school of thought that believes knowledge springs from the faculty of reason, as opposed to a belief that all knowledge is based on sensory experience. The latter school is defined as ‘empiricism’ (Mautner 2000, 470).

3 Plato can be classified as rationalist, but not as materialist. For Plato, ‘reality’ could in fact not be further removed from matter, existing far beyond our perceived manifestation of the universe – a reality that is transcendent, abstract, unmarred. This is a description of the Forms, the non-particular universal essences of which the particular ‘things’ with which we are familiar are mere ghostly shadows. In The Republic, Plato (1969, 16) explains the notion of the Forms as follows: ‘Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume that there is one corresponding idea or form … (for instance) there are beds and tables in the world – many of each … but there are only two ideas or forms of such furniture – one the idea of a bed, the other of a table’. It is this transcendent aspect of Plato’s work that had the most profound influence on metaphysical thought up to and including the twentieth century owing to lingering waves of neo-Platonic thought.

4 Radical materialists, such as Wilson, purport that genetic evolution is responsible for culture. Wilson (1999, 139) states: ‘Culture is created by the communal mind, and each mind in turn is the product of the genetically structured
human brain. Thus culture, and art, as a product of culture, are regarded as the result of genetic evolution and any hope of creating 'an enduring theory of the arts' lies in acquiring and consolidating knowledge in the fields of brain sciences and evolutionary biology – creating something in the nature of 'bio-aesthetics' (Wilson 1999, 254-255). Wilson (1999, 268) further states that human biology should determine human morality and ethics and that the existence, or non-existence, of God is a puzzle for astrophysicists to conclusively resolve. Thus, ethics, aesthetics and the existence of God all amount to matters of biology and science, consigned to the realm of matter.

5 The full title of the article is Natural reality and abstract reality: a dialogue (while strolling from the country to the city).

6 Nominalism is the view that 'universals have no existence independently of being thought and are mere names, presenting nothing that really exists' (Flew 1984, 250).

7 Although the strict Calvinist upbringing Mondrian was exposed to might be inferred to have had an influence on his approach to his art and thought, Calvinist ideology is never referred to as such in his writings, whereas theosophist philosophy is pointedly mentioned and its application to the formulation of abstraction carefully explained.

8 By the early 1920s van Doesburg began to feel that this relation of balanced opposites represented stagnation rather than harmony, and introduced the diagonal in an attempt to dynamise what had become for him a cul de sac in Neoplastic thought. Mondrian, in turn, was adamantine about what he perceived to be an inviolable archetypal paradigm. Mondrian disassociated himself from De Stijl and broke off relations with van Doesburg in 1924. Mondrian continued to refer to the system of thought he had worked so meticulously on as Neoplasticism, whilst van Doesburg named his newly evolved system Elementarism.

9 In Hindu philosophy, the union of the male element, symbolic of compassion, and the female element, symbolic of wisdom, constitute enlightenment, or knowledge of perfection. Thus, in Kundalini Yoga, Shakti ('the Great Goddess', personification of 'the urge ... to separate existence' i.e. materiality), is said to reside in the base chakra, whereas Shiva (personification of the male, ethereal principle) is said to reside within the crown chakra. Shakti (matter) is progressively 'spiritualised', that is to say brought closer to Shiva, by means of disciplined practice. The union of Shakti with Shiva is 'an actual resolution of the duality that constitutes the phenomenal world' (Cross 1994, 113). This notion can be compared to Mondrian's (1970, 38) formulation of Neoplasticism as the nullification of the matter and mind schism.

References


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