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THE EVENING IS OVER, THE BEAUTY REMAINS

A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF
PIET MONDRIAN'S TEXT
"NATURAL REALITY AND
ABSTRACT REALITY"

Jaana Pääsky

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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A detail of Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* (1919).
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

ABSTRACT

This study concentrates on the Dutch artist, Piet Mondrian, as a producer of a Neo-Plastic theory of art. My semiotic reading focuses mainly on one of his article series, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* (*Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit* [1919-1920]), and acknowledges also the accompanying writings in the *De Stijl* periodical where it appeared, and a few photographs of Mondrian's studio and motifs present in the paintings at the time when Mondrian wrote *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. Mondrian produces his ideas of non-figurative art in a way in which other external cognitive processes from science, certain esoteric streams, modern urban experience and popular culture, are to be taken as integral parts of the theory formation in his own text. This view elucidates the idea of creativity in a new way because it situates the artist's individual activity *within* cultural knowledge and memory rather than just taking influences from it.

I have reached these findings by relating Mondrian's little-researched article series to the surrounding international philosophical, esoteric and technologizing cultures of the 1920s. Studying this relation in terms of significations has led to my study reflecting the paradigmatic and related meaning effects in contemporary philosophies and reflections, such as those of Henri Poincaré, Rudolf Steiner, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. By reading the text as a fictive dramatic score my study relies on Roman Jakobson's poetic function. Following in the lines of literary scholar Jørgen Johansen's subsequent application of Charles Peirce's semiotics this study reads Mondrian's article series as the process of *iconization*; as a flow of images, as diagrammatic enactment and as metaphors of night and a stroll.

To stage the route from 'natural reality' to 'abstract, Mondrian gives to *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* the flavour of being a form of logical inference applied by means of images. As a *flow of images* the text shows a stream of consciousness and, thus, the modern insight of perception, which differs from the traditional Kantian dualistic insight and the notion of the stable subject. The form of the text itself also represents meaning, which shows that Mondrian had literary ambitions. The aesthetic effect of the text as a *diagram* of many thematic oppositions and as the characters' relations makes it a self-reflective icon of its own theme of modern consciousness. *Metaphorically*, the text presents the processual character of an artist's creative thought as a night-time stroll, while developing the idea of Neo-Plasticism. Thus, there are definite Neoplatonic tenets in Mondrian's text. This study shows that creative activity takes place not only in the processes of an individual mind but also by actively integrating and using cultural signs, such as the idea of evolution or the cultural text of the Euclidean derivative, the 'point to line to plane'. By these kinds of 'cultural artefacts' Mondrian is able to conduct his own activity within and for the modern culture of the 1920s.

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There is an age-old metaphor about the process of researching: research is a journey and a researcher is a wanderer in new territories. The final outcome of these processes, such as a Ph D dissertation, might make these journeys seem simple – a logical and linear sauntering in the clarity of daylight. In reality, the actual process of researching is a messy and recursive one; more like a night-time journey than a stroll in the sunshine. Before the thesis acquires its final scope and form, there is much wandering in the darkness of insecurity. But having said that, for me the object of my research seemed too exciting to be put aside. The journey was so inviting it just had to be taken. I am thankful to those many sensitive and observant minds who have helped me find my path.

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I dedicate this book to two artists: to my mother, Liisa, and to the memory of my father, Erkki Heikkilä.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Art as Attuned to the Times

There is a peculiar spirit in the early twentieth-century Dutch art movement known as *De Stijl*. It seems constantly to stand against the corruption of time. Several researchers during the past decades have marked its ever-fresh, youthful quality. In the 1950s the art historian Hans Jaffé asked how an art historian should treat a subject which clearly belongs to the past, but still a part of that past is constantly present.¹ Another art historian, Sixten Ringbom, recognized that the poster of Piet Mondrian's abstract painting in a housing fair advertisement in Turku, in Finland, 1986, still symbolized fresh modernity, 'the world of tomorrow' as the poster text says, even though the painting itself, if it were in Finland, would be included in objects submitted under the law of historical artefacts.² Paul Overy also noticed in the 1990s how this phenomenon of keeping the past fresh still continues with more recent exhibitions.³

The situation today still seems to be the same. *De Stijl* has become a constant object of many kinds of return. This applies not only to the variety of themes of recent exhibitions, to architectural scale models, but also to the work of other artists, designers and architects. Therefore, the modernity of *De Stijl* seems to stand against the corruption of time by giving an impression of fresh, up-to-date art. It seems to open itself to the future, not to the past, no matter in which decade we are viewing this art. What could be the reason why a certain aesthetic style is able to create an impression of being attuned to the times, of belonging not only to the time of its own birth but also able to radiate its contemporary character over and over again?

In a certain way this need to maintain a sense of freshness was also recognized by the artists themselves in the early years of the *De Stijl* movement. Thus, they devoted themselves to expressing the common consciousness of the period in their art. This *tijdsbewustzijn* (consciousness of time), as the Dutch word would suggest, was the first point in the *De Stijl* manifesto⁴ (see Figure 1, a and b.). It was this spirit that actually guided the formation of the movement.⁵ It anticipated a surrender

1 Jaffé 1956, 1.

2 Ringbom 1989, 11. The poster reproduced Mondrian's *Composition I: Red-Yellow-Blue* (1921), which is in the Gemeente Museum in The Hague.

3 Overy 1991, 198.

4 The *De Stijl* manifesto mentions this word in its first article. *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, p.4.

5 Jaffé 1956, 3, 8.

to the hectic tempo of the urbanized world, to the rhythms of jazz and modern dances, but also to puzzlement over the transiency of the old world – and indeed puzzlement over the new world too, where only the ‘infinite skies’ circumscribed the ‘new man’. My study also takes the starting point from this broad perspective. But from this viewpoint it heads towards a field that has been more or less set aside. Thus, while *De Stijl* art is famous, the writings of these artists are less familiar to a wider audience. My study aims to uncover why especially one particular series of articles by Mondrian reflected the common consciousness of the period. This series, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* (*Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit*), appeared in twelve instalments in *De Stijl* magazine, from June 1919 until August 1920 (see Figure 2.). It is a long conversation conducted by three persons, a modern artist, a traditional artist, and a layman, while strolling from the rural countryside into the city. The article series comprises seven *Scenes*. The first six start with a description of a landscape and the last *Scene* with a view of a studio.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality belongs to Mondrian’s wide reservoir of literary texts which could set light to this art, but which have in fact remained in the shadows.⁶ Nowadays, most authors or researchers have avoided discussing their content systematically. Thus, relating Mondrian’s abstract works of art with his texts has been a difficult task because abstract paintings are usually considered to speak for themselves. Words of explanation are virtually forbidden, or at least regarded as unnecessary. Having said that, in the research literature, Mondrian’s texts are often cited to provide support for the researcher’s argument. His writings have also been seen as a good resource when seeking access to ‘Mondrian’s opinion’ about a particular matter in question. But as texts with a voice of their own, they have been largely ignored. Orientated to semiotic philosophy and semiotic analysis, my study considers Mondrian’s literary piece as an independent enterprise in the *De Stijl* movement.

Approaching *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*

How should one study a literary text by a world-famous painter of abstract art? Should it be approached from a literary perspective in order to reveal its unique literary features? Or should it be viewed from the art-historical point of view to illuminate Mondrian’s visual art? Either way, both approaches would miss some important features in the text, and one solution is to adopt both perspectives. My academic training stems from the field of art history and I will thus not take up all

6 *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* was not published in English until 1956, when it appeared in Michel Seuphor’s *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. This is rather late, considering that many translations (German, Italian, English, Polish) and publications of Mondrian’s writings, in selected combinations, had already appeared by then.

the possibilities that the field of literature is able to offer. This study does include, however, some analysis of visual works, which are used where appropriate as supportive evidence. My study uses analytical methods and concepts of semiotics that can be used both in literature and in visual works, integrating written texts and visual works of art. Mondrian's article series, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, has surprised me particularly with its philosophical character and therefore its high level of abstractness. What has also become apparent is that Mondrian meant more than he let the text explicitly say. In fact, it is to my mind little wonder that Herbert Henkels points out that this text has an 'almost explosively loaded metaphorical character'.⁷

To frame my approach, we need to know what kind of text *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is. It appeared in *De Stijl* among the writings of other artists in that movement.⁸ Many of these writings were divided up into several instalments. Consequently, readers probably related Mondrian's article series to these other articles rather than comprehended it as a single literary work. The same applies to other articles by other *De Stijl* artists. Mondrian's article series has been referred to as a 'Triologue', the name originating from French.⁹ This usage does not mean a tripartite piece of literature, but instead refers to a conversation involving three people. It is by this term, too, that I will address Mondrian's article series in this study. In this way it cannot be confused with Mondrian's earlier large article series from 1917, "The New Plastic in Painting" (*De Nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst*) in *De Stijl*. Neither should it be confused with Mondrian's *Dialogue on the New Plastic*, 1919, (*Dialogo over de Nieuwe Beelding*), which also appeared in *De Stijl*. Harry Holzman and Martin James translated the 'Triologue' into English in 1986.¹⁰ From Mondrian's correspondence with a fellow artist and contributor to *De Stijl*, Theo Van Doesburg, it can be concluded that Mondrian started 'Triologue' in Holland and completed it in Paris after his return there in July 1919. Mondrian anticipated that the writing process would be lengthy. In fact, it probably became even longer than Mondrian had expected, since each article underwent revisions

7 Henkels 1986, 16.

8 In addition to Mondrian, between 1917 and 1920 the most active writers in *De Stijl* were Theo van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszár, J. J. P. Oud, Georges Vantongerloo, Gino Severini, Bart van der Leek, Jan Wils and Robert van't Hoff.

9 The letter to van Doesburg in April 1919 shows that Mondrian wanted to use the term but that he was uncertain about the correct Dutch form of the word. Holzman's edition uses the word 'Triologue'.

10 This study refers to Holzman's and James's translation in 1986: *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. When referring to the *De Stijl* periodical this study uses the facsimile of 1968. In the *De Stijl* periodical, the division of the *Scenes* is different from Holzman's translation, namely, in the original *De Stijl* the *Studio-Scene* was divided into the seventh and eighth *Scenes*, whereas in Holzman's translation the seventh *Scene* includes the whole text of the *Studio-Scene*. For reasons of clarity my study also follows Holzman's translation in this respect. Moreover, the original text in *De Stijl* includes a mistake in the numbering of the *Scenes*, namely one instalment which ought to continue the sixth *Scene* is titled the fourth *Scene*. See *De Stijl*, III, 3, 1920, p.27.

and corrections, as is apparent in most of his letters during this time.¹¹ Mondrian's letters to Van Doesburg also reveal that during this period when Mondrian was writing the *'Triologue'* he was influenced by the Italian pre-Futurist circles¹² and was pondering on the idea of literary form and the idea of rhythm in the sense that "he had not before considered it".¹³ The correspondence also includes critical comments about the contribution of several *De Stijl* artists in the journal. Thus, Mondrian questions whether such artists as Gino Severini, Georges Vantongerloo or Vilmos Huszár are truly kindred spirits.¹⁴ Mondrian also acknowledged the idea of evolution as a valuable feature in the work of other artists at this time.¹⁵

When surveying Piet Mondrian's *'Triologue'*, the reader immediately gets the impression that it speaks a lot about visual perception and does so from the point of view of an artist. Furthermore, it has quite a philosophically charged nature and an odd inaccessibility. The reader notices several highly philosophic-sounding words and conceptions, which carry wide abstract connotations. Reading the text is not made easier by the fact that Mondrian clearly uses concepts in his own particular way.¹⁶ In addition, Mondrian often wants to emphasize their meaningfulness even more so by altering the spacing between the letters. To the reader it suggests that the word just read is somehow special, expressing a core idea which needs special attention. But although a word may be emphasized in this way, it does not necessarily disclose its meaning. Thus, Mondrian's words and style both arouse the reader's curiosity and, at the same time, seem to maintain a cryptic distance.

In order to choose the appropriate ways of approaching this kind of literary text, a study needs to appreciate and frame its subject matter. Mondrian's other literary texts are mostly 'factual' essays, where Mondrian speaks in his own authorial voice. *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, however, arouses an attitude in the reader in which the text is considered a piece of literary art because Mondrian clothes it in a dramatic form of dialogue and creates a play with actors.¹⁷ According to Carel Blotkamp, this kind of dramatic form of discussions between the characters in a

11 The first letter to van Doesburg, where Mondrian mentions the *'Triologue'* is dated January, 1919. During the following months Mondrian notes the corrections to be made to the *'Triologue'* in several letters to van Doesburg. The final part of the *'Triologue'* he sent to van Doesburg on November 22, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

12 Mondrian's letter March 3, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

13 Mondrian's letter to van Doesburg August 1, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

14 See, for example, Mondrian's letters to van Doesburg July 9, 1918 and August 21, 1919 and several undated letters in 1917 and 1918. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

15 Mondrian's letter January 8, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

16 Janssen 2011, 29. Janssen notes that Mondrian's use of Dutch is in fact much stranger than the English – or French – translations can ever suggest. This is because Mondrian tried to suggest more meaning than is actually intrinsic to the words.

17 In a letter to van Doesburg, dated March 28, 1919, Mondrian goes back and forth debating whether the *'Triologue'* is a play or not. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

play was often used in the 18th and 19th centuries to expound some theory of art or literature.¹⁸ This applies to Mondrian's play in the sense that it becomes obvious to the reader that the dialogue in the text concerns theoretical ponderings about art. Readers, moreover, need to use their imagination, since Mondrian leaves out many naturalistic details. The characters, for example, are given abstract identities, such as 'a naturalist painter' or 'an abstract-real painter', rather than ordinary names. In addition, they stroll from the rural Dutch countryside to the city of Paris in one evening, the text telling us almost nothing about the trip itself. It is also not always clear to the reader if the talk about the landscapes passed by means a real vision or merely a view of a painting.

What has been said above is precisely what takes place when a play moves from being a script into an actual performance before a live audience. The literary scholar Jørgen Dines Johansen links literature with theatrical performance in that both serve as a script for the mental processes active in reading or staging. They predispose the reader or actor to react emotionally, because in order to make sense of the text's universe the reader and the actor have to supply what is not mentioned but is presupposed.¹⁹

My choice of methods is based on a certain quality in Mondrian's text, namely that features which require the reader's imagination suggest the fictional character of Mondrian's text. They suggest its character as literature. According to Johansen, since a fictional universe is only accessible through the imagination, a strange relationship prevails between the reader and the text. On one hand, a fictional universe is autonomous and separated from the reader's world of experience, on the other its concrete realization is dependent on the identical experiential world as represented to the reader.²⁰ For example, a fictional text asserts that something is the case without being held responsible for asserting that this state of affairs cannot necessarily be pointed out and identified either within a common experiential world or within a common historical past.²¹ For me, the '*Trialogue*' appears to be a fiction. The setting of an overnight journey forces the reader to read the text as fiction as the time-span between the places in Mondrian's text do not match our common experiential world. Nobody strolls from a Dutch rural district to Paris in one evening.

Furthermore, like every playwright, Mondrian too wishes to say more than he lets his characters speak. While writing the '*Trialogue*', Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg that he had found something related to form in writing, and later on he

18 Blotkamp 1994, 131.

19 Johansen 2002, 326.

20 Johansen 2002, 123–124.

21 Johansen 2002, 122.

will see whether it works.²² When surveying Mondrian's text it becomes obvious that it seems to display some compositional principles which utilize thematic symmetry between the story's opposite poles, namely places and the illuminations of the *Scenes*. According to Johansen, these kinds of features indicate the text's poetic character. They further the text's representative force by letting the text become exemplary.²³

Mondrian's '*Triologue*' also reveals few clues about its frame. It is not only that the text does not describe the stroll itself, or that it does not tell us practically anything about the characters who are strolling, but Mondrian's text lacks a separate narratorial voice which would allow the reader to comprehend the characters' motives. Therefore, the text is in this way not tied down to the particularities of the actual. Mondrian, as a writer, is free to assume a point of view where he can discard certain things and foreground others. He can, for example, discard the realistic details of walking at night in order to make the dialogue central to the reader's focus. Johansen notes that this is also a license allowed literary texts. Even if in this way literature achieves autonomy and even if it is not immediately related to our lived world, literature is worthy not because it bears no relation to our world but because of the particular way it is related to it.²⁴

These notions lead me to approach Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* as a piece of fictive conversation. As such, Mondrian's text mediates between the reader's life world and its own context of intellectual and urban culture in the 1920s. Moreover, this kind of relation was also the openly stated purpose of the *De Stijl* movement itself. Thus, to study Mondrian's '*Triologue*' is to study it through the lens of these kinds of specific relations. They give birth to the meanings which I intend to search and describe. For this I need to find a theoretical frame which explains how Mondrian's text is related to the surrounding world. Roman Jakobson's semiotic notion of the poetic function of literary texts provides this perspective.

Thesis and Poetic Function

My thesis hypothesizes that Mondrian's article series *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* represents a creative thought process which contributes to the theory of Neo-Plasticism. This process is dependent on the surrounding contemporary cultural ideas about seeing and the human consciousness and presents this process as a piece of literature.

22 Mondrian's letter to van Doesburg in 22 November, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, (0408) RKD.

23 Johansen 2002, 98.

24 Johansen 2002, 99. Italics original.

Mondrian's text is an expression of a certain life world and experiences and is concerned with thoughts, desires and emotions. It is part of the avant-gardist *De Stijl* movement but also a literary text created by an individual artist. As such, the reader may expect it to contest the dividing lines between the arts and even 'art' and 'life', but my reading also follows the inner construction of a middle-aged artist on the threshold of abstract art. The scope of my study may seem to be rather narrow as it primarily focuses on only one of Mondrian's literary works, namely *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. However, my purpose is to explore this work within a wide network of operative surroundings, including the *De Stijl* periodical and esoteric, scientific and philosophical fields, in order to show the discursive dimensions and meaning systems wherein it was produced and read. Hence, my initial question is 'What made this literary work possible?' My approach also takes my analysis beyond the Dutch national framework since the supposition is that Mondrian's text was not isolated from the international aspirations of the *De Stijl* movement. Avant-garde movements took place in several countries at the same time and the major scientific breakthroughs of the time pervaded quickly into the collective psyche, even if only as metaphors. Seen within a national framework or only within the field of art, Mondrian's enterprise might seem too sporadic and fragmentary. Accordingly, this study suggests cross-mediality and cross-aesthetic intentions between the established institutions of art and other intellectual enterprises present in that era.

This study does not aim to apply a historical-critical approach to Mondrian's art and writings, neither does it seek to provide conceptual approaches to the abstract formal considerations of Mondrian's paintings. My approach is not primarily directed at Mondrian's abstract works of art per se. Rather the aim is to shed light on Mondrian's way of creating an art theory and, therefore, also on Mondrian as a creative thinker. Consequently, this study primarily contributes to recent research paradigms concerning the avant-garde and modernism. In these paradigms political, geographical, material and historical environments have been understood as increasingly important, meaning in practice that the object of research is more often a discourse, a location, a network, an institution or a magazine.²⁵ Thus, with these considerations in mind, it follows that the organization of this study is semiotic.

My purpose is to compare Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* to the epistemological world of the 1920s, which is both inconsistent and fragmentary,

25 See, for example, the publications and congresses of the European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies from 2008 on: a series of books, *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries* (ed. Hubert van den Berg et al.); Béatrice Joyeux-Prunell's *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1848-1918. Une histoire transnationale* (2017).

as Johansen notices about modelling the lifeworld.²⁶ Our interpretation of the lifeworld is sketchy, fragmented and incoherent. When it comes to the epistemological turmoil of the epoch, Mondrian too, as an artist, was in a sense a man in the street. Yet he was also a ‘world-maker’ of abstract art. As Nelson Goodman reminds us, world-making is an activity in which taking from some already existing world version as the point of departure, one creates a new world as a layman.²⁷ The theory of Neo-Plasticism was created in this fragmentary lifeworld and *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* belongs to the network of its creations and ideas.

The starting hypothesis for this study is that the work within *De Stijl* and also its work across the borders of art is mediated activity. This view is, as I have said, semiotic. According to Lev Vygotsky, intelligent human behaviour is mediated by signs and tools, which give birth to new culturally based forms of activity and artefacts.²⁸ Therefore, when applying this idea to the creative work of an artist, mediated activity is not merely about the ‘sharing of ideas’ or ‘mutual stimulation’ between the participants, rather it is about the external processes which should be taken as integral parts of the cognitive process of the one who brings the new to life, like Mondrian when introducing Neo-Plasticism. Studying *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* as this kind of sign-based activity sheds light on Mondrian as a producer of an art theory.

It is characteristic of the signification of the literary text, as well as of any work of art, that it cannot be completely traced to the intentions of the author. That is why my reading will not approach Mondrian’s text as if it wanted to reveal or explain Mondrian’s opinions and purposes. Even though I occasionally refer to Mondrian thoughts, for example his letters, my study concentrates on the many meanings the ‘*Triologue*’ itself produces. Having said that, sometimes the meanings raised by the research material may reveal personal considerations, because texts ultimately also speak of the problem of an individual in relation to structure, or as art historian Renja Suominen-Kokkonen points out, of how free the individual is in theory and practice.²⁹ Thus, in semiotic reading, reconsiderations of personal interests and life may also become apparent even though the starting point has not been the hopes or aspirations of the artist.

As the literary scholar Harri Veivo reminds us, the text demands active cooperation on the reader’s part. This leads the reader beyond the purely informational structures of the text. In this way the text produces the meaning which

26 Johansen 2002, 164.

27 Goodman 1978, 6–7, 20.

28 Vygotsky 1978, 54. Vygotsky notes that there is an analogy between sign and tool and this rests on the mediating function that characterizes each of them.

29 Suominen-Kokkonen 2013, 10.

becomes embedded in both the cultural context and the individual experiences of the reader.³⁰ Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* almost compels this kind of reading because of its inaccessible and hermetic character.³¹ Active co-operation takes place almost automatically in the reading process. This means that Mondrian's article series as a semiotic text may signify in such a way that is impossible to verify empirically, yet it still produces certain meaning effects for its audience. Signification is thus shared between the reader and the author. Considering that Mondrian was prone to covering up clues³² about the sources which had possibly inspired him, I suggest that a semiotic approach is not only appropriate but necessary when studying the mediating meaning processes between the 'Triologue' and the surrounding culture.

What makes a verbal message a work of art? According to linguist and literary theoretician Roman Jakobson, this is the question that poetics primarily deals with. Jakobson, who has studied verbal art in relation to other arts, has coined the term 'poetic function' for verbal art. It is with this approach that my study intends to search for meanings in Mondrian's text. Poetic function is not the sole function of a literary text but only its defining function. There are also other verbal activities for which it acts as a supporting constituent. According to Jakobson, poetry is not the only field where the poetic function can be applied.³³ All texts are goal directed, and so is Mondrian's. Therefore, poetic function means the elaborate patterning of the linguistic texture that brings about this effect. There are obvious 'elaborated patterns' in Mondrian's 'Triologue', like, for example, its form as a conversation, as a play, its oppositional structure, and the terms and concepts it uses.

When thinking about Mondrian's 'Triologue' as a text which participates in the network of the *De Stijl* movement and the surrounding intellectual milieu, Jakobson's poetic functions seem to be an appropriate theoretical approach for Mondrian's 'Triologue'. This is because these functions explain what kind of relation a fictive text has to its context. It is this relation that my study seeks to clarify, namely the connection between the literary text and the intellectual milieu in terms of analogical meaning. According to such a view, the state of affairs and the states of mind represented in a literary text are the interpretations of a given lived world.³⁴ According to Jakobson, "the poetic function projects the principle

30 Veivo 2001, 61.

31 The philosopher Jan Bor noted that the hermetic character of Mondrian's writings far surpassed his expectations. See Bor 2015, 25.

32 Mondrian used to pass on the books he had read and he did not wish to keep any printed literary material in his studio. He also destroyed the letters he received, so that there is virtually no correspondence addressed to him in his entire estate.

33 Jakobson 1981, 25. According to Jakobson, limiting the sphere of the poetic function to merely poetry would oversimplify verbal art.

34 Johansen 2002, 165–166.

of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence.”³⁵ Therefore, Jørgen Dines Johansen considers similarity to be an important formation rule for the chain of signs in literature: “It seems that fictionality promotes a similar process as regards fictional narrative, in the sense that contiguity is put at the service of similarity, because the probable is that which is similar to how things usually are.”³⁶

Following Jakobson’s principle, which justifies the emphasis on similarity and Johansen’s semiotic-pragmatic point of view, my purpose is to study Mondrian’s text as a semiotic-pragmatic signification process. In this my study relies on the semiotics and pragmatics of the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Later in this Introduction I take a deeper look at my methodological tools and at ways of reading Mondrian’s text. At this point I shall just briefly present the guidelines of my approach based on Peirce’s semiotic pragmatism.

Peirce sees semiosis as a dynamic signification process. It is central to communication and involves three aspects, namely the sign, its object and its interpretant.³⁷ Semiosis also makes possible the communication between Mondrian’s text and its readers. It is simply a process between three elements: the object to which the sign refers; the sign vehicle, which is the material support of the sign; and the interpretant. According to Floyd Merrell, “semiosis is the process whereby a sign comes into the mind by way of another sign, such a sign being a translation of the first sign, and the mind being that of the interpreter interpreting the sign”.³⁸ Peirce’s concept of an interpretant is tied to the idea of semiosis and does not simply mean the interpreting reader. Johansen clarifies that the interpretant is to be understood “as transformation rules that translate signs into something else and which requires, thus, interpretation”.³⁹ Thus, the signifying relation between Mondrian’s text and the surrounding intellectual milieu may be the kind in which the meaning works according to certain principles, which then become translated into a meaning within an art theory. Johansen emphasizes that when we relate the text to our life world, we do not compare fictional thoughts, feelings, or a plot to what is going on in the world; rather, we compare these elements to our interpretation of the forces, interests and reasons governing man’s relation to his lifeworld.⁴⁰

35 Jakobson 1981, 27.

36 Johansen 2002, 159.

37 EP2, 411–412.

38 Merrell 1995, 94. The interpretant is susceptible to being interpreted further and is therefore capable of becoming a sign in itself. In this way, semiosis is also a process between signs, but not an autonomous and immanent process, since signs are subject to influences from the material and social world.

39 Johansen 2002, 42.

40 Johansen 2002, 164.

According to Johansen, there are three possible ways by which literature is related to the real historical world and how literature integrates with this world. These relations are by similarity, by contiguity and by conventionality.⁴¹ These are, of course, the same three relations of mediation as in Peirce's concept of a sign. According to Peirce:

there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitation them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. Such is a guidepost, which points down the road to be taken, or a relative pronoun which is placed just after the name of the thing indented to be denoted, or a vocative exclamation, as "Hi! there," which acts upon the nerves of the person addressed and forces his attention. Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage, such are most works, and phrases, and speeches, and books, and libraries.⁴²

My reading proceeds through these three facets of signification. However, often in semiotic approaches one of these facets becomes more important than the other two. Since my approach is dependent upon Jacobson's notion of the poetic function, which emphasizes that the relations between the world and literature are based on similarity, my approach also shows an emphasis on iconicity.

Questions of seeing

The *De Stijl* movement was the response of artists to rapidly changing world-images. Hence, this study deals with questions concerning the way in which the macro-historical and macro-cosmological ideas of the era, such as evolution and the principle of relativity, were represented in the microcosm of the human mind. The new ideas typically introduce metaphors by which we live. The question which follows is whether the '*Trialogue*' exemplifies and uses these meanings. The theoretical writings and statements of the *De Stijl* movement share sources in mystical and esoteric traditions, in pseudoscientific and even in purely scientific literature. As Michael H. Whitworth argues, one of such ideas was the finite character of the velocity of light, which Einstein's theory of relativity again provided additional significance. Modernist writers applied the idea as many metaphors in

41 Johansen 2002, 146–147.

42 EP2, 5 (italics original). Peirce: "What Is a Sign?" (1894).

their literary works.⁴³ The popularized philosophical literature, which the *De Stijl* artists read, questioned positivistic science and its image of the perceiving subject. What these mental currents seem to have in common is a monistic philosophy which unites spirit and matter. These sources reflect the vigorous epistemological debate which was going on in 1915–1925 in the field of philosophy. For a visual artist the relevance of this debate for ideas of seeing was crucial.

The terrain of visual perception can be understood rather as a fluctuating field in the course of history rather than as clearly distinguished ideas.⁴⁴ However, to cope with this fluctuating field, some earlier ideas from the beginning of the 20th century must be brought up. They are not to be taken as strictly applied ideas but rather as guidelines for my study, and can be grouped as major reconsiderations. Firstly, questions about the nature of perception were aroused.⁴⁵ Specifically, perspective was eliminated since it correlated to the transcendental. Thus, the subject position in the “Cartesian perspectivalist” epistemology, as Martin Jay calls it, could be equated with the monocular eye at the apex of the beholder’s pyramid (the imagined receding lines between the object of vision and the beholder). Thus, this eye was transcendental and universal. It was the same for any human viewer occupying the same point in time and space.⁴⁶

Secondly, the viewing subject became embodied. The new knowledge in physiological optics made the reading of the visual signal an entirely different process in the nervous system. It was understood in terms of the conditions of the body’s real orientation to the world, as Rosalind Krauss notes. It changed the Cartesian transparent eye and re-inscribed it in the carnal body.⁴⁷ Jonathan Crary also notices, in line with Krauss, how vision became relocated in the subjectivity of the observer. The immense significance of this concerns the body of the observer, which had thus far been a neutral or invisible term in vision.⁴⁸

Thirdly, the ongoing aspects of perception attracted the field of philosophy.⁴⁹ The aspect of time now became appreciated. As Nicola Creighton points out, contemporaneous with and related to the rethinking of three-dimensional Euclidean

43 Whitworth 2001, 170. Whitworth points out that modernist writers treated space and time in unusual ways even before they had heard of Einstein.

44 Jay 1988, 4.

45 Whitworth 2001, 84, 233. Whitworth foregrounds British modernist writers and thus emphasizes the local networks of modernism rather than its international character. According to him, the divergence is more apparent than real: after all, he examines scientific theories which were mostly developed in continental Europe.

46 Jay 1988, 11.

47 Krauss 1990, 183; Jay 1988, 18.

48 Crary 1990, 150.

49 Contemporary with *De Stijl* two of the leading figures in these ideas were the philosopher Henri Bergson and the mathematician Henri Poincaré. They both included the aspect of intuition as a necessary element of perception. See Jay 1993, 118–119.

space was the notion of conventional time versus subjective time. In conventional time the human intellect divides up time, but it can only be apprehended as framed moments, it cannot know the process of time as it flows.⁵⁰ The divided up reality, whether of an object or of an event, can never again be recovered in its unified entirety.

My study intends to trace these epistemological changes, my reading of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* proceeding by posing four questions. Firstly, how does *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* reflect the awareness of the perceiving subject? Secondly, in what ways is the collapse of Euclidean notions of space represented in the text? Thirdly, how is the change from conventional linear time to subjective time represented? Finally, how does *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* convey its message as an art-theoretical text? As an art-theoretical text, it is concerned with abstract art and Neo-Plasticism, and these elements are not neglected in my thesis. It is mainly through these viewpoints that my study explores the meanings of Mondrian's 'new vision'.

In order to study the issue of perception in the 'Triologue', I also need to use an appropriate vocabulary. Mondrian used the concept of 'vision' (*zien*) in his text, and the implications of this concept need to be considered, especially as the word does not occur as a single sight-related concept in Mondrian's text. Mondrian frequently uses the word *aanschouwen* (to contemplate). It is partly a concept which overlaps with vision, but to my mind contemplation emphasizes even more the thinking, pondering and considering elements of vision and should not be understood exclusively in the technical-visual sense.⁵¹ In my study the word 'vision' should for working purposes cover as much as possible the generality and neutrality of my approach, and to me the relative neutrality of Peirce's epistemological ideas on perception presupposes this. Thus, words such as 'view', 'look' and 'gaze' are all considered to be too active or intense. They refer to visual perception in a particular situation rather than to vision of a more general kind. They also include an implicit object in that to 'look' is often thought of as looking at something, and gazing is an even more intense look. Moreover, as Mieke Bal reminds us, they indicate the position of the subject doing the looking.⁵² Thus, the choice of words related to vision needs to be highly nuanced and the appropriacy of such words must depend upon the field of study in question.

The words 'observing' and 'seeing' include an action which has some duration and goes beyond the mere particular moment or situation. I understand the distinction between them in the following way. 'Observing' pertains to models of

50 Creighton 2004, 39–40.

51 Mieke Bal, for example, reminds us of the slightly metaphorical character of 'vision', which is not, however, identical to imagination. Vision tends to involve both looking and interpreting. See Bal 2002, 37.

52 Bal 2002, 35.

viewing and of depicting. Therefore, it has something to do with obeying some kind of rules in connection with the act. The pretexts in all the *Scenes* in Mondrian's describe and at the same time observe the sceneries.

I find both seeing and observing to be compatible with the very movement of thought and its process character, ideas which strongly characterize Peirce's philosophy.⁵³ 'Observing', in fact, presupposes some kind of neutrality or reticence on the part of the viewing subject. In this way it would be in line with the rather neutral idea of subjectivity which we recognize in Peirce's phenomenology and semiotics. 'Seeing' for its part refers to the dynamic, potentially creative visual process. It has a plurality of meanings, including such connotations as understanding, looking, realizing, meeting and guiding.

1.2 Reflections on Research Literature

Hans Jaffé's foundational study, *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (1956), set the standards for *De Stijl* inquiry, providing the kind of comprehensiveness that offers a basis for future studies whatever their focus might be. The study has a fresh appeal in the sense that it sets the *De Stijl* movement into the network of some clusters of ideas. To express the common consciousness of the period, *tijdsbewustzijn*, was the manifest purpose of the *De Stijl* artists, but the concept also provides the framework for Jaffé's study.⁵⁴ Jaffé's method is to subdivide his research into the intellectual fields which were most prominently in evidence within the *De Stijl* movement. My study, too, uses these cultural and philosophical fields as a prompt for some obvious topics in Mondrian's article series. However, I am not particularly searching for some kind of a general consciousness of the era, but a few specific meanings which the differing intellectual fields shared and which shed light on Mondrian's literary considerations.⁵⁵

53 Many scholars have noticed as typical of Peirce the process character of thought which relies on observing schemes, figures, interconnected lines. Frederik Sjtjernfelt, for example, writes a whole chapter on observing rationally related objects as "moving pictures of thought", whereas in Floyd Merrell's work the idea of observation provides the background to his considerations. See Sjtjernfelt 2007, 89–116, and Merrell 1995, 51.

54 The *De Stijl* manifesto presents the word *tijdsbewustzijn* in its first article. See *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, p.2.

55 To mention a few of these indicators about the consciousness of the time, Jaffé notes that universalism is "something that comes close to the platonic idea" (Jaffé 1956, 5); the idea of evolutionism, the interest in mathematics and geometry (Jaffé 1956, 57); the need to consider art by using the motifs of dance and rhythm (Jaffé 1956, 154, 188); and the optimistic new spirit that relies on the human faculty (Jaffé, 1956, 63).

Formal-Analytical Tradition

In the research literature after Jaffé's study the reader is confronted with a peculiar feature, namely there seems to be just one approved approach to Mondrian's abstract paintings. This has prevailed for decades, concentrating on the visual as though any other way of talking about the paintings would appear to be inappropriate. By this I refer to the formal-analytic tradition, which has acquired an apparently canonical status in the history of modernism. It has for decades led to a certain form of discourse which has been taken as a qualified and competent way to talk about abstract art. The primary purpose of this study is not to position itself against this tradition, after all my focus is not on Mondrian's paintings but rather on a network of discursive formations. However, the formal-analytical tradition provides the starting place since it is mostly through this kind of literature that the researcher has to approach Mondrian's art. Kermit Champa, for example, in his *Mondrian Studies* (1985) elaborates this vision most consistently. This formal-analytical tradition claims that the field of art is at once "timeless and in constant flux" and the works of art are "universal transhistorical forms", as Rosalind Krauss characterizes it.⁵⁶ This has had definite consequences for Mondrian's literary works. The formal-analytical tradition has replaced the literary theoretical expressions of Neo-Plasticism so that the literary expressions ceased to have a voice of their own.

Carel Blotkamp's *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (1994), however, criticizes the formal-analytical tradition. He argues that the canonized and petrified meanings of formal-analytical language came to control the discourse of art criticism and became the measure of research competence.⁵⁷ Whereas Blotkamp sees Mondrian as an artist who has roots in nineteenth-century ideas, Yve-Alain Bois emphasizes Mondrian's modernity. Bois's analyses of Mondrian's abstract works of art in his essay "Iconoclast" may be situated in the formal-analytical tradition in the sense that they keep primarily to what is visible in the paintings. However, the essay introduces Hegel's influence on Mondrian's theory and interestingly situates the '*Trialogue*' as the turning point in his writings after which Mondrian distances himself permanently from the Dutch-Hegelian sphere.⁵⁸ Marek Wieczorek continues this research line in his dissertation, *Space and Evolution in Piet Mondrian's Early Abstract Paintings*. Applying historical specificity, he shows how Hegelian dialectic is at work in the abstract formal, operative ideas of Mondrian's paintings and argues that Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism manifests a Hegelian conception of space.⁵⁹ He draws a reasoned and focused picture of one of the contexts for Mondrian but does not consider the issue, of which Janet Beckett in "Discoursing on Dutch

56 Krauss 1985, 1.

57 Blotkamp 1994, 11–12.

58 Bois 1994, 333–334.

59 Wieczorek 1997, 333.

Modernism” (1983) reminds us, namely that Hegelian arguments came inevitably to be reinterpreted in many discourses and esoteric doctrines. When arguing that the meaning and coherence of *De Stijl* should be relocated into wider discursive formations, both within and outside the domain of art, her approach provides guidelines for my own.

According to Harry Cooper, finding relationships between painting and dance or music requires the kind of formal study that is not very popular in art history.⁶⁰ His essay, “Popular Models: Fox-Trot and Jazz Band in Mondrian’s Abstraction”, studies these kinds of relations in terms of formal rhythmic or diagrammatic step patterns. The essay, in fact, comes close to a semiotic study, the object of which is usually some kind of principle, or rule of interpretation in that relation. However, a mere formal analogy does not say much in itself; what must be asked is the meaning that this analogy produces.

Already in the 1970s, two scholars, Robert Welsh and Sixten Ringbom, tried to open up the closed nature of the formal-analytical tradition. They brought into the discussion the influences that Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky had taken from theosophy and Steiner’s anthroposophy. Ringbom’s *Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (1970) and Welsh’s essay “Mondrian and Theosophy” (1971) are the first two studies which seriously showed with very detailed analyses the impact of theosophy.

Both Welsh and Ringbom obviously somehow recognized the status of their studies at the heart of the petrified formal interpretation tradition. It tells us something about the power of the formal-analytical tradition that Welsh applies theosophical visual codes only to Mondrian’s figurative period, Welsh being careful not to intrude with this method into the formalistic tradition.⁶¹ Ringbom also maintained that theosophical figures are the starting point for Kandinsky’s abstract work, though he was criticized for saying so.⁶²

However, in the light of the semiotic approach of my study, their insights seem completely fresh. A couple of decades later, Altti Kuusamo argued that abstract art does have motifs about which we can agree. Therefore, to stipulate the abstract motif as its own subject matter is just what scholars should do if they want to study abstract art by using semiotic methods.⁶³ The undiminished value of Ringbom’s

60 Cooper 2002, 163.

61 “No one who seriously studies Mondrian’s abstract work in the original will confuse his paintings – enlivened as they are by subtle tensions of line, color, implied movement and generated space – with the theoretical preoccupations which inform his iconographic content. Nonetheless, it was with the aid of such preoccupations that Mondrian achieved the artistic results on view in the present exhibition. If for no other reason than this, one may feel grateful for the contribution made by Theosophic doctrine to the art of one of the major painters of the present century.” See Welsh 1971, 51.

62 See, for example, Sakari 1998, 33–39.

63 Kuusamo 1996, 142.

work is that he is the first to shed light on the philosophical sources of abstract art. *Sounding Cosmos* points to the ‘content’ of the work in immaterial forms. Ringbom stresses repeatedly its importance as opposed to the empty formalistic interpretation.⁶⁴ Welsh studied the “theosophical philosophical cross” as a sign.⁶⁵ As Altti Kuusamo points out, semiotics tends to detach itself from the old “paragon-circle” which was based on comparisons between different fields of art. Every system of signification can be ‘read’ in the same way as words in language systems.⁶⁶ My study takes as a starting point that not just one, unanimous and transparent way to link Mondrian’s art to theosophical or Steiner’s ideas exists. Flowing meanings tend to obscure historical specificity. Instead, the more important question is how did Mondrian use these ideas and for what purpose. It is here that semiotics is useful. Studies which apply semiotic methods typically seek to reveal *how* meanings accrue in the object of research.

Many researches have paid attention to the question of how Mondrian developed his pictorial inventions. Already in the early years *De Stijl* addressed the issue of theory within Dutch art discourse, suggesting that modern art does not emanate from previously determined theories but the principles are the result of the plastic work itself.⁶⁷ However, there seems to have been a constant interest in the role of Mondrian’s theoretical writings in relation to painting or in the dynamic relationship between his studio wall works and his paintings.

The intense reciprocal character of this relation as a sort of artist’s comparative act and as a deliberate message to contemporary Dutch art criticism comes out especially in Herbert Henkels’s Introduction to *Piet Mondriaan. Geduurende een wandeling van buiten naar de stad* (1986).⁶⁸ Frans Postma in *26, Rue du Départ: Mondrian’s Studio in Paris, 1921–1936* also notes the delicate balance between the writings and the visual work in which verbal clarification means gaining consciousness.⁶⁹ Blotkamp, for his part, emphasizes that it was a strategic pronouncement on Mondrian’s part to present the idea that theory always follows practice. It was “intended to silence the critics who found his work cerebral and saw in it little more than the illustration of a preconceived theory”.⁷⁰ Blotkamp also points out that theory has been known to precede practice. Hans Janssen’s essay, “Reading ‘the New Plastic’” (2011), discusses the same issue through a metaphor: the coat or the coat hanger – which comes first? One of the latest essays dealing

64 Ringbom 1970, 78, 160, 183.

65 Welsh 1971, 48–49.

66 Kuusamo 1996, 142.

67 See the words of the editorial board in *De Stijl* I, 1, 1917, 1–2.

68 Henkels 1986, 8, 16.

69 Postma 1995, 84–85.

70 Blotkamp 1994, 11. See also Henkels 1986, 12.

with this kind of interaction in Mondrian's art is Wiczorek's "Mondrian's Studio Utopia, 26 rue du Départ" (2014). The focus is on Mondrian's studio space and his non-figurative works, and the way in which their mutual effect seems to boost new pictorial investigations. This constant implicit interest in Mondrian's innovations inspires my study to pay attention to the forms that Mondrian's creativity takes when producing the new.

When posing questions about a development and a creative process in this way, that is, as a relation between the artist and the work of art, then the presupposition one makes is that creativity is something which only resides inside the artist's mind. Janet Beckett notices that in Dutch modernist discourse the concept of creativity came to be linked to the masculinity and the artist is further constructed through these terms within modernist discourse.⁷¹ It is true to say that creative processes seem to dwell in a field which escapes conceptual descriptions or analytical models. Creativity is a topic which easily seems to surround itself with mysticism. This study hypothesizes that a new creation is not governed only by the mystified creative impulse in the mind but also by integrating and operating with mental structures from the surrounding world. For this kind of an approach Peirce's semiotics and sign concepts offer workable insights.

Research on Mondrian's Writing

Mondrian's literary work has to a large extent been critically dismissed, largely on account of the formal-analytic interpretative tradition in modernism, Henkels being one of the few scholars who has appreciated the unique autobiographical and many-layered metaphorical character of the *'Triologue'* in Dutch art history.⁷² Having said that, there is a recent growing interest in Mondrian's literary works. Lodewijk Albert Veen's thesis, *Het geschreven werk van Piet Mondriaan*, appeared in 2011 and it led to a digital edition project of Mondrian's complete writings and letters in 2017 under Leo Jansen's lead. The scope of Veen's study is the whole corpus of Mondrian's writings, and therefore it offers a general overview of Mondrian's literary work. Marty Bax's thesis, *Het web der schepping, theosofie en kunst in Nederland. Van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* for its part juxtaposes Mondrian's art and literary terms with corresponding theosophical concepts, however a further discussion of Bax's text goes beyond the scope of this study.⁷³

One typical category of studies is built on the assumption that Mondrian's own writings offer a source for understanding his abstract paintings. Such

71 Beckett 1983, 73, 77.

72 Henkels 1986, 8, 16.

73 See, for example, Bax 2006, 272.

studies, however, do not always focus on wider discursive formations, which were arguably the most important targets of *De Stijl*. It was fundamental to the *De Stijl* philosophy that the created work should be seen in relation to the contemporary milieu. Examples of two studies which take a philosophical approach to Mondrian, using *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* to support their arguments, are Mark Cheetham's *Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* and Jan Bor's *Mondrian filosoof*. Mark Cheetham's approach demonstrates that Mondrian's Hegelian project goes beyond the Platonic idea.⁷⁴ Jan Bor in his *Mondriaan filosoof* uses Mondrian's writings as a source, but Bor's contribution to the field is the notion that Mondrian's art, whether visual or literary, cannot be traced along only one philosophical tradition. On the contrary, Mondrian's work is a mixture of Neoplatonist and dialectical Hegelian features, as well as a third tradition, the hermetic thinking stemming from theosophy.⁷⁵ Without understanding this, Mondrian's literary texts seem inaccessible. However, his study does not mention Rudolf Steiner's significance for Mondrian's art theory. On the other hand, Jacqueline van Paaschen's book, *Mondriaan en Steiner. Wegen naar Nieuwe Beelding*, relies solely on Steiner's influence on Mondrian's method of abstraction.⁷⁶ The book represents the facsimile of Steiner's lectures in the Netherlands in 1908, a copy of which Mondrian preserved until his death.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality has not yet been systematically studied, though it has provided support for many researchers' arguments.⁷⁷ One reason for the scarce amount of primary research on the text might be the often incomprehensible nature of Mondrian's texts. Blotkamp is one of the few researchers who has looked at Mondrian's writings in greater detail. He notes their elaborate and long-winded argumentation and their odd character. As a consequence, Mondrian's texts seem to hide their meanings, even though the reader clearly feels that there is meaning behind the surface content.⁷⁸ In addition to Wieczorek's above-mentioned dissertation, Hans Janssen, in his essay, "Reading 'the New Plastic'", (2011), studies the meaning of some incomprehensible words in Mondrian's article series "The New Plastic in Painting" (1917). Here Janssen notices the extremely complex, sometimes even obscure pieces of writing which have led to researchers avoiding summarizing them.⁷⁹ The words and concepts that

74 Cheetham 1991, especially pp. 45–50.

75 Bor 2015, 120–123.

76 Paaschen 2017, 17.

77 Bois 1994, Cheetham 1991, White 2003, Wieczorek 1997, Reynolds 1995, just to mention a few.

78 Blotkamp 1994, 9.

79 Janssen 2011, 27.

Janssen and Wieczorek notice in “The New Plastic in Painting” are the same that Mondrian also included in his *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*.⁸⁰

What comes clear from Blotkamp’s, Janssen’s and Wieczorek’s notions is that Mondrian’s vocabulary and his literary argumentative structures draw attention to themselves. They are not transparent means of expression but become signifying elements in the text. However, when considering the manifestos in *De Stijl* and the writings of the fellow artists there, it is obvious that this small circle of artists, and possibly those few hundred who read the magazine regularly, were familiar with the vocabulary that Mondrian used.⁸¹

As pointed out earlier, Jaffé in his influential study from 1956, suggests that a certain *tijdsbewustzijn*, the optimistic belief in the possibility of human development at that time is a characteristic of *De Stijl*.⁸² However a common consciousness of this period in time is not the main object of this study, rather my study leans on an idea of culture as a collective intellect which preserves, mediates and creates knowledge through signs. When tracking meaning effects in this way, my study will pay attention to the influence of Italian artists and writers on *De Stijl* in a different way to that of Blotkamp or of Michael White in his essays “ ‘Dreaming in the Abstract’: Mondrian, Psychoanalysis and Abstract Art in the Netherlands” (2006) and “Theo van Doesburg: A Counter-Life” (2009). Both Blotkamp and White speak about these writers and artists as forthcoming Italian Futurists.⁸³ My study, on the other hand, concentrates on the philosophy these Italians represented at that time when Mondrian expressed his excitement about their literature.⁸⁴

It is typical of the research literature about Mondrian that, depending on the viewpoint of the researcher, the same source is used to explain quite different aspects among *De Stijl* artists. For example, when Bois and Wieczorek inform us that the Dutch philosopher G. J. P. J. Bolland was an important mediator of Hegelian dialectics, Hans Janssen, in his turn, emphasizes Bolland’s sociolinguistic settings as the source of some words in Mondrian’s texts.⁸⁵ The idea of evolution

80 For example: determinateness (*bebaaldheid*); generalization (*veralgemeening*); the absolute (*het volstrekte*); clarity (*klaarheid*); interiorization (*verinnerlijking*); exteriorization (*veruiterlijking*); expansion (*uitbreiding*); the universal (*het universele*); particularity (*bijzonderheid*); the immutable (*het onveranderlijke*); tensed curve (*gespannen lijn*); equilibrated relationships (*evenwichtige verhouding*).

81 Janssen notices that “The New Plastic in Painting” contains hidden dialogues with a number of members from the inner *De Stijl* circle. See Janssen 2011, 29.

82 Jaffé 1956, 63.

83 Blotkamp 1994, 131. White 2009, 72.

84 Mondrian’s letters to van Doesburg March 3, 1919 and November 22, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

85 Janssen 2011, 39. Janssen notices that Bolland enjoyed exploring the ‘real’ meaning of words by taking them ‘literally’. All kinds of concepts appear to reveal their meaning spontaneously when their morphology is examined.

seems to have received a variety of interpretations in research literature on the *De Stijl* movement. Blotkamp confirms that the article series is a reflection on the evolution of the material world as a journey from the countryside to the big city, but also the spiritual evolution of human development and insight.⁸⁶ Besides this, the concept of evolution has been linked to Theo van Doesburg's development as a writer who showed multiple artistic identities, or 'mutations', in *De Stijl*. In Michael White's essay, "Theo van Doesburg: A Counter-Life", for example, this type of evolution stems from Henri Bergson, which produces a different insight into evolution than the theosophical one.⁸⁷

Furthermore, judging from the research literature, there can be many sources for a single feature in the text studied. For example, the obvious references to mathematics and geometry found in *De Stijl* seem to have come from a variety of sources, such as the idea of the fourth dimension or Dr. Schoenmaekers's 'mystic plastic mathematics' or the appeal of French mathematician Henri Poincaré or the theosophical Euclidean-related idea of point to line to plane. In this light it has become obvious to me that considering the notion of *tijdsbewustzijn* in *De Stijl* no clear-cut source entities can be found. This notion may seem self-evident, but even so, in semiotic research this is the starting point. The 'life-world' is, as mentioned earlier, fragmentary and incoherent. Consequently, the methodology that I need has to be able to provide an understanding of how meanings interact between different cultural domains. For example, H. J. Vink has studied *De Stijl* in his *Ruimte en tijd in de geschriften van Severini, Vantongerloo, Mondriaan en Van Doesburg* from the point of view of natural sciences and mathematics.⁸⁸ When art and science do not exactly match, Vink offers a misunderstanding by the artist or a lack of education in the field in question as an explanation.⁸⁹ In this way, the study produces an exact but narrow view about the subject. However, from the semiotic viewpoint, misunderstandings may be fruitful in producing useful results in another field. Typically, the discourse of modern art seems to consist of a heterogeneous mixture of scientific, religious and philosophical ideas. This discourse is, moreover, uncommitted to any of its 'sources'. Therefore, rather than trying to recognize the mathematical skills and comprehensive abilities of these clearly mathematically-inclined artists, I suggest that the more interesting question is what kind of purpose do these misunderstandings serve in *De Stijl*. In my inquiry I intend to deal with motives, meanings and means, and therefore my perspective

86 Blotkamp 1994, 140.

87 White 2009, 73–74.

88 *Jong Holland* nummer 2 jaargang 6 ,1990; *Jong Holland* nummer 3 jaargang 6, 1990.

89 Vink, 1990: "Ruimte en tijd..." (*Jong Holland* no 2, 3, 1990). Vink comments in this essay on Vantongerloo's skills in mathematics (no 3, p.6), van Doesburg's insights about Poincaré and the fourth dimension (no 3, p. 13), and Severini's understanding concerning Poincaré's intuitive continuum (no 2, p. 11).

is semiotic. I aim to step behind the acts of communication in order to try and understand how and why these acts were born.

1.3 *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality as a Sign Vehicle*

My interests in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, are, besides its obvious content, also its overall form, which this lengthy series of articles suggests to my mind. A no less important aim is to understand its place and meaning within the *De Stijl* movement. This study focuses on the semiotic strategies of how these two spheres, form and content, produce meanings. In this sense literary works have a dual nature. They should be apprehended both as material sign vehicles and semiotic processes. For this reason there should be two different words to apply to the object of study. I am aware that in semiotics the term 'text' often applies to the semiotic inferential process when the material sign vehicle, like for example Mondrian's '*Triologue*', is brought into contact with cultural conventions that make it meaningful in the act of reading.⁹⁰ However, for reasons of clarity this study uses the word 'text' in the simple sense, namely when speaking about conversational lines and responses. To my mind, here in this study Peircean semiotic sign concepts should make a clear difference between the sign vehicle, Mondrian's '*Triologue*', and the meaning it produces, so that confusion is avoided.

Mondrian's literary production offers certain clues which encourage me in my semiotic approach. These clues emerge from his character as a writer and from the nature of Mondrian's literary works, which seem to work according to a sort of productive indeterminacy. Thus, it is often noticed that Mondrian himself, despite his interest, for example, in Blavatsky's theosophy, Steiner's anthroposophy, and G. J. P. J. Bolland's Hegelian-related sociolinguistics, did not have an over-pedantic relation to the doctrines or ideas of these philosophical streams.⁹¹ He trusted more to his own artistic impression of these same sources. This is obvious, for example, in the concepts Mondrian uses. As mentioned earlier, Mondrian's use of Dutch is in fact much stranger than the English or French translations can here suggest.⁹² For example, there are words and terminology in Mondrian's text that resemble very

90 In semiotics it is common to speak of a 'text' when referring to the semiotic inferential processes of the reader when the material sign vehicle is brought into contact with cultural conventions that make it meaningful in the act of reading. A literary scholar Harri Veivo speaks of a 'book' when referring to the material sign vehicle and of a 'text' when referring to the semiotic process. Together they comprise the dual nature of literature. See Veivo 2001, 75.

91 See Blotkamp 1994, 16. See Mondrian's letter to Rudolf Steiner February 25, 1921, cited in Blotkamp 1994, 182.

92 Janssen 2011, 29.

much the terminology of the Dutch Christosophist (as he called himself) M.H.J. Schoenmaekers in his literary works on a kind of mystical mathematics.⁹³ Yet, after his first enthusiasm, Mondrian finally denied having adapted anything from him.⁹⁴

Mondrian also kept some sort of interpretative distance to the surrounding esoteric ideas. Hence, he often used to have a kind of ‘hearsay’ relation to the news and discoveries of his time even though he reflected on them to some extent in his texts and letters, as Janssen notes.⁹⁵ This attitude comes clear, for example, in Sixten Ringbom’s work. He points out that joining the Theosophical Society as a member usually required a fairly strong commitment and converts normally tended to subordinate their artistic individuality to the doctrinaire requirements of their new faith.⁹⁶ This could easily result in difficulties in the creative work of an artist. However, according to Ringbom, Mondrian is a good example of an artist “who asserted his artistic profile without surrendering to the banality normally concomitant with sectarian art”.⁹⁷

There are also indeterminate features in Mondrian’s writings themselves,⁹⁸ and this is precisely the aspect on which my study relies. It is as if in his writings nothing locked the meaning too strictly to the sources Mondrian might have had at his disposal. For example, it is known well how important the theosophical idea of evolution was for Mondrian. Yet in his writings, he only refers openly to theosophy once.⁹⁹ With Mondrian, researchers seem to confront the frustrating fact that clues concerning direct influence always appear to fade away.¹⁰⁰ Harri Veivo, however, points out that in the semiotic research of literature, it is the reader who supplements and completes the information expressed by the text.¹⁰¹

My research methods and targets mostly go beyond single words or sentences. Except for one short analysis in my third chapter I mainly leave out the interpretation of words in the ‘*Triologue*’ from my study. As a non-native reader I am unable to interpret words which would be difficult even for a native Dutch-speaking audience to understand.¹⁰² Also in this respect, the choice of pragmatic semiotics seems to

93 The research history of the related ideas and words of Mondrian and Schoenmaekers is long, and many Mondrian scholars, from Robert Welsh (in the 1970s) until our own days have seen the dependence of Mondrian’s literary works on Schoenmaekers’s conceptions.

94 In a few of his undated letters to van Doesburg in 1918, Mondrian tackles the meanings of certain concepts where he disagrees with Schoenmaekers. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, (0408) RKD.

95 Janssen 2011, 39.

96 Ringbom 1970, 58–59.

97 Ibid.

98 Blotkamp 1994, 140; Janssen 2011, 33.

99 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 49. In his *New Plastic in Painting (Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst)* 1917, Mondrian refers to theosophical world periods and to Rudolf Steiner.

100 Blotkamp 1994, 9.

101 Veivo 2001, 73.

102 Janssen 2011, 29.

be suitable for this study since, as a rule, pragmatics does not analyse sentences produced by the linguist him- or herself and claimed to be paradigmatic. Instead, as Johansen notes, pragmatics studies actual texts produced in specific contexts.¹⁰³ My purpose is to take into account the roles, intentions, and purposes characterizing the utterer and the interpreter in the communicative situations of the text's world.

Mondrian's art has been derived from many philosophers. The research literature has spoken about Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Bolland or Goethe when interpreting his art, showing the possibility of different readings concerning Mondrian's production. However, overly strict linking about sources does not seem to produce a coherent picture of Mondrian's article series. As Janssen reminds us, Mondrian himself picked up names and words from conversations or read about them in newspapers, and then incorporated them into his own thoughts and writings.¹⁰⁴

As has been mentioned, the semiotic approach allows for a certain kind of indeterminacy concerning the research object. However, this view does not permit any kind of interpretation. Meaning is not produced through one interpretation, but in a series of interpretations, which finally transcend the private interpretation and make this interpretation attain a level of shared conceptions. This is precisely how Charles Peirce's semiosis works. Not all interpretations are possible even though there might be different readings and a single interpretation might to a certain extent be fallible. In Peircean semiosis all interpretations work towards the final meaning, which theoretically can be an open-ended process but in practice the meaning is reached at some point. In this way whole of semiosis is what Merrell calls "a self-organizing bootstrapping operation".¹⁰⁵

From indeterminate features I now proceed to those features which might provide some sort of 'grip' on the text. There are some obvious thematic motifs in Mondrian's text which provide boundaries for my interpretations. They appear as more or less explicit themes and conversational topics, expressing the contents but also participating in the meaning-producing effect. Mondrian himself, as an author, does not openly specify these themes himself, but they are commonly included as implicit in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. According to Blotkamp, these themes are an evolutionary force (life moving inexorably towards Neo-Plasticism), an aesthetic force (universal beauty revealing itself in its pure form),

103 Johansen 2002, 64–65.

104 For example, Mondrian asked van Doesburg in a letter written in March 1918: "I wanted to ask you if that expression of Spinoza's was correct. I have none of his works and since you cited it in your last letter to me I came upon the idea of including it because I was talking about truth [...]. It looks so odd if I try to use different words than what Spinoza said." He also had a kind of 'hearsay' relationship to the Hegelian revival that was causing a swing way from Neo-Kantism across the Netherlands at that time. Cited in Janssen 2011, 39.

105 Merrell 1995, 227.

and a psychological force (awareness causes the individual to recede more and more into the background and the unity of spirit and nature allows old forms to be abandoned and the vitality of the modern spirit of life to be expressed).¹⁰⁶ Janssen also notes that these are the motives or levels in which a part of Mondrian's earlier article series operates.¹⁰⁷

As previously mentioned, to my knowledge the way in which these levels produce the overall meaning or the form of the text, and how they cooperate or fuse together into a new meaning, has not been sufficiently researched. These notions can be described to a considerable extent, for example, by referring to the philosophers who were important to Mondrian, but if the text is not seen as a sign and interpreted as a signifying process they remain more or less scattered reflections of different philosophical and aesthetic ideas stamped on the surface of the text.

The three above-mentioned levels of the text help me locate my *discourses*.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned earlier, not all kinds of interpretation are possible. It is through these discourses that Mondrian's text suggests its ideas of vision. Therefore, my interpretations are anchored to 1) signs of geometry and the idea of evolution, 2) beauty as a continuing tendency from figurative art to abstract art and, thus, as an idea which is related to memory, and 3) the discourse of perception. My establishing these three aspects as the discourses of the text designates the structures which the text develops in order to delimit or extend the reader's range of inferences, conceptions and conclusions, as Veivo notes about the possibilities of discourses.¹⁰⁹

The Semiotic Approach to Context

In the semiotic research of literature the importance and meaning of context is an issue which has created several approaches among scholars. One of these assumes a critical approach and emphasizes the constructional nature of contexts, whereas the object of inquiry, the text itself, is conceived of as radically polysemous. Thus, as Mieke Bal notes, this means that a sign is an event which takes place in specific circumstances.¹¹⁰ As Roland Barthes points out, it is important to understand the way in which society takes possession of the signs in literary texts in order to make them the substance of certain signifying systems.¹¹¹ This view opens up a way to

106 Blotkamp 1994, 140.

107 Janssen 2011, 33.

108 The text and the discourse must be differentiated as conceptions in semiotic interpretation. According to Veivo, discourse is surrounded by text, and a single text may develop several discourses. "Discourse refers to a set of representative elements in the text, which are in some respect strategically organized and thus offer the basis for an interpretation." See Veivo 2001, 77.

109 Veivo 2001, 76.

110 Bal 1994, 202–203.

111 Barthes 1972 (1964), 150–152.

interpret the research object by taking the power relations found in the context into account. Although one analysis in this study takes this view, namely the analysis of the dialogical form in Mondrian's text, my account of context takes another starting point. There is another kind of critical view in the field of semiotic research and it concerns situations when a clear constant and predetermined relation between the text and the context cannot be found. In fact, this kind of a situation often seems to be the case with the sources of Mondrian's texts. That is why I argue that if there was clear-cut evidence ('when' and 'where') which could be verified each time when unearthing the origins of Mondrian's ideas, then there would be no need for semiotic inquiry, and a historical-critical approach would be suitable. Moreover, the idea transmitted into the domain of art in this way would be understood in terms of 'mutual sharing' and 'influence'. But semiotic research sees its research material as embedded in the network of cross-mediated meanings. Therefore, it is important to understand that meaning production is governed by co-operative principles stemming from the context. In fact, the actual object of semiotic research is the prevailing rule, a law or principle, connecting two or more phenomena. Therefore, semiotic research is based on the sustainability that several instances of a certain principle have in a specific context. An absolutely unique relation between the text and the context would not signify anything.

It is not by chance that Mondrian's literary works appear as single articles. They appeared in a context of experimental modernism, namely the periodical *De Stijl*, and this delimits the range of possible meanings. Mondrian knew where his texts would appear and his correspondence shows that he was interested in the theoretical coherence of the *De Stijl* periodical. Like any writer, he naturally wanted to make his writings communicate to readers in those surroundings. For my study this means that some interpretations are more plausible than others, as Johansen points out about context.¹¹² The writings of the other contributors, such as Theo van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, Vilmos Huszár, Anthony Kok and Gino Severini introduce much of the cultural context and conventions. It is also through their work that the latest scientific world image or, for example, the motifs of dance are mediated as artistic interpretations. Thus, they participate in the semiotic interpretation of Mondrian's text. The context for Mondrian's production not only consists of the ideas of the surrounding esoteric, pseudoscientific insights and scientific discoveries. It also consists of Mondrian's other literary works and letters as 'paratexts' to the text to be interpreted. These factors help the reader place the articles in the correct cultural context. They help, as Veivo reminds us

112 Johansen 2002, 70–71.

about 'paratexts', to apply the reader's interpretative knowledge of the historical situation at the original time of publication.¹¹³

Therefore, the context mediates cultural meaning effects into Mondrian's text, and it is here that Peirce's theory of knowledge is valuable to my argument. According to Peirce, we only think through signs.¹¹⁴ This naturally means that if the object of cognition can only be a sign, then the context is also a sign or a set of signs. However, Peirce's sign system is a wide one. Not all sign relations in it are seen as purely cultural constructions. Instead, Peirce's sign system is such that it is also able to take into consideration those relations as natural and as based on experience and ordinary perception. However, this means that in its breadth the system is rather neutral in character. Therefore, when applied to contextual issues it often needs to have other deepening viewpoints and semiotic concepts alongside it.¹¹⁵ Here my study widens its perspective to include the concept of belonging within the field of cultural semiotics, namely the concept of a cultural text.

In English, the word 'culture' is one of those concepts that is difficult to describe. However, this study uses the semiotic concept of culture. It is to be understood as a collective intellect, which preserves, mediates and creates knowledge, then its texts (in their semiotic meaning) can be considered to be its basic units in which these kinds of actions take place. Cultural texts carry, mediate and create the memory of the culture in a mutual relationship. These are the primary research objects of cultural semiotics. Even though my reading of Mondrian's '*Triologue*' does not in the first place aim at an interpretation along the lines of cultural semiotics, I still consider the concept of cultural text, when understood in a broad way, to be beneficial for my research. Therefore, I borrow the definition of the concept from this field.

According to semioticians Boris Uspenskij and Juri Lotman, who represent the Tartu-Moscow school, a cultural text is a limited whole inside the culture. In this context, the term 'text' is used in a specifically semiotic sense. It is expressed and can be understood as at least two languages in a culture.¹¹⁶ Therefore, not necessarily only a literary text or a spoken text is expressed using natural language, it can also be another kind of coherent whole such as, for example, a mathematical formula or a geometrical diagram or a postulate. It can also be, for example, a popularized adjusted version of some coherent entity in the field of physics and mathematics

113 Veivo 2001, 70–71.

114 Peirce EP1, 30. In "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868), Peirce asserts that all mental events are valid inferences, and claims that every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions and that we have no power of thinking without signs.

115 Peirce's semiotics and sign vehicles do not, for example, explain ideological power relations, and cannot be used for that purpose. In addition, Peirce's production does not offer a specific theory about communication either, at least not in a social sciences sense.

116 Uspenskij, Lotman, et al. 1998 (1973), 38–41.

expressed in natural language, but at the same time introducing mathematical concepts. According to Uspenskij and Lotman, mathematical linguistics or semiotics act as a source of regularity in a culture, which strives to maximize this regularity.¹¹⁷ Blotkamp notes, for example, that the new art adopted the idea of ‘the rectangle’ as the universal vehicle of expression.¹¹⁸ Hence, my study approaches the idea of a ‘rectangle’ as a cultural sign. This study acknowledges it as deriving from other cultural fields as adjusted forms, such as from Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry, theosophy, Christosophy, and so on. Mediating actors are important in this meaning production. All kinds of popularized versions of physics and non-Euclidean geometry were circulating in Western culture during the first two decades of the 20th century. They were also within the reach of *De Stijl* artists. The literary articles of *De Stijl* appeared within these kinds of contexts of mathematical and evolution-based cosmological ideas. The concept of a cultural text is in this way intersemiotic, and Mondrian’s intellectual milieu can be understood as a bundle of texts which are able to circulate from one field to another.

To date there is already a long and broad research tradition concerning Mondrian’s visual works, as there is about other *De Stijl* artists as well. Similarly, the works of *De Stijl* have constantly been represented in numerous exhibitions along with accompanying catalogues. They all influence the reader when interpreting a particular Mondrian text. My approach aims to relate this already existing interpretative tradition and ‘authorial contexts’ to Mondrian’s writings and letters, to the historical and cultural events of the era. This tradition points to a correct set of conventions to be adopted by the reader although Mondrian’s literary texts, in themselves, have been little researched. This approach lets the reader frame the text. Readers also have other sign instances at their disposal. For example, Mondrian’s other contemporary texts and what is known of him, direct the interpretation as a set of signs.¹¹⁹ They may be taken as a sign if they reveal some regularities, which may then be used to establish a set of presuppositions concerning the text to be investigated.¹²⁰ However, it is important to remember at the same time that these are contextual matters and as such they are situated at a different level than the text that is to be studied.

117 Uspenskij, Lotman, et al. 1998 (1973), 59.

118 Blotkamp 1994, 109.

119 For example, Mondrian’s long essay, *New Plastic in Painting*, 1917, (*Nieuwe beelding in schilderkunst*) already reveals some interpretational concerns of Mondrian’s famous graphic design of horizontality and verticality and of evolution in chapter 5: *From the Natural to the Abstract: From the Indeterminate to the Determinate*, and of rationality and fantasy in chapter 4: *The Rationality of the New Plastic*. See Mondrian 1986 (1917), 27–74.

120 Veivo 2001, 71.

Methods, Tools, Ways of Reading

In Peirce's theory, signs are a medium which allows access from a private and individual mental field to shared and public interpretations. Thus, Peirce considers how the human mind works and what the role of signs is in this function in the following way: "1. We have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts. 2. We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions. 3. We have no power of thinking without signs. 4. We have no conception of the absolutely incognizable."¹²¹ This means that no experience whatsoever is purely nonconfrontational to us. This also means that Peirce's philosophy does not include the transcendental *das Ding an Sich* (the thing in itself). We live only by and through signs and we share them.

Peirce's definition of the concept of sign is somewhat complicated. He defines a sign as "anything, which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former".¹²² The point here is that Peirce's sign comprises the sign vehicle, the object and the interpretation. It is also important to understand the shared bases of signs. When two receivers can interpret one sign similarly, or at least can discuss different interpretations, this means that mental signs are to a great extent shared, even though they are also private and individual.¹²³ In addition, a sign is a sign only if it is a sign for someone, that is, it always needs someone to interpret it, someone who creates the connection between the sign and the signified object. As mentioned earlier, in Peirce's semiotics this is called an interpretant. The interpretant gives purpose, direction and meaning to a sign.¹²⁴

Therefore, within Peirce's frame the meaning producing processes are dynamic. Studying Mondrian's text as a semiotic artefact means taking its stable features and structures into account but also understanding that it takes part in the activities of its own production, reception and interpretation. Otherwise it would not be culturally significant. When understanding the text as showing *tijdsbewustzijn*, as reflecting these kinds of contexts, my purpose is to find out if Mondrian's '*Trialogue*' is capable of transcending particular contexts, of being in some sense 'more' than any incidental historical interpretation can demonstrate, as Veivo characterizes the dynamics of signification.¹²⁵

121 EP1, 11. Peirce: "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man".

122 EP2, xxx, 388–389.

123 Veivo 2001, 92.

124 Merrell 1995, 31.

125 Veivo 2009, 4.

The mediating relation is based on the equivalence between Mondrian's text and the phenomena of the era. In other words, it is based on the similarities with the surrounding intellectual culture. Therefore, my study will emphasize Peirce's semiotic concepts of icons, as they are based on similarity. Since there are three types of iconic signs, namely images, diagrams, and metaphors, there should also be three ways to iconize the text during reading. As Johansen reminds us, there is "the production of mental images triggered by what is represented in the literary text", this means imaginative iconization. Secondly, there is the structuring of what is represented as a network of relationships, i.e. diagrammatization. Thirdly, there is the relating of elements and relationships of universes represented in the text to other conceptual structures, i.e. allegorization, which Johansen correlates with the third concept of iconicity, i.e. metaphors.¹²⁶ These approaches can be seen as the three grades of an icon sign: the icon as image, the icon as diagram and the icon as metaphor. I intend to interpret Mondrian's *'Triologue'* as a 'poetic model' of contemporary cultural and visual ideas by applying these three sign relations.

On the one hand it is possible to take this view of iconicity quite far. For example, Max Nänný suggests that the overall structure of a piece of literature may also function as a global icon of its theme.¹²⁷ On the other hand, a semiotic process cannot be restricted to its iconic grounding in the mind. As is generally acknowledged about Peirce's sign, the birth of meaning requires that the other two aspects of the sign, namely, the sign as an index and as a symbol, are also considered. This means that no sign is purely an icon or index or symbol but that signs always include all of these three aspects. However, usually the situation is such that one of these relations arises from the text as the dominant so that it gains the reader's main attention. It is true that Peirce's sign theory has often been understood as a more or less useful classification system. Moreover, even though it has been referred to regularly, its philosophical foundations have remained unnoticed. Therefore, my study uses two of Peirce's philosophical doctrines, namely 'continuity' and 'evolution', to achieve a more comprehensive view of sign use rather than using three concepts of icons.

Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* offers sequential pictures of a comprehensive kind, being a journey through seven *Scenes* which include seven views. Thus, as a kind of global structure, the text can be understood as a continuous flow of images. The images are built for the reader's 'mental eye' through the reading process. An image is an icon that may represent its object

126 Johansen 2002, 327, 334.

127 Nänný 1986, 199, 200. Nänný's view suggests that "the representative function of iconicity in literary texts can only be perceived if the reader moves from meaning to form". To my mind there is a danger of misunderstanding this, namely that in the light of Peirce's theory this view would presuppose direct access to meanings, whereas pragmatics emphasizes the role of mediation.

mainly by its similarity, by simple qualities.¹²⁸ Peirce speaks about the feeling which tells us that a present idea has been experienced before it is interpreted as having a certain meaning.¹²⁹ When contemplating the descriptions in Mondrian's text, readers, by their experience of real life, know that there is a certain order of perceiving, which has to be respected. For example, when viewing a space inside a studio, one perceives differently than when viewing a certain single detail in a painting. These ways of perceiving conform to the mood and emotions in the strollers' dialogue in the text.

Johansen compares imaginization to going to the cinema, since the text becomes realized as a movie on the viewer's internal screen of the imagination, where the symbolic signs of the text come to be linked with iconic ones.¹³⁰ As mentioned earlier, the '*Triologue*' is a drama where Mondrian leaves a lot untold. However, the seven 'written' images awaken the readers' imaginative powers. Mondrian also includes the feelings of his characters in his text, communicating the emotional force that these images as personal experiences awake. It is the imaginization of personal and private experiences that gives them their emotional impact.¹³¹ In the third chapter I relate the text to a variety of contexts known to be important to the *De Stijl* movement to understand how Mondrian's text as a flow of images is contiguous with, for example, philosophical trends which strive to explain the continuity of experience.

Reading Mondrian's text according to the second group of icons, diagrams, is different from imaginization. Johansen and Nänny both argue that diagrammatization is abstractive, systematic and concerned with the entirety of the text, not with focusing on details.¹³² In this case, my approach concerns the text as oppositional structures, a kind of thematic structure in Mondrian's text that is an obvious feature by which one can take 'a grip' on the text. The purpose is to observe the elements of the text as a diagram of their dialogical and oppositional relations. Seeing the text as a diagram means moving from the text's content to its form. It is Mondrian's own interests concerning the form of a literary text that has inspired me to take this view. This is almost like visualizing the text as a certain kind of geometric structure, though a very unusual one. This 'visualizing' reading then shows the large and important elements in the dialogue and their transformations into a skeleton-like figure, transcending the semantic flow of the text. However, Mondrian thought that his writings were supposed to show the

128 EP2, 273–274.

129 EP2, 318–319.

130 Johansen 2002, 328.

131 Johansen 2002, 331.

132 Johansen 2002, 332; Nänny 1986, 199–200.

rationality of new art,¹³³ and thus diagrammatization as a rational way of reading the text seems to be a justified approach. For Peirce “a Diagram is an Icon of a set of rationally related objects”. By “rationally related”, Peirce means “that there is between them, not merely one of those relations, which we know by experience, but know not how to comprehend, but one of those relations which anybody who reasons at all must have an inward acquaintance with”.¹³⁴

According to Nänny, literary texts have a range of this kind of potential iconicity. The perception of iconic features depends on the reader’s awareness and readiness to recognize, so to speak, that analogical structure behind the surface of the text.¹³⁵ Consequently, iconicity exists only as it is perceived. Iconic functions of textual elements are thus no more than latent possibilities. They will only appear if the meaning of the textual passage is compatible with them.¹³⁶ Therefore, the same principle applies here with diagrammatization as with imaginization.

As mentioned earlier, when studying the conversational elements and the polarized structure of Mondrian’s text, the purpose is to apply the sign of a diagram. However, this will not be the only way to apply diagrams in this study, for my reading also applies the diagram-sign as a tool to understand the motif of the ‘perpendicular’. The topic of horizontality and verticality is a ‘visual’ theme in Mondrian’s text, originating from its ‘written’ landscapes. I conceive the ‘perpendicular’ as a diagram-sign which operates within Mondrian’s conversations. It is interesting to see what will happen to the figure of the ‘perpendicular’ in the course of the ‘journey’. In Peirce’s sign theory, diagrams are of the utmost importance because with their help we can reason things out and find new information about the object. This leads me to my second reason for choosing Peirce’s icons as a method. Namely, the diagram integrates the ‘visual material’, that is, Mondrian’s imagined landscapes and his textual material, with each other. In this way I hope to relate Mondrian’s text to the visual expressions, paintings and photographs of his studio.

This horizontal-vertical figure acts like a ‘wayfarer’ in the text. It ‘runs’ through the story as a conversational topic and as ‘a visual’ figure. As a sign within the narrative it is thus applicable in most of the *Scenes*. My purpose is to use this wayfarer-diagram as a tool to associate emotions and ideas, so that it becomes an idea which unites Mondrian’s *Scenes*. In this way I study the text as developing an idea which is crucial in Neo-Plasticism. Diagrams bend to this kind of action.

133 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 40–41. This is the fourth chapter, “The Rationality of the New Plastic”, in “The New Plastic in Painting”.

134 Peirce’s “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism” (1906), ‘PAP’ in Peirce’s own abbreviation. Cited in Stjernfelt 2007, 93–94.

135 Nänny 1986, 200.

136 Nänny 1986, 199.

They assist reasoning. Peirce continues to explain the character of diagrams in his PAP paper:

[...] the Diagram not only represents the related correlates, but also, and much more definitely represents the relations between them, as so many objects of the Icons. Now necessary reasoning makes its conclusion *evident*. What is this 'Evidence'? It consists in the fact that the truth of the conclusion is perceived, in all its generality, and in the generality of the how and the why of the truth is perceived [...] The diagram remains in the field of perception and imagination.¹³⁷

The simplest way to exemplify Peirce's philosophical explanation is to think of a simple geometrical form which could be drawn on a sheet of paper. By keeping the diagrammatic relations of this form strictly the same I can move the image, I can magnify it, or even manipulate it as long as I keep the diagrammatical relations the same. Therefore, by this act I may possibly through reason uncover new truths: "The art of reasoning is the art of marshalling such signs, and of finding out the truth."¹³⁸ Diagrams are signs of Peirce's secondness category when they entail consciousness in relation to something else, or consciousness of something else.¹³⁹ They show some actual relation between the sign and its object. In Peirce's words it is "the Idea of that which is such as it is as being Second to some First, regardless of anything else and in particular regardless of any law, although it may conform to a law. That is to say it is *Reaction* as an element of the Phenomenon."¹⁴⁰

Finally, the metaphoric reading means to continuously allegorize the text. Since allegory is a type of metaphor, it is not surprising that allegorizing is a process that starts in the text itself.¹⁴¹ Like a playwright, Mondrian, too, obviously means more than he lets his characters say. According to Johansen, to allegorize means speaking otherwise than one seems to speak, and thus an allegorical interpretation means looking for a second meaning.¹⁴² Metaphors are specifically elaborated forms of rhetorical or poetic devices in which phenomena are related to one another in the reader's mind. Thus, unlike diagrams, metaphors are tied to the semantics of the text. There are several themes in Mondrian's text by which we can take 'a grip', among them the journey, the distant reflecting city lights and the night landscapes. Here, in Mondrian's text the ideas of night-time and of a journey could

137 Peirce's PAP-paper (1906), cited in Stjernfelt 2007, 93–94.

138 EP2, 10. Peirce: "What is a Sign?" (1984).

139 Merrell 1995, 54.

140 EP2, 160.

141 Johansen 2002, 336.

142 Johansen 2002, 334.

be understood as the so-called source domain. They are real at the plot's semantic level. As metaphors they refer to another semantic domain, to the so-called target domain, by the projection of some elements and meanings to this domain.¹⁴³

Peirce defines metaphors as signs that "represent the representative character of a representamen [that is, a sign] by representing a parallelism in something else".¹⁴⁴ Veivo clarifies that "we can say that a metaphor establishes a connection between two terms (the sign and the something else) that may be taken as parallel because of the metaphor, in such a way that this relation captures the pertinent feature of the sign".¹⁴⁵ Put simply, metaphors make us perceive how the semantics of a text means more than it explicitly states. As already suggested, Mondrian's text participates in an era which was dealing with the critical issue of crossing the border between figurative and abstract art. There is something similar between this change and the end of the evening. In both of them we confront the end and closure. The effect of the source domain to this target, the world of art, is always abstract, but the world of art derives some crucial meaning structures from the evening and the dawn.

Metaphors are not only linguistic phenomena but are cognitive as well.¹⁴⁶ They also seem to provide mental imagery to the reader. The comprehension of metaphors involves not only words, but also the icons they evoke in the mind. Lakoff and Johnson's influential cognitive research about the cognitive side of metaphors helps us to understand how they work in the text as strategies. When understanding the text as this kind of cognitive model, the meaning is not at first on the linguistic level, instead it is a fundamental, and in most cases even an unconscious, mental process.¹⁴⁷ This is in accordance with Peirce's general account, which emphasizes that our thought processes are often iconic.¹⁴⁸

Johansen assumes that there seems to be an allegorical side to most literary texts. Some genres, such as the fable, make it a main feature. In addition, the thirst for metaphorical iconization, that is allegorization, is our general pursuit for meaning.¹⁴⁹ Hence, allegorization embodies general relationships or principles in a concrete case. Thereby, what is represented, becomes an example of what is generally believed to be the case.¹⁵⁰ This is to say that metaphors belong to the

143 Johansen 2002, 195.

144 EP2, 274.

145 Veivo 2001, 159.

146 Ibid.

147 Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3, 158.

148 Stjernfelt 2007, 288.

149 Johansen 2002, 336.

150 Johansen 2002, 338.

signs of thirdness. The category includes meanings of purpose, interpretation, cognition, inference, intentionality and hypothesis.¹⁵¹

In practice, my reading process will switch between these three levels. While the image represents its object through simple qualities, the diagram is characterized by its skeleton-like structural similarity to its objects, and the metaphor represents the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar through the similarity found in them both.¹⁵² The levels cannot be exclusively separated. Therefore, in this study they may also occasionally be found to overlap. However, as Johansen notes, all three ways of reading are not only useful, but are inevitable for reading literature.¹⁵³

1.4 Why Peirce's Philosophy, Semiotics and Phenomenology?

As is often noticed, Peirce took up the task of constructing a complete philosophical system, and his sign theory cannot be detached from the whole body of his philosophical writings. As has been widely recognized, this intense connection between semiotics, epistemology and ontology is one of the most original aspects of Peirce's semiotic theory and philosophy. My semiotic approach receives support from Peirce's phenomenology. Mondrian's text is a text about the visual arts and visual perception is strongly emphasized. The close connection between phenomenology and the theory of signs is one of the reasons that has led me to choose Peirce's semiotics as my methodological tool, and in my approach I will look at the phenomenological basis of iconicity. Within the frame of Peirce's sign theory it is possible to ask what are the phenomenological prerequisites of sign use and from there enter into the field of perception. This in fact is in line with how Mondrian himself starts his text in the first *Scene* when he establishes the phenomenological base of the 'perpendicular' sign in the visual features of a landscape in relation to the observer.

Peirce's phenomenology concentrates on that which is present to the experience without enquiring after corresponding ideas from ethics, aesthetics or truth outside of this experience. As individuals we are always aware of the continuous flow of experience. This is because, for Peirce, perception is both continuous and compelling. It is something that is first and foremost 'undergone'. As Floyd Innis notices, what paradoxically is 'undergone', "is the continuous process of encountering already synthesized complexes" in the flow of an experience.¹⁵⁴

151 Merrell 1995, 55.

152 Sjöternfelt 2007, 90.

153 Johansen 2002, 338.

154 Innis 2002, 27.

Phenomenological categories can be considered modes of being. All that can be perceived or conceived, whether it is real or fictional, belongs to one of these fundamental modes. Peirce describes the first category in the following way: “Firstness is that which is such as it is positively and regardless of anything else”.¹⁵⁵ This is a category of feelings and emotional intuition. It is characterized by potentiality, indeterminacy, possibility and by being *positively* what it is.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, since images belong to the firstness category, as all three icons do, images in this way represent a subcategory within the firstness category, the ‘first’ of the three firstness subcategories.

Iconicity was already discussed to some extent earlier in this Introduction. It will be discussed once again from the critical point of view later in this chapter. We now move to the category of secondness, which is the category of the actual, comprising dyadic causal relations, relations based on existence, that do not follow any purpose, rule or general idea. Peirce describes it as containing the element of struggle: “The sense of shock is as much a sense of resisting as of being acted upon. So it is when anything strikes the senses.”¹⁵⁷ Finally, the category of thirdness comprises generality, conventionality and regularity.¹⁵⁸ Thus, it comprises such phenomena as laws, habits – and important for my thesis– style. Thirdness is a set of relations between three elements that cannot be reduced to dyadic relations. Peirce describes it as “the Idea of that which is such as it is as being a Third or medium, between a Second and its First. That is to say, it is Representation as an element of the Phenomenon”.¹⁵⁹ As Veivo explains, there is a mediating factor, a convention, habit, law or purpose, which makes the relation of the elements it mediates between basically different from secondness.¹⁶⁰ It is possible to consider the sign from the point of view of one of the categories, but not to exclude it from this whole complex. This holds for pictorial semiosis based on visual perception as well as for linguistic signs and thus for literature.

As has been mentioned above, the Peircean sign has a strong phenomenological base. It is this connection to the visual that makes Peirce more suitable for my study than Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁶¹ Saussure’s sign, stemming from the semiology of language, is a simple coding relation connecting pre-established expression and content. Peirce’s signs are not static elements, rather they need to be analysed to

155 EP2, 267.

156 EP2, 149–150.

157 EP2, 150, 151.

158 EP2, 269.

159 EP2, 160.

160 Veivo 2001, 34.

161 Saussure’s semiology is one of the two main branches that started modern semiotics at the beginning of the 20th century.

see how the three modes, firstness, secondness and thirdness, appear and function in them. This in turn takes the Peircean sign beyond the idea of simple coding and decoding. It takes the sign, as Stjernfelt reminds us, to the epistemological questions of knowledge through thought processes and reasoning.¹⁶² Thus, it is this dynamic character of Peirce's sign relations which separates it from the Saussurean tradition.

Considering the semiotic approach in this study, one of the basic problems of the Saussurean tradition is that the Saussurean sign is pre-coded. Therefore, it cannot deal with things like change, transformation and action, nor some kind of activity. Since my account hypothesizes that it is the change from figurative art to abstract art that Mondrian's article is primarily concerned with and that it is a thinking process, I find Peirce's concept of the sign to be more suitable for my purposes. This in a way presupposes the idea that the possibility of improvement and thinking as a process belongs to the human mind. Therefore, meaning is not pre-established but born in a meaningful action in the text's features, in the 'journey' of the text. This is in line with the Peircean idea that a sign is a sign only when it is in action.¹⁶³

From this it follows that when Peirce's sign relations are able to take into consideration relations based on an experience and perception, then not all of these sign relations can be seen as cultural constructions. Therefore, this makes Peirce's sign concepts applicable both in visual material and in literature. For Peirce, thinking is pictorial. Icons are not some kind of surplus in the processes of thinking. Instead they are preconditions for thinking processes, without which it would not be possible to think at all. That Mondrian includes the motifs of his own figurative paintings as 'written' images in the text leads me to hypothesize that Mondrian's text also 'thinks' with and through images. In this, Peirce's signs of icons unite the thinking processes and imaginative visualization. Thinking is not based merely on language. With Peirce's philosophy as my tool I hope to be able to integrate Mondrian's art and his writings. This is possible since Peirce's phenomenologically-based concept of the sign makes it possible to apply the same concepts to both Mondrian's literary text and to his visual art.

162 Stjernfelt 2007, ix.

163 By 'sign in action' my study not only means that meaning production is a process but that Peirce's icons are operative in character. This becomes obvious in his 'PAP' paper. Icons are vehicles for mental experiments and manipulation, and diagrams have a special role in this. According to Peirce, a diagram is an icon embodying the meaning of a general predicate; and from the observation of this icon we are supposed to construct a new general predicate. See EP2, 303.

Critical Views

Continuity is fundamental in Peirce's philosophy. Hence the mature version of his phenomenological categories and his doctrine of icon and of diagrams rest on a philosophy of continuity.¹⁶⁴ Continuity is related to the foundation of our sense experience. According to Hookway, this means that we do not confront a discrete series of distinct 'percepts' but we are aware of a continuous flow of experience.¹⁶⁵ Peirce's notion of continuity will be the central means for my analysis of Mondrian's text as a flow of images. However, as is well known among Peirce scholars, the idea of iconicity as resting on continuity has met with some criticism.

Peirce's definitions sometimes seem blurred. In what follows I consider the apparent controversy in the definitions of icons. It is well known that many of Peirce's central conceptions have several, sometimes different definitions. As Stjernfelt notes, this has led researchers to give explanations for this. Peirce adjusted his ideas about signs constantly during his life. Therefore, the question is whether Peirce was intent on constantly developing his theory or whether he did in fact contradict himself.¹⁶⁶ Stjernfelt reminds us that Peirce does have definitions, which differ from each other without their necessarily being in conflict. When, for example, Peirce sometimes defines an icon as a sign which is based on a similarity with its object, and then, in other circumstances, as a sign with which it is possible to learn more about by contemplating this icon, these two viewpoints are not in conflict.¹⁶⁷ Accordingly, I consider that Peirce's definitions are seldom rules in the sense that they would describe a phenomenon completely. Instead they are rather like different viewpoints on this same phenomenon without necessarily being contradictory with each other.

However, contradiction does seem to be involved in Peirce's definition of firstness. The basic idea of firstness is that it appears as a multidimensional continuum yet each quality is in itself absolutely severed from every other.¹⁶⁸ This, however, appears to be counter to Peirce's insistence on non-distinctiveness as a basic property in continua. Stjernfelt and Hookway have paid attention to the notion of continuity and how it belongs to the character of firstness. In their accounts the continuum is somehow 'cemented together' and is not composed of points.¹⁶⁹ Both Stjernfelt and Hookway present the idea of 'bits of the same quality' or 'powder' to explain the contradictory definition. Thus, just as there are individual granules in

164 Stjernfelt 2007, 3.

165 Hookway 1985, 165.

166 Stjernfelt 2007, 13.

167 Stjernfelt 2007, 13.

168 EP1, xxx. EP2, 160.

169 Hookway 1985, 177–178. Stjernfelt 2007, 13.

powder, so the distinctive quality of the granules of firstness are separated from each other, but still form a continuum as powder.

Peirce's firstness as a state of mind has met with criticism as a sort of 'meta-physics of presence and immediacy'. When considering the formal-analytical tradition this criticism gathers around the discourse of 'the innocent eye'. Formalism analysed modernist paintings as if they were universal optical structures and opted for perception as a pure mechanical process. The work of art was in this way exposed to an eye as if the 'eye' were uncontaminated by imagination, purpose, desire and history. Thus it was 'innocent' even though we now know that the viewer is an active producer of meanings. However, Peirce's concept of an icon is simple only when we do not pay attention to its firstness aspect. The fact that it is at the same time a firstness state of mind makes it complicated. Peirce believed there is no immediacy of sign processes of which we can be conscious. Thus, as soon as we start to speak of this experience we lose its firstness quality, we lose its freshness. To my mind, in practice Peirce's firstness does not suppose 'an innocent eye' since firstness is not an exclusive category. Therefore, for Peirce, in theory firstness would be perception in a chaotic stage before it has been elevated to the attention of consciousness.¹⁷⁰ Likewise for E.H. Gombrich, 'the innocent eye' would be under the painful impact of a chaotic medley of forms and colours, and thus would be blind.¹⁷¹ There have also been other prominent debates about iconicity which have been comprehensively discussed elsewhere in the research literature but this goes beyond the scope of my study.¹⁷²

1.5 Concepts

It is obvious that my study still needs to apply a few concepts which require definitions. Evolution is one of those ideas that circulated widely in intellectual circles in Mondrian's time. In my study it will be approached as a methodological

170 Merrell 1995, 54.

171 Gombrich 1963, 9.

172 I am also aware of the so-called anti-iconicity movement. This is a prominent debate in philosophical fields during the last century where the idea of similarity has received rather contradictory treatments. As usually presented, iconicity is dependent upon similarity, where similarity simply means shared qualities with the object. It has been doomed to insignificance because of its omnipresence, 'everything can be proved as similar with everything'. My study will not concentrate on this debate more than this, for the topic would require a thesis in itself. However, to understand why icons in Peirce's philosophy actually work, it is necessary to remember that Peirce's idea is in this sense quite mathematical. Thus, to apply an icon as a sign means that one must decide what establishes features of similarity between two phenomena, and decide which features will prevail and which will change. The most famous representatives of this debate are Nelson Goodman and the young Umberto Eco. Although this debate has quietened and in recent years the vast domain of cognitive science has upgraded the status of iconicity, nevertheless the anti-similarity movement is still strong. See Stjernfelt 2007, 50, 60.

concept. One of the aims of this study is to understand the character of the perceiving subject in Mondrian's text. Therefore, the nature of Mondrian's 'new vision' and 'new man' is one object of my study, and as such, the shapes they take on will be suggested by Mondrian's text. To approach the idea of subjectivity I will frame here some ideas which answer to my methodological needs. By selecting an object of research it is usually thought that the theoretical field and one's methods are selected at the same time. However, Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* challenges the traditional delimitations between theoretical fields, since it is a literary work whose 'skeleton' is based on seven visualized images. It verbalizes visual perception in its seven descriptions and in the studio setting in the last *Scene*. Analysis of this work requires several approaches. However, it is primarily a work of literature and therefore my study applies the literary concept of focalization. This approach is not completely adjustable to purely visual work of arts though Peirce's conceptions usually are.

The Concept of Evolution:

My hypothesis is that Mondrian's literary piece is also a representation of a thinking process where the idea of Neo-Plasticism emerges. In this sense Peirce's doctrine of evolution becomes interesting since it tells us how ideas, universals, laws and theories emerge and grow so that they are finally inhabitants of thirdness:

We look back toward a point in the infinitely distant past when there was no law but mere indeterminacy; we look forward to a point in the infinitely distant future when there will be no indeterminacy of chance but a complete reign of law. But at any assignable date in the past, however early, there was already some tendency toward uniformity; and at any assignable date in the future there will be some slight aberrancy from law. Moreover, all things have a tendency to take habits.¹⁷³

In other words, evolution for Peirce is a process which develops from the vague to the definite, from the chaotic to the orderly, from firstness through secondness to thirdness. It is a metaphor of growth, as Douglas Anderson puts it, and analogous to artistic creativity.¹⁷⁴ It is related to Peirce's epistemology, so that there is a tight analogy between evolutionary processes in the world and logical inference processes in the mind.

¹⁷³ EP1, 277. "A Guess at the Riddle" (1887–88).

¹⁷⁴ Anderson 1987, 115, 128. Anderson argues on the bases of an analogy of God's creative work and Peirce's concept of evolution, where artistic creativity, like God's creation, is teleological by way of a developmental teleology of creative evolution.

For my study the important aspect is that in “The Law of Mind” (1898)¹⁷⁵ Peirce applies the principle of evolution to the character of the human mind and human thought. Consequently, as Stjernfelt notes, this is what establishes the ideas of consciousness and Peirce’s famous ‘logical realism’.¹⁷⁶ Peirce’s work tells how it is possible for past ideas to be present in contemporary actuality. Therefore, this law of mind can also be applied to the analysis of *memory*.¹⁷⁷ For my study, it is noticeable that the creative process of an artist can be described by Peirce’s evolution, and icons play a crucial part in this.¹⁷⁸ Firstness is the category of creativity in Peirce, and this seems to be meaningful notion when considering that Mondrian’s text ‘operates’ through a flow of images.

Bergson’s *Creative Evolution (L’évolution créatrice)*, 1907, offers another kind of idea about creativity and as such provides a ‘metatext’ of the culture in which Mondrian worked. It introduces a model of thought that takes its starting point from biology, not from supra-sensible worlds, nor is it based on the kind of logic we find in Peirce’s model. It helps me to relate the meanings in Mondrian’s text to the surrounding culture, but also, as a methodological concept, to open up ideas about creativity. In this model, life must be equated with creation because it alone can accomplish both the continuity of life and the discontinuities and diverging tendencies within it. Such is Bergson’s tendency theory which, when applied to human life, is identified on the one hand with instinct and on the other with intelligence. These are opposite tendencies even though they are intermingled.¹⁷⁹

Focalization:

Focalization is a concept that belongs to literature. It can be used to evoke an impression of visual perception in the reading process. In narrative it becomes important in the manner in which the text regulates information about the fictional world. Gérard Genette introduced the notion of focalization in 1972 with the intention of clearing up the confusion between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ in literary texts. For Genette, focalization belongs strictly to literature and cannot be defined

175 EP1, 312–333. “The Law of Mind” (1892).

176 Stjernfelt 2007, 393–394.

177 Stjernfelt 2007, 387. Italics original.

178 Douglas Anderson’s approach tells us how, according to Peirce, artistic creativity can be articulated, namely that the beginning of creativity belongs to the field of firstness. With the necessary conditions (technique in medium application, and some familiarity with tradition) under control, “an artist proceeds to open himself to a random play of ideas through imagination”. See Anderson 1987, 149. According to Stjernfelt, only icons are fertile in the sense that through them it is possible to have new knowledge about the object. See Stjernfelt 2007, 278.

179 Bergson 2016 (1907), 89, 136, 185.

in reference to perception.¹⁸⁰ Mieke Bal's account, however, has its starting point more in the visual sphere, emphasizing "the movement of the look". It introduces an agent, the focalizer, and the ability to constantly change focus.¹⁸¹ To Genette, however, the focalizer can only be the person who focalizes the narrative, that is, the narrator or the author himself.¹⁸²

As such, neither Bal's nor Genette's concepts are usable in my study, for they do not consider focalization as something that presupposes the reader's imaginary co-operation with the text. Genette's structural premises lack such concepts as eidetic imagery, cognitive image schemas or iconization, which emphasize the mediated and creative aspects of representation.¹⁸³ In Bal's dynamic conception the reader's imaginary process is not emphasized either.

The nature of Mondrian's text requires considerable input from the reader's imagination, and here focalization should be understood as an imagined action. Mondrian's text verbalizes views and in a few of these views the text even describes imaginative acts of visions. The text presents an imaginative act in an imagined scenery. The useful notion which includes imagination and is situated on the threshold of language, comes from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. According to her, focalization is, in itself, non-verbal and influenced by the cognitive and emotive orientation of the focalizer towards the focalized.¹⁸⁴ It involves namely, the reader's imaginary visual co-operation with the text. I find this to be more in line with the Peircean thought of imagination and his interpretation of iconicity.

In Mondrian's text the reader mentally constructs visions of the landscapes in the reading process. Here, the reader's imaginative co-operation means that he or she is willing to attribute a specific perception to the character's experience but, at the same time, provides that experience with her own experience from the lived world. The idea is that focalization can be defined experientially.

The Subject:

Ideas on subjectivity and the subject are numerous. Different contexts produce different terms. Since Mondrian's text clearly considers vision, one possibility would be to understand the subject as an agent of cognition, that is, the epistemological

180 Genette 1988, 43. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988) Genette confirms this account by denying the text's possibility to reproduce a pre-existing phenomenon, which is situated outside the language of the text. However, Veivo's opinion is that even Genette's focalization cannot be completely understood on the immanent levels of language and the narrative system alone. Perception seems anyway to be implicitly present in Genette's earlier works. See Veivo 2001, 188.

181 Bal 2002, 38–39.

182 Genette 1988, 72–73.

183 Genette 1988, 43.

184 Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 79, 82.

subject. As Johansen notes, philosophical discussions on the subject of knowledge are perpetual and no agreement exists about how it should be characterized.¹⁸⁵ In the culture which surrounded Mondrian and other *De Stijl* artists, this epistemological subject underwent a thorough reconsideration. The split subject can be noticed in psychoanalysis and, as Michael White reminds us, psychoanalytical concepts developed at the same time as abstract art in the Netherlands.¹⁸⁶ However, this version of subjectivity does not seem to be relevant since this study does not take a psychoanalytical approach.

In this matter Peirce's semiotics does not provide much support to my purposes, since Peirce does not give any primary importance to the subject. As Johansen points out, a sign is determined by the object not the subject as interpretant. It is semiosis that is the precondition for the subject and not the other way around.¹⁸⁷ However, when considering that Mondrian's text is a dialogue between three characters, Peirce's philosophy becomes interesting, for in Peirce the subject is formed through an internal dialogue between utterer and interpreter.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, my study takes Peirce's idea into consideration and applies the idea of internal dialogue to the dialogical form in Mondrian's text.

My semiotic approach positions the story's characters vis-à-vis one another. This is one of the ways in which subjectivity is played out in literary texts, as Christina Ljungberg's simplified idea of subjectivity shows.¹⁸⁹ As mentioned earlier, Mondrian's text is actually a play, acted out by three characters. According to Ljungberg, "whatever else subjects are, they are actors caught up in an indefinite number of intersecting performances".¹⁹⁰ Subjectivity as performance in a literary text seems suitable for my purposes, since it directs my semiotic account to how literary texts work when they use the 'real' experiential world as a model.

1.6 Contents of Chapters

Since my basic approach to Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is to study it in terms of signs, my interpretation must move beyond the boundaries of the narrative into the culture that surrounded that narrative and where *De Stijl* artists worked. This will be the focus of the second chapter. Mondrian will be

185 Johansen 2002, 234.

186 White 2006, 98.

187 Johansen 2002, 236. The human subject, according to this point of view, is the subject precisely because he or she is able to interpret and emit signs and more specifically because he or she is capable of assuming the utterer's position, that is, is capable of being an active factor in semiosis.

188 Johansen 2002, 237.

189 Ljungberg 2009, 88.

190 Ljungberg 2009, 86–87.

considered as an artist who is not only a modernist but is also part of the realist tradition. The chapter looks at the synergy between literature, painting and dance in the culture of that time. This modernizing culture also recognized perceptual experience as continuous phenomenon, an idea also articulated in the fields of philosophy and mathematics.

The third chapter is the longest one in my study. In section 3.1 I first study Mondrian's seven *Scenes* as a flow of images, where one privileged image, namely, the figure of 'the perpendicular', acquires continuity. Here my study uses Peirce's doctrine of consciousness, found in "The Law of Mind",¹⁹¹ which is based on an analysis of memory and which states that ideas cannot be connected except by continuity. After this initial analysis, the chapter goes on to study the text *Scene* by *Scene* according to the features and topics that the strollers' conversation arises, since the *De Stijl* readers of the time also apprehended the articles in this way. Sections 3.2 and 3.4 study the figure of 'the perpendicular' especially in terms of a semiotic sign in Mondrian's text.

The fourth chapter of my study concentrates entirely on the conversational form of Mondrian's text. The chapter notices the meaning effects that the text as a kind of drama brings out. I follow the hints given by conventional speech habits to provide the strollers' conversation with some predictability. Finally, the dynamic character of the conversation becomes apparent when it is read as a diagrammatic structure. This supports the self-representative capacity of the text as an icon of consciousness where Platonic and Steinerian meanings intermingle.

The fifth chapter studies the metaphorical meanings of the text. Thus, it completes the idea of an icon by introducing the third class, metaphor, as a means to study the text. These night-time sceneries bathed in natural moonlight, the illuminated city and the journey mediating between these points are the most prominent features in Mondrian's text. They urge the reader to comprehend the text in a generalized manner. By these meaning effects Mondrian's text makes a claim in the field of art and exemplifies its *tijdsbewustzijn* about the world, where the transience of the old and the blurring effects of the new are deeply recognized.

191 EP1, 326–327.

2 THE CONTEXTUAL FRAME: MOVING PICTURES OF THOUGHT

This chapter studies the contextual frame of Mondrian's literary-drama piece, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* (1919-1920). Revolutionary scientific discoveries and an epistemological crisis characterized the cultural context in which *De Stijl* magazine appeared. By epistemological crises this study means those more or less sudden changes which in those days revised the understanding of perceptual experience. The time was ripe and receptive to the kind of ideas that could be described as macro-historical and macro-cosmological. They were moving from Darwin's theory of evolution to a non-Euclidean understanding of space and time. One result of the breakthrough of such ideas was that the world seemed to loom much larger than people had imagined. Equally its past seemed to reach back much further than most of its myths had suggested.¹⁹² Naturally, these ideas also affected the way in which human cognition and consciousness was apprehended. Not only did old philosophical insights come to be re-evaluated, new comprehensions were also found. The depths of the human psyche, for example, were uncovered by psychoanalysis. Although the above-mentioned ideas rose purely in the field of science and therefore represented one of the symbols of modernism, namely specialization, the opposite tendency was also implied as a modernist tendency, namely popularization.¹⁹³ Often these new ideas were followed by pseudo-versions and popularizing literature, and were influenced by other mental currents, depending on the country in which they appeared. In the Netherlands, for example, the fourth dimension came to be understood in esoteric contexts,¹⁹⁴ whereas in Germany the strong influence of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, as an anti-materialist philosophy, overshadowed the notion of the fourth dimension so that it never had the popularity there that it had elsewhere.¹⁹⁵

In this chapter I discuss Mondrian as a painter who also produces literary texts. He wrote his articles as a forty-seven-year-old painter within the long realist

192 Tromph 1998, 269. 'Macrohistory' is the term of anthroposophist Owen Barfield for the idea that because of colonialism, marketing goods, memorization, no traditional culture is left untouched by the wider world so that also history must begin in just about every place on earth. Both evolution and non-Euclidean geometry (the latter leading to the theory of relativity), are the macro-histories and macro-cosmologies of that time. G. W. Tromph sees them as signifying the conceived enormousness of geographical breadth and (linear-) temporal depth.

193 Whitworth 2001, 26–27. According to Whitworth, the impulse to popularize science to a wide audience was a mark of nostalgia about a lost unity brought about by the fragmentation of sensibility.

194 Gasten 1978, 66.

195 Henderson 1983, xxii.

tradition of Dutch landscape painting. As he himself said: “From the very beginning, I was always a realist.”¹⁹⁶ Mondrian started to write *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* in the Netherlands but completed it in Paris, the city he returned to in 1919 after the First World War. Mondrian takes ‘a few steps back’ by including as the motifs of the *Scenes* motifs from his landscape paintings.¹⁹⁷ Hence, the text has a sort of retrospective character. Moreover, although the title of the article series offers a clear authorial context, what might the term ‘realism’ mean for a Dutch artist in the 1920s? One of the special features of Dutch art circles at this time was that different fields of art began to influence and co-operate with each other.¹⁹⁸ As both writers and painters who were keen on dance motifs and even dancing, Mondrian and van Doesburg are key figures in this artistic collaboration in which signs from different fields cross borders. Mondrian became a member of the Theosophical Society in 1909, after many years of ‘official’ training sessions.¹⁹⁹ However, as Blotkamp points out, the tragedy of Mondrian’s life was that despite all his efforts, his art and his vision did not meet with a single positive response in these circles. In 1914 the Society rejected an article which Mondrian had written for the Society journal about his insights into art in the light of theosophy. Also Mondrian’s letter to Rudolf Steiner, which included his brochure, *Neoplasticism* (1921), received no reply.²⁰⁰ This total lack of response from the theosophists can mean only one thing, namely that Mondrian’s interpretations did not meet the officially accepted conventions of these circles.

Following a semiotic approach, I suggest that Mondrian ‘read’ the theosophical doctrines, Steiner’s ideas and contemporary scientific proceedings more or less as signifying ideas. He then interpreted them in his own way, to support his own art theory. Ultimately, the *‘Dialogue’* produces meanings within the field of art and in the periodical *De Stijl*, which was not a theosophical publication.

2.1 *De Ware Werkelijkheid* [The real truth]: The Term ‘Realism’ in Dutch Painting

Mondrian’s text has as its starting point a genre which does not in itself suggest abstract art. Marty Bax assumes that the motifs of the *Scenes* might stem from

196 Mondrian 1986 (1941), 338. “Toward the True Vision of Reality” is Mondrian’s only explicitly autobiographical essay.

197 See, for example, James’s foreword in Mondrian 1986, 82 and Blotkamp 1994, 140.

198 Blotkamp & Rijnders 1978, 76; de Boer 1995, 38.

199 Bax 2006, 263–264.

200 Blotkamp 1994, 16, 182.

the paintings of 1906–1908,²⁰¹ though it is impossible to say, since the text does not identify the paintings. However, it is clear that the motifs derive from realistic, figurative paintings, not from the paintings from Mondrian’s pre-Cubist or Cubist period from 1912–14. Neither are these motifs affected by symbolism or by a motif related somehow to theosophy, such as Mondrian’s *Evolution* (1911), *Passion-flower* (1908), or *Devotion* (1908), which all depict persons and/or flowers.²⁰² Mondrian wrote ‘*Triologue*’ after or during his ‘regular grids’ or ‘plus-minus’ periods, which are both clearly abstract in style, although they do not yet represent full-grown Neo-Plasticism. This is meaningful, since it may reflect how Mondrian himself, in a way retrospectively, conceived of the phases of his own development towards abstract art. The text appears to be constructed on the idea that Mondrian, as it were, skips over some prominent phases in his artistic development and links these realistic motifs directly to abstract art, which he exemplifies in the settings of the studio in the last *Scene*. However, the elements found in Mondrian’s Cubist or ‘plus-minus’ paintings would have been easier to understand as the artist’s ‘path towards abstract art’.

In 1941, towards the end of his life, Mondrian in *Toward the True Vision of Reality*, an autobiographical essay, remembers his own development:

I preferred to paint landscape and houses seen in grey, dark weather or in very strong sunlight, when the density of the atmosphere obscures the details and accentuates the large outlines of objects, I rather sketched by moonlight – cows resting or standing immovable on flat Dutch meadows [...]. Shortly before the outbreak of the first World War, I went back to Holland on a visit [...]. I remained there for the duration of the war, continuing my work of abstraction in a series of church facades, trees, houses, etc. But I felt that I still worked as an Impressionist and was continuing to express particular feelings, not pure reality.²⁰³

After a lifetime as an artist, these words suggest that it is these realistic motifs, of which also the *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* speaks, as well as the notions of reality and realism, that are so important that they become a leading theme in Mondrian’s development towards abstract art. This notion of realism from the mouth of one of the leading abstract artists of the twentieth century seems at

201 Bax 2006, 292.

202 Theosophical interpretations of these paintings’ motifs have been treated elsewhere, one of the earliest scholars being Robert Welsh in his essay for the 1971 exhibition catalogue, “Mondrian and Theosophy”. Carel Blotkamp in *The Art of Destruction* (1994) and Hans Janssen and Joop M. Joosten in *Mondrian 1892–1914: The Path to Abstraction* (2002) have also discussed the motifs of these paintings.

203 Mondrian 1986 (1941), 338, 339.

first glance odd. Mondrian, however, was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and his immersion in the Dutch landscape tradition through the 1890s and into the 1900s was deep.

The title of Mondrian's text already announces a concern with 'reality'. In itself the term 'reality' is a highly problematic concept. Therefore, its relationship to the notion of 'realism' is ambiguous, as for example Linda Nochlin notes.²⁰⁴ To avoid this ambiguity I will approach Mondrian's notion more thoroughly by looking at the Dutch context of the term 'realism', for it is obvious that he apprehended its meanings through this context.

The term 'realism' was itself new in the Dutch art world of the 1850s. As Toos Streng points out, it appeared for the first time in 1852 in a Dutch periodical. It is through and by this concept that the Dutch art of painting has always been distinguished from the Italian tradition. It was used as a way of classifying old Dutch art, a whole tradition starting from Rembrandt van Rijn.²⁰⁵ According to Svetlana Alpers, an expert on 17th-century Dutch painting, the prominent feature of this art is that it describes the world as we see it, rather than the narrative content and significant human actions of traditional Italian art.²⁰⁶

Visual culture was central to the life of society in Holland. In this light the concept of realism seems to linger deep in the ideas of visual perception and not just in its application to a certain figurative tradition. As Alpers characterizes it, the 'eye' was a central means of self-representation and visual experience an essential state of self-consciousness. She notes the distinction between the seventeenth-century emphasis on seeing and representation and the Renaissance emphasis on reading and interpretation, the former being especially strong in Holland.²⁰⁷ I find parallel ideas in Mondrian's Neo-Plastic works and those of the Dutch realistic pictorial traditions. Thus, a positioned viewer is frequently absent, as if the world came first. There is also the absence of a prior frame, so that the world depicted in Dutch pictures often seems to be cut off by the edges of the work, or conversely, seems to extend beyond its bounds as if the frame were an afterthought and not a prior defining device. Finally, there is a formidable sense of the picture as a surface, as though the picture is a mirror or a map rather than a window.²⁰⁸

As both Streng and Alpers note, the term 'realism' was tied to the wider and historically longer context of Italian and Northern art. In this sense the term seems to have had a central role in art criticism at the end of the nineteenth century. At first it was tied to the lack of native critical discourse. A split prevailed between Northern

204 Nochlin 1990 (1971), 13.

205 Streng 1994, 236–237.

206 Alpers 1983, xxii, xxv.

207 Alpers 1983, xxiv–xxv.

208 Alpers 1983, xxv.

practice and Italian ideals and its handbooks and treatises on art. Therefore, Italian critical discourse failed to do justice to the art of the visual.²⁰⁹ Correspondingly, a distinction was made between the two ways of acquiring knowledge of the world: sense perception and thought. The sensuous world could be reached by perception, but the world of ideas could only be grasped by inner reflection.²¹⁰

This division can be considered a universal philosophical insight. What is important in the criticism of old Dutch art is that it came to have a specific solution, and this solution was tied to the term 'realism' at the end of the nineteenth century. According to the old Dutch art tradition realism was a trend where it was possible to achieve a high level of skills but where it was impossible to express the ideal. However, a revised opinion which arose in the late nineteenth century stated that Dutch painting allowed one to see how artists were able to picture subject matter according to their own experience and were thus able to infuse their own thought and compassion. It was this kindness and sympathy for the pictured object which provided the ideal. Artistic traditions and conventions along Italian lines were no longer necessary.²¹¹

The starting point in this study is that Mondrian's text is sensitive to these connotations of the term 'realism'. It is reasonable to predict that Mondrian, who was awarded the highest grade in aesthetics in his two years of study in the National Academy in 1892–1894,²¹² was deeply familiar with these aspects of the term. Dutch art criticism is part of the intellectual context in which Mondrian functioned. It participates in that semiosphere which possibly produced meanings for *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, for it is generally known that Mondrian acknowledged the sharp division between the particularities of the sensuous world and the universals of inner thought. In *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* Mondrian writes:

In the artist, then, we see the image of beauty developing [...]. *By freeing itself from the object, it can grow from particular beauty toward universal beauty [...].* The universal is generally *unattainable as long as we remain traditionally attached to the particular.*²¹³

209 Streng 1994, 239; Alpers 1983, xxii.

210 Streng 1994, 239–240. Generally, the word 'realism' revealed a stance towards a dualistic system of philosophy in which ideality was highly respected and reality was less so. Therefore, the term 'realism' came to be tied to the discussion of 'real art' and 'real beauty'. According to this debate, beauty in art was not a perception but a concept and therefore was attainable only by the thinking artist. The artist who gave the truthfully pictured objects of the world according to his own perception could not reach any higher level than that of merely 'pleasing'.

211 Streng 1994, 246–248.

212 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 37.

213 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 106–107. Italics original.

Thus, the title together with these lines suggest that realism is now conceived of as being free from the earlier contradictions of the term. 'Realism' now acquires the meaning of 'real art' and 'real beauty'. Since 'realism' had already shown its capacity to mediate the dualism of philosophical perspectives visual art, it could now be said to signify the Dutch tradition.

2.2 Synergetic Actions: Literature, Painting and Dance

The modernist discourse which emerged between 1880 and 1919 in the Netherlands was often not a fixed or linear construction but a contradictory set of discourses, renegotiations and transformations. This can largely be seen in the journals which appeared at that time, as Beckett points out.²¹⁴ *De Stijl* belongs to these journals. Moreover, it offered a stage for the co-orientation and mutual influence of the art of painting, architecture and literature and, as I conclude, to a certain extent also of dance. Many other periodicals in the Netherlands, such as *Het Getij* (1916–1922) and *Holland Express* (1908–1922), also acted as a forum for co-operation and influence between writers and artists. This was not only practical and social, for often writers and artists also used the same motifs.²¹⁵ Many of the artists were also multitalented.²¹⁶ The most prevalent idea in this co-operative assembly of writers and painters was the claim for the unity of form and content. The idea is, of course, older and in its modern form stemmed from Walter Pater in the 1890s.²¹⁷

The unity of form and content actually meant the ability of the text to represent itself in many ways. Mondrian was part of this cultural climate. This already provides enough reason to ask what literary form then meant to him. Blotkamp and Rijnders consider van Doesburg to be the only artist who both in painting and in literature followed the principle of the unity of form and content.²¹⁸ However, Mondrian signed the *Manifesto II of De Stijl*, which appeared in *De Stijl* in 1920 and concerned literature²¹⁹ (see Figure 3a and 3b). To my mind, this reflects that

214 Beckett 1983, 69. *De Nieuwe Tijd* (The New Tide), *De Nieuwe Gids* (The New Guides) and *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* reflect the discourse as working by oppositions between the old, conservative and agricultural Netherlands and the new industrial nation. *De Nieuwe Gids* was also a journal of literature, art, politics and science, and it advocated an individualistic art-for-art's-sake aesthetic. The more specialist cultural reviews such as *De Beweging* (the Movement), *Wendingen* (Wanderings) and *Eenheid* (Unity) modified these debates.

215 Blotkamp & Rijnders 1978, 76, 77.

216 Blotkamp and Rijnders 1978, 82–83. Blotkamp and Rijnders name several, such as van Looy, van Eeden, Jan Veth, P. H. van Moerkerken and Carel de Nerée and Babberich, and in the generation between 1910 and 1920 Wichman, Anita Feis, van Doesburg, Hendrik de Vries, Hein von Essen, Canter and Van Kuik.

217 In his *The School of Giorgione* Pater says: "I have spoken of a certain interpenetration of the matter or subject of a work of art with the form of it, a condition realised absolutely only in music... ." See Pater, Walter 1975 (1873), 140.

218 Blotkamp & Rijnders 1978, 83.

219 *De Stijl* 1920, III, 6, 49–50.

Mondrian, as a starting writer, also had a serious aim to make a contribution in the field of literature. I find this manifesto to be a good starting place to exemplify what was meant by the unity of form and content in *De Stijl*. The manifesto itself has many of the features of an iconic poem. According to the manifesto, the old tradition of literary representation as something with duration, as the production of meaning within the confines of time, must be substituted for the notion of the intensity and depth of the text. The manifesto expresses its content through unusual lineation and with words suddenly appearing in capitals and in bold font. As such, it iconizes the demise of traditional literature. The words in bold announce by repetition that “the word is dead”, “the word is powerless”, “the meaning of the word is dead”.²²⁰ Repeated elements are meaningful. The chain of these sentences is built on internal similarities. Without the sentences being recognized as similar to each other, and without a discernable pattern in the representation of the clue words, meaning would not be possible – the absolutely unique would not signify anything but the repeated elements combine the aesthetic effect with the meaning.²²¹ Formally, they are represented in short lines intensified with large bold capitals. In this way they cut the duration of the lengthy lines using traditional small-font text. The manifesto ends with a claim for the constructive unity of form and content. Thus, there is a relationship between this claim and the formal representation.²²²

The manifesto intensifies its message through its overall appearance. Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’, however, does not follow at all this iconic pattern and proceeds in a traditional way. While it is clear that this literary manifesto intends to create such poems as those of van Doesburg, my approach takes the view that traditional literary texts may also be studied by using icons, as the semiotic theory of literature in the Introduction suggests. Therefore, as Nänny notes about this kind of iconicity in literature, even a literary text of traditional appearance may also function as a global icon of its theme, of what the text is about.²²³

Mondrian’s own insights prove that *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* has been central in exemplifying how Mondrian understood Neo-Plastic literature. Shortly after the ‘*Triologue*’, Mondrian wrote an essay where he “had made a condensed adaptation of the ideas in it”.²²⁴ This is an important ‘paratext’ for my study. In this essay, “Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence” (1921), he brings out his own idea about “the new art of the word”: “The essential is that the *principle of opposites rules the work as a whole* as much in its composition

220 Ibid.

221 Johansen 2002, 200–201.

222 This unity does not have to remain on the level of mere lineation, typography and fonts; in fact the manifesto says that “syntax, prosody, arithmetic and orthography” are included as well. See *De Stijl* 1920, III, 6, 49–50.

223 Nänny 1986, 200.

224 Mondrian’s words in a letter to Salomon Slijper, 4 April, 1920. Cited in Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 132.

as in the equilibrated relationship of its plastic means.”²²⁵ Noticeable here is the fact that Mondrian speaks of “plastic means” in connection with literature. This, to my understanding, suggests that the literary text may be understood as something which hovers between the word and the image. In this case the iconicity rests on the larger elements of the text, not just on typography or lineation.

It should be remembered when thinking about the sources that could have influenced the *‘Triologue’*, that the manifesto did not appear in *De Stijl* until 1920 and Mondrian’s above-mentioned essay appeared after the *‘Triologue’*. This raises the question about the sources of inspiration for the text itself. As such, Blotkamp tracks a piece of literature, a short play by van Doesburg, *Resurrection: A Historical Drama of Ideas on Beauty and Love*, 1913, (*Opstanding. Een historisch gedachtenspel van Schoonheid en Liefde in één bedrijf*), as the model for Mondrian’s text. Undoubtedly, this has the same setting as Mondrian’s play.²²⁶ It is also a dialogue between a modern artist and an old-fashioned one in which an artist’s model, as the third person, occasionally participates. The language in van Doesburg’s play with its pauses and hesitations is very informal and speech-like. By this it urges expression to use a realistic tone. Mondrian’s *‘Triologue’* also depends on a rather informal conversational tone. However, besides these similarities, van Doesburg’s play does not foreshadow the strong opposition-based and developmental (journey) structure of Mondrian’s text.

One of the central sources of inspiration for Mondrian was Giovanni Papini’s book, *Il pilota cieco (The Blind Pilot)*, 1907. The ‘blindness’ in the title became to Mondrian a metaphor for intuition.²²⁷ Papini’s book, which was translated into Dutch in 1908, might well have influenced the *‘Triologue’*. Its writing probably proved to be longer than expected because of the many revisions and corrections, and Mondrian was still adjusting his text while reading Papini’s book. This becomes evident in Mondrian’s correspondence to van Doesburg.²²⁸ The research literature usually refers to Papini as a Futurist, but it is meaningful for my argument that *The Blind Pilot* appeared before Papini’s Futurist period, at a time when Papini

225 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141. According to Joosten, the essay was ready in February 1921 (Joosten 1998, II, 120), whereas Holzman’s and James’s translation gives the year as 1920. However, since I am referring to the text of this translation and for reasons of clarity, I use the same date as the translation uses even though I believe Joosten’s date to be more accurate.

226 The play appeared in 1913 in the periodical *Eenheid*. Cited in *Theo Van Doesburg. Oeuvre Catalogus*, 2000. pp. 599–605.

227 Janssen 2016, 58–60.

228 Mondrian writes to van Doesburg 3 March, 1919, having read Papini’s book, and a letter from April, 1919 shows that Mondrian was still making adjustments to the *‘Triologue’*.

represented pragmatist philosophy and corresponded with Charles Peirce and even met William James.²²⁹

Thus, Papini belonged to the young pragmatist circle, which was born in Florence around the periodical, *Leonardo* (1903–1907) and which van Doesburg’s active correspondence brought to Mondrian’s awareness.²³⁰ But Italian influences seemingly affected Mondrian’s insights about literature in a wider sense. Mondrian’s above-mentioned essay, “Neo-Plasticism”, shows that especially when pondering the possibility of the “new art of the word”²³¹, Mondrian had studied the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* by Marinetti (1912). In this essay Mondrian clarifies his own stance with respect to Italian Futurist literature.²³² What is interesting in Marinetti’s manifesto is the appeal to analogies when writing: “Analogy is nothing more than the deep love that assembles distant seemingly diverse and hostile things.”²³³ One can conclude from Mondrian’s own words that it is this idea that has affected his own insights about literature. Van Doesburg, as Blotkamp notes, also maintained that literature ought to re-create the theme in transforming it into elementary values and then exteriorizing it by linguistic means.²³⁴ It is this attitude among the *De Stijl* artists that has inspired me to apply Jakobson’s poetic function of the literary text, which works from the axis of selection to the axis of combination, and in doing so it projects the principle of equivalence.²³⁵ Therefore, far from suggesting that Mondrian appropriated Papini’s short stories to create his own texts I believe that he transformed them by imaginatively reworking their principles and ‘elementary’ values.

Apart from in Florence, pragmatism was not known in Europe during this time. Therefore, it is through Papini’s work and through Theo van Doesburg that the effects of this philosophy might have influenced Mondrian’s text. William James described Papini’s pragmatism as a collection of attitudes and methods. As a doctrine it is neutral, and he compares it to a corridor in a hotel, from which a hundred doors open into a hundred chambers. In one of them you may see a man praying, in another a desk at which sits someone eager to destroy old ideas in physics, in a third there is a laboratory with an investigator looking for new footholds by which to advance into the future. But the corridor belongs to all, and

229 Peirce’s letter to Giovanni Papini, 10 April, 1907. Cited in the Introduction in EP2, xxxvi. Peirce also comments on Papini’s pragmatism in his article *Pragmatism* (1907), see EP2, 398, 420, 448. William James met Papini in 1906.

230 The letter to van Doesburg 21 August, 1919 shows that Mondrian considered the Italian connections important.

231 Mondrian 1986, (1920b), 141.

232 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 142, 143. Mondrian had studied the manifesto so that he was able to specify the points where he disagreed with Marinetti and Dominique Braga.

233 Marinetti 1973 (1912), 99.

234 Blotkamp 1994, 130–131.

235 Jakobson 1981, 27.

all must pass there.²³⁶ James continues that for Papini pragmatism meant “the necessity of enlarging our means of action, the vanity of the universal as such, the bringing of spiritual powers into use, and the need of making the world instead of merely standing by and contemplating it [...]. The common denominator to which all the forms of human life can be reduced is the quest of instruments to act with.”²³⁷ Many of Papini’s stories observe the change within oneself. Mondrian’s own text, too, ponders a change and not only within himself but also within the field of art. Therefore, he may have recognized in Papini’s book the influence of the theory of human action, where art, science, religion and philosophy are all instruments of change.

The *De Stijl* movement wanted to express the consciousness of the time. Time was marked by the crisis in physics and in the theory of knowledge. In this light, van Doesburg’s connections to Italy seem to be meaningful. What is important, as Innis notes, is that these circles were small enough for writers, such as Papini, and for natural scientists to have an influence on each other and to recognize an affinity between mathematics and artistic creation.²³⁸ In this, metaphors – that is, the image-schemata of deduction – played an important role in modelling the mental processes. They have an instrumental character, which could be compared, for example, to that of a lens as an instrument for seeing or a dagger for penetrating.²³⁹ It is rather in this kind of a spirit of instrumentalism that the metaphors of different disciplines of exact science, based on logic and creativity, are of significance in my study when they are reworked in the field of art to produce a theory of art.

Syncopated Beats: Moving the Body in Time and Space

Dance and various dance-related movement and exercise techniques played a particularly significant role in modernist drama, literature and works of art.²⁴⁰ Dance also came to play an important role in the idea of perceiving, where corporeality and rhythm were seen as important elements in the function of human

236 James 1906, 339.

237 Ibid.

238 Innis 2002, 99–100, 102, 106 (note 5), 117. One of these voices in Italian philosophy but also in the early development of an ‘international’ moment in the pragmatist project was Giovanni Vailati. Giovanni Vailati was professionally trained in physics and mathematics and his work has an intimate theoretical as well as historical connection to Charles Peirce’s and John Dewey’s work. Vailati’s work consists of the analyses of the meanings of modern scientific methods and they are intertwined together with pragmatic reflections on the philosophy of language.

239 Innis 2002, 114.

240 For example, Harold B. Segel argues that Modernism’s preoccupation with physicality arose from a disenchantment with traditional intellectual culture, including language. See Segel 1998, ch. 3. *The Body Ascendant, Modernism and the Physical Imperative*.

cognition.²⁴¹ Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* makes a number of references to modern music and rhythms, such as to jazz. In the text these references are naturally tied to the whole conversational situation, where various topics constantly intermingle. The meaning effects of these grouped topics are difficult, if not impossible, to clarify by referring to the 'Triologue' alone, since Mondrian structured the text in the form of a play. Therefore, it lacks the narratorial voice, which would inform the reader about the background. As already mentioned there were close links between writers and artists during this time, but when analysing the motifs of *De Stijl* artists, and Mondrian's enthusiastic attitude towards dance, it is obvious that dance came to have a role where it mediated meanings to Neo-Plasticism.²⁴²

In the Netherlands, dancers also began to spend evenings with modernist painters and sculptors in soirées where all sorts of dancing performances were presented.²⁴³ The painters and sculptors were not just interested in modern dance styles, such as those of Isadora Duncan, but also Javanese and Bali dances were performed in these soirées.²⁴⁴ Dancers also began to act as active members of artists' associations.²⁴⁵ This created opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for co-operation between dancers and painters. Dance motifs were applied not only in paintings and sculptures but also in photographs.

Dance offered an analytical tool for artists to study movement. It was movement itself which was the ultimate motif in the paintings, sculptures and photographs, not the dancer as a person. The analytical method was such that a photograph of a moving dancer and the artist's sketch representing the movement were juxtaposed. The idea was that the dancer was moving while being photographed, which was a new thing when compared to the former habit of shooting a photograph of a rigidly posing dancer.²⁴⁶ Using a drawing which was placed over the photographic image of the moving dancer, the artist was able to trace lines that followed precisely the shape of the dancer. Both verbal and visual representations of dancing figures

241 Christopher Wilk notes that there were close links between dance and other areas of modernist culture where dance had made a break with classical ballet, and even with the most contemporary forms of ballet, where abstraction and spirituality was concerned. See Wilk 2006, 259.

242 Vilmos Huszár's mechanical *Dancing Figure* (1920), a doll made for a 'Plastic Drama' coincides not only to several of van Doesburg's images of dancing figures but also with Piet Mondrian's early personal interest in dance. Nancy Troy analyses Mondrian's personal "rectangular" way of expressing his own dance movements, when dancing the Charleston, the shimmy and other modern dances. See Troy 1984, 645.

243 de Boer 1995, 38.

244 Isadora Duncan performed in the Netherlands in 1905. In March 1919 the journal *Wendingen* dedicated an issue to dance. Because of the Netherlands' colonial history, Indonesian culture was easily reachable.

245 de Boer 1995, 38.

246 Wilk 2006, 269.

appeared in art-theoretical writings or magazines.²⁴⁷ I consider them to work as translations from one field to another in which the dancer became a simple group of intersecting lines. Consequently, the moving figure became an abstraction, though an abstraction based on mimesis. In this way the rhythm of the music, through its repetitive patterns, came to be incarnated from the abstract realm of music to the realm of reality through the movements of the dancer's body and limbs.

2.3 The Need for Perceptual Continuity

The intellectual and philosophical milieu surrounding *De Stijl* artists responded in many ways to the scientific breakthroughs and urbanization which coincided with the crisis of epistemological insights. The First World War, moreover, gave rise to a general feeling of loss and transience that affected the common consciousness and encouraged the search for continuing aspects of experience.²⁴⁸ The effects of them all influenced how visual perception was conceived. When reading the esoteric, pseudoscientific and scientific literature of the surrounding intellectual milieu the reader at once recognizes how certain elementary pictorial means constantly appear in that milieu: the idea of 'point to line to plane' as tied to the contemporary reconsiderations of space and time. When we consider Mondrian and his sources, it is difficult to know precisely how he used them. Mondrian himself gives us few clues as he destroyed much of his correspondence.²⁴⁹ In addition, Mondrian passed on every book he read, keeping only a few esoteric publications, among which were Rudolf Steiner's Dutch lectures.²⁵⁰ However, the first *Scene* of Mondrian's '*Triologue*', for example, takes its starting point from the fundamental geometrical notion of 'point to line to plane'.

247 For example, Jaap Kool's reflection in his article in the journal *Wendingen* about Grit Hegesa's dance, *Groteske*, considered corporeal movements to be lines which intersected each other, "it is rhythmic, it is rising and structuring and really considers the music". See de Boer 1995, 38. Using almost exactly the same words, Vilmos Huszár describes Archipenko's sculpture *Dance* in *De Stijl* in 1917 as a collection of intersecting and opposing lines. See Huszár 1917, 20 – 23. *De Stijl* I, 2, 1917. Wassily Kandinsky also deals with the photographs taken of the dancer, Palucca, as simple rhythmic intersecting lines. Among the *De Stijl* artists van Doesburg reversed the relation by making the dancer, Kamares, adjust her limbs to follow the line-patterns of an already finished painting.

248 See, for example, Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 307 and Kern 2003 (1983), 36–37.

249 The mutual discussion in the correspondence between van Doesburg and Mondrian is impossible to follow because van Doesburg's letters to Mondrian are missing or have been destroyed, although it is possible to read Mondrian's letters to van Doesburg. Several scholars have mentioned this as a problem. See Blotkamp 1982, xi; Blotkamp 1994, 9–10; Gasten 1978, 64.

250 Rudolf Steiner's *Verslag van de voordrachten gehouden voor de Ned. Afd. Theos. Ver.*, 4–11 maart 1908. See the appendix in van Paaschen 2017, 148–181.

Point to Line to Plane as a Cultural Text

Euclid set forth the basis of his deductive system of geometry in his *Elements* (ca. 300 B.C.). The first book establishes the basic geometrical concepts: point, line and plane, and thus the Euclidean geometry of space. Put simply, the idea is that a line is the trace of a point in movement, a plane is the trace of the movement of a line, and a three-dimensional solid is the trace of the movement of a plane.²⁵¹ Therefore, a space is a result of the serial movements in a direction always perpendicular to the previous geometrical concept: a line moves in a direction perpendicular to itself in order to form a plane. Similarly, a plane moves in a direction perpendicular to itself in order to form a cubical space. Using Juri Lotman's and Boris Uspenskij's semiotic approach, I consider this Euclidean geometry of space to be a cultural text. According to the definition of a cultural text, the notion of 'point to line to plane' was expressed as two languages of the culture, namely as a geometrical concept expressing elementary abstract forms and as written and spoken words of language, as I explained in the Introduction. Euclidean geometry came into the spotlight again at the end of the 19th century, when one of the Euclidean postulates, the famous 'parallel postulate' was called into question and ideas associated with non-Euclidean geometry started to gain scientific significance.²⁵² The philosophical impact of non-Euclidean geometry in the nineteenth century not only challenged Kant's philosophy it also led to a recognition of the relativity of knowledge. Philosophical discussion about relativity occurred decades before Einstein's theory of relativity, so that by 1911 it was a well-known topic and seemed to be added to everything.²⁵³ Linda Henderson, writing on non-Euclidean geometry in the world of art, argues that non-Euclidean geometry shook the foundations of mathematics and science, branches of learning that for two thousand years had depended on the truth of Euclid's axioms.²⁵⁴ *De Stijl* artists also responded to this revolution, though with differing insights.

The idea of 'point to line to plane' appeared in many different expressions when non-Euclidean geometry and the idea of the fourth dimension started to take centre stage. In this mediation the important concept is 'popularization'. As

251 The axiomatic foundation of Euclidean geometry includes five initial axioms (called *postulates* by the ancient Greeks). These are not sufficient to establish Euclidean geometry. Therefore, many mathematicians have produced complete sets of axioms which do establish Euclidean geometry. One of the most notable of these is due to David Hilbert, who created a system in the same style as Euclid. In geometry, the point-line-plane postulate is a collection of assumptions that can be used in a set of postulates for Euclidean geometry in two, three or more dimensions. See Whittaker 1958, 6-7, 24.

252 János Bolyai, a Hungarian, and Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, a Russian, separately formulated the first principles of non-Euclidean geometry. Lobachevsky's "On the Principles of Geometry" in *Kazan Messenger* appeared in 1829 and Bolyai's work "Absolute Science of Space" appeared in 1832 as an appendix to his father's work. Both Bolyai and Lobachevsky gave the same alternative to the Euclidean parallel postulate. See Henderson 1983, 4.

253 Whitworth 2001, 131.

254 Henderson 1983, 17.

Michael H. Whitworth points out, it is an ambiguous concept, signifying either the movement between two expertise fields or the movement downwards from the elite to the mass, or both. Moreover, it resonates with making something ‘admired’ or agreeable and understandable.²⁵⁵ Mondrian’s *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* makes use of a popularized idea of ‘point to line to plane’. In this way its cultural meaning becomes a meaning within an art-theoretical text.

This is how cultural texts behave. Their switching from one level to another may occur when rules are rewritten. In fact, the actualizations of ‘point to line to plane’ in different fields are not supposed to be identical, only equivalent. The ‘point to line to plane’ was connected to notions of spiritual evolution in esoteric and related currents and to Dutch Hegelianism. Therefore, their relation to this originally scientific idea was shaped by the general ethos of that esoteric culture in its popular form.²⁵⁶ However, as a cultural text it cannot be separated from its own context, the culture itself, in which it had carried and preserved a cultural memory for thousands of years. The notion of ‘point to line to plane’ had been conceived as a self-evident expression of the truest articulation of space, and was associated with the truth of vision and the linear perspective known to artists since the Renaissance. According to Henderson, non-Euclidean geometry with its notion of curved space necessarily invalidated this understanding.²⁵⁷ It had been taken as something which is unquestionable, constantly present and therefore unnoticed. As an archaic text, it had been almost forgotten, set aside merely into the mathematical realm, but in these days of epistemological crises it had again become of acute importance. As a cultural text it moved from one level of culture to another, the new modifications obscuring the old meanings. This switching always involves an element of untranslatability, as Uspenskij and Lotman remind us.²⁵⁸

Before the First World War, theosophy²⁵⁹ was a socially acceptable, even fashionable philosophy. Appearing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, its appeal filled an intellectual and spiritual vacuum. Evolutionism threatened the long-held religious traditions of the culture and theosophy offered a spiritual substitute. As Tromph argues, it stood against literalist interpretations of the seven days of creation and presented the far-extended lineage of biological life.²⁶⁰ In theosophy the Euclidean elements represent not only macro-history, but macrocosmic

255 Whitworth 2001, 27.

256 Whitworth 2001, 30.

257 Henderson 1983, 6.

258 Uspenskij, Lotman, et. al. 1998 (1973), 55.

259 Theosophy, of course, is a complex combination of different philosophies. Faivre specifies several differing lines of development within theosophy in Europe and sees Mme Helena Blavatsky’s theosophy as representing a line of its own. See Faivre 1998, 1–10. Allusions to ‘theosophy’ in my study refer to Blavatsky’s version of the philosophy.

260 Tromph 1998, 270–271.

interpretation as well. These geometrical elements were believed to express the cosmic, theosophical development from spirit to matter. For Helena Blavatsky the idea seems to have come originally from Plato. In the *Timaeus*, one of Plato's dialogues, all the elements in the world are constructed of similar components. Plato sees the four most important elements as fire, earth, air, and water. It was not possible for these elements to combine as a cosmos until they had taken on "a form expressed by ideas and numbers", and Plato argues that these four elements are formed by right-angled triangles.²⁶¹ Blavatsky's alleged quotation from Plato, "God geometrizes" suggests that all basic geometric shapes bear witness to the same doctrine, which Blavatsky discusses in reference to the triangle as a theosophical emblem.²⁶² According to Blavatsky:

the philosophical cross, the two lines running in opposite directions, the horizontal and the perpendicular, the height and the breadth, which the geometrizing Deity divides at the intersecting point, and which forms the magical as well as the scientific quaternary [...] symbolizes our human existence, for the circle of life circumscribed the four points of the cross, which represent in succession birth, life, death and immortality.²⁶³

As Welsh concludes, the cross, too, may be thought emblematic of those cosmic processes, which theosophy sums up in the term 'evolution'.²⁶⁴

The 'point to line to plane' as a cultural sign signified evolution in this theosophical reorientation, and as Tromph writes: "there was already present the nostalgia for what might be called a macrohistory of a related context which was at once planetary and truly cosmic".²⁶⁵ As Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* puts it, the point is regarded as the first stage of "potential space within abstract Space", the horizontal line as the second stage, and the cross formed by the introduction of a vertical as the third stage.²⁶⁶ There is an element of time-relevant development in Blavatsky's view, which in this way searches for a correspondence and place in society, a notion of nature's creative force which was heavily influenced by Darwinism. As a theosophical idea, the meaning of 'point to line to plane' is linked to creation and to creative work and, as Sixten Ringbom argues, artists saw in it a capacity that could be used in their artistic creative work.²⁶⁷

261 Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* is in the fifth part of the series of Plato's *Works*. 53a-d.

262 Welsh 1971, 48.

263 Blavatsky 1882, 508.

264 Welsh 1971, 49.

265 Tromph 1998, 274.

266 Blavatsky 1970 (1888), 4-5.

267 Ringbom 1970, 200.

Ringbom and Welsh conclude that the figure of horizontality and verticality refers to the theosophical ‘cross-emblem’ of evolution. Widely understood, the idea of evolution shows how that which already is past can be present in presence. This can be linked to the principle of continuity. Therefore, the idea of evolution produces the meanings of immortality and continuity, continuity being connected to the cyclic world view: life proceeds from birth to maturity to death and again to rebirth. In “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917) Mondrian develops the use of this idea in visual art: “Evolution involves destruction of preceding form [...] every new art expression is thus built upon a previous one but differs from it in form.[...] In this sense each new expression of art destroys the preceding one.”²⁶⁸

One of the few books from which Mondrian never parted was the published version of Rudolf Steiner’s Dutch lectures.²⁶⁹ Although Mondrian’s explicit references to Steiner are scanty, in a letter he sent to Steiner in 1921, he mentions having read several of his books.²⁷⁰ This letter also gives clues to Mondrian’s way of thinking about the evolution of spirit and matter, and overall the influence of Steiner in Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’ is apparent. The nucleus of Steiner’s philosophy is the primordial capacity to see higher realities and other worlds through an appreciation of elementary forms. This “clairvoyant vision”,²⁷¹ is related to Euclidean geometry in that what we usually think of as Platonic forms are those elementary geometrical shapes such as triangles, squares, etc. which can be constructed by the moving point and line.²⁷² However, it is not in this super-sensible sense that I consider Steiner’s ideas meaningful to Mondrian’s article series, for Mondrian seems to have considered that ordinary visible reality provided sufficient opportunities for conscious observation.²⁷³

According to Steiner, this act of perceiving is a field of forces which we detach from ourselves and then set into outer space. Vertical and horizontal forces are connected in space in a way which corresponds to the workings of the human body. They have just been transported outside the body. The influence of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749-1832) teachings about the fundamental physicality of perception appears in Steiner’s ideas about the human body in the act of

268 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 49 (italics original). Mondrian writes: “The evolution of consciousness creates form after form – in life as in art. In its evolution of form, art can precede life, in so far as its *form becomes manifestation* – the *natural* becomes *abstract*.”

269 Rudolf Steiner’s *Verslag van de voordrachten gehouden voor de Ned. Afd. Theos. Ver.*, 4–11 maart 1908. See the appendix in van Paaschen 2017, 148–181.

270 Blotkamp 1994, 182.

271 The term is often connected to Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy, where it means seeing occult realities and spiritual beings. Web-page of Kheper Home. M.Alan Kazlev, page uploaded 6 June 1998; last modified 7 August, 2004. See also Welsh 1971, 40 and Ringbom 1970, 80.

272 Tromph 1998, 288, 290.

273 Mondrian’s letter to Israël Querido summer, 1909, quoted in Blotkamp 1994, 35–36 and a letter to Bremmer January 29, 1914, quoted in Janssen & Joosten 2002, 196.

perceiving.²⁷⁴ Steiner's idea corresponds to Mondrian's own words from 1926 in which he associated the idea of harmony and beauty with the normal vertical position of human beings and with its relation to the horizontal earth, since this for him was a relation to which the human eye was inherently tied.²⁷⁵

Living in Laren in 1916, Mondrian became acquainted with Mathieu Schoenmaekers.²⁷⁶ Schoenmaekers's idea of horizontality-verticality does not fundamentally dwell in the world of ideal forms but in the 'real world' of human physical experience. In Schoenmaekers's *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld*, 1915 (*The New Image of the World*), for example, ultimate harmony and beauty rests in cosmological relations, such as in the relation between the globe's radius and its circumference, which in fact is the relation between horizontality and verticality as the human perception experiences it.²⁷⁷

Summing up the meaning potential of this circulating cultural text of 'point to line to plane', it stood for ideas of human consciousness in a modernizing and expanding world. This world had recently grown to a macro-cosmological and macro-historical scale. It signified both evolution as temporal processes and spatial totality in the awareness of infinitesimal large distances. I suggest that Mondrian imaginatively reworked this esoteric meaning potential, although it is probable that esoteric circles of this time did not recognize their own ideas when they are represented in Mondrian's writings about art. After the Dutch Theosophical Society rejected his article about theosophical art theory, Steiner did not bother to answer his letter, and when his acquaintance with Schoenmaekers ended in disagreement, Mondrian would seem to have kept a certain critical distance from these philosophical currents. In this way he maintained his artistic freedom.

274 Steiner 2014 (1915), 31–33. Steiner's approach to the arts leads to his notion that the creative work of artists no longer relies on adjusting symbolic meanings to works of art, since it is something which comes into the work of art 'from outside'. Instead, the artist should understand the work of art as something in which he himself moves wholeheartedly. Critically viewed, this is a rather general formalistic insight, in that Steinerian ideas also come 'from outside'. Steiner's art theory continues in the following way. He includes the notion of the ethereal body, which is a spiritual body that influences our physical bodies. This ethereal body gives its stamp to our physical bodies and marks its physical laws, which we then transfer to the outer world through architecture. In sculpture, however, we do not transport the laws into the outer world but instead we turn the laws of the ethereal body into our own inner being. Steiner also includes the notion of the astral body, which is a one step higher form of spiritual body in Steiner's anthroposophy, to the system which finally realizes itself as art. Thus, by merely directing our astral bodies into our ethereal bodies, we can no longer create anything which has substance, since astral bodies cannot be transported into volume. But as ethereal bodies are concerned with rhythm and harmony, this is the place for the birth of painting. Painting is the field of art which includes the laws of our astral bodies, in the same way as sculpture includes the laws of our ethereal bodies, and architecture includes the laws of our physical bodies.

275 Mondrian 1986 (1926), 210.

276 It was Michel Seuphor, writer of the first monograph on Mondrian, who first mentioned Schoenmaekers in connection with Mondrian. See Seuphor 1956, 132–134. Subsequently, many researchers have commented on the influence of Schoenmaekers on Mondrian, among others Jaffé, Welsh, Blotkamp and Bois. Wiczorek's dissertation, 1997, also argues that Mondrian allowed himself to be influenced by concepts formulated by Schoenmaekers.

277 Schoenmaekers 1915, 67–96.

From Euclidean Solid Cube to Minkowski's "Stretchable Space"

One of the most fascinating aspects of Dutch painting at the turn of the century was the fact that artists were apparently interested in everything of a mathematical nature. This is not to say that they had mathematical skills, as only a few had more than basic knowledge of this field. However, as Andrea Gasten notes, mathematical principles as form-giving principles for aesthetic ideas can be recognized in the writings of both Mondrian and van Doesburg.²⁷⁸ Vantongerloo, who had even studied mathematics for some time, probably stands out as the most mathematical mind among the *De Stijl* artists. Most often these mathematical ideas were propagated through the notion of the fourth dimension or through the ideas of the astronomer Henri Poincaré, though adjusted by the artists themselves.

When comparing the pseudoscientific and scientific ideas of this time with the work of artists in the *De Stijl* group, one should remember that in some respects these artists were in a privileged position. For one thing, they lived in close proximity to such intellectual sources as Minkowski's explorations of space/time and the work of the Dutch physicist, Hendrik Lorentz, who played an important part in the early days of the theory of relativity. Schoenmaekers had also written about the theory of relativity in *Beginnselen der beeldende wiskunde*, 1916 (*The Principles of Plastic Mathematics*). Schoenmaekers's circle also included the mathematician L.E.J. Brouwer, from whom Schoenmaekers may have heard of Einstein's Special Theory, and its mathematical equivalent in the space-time continuum of Minkowski.²⁷⁹ In this way Dutch artists would have gained more than a shallow interest in these ideas, and Theo van Doesburg in particular must have been familiar with the notion of the fourth dimension.²⁸⁰

The effect of such scientific ideas on these artists, however, need not necessarily be based on a deep understanding. It may be based on an 'aberrant reading'²⁸¹ of one cultural field which, however, produces a successful outcome in another field, for example, as a work of art. It may even have remained on the level of a

278 Gasten 1978, 59, 60. As examples, Gasten mentions the art works of Willem van Konijnenburg, who defined each element in his compositions by using geometry, and Karel Schmidt who used Schoenmaekers's pseudo-mathematical theories. Architect Mathieu Lauweriks's geometrical rules about "oneness in multitude", were openly propagated in the theoretical writings of architect Hendrik Berlage, through whom these ideas came to *De Stijl*.

279 Henderson 1983, 318.

280 Vink 1990b, 8. Vink notices that van Doesburg must have been familiar with the notion of the fourth dimension at least by the end of 1917. It is possible that Mondrian informed him about this as a consequence of his acquaintance with Schoenmaekers. However, most probably van Doesburg had become familiar with the notions of the fourth dimension and non-Euclidean space earlier, after having read Apollinaire's book *Les Peintres Cubistes*.

281 Calabrese 1992, 150–151. The term 'aberrant reading' comes from Omar Calabrese's study of cultural semiospheres where meanings cross the lines between different fields of culture. Although Calabrese's semiotic inquiry *Neobarocco* considers the cultural objects and phenomena of the 1980s, I consider that his notion of 'aberrant reading' also applies to semiospheres of all kinds.

mere figure of speech. By including certain ‘key’ words into their writings these artists may have succeeded in adding the required impression to their theoretical texts. My study also takes this possibility into consideration. Broader views of geometry as figures of speech are also possible. In their writings both Mondrian and Vantongerloo used the idea of ‘curved space’ in the context of pictorial ideas, and Linda Henderson points out that the notion of curved space had a natural appeal to modern artists.²⁸² Through direct citation of Poincaré’s text in *De Stijl*, these Dutch artists came to know about it as well.²⁸³

Mondrian also mentions the concept of the fourth dimension in his ‘*Triologue*’.²⁸⁴ Judging from the research literature, his relation to the concept remained more or less unclear. The term had so many different uses and contexts at the beginning of the 20th century in the Netherlands that it is impossible to render its precise meaning. However, considering these artists, the question is always what kind of visual form might the fourth dimension have acquired. Even when the fourth dimension received many differing representations in paintings, it would seem that it was based on reductive pictorial means in the interpretations of the concept. At least in the essays where the Dutch artists formulated their theories, the notion of the fourth dimension was never without an occultist context. Mondrian also seemed to acquire the knowledge of the fourth dimension at first with occultist associations, about which he initially had reservations.²⁸⁵

The research of the German mathematician Hermann Minkowski (1864–1909) was influential in making the mathematical formulations of Einstein’s theory understandable to a wider public,²⁸⁶ although artists and writers loaded the notion of the fourth dimension with their own personal meanings. Aldo Camini, Theo van Doesburg’s alter ego, wrote: “The four-dimensional world of Minkowski is made of rubber. It can be squeezed or stretched without it losing or gaining anything of

282 Henderson 1983, 5–6. This idea eventually led to non-Euclidean geometry. It suggested the possibility of surfaces or spaces which were curved in various ways. That the space beyond our immediate perceptions might be curved or that the appearance of objects moving about in an irregularly curved space might change, had a natural appeal to early modern artists. Curved space meant likewise that the traditional means of rendering objects could hardly be adequate if no absolute, unchanging form for an object could be posited.

283 1867 witnessed the publication of Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann’s now famous speech of 1854. Poincaré refers to Riemann’s important work in his essay *Pourquoi l’Espace a trois dimensions*. See Henderson 1983, 5–6. The introduction of this essay ended up on the pages of *De Stijl* under the title *De beteekenis der 4e dimensie voor de nieuwe beelding* by van Doesburg. See *De Stijl* VI, 5, 1923, pp. 66–70. However, Vink reminds us that Poincaré did not in fact mention the fourth dimension in his essay. See Vink 1990b, 13.

284 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99.

285 Gasten’s opinion is that in 1919 Mondrian seems to understand the term more clearly as mathematical and starts to incorporate it into his own theoretical insights in Neo-Plasticism. See Gasten 1978, 64–66. Henderson even notes that Mondrian accepted the idea as a supplement to theosophical beliefs. See Henderson 1983, 340.

286 Vink 1990a, 8. Because of Minkowski’s publication, the fourth dimension almost always came to be seen as a spatial phenomenon.

its volume.”²⁸⁷ It is through such popularizations as these that the general public came to grips with the idea of non-Euclidean space. The notions came to widen people’s understanding or intuitions, protected from the complexities of purely scientific and mathematical contexts.

The fourth dimension became a widely applied source of meaning effects and gave a scientific-sounding legitimacy to wholly non-mathematical fields.²⁸⁸ The idea of logical reasoning, stemming from popularized literature about the fourth dimension, might well have appealed to Mondrian’s aspirations. Mondrian wrote: “there is also the word *without art*: reasoning, logical explanation, through which the *rationality* of an art can be shown.”²⁸⁹ An example of popularizing literature is provided by Professor H.K. De Vries’s *De vierde dimensie*, 1915, (*The Fourth Dimension*), in which the fourth dimension was not considered solely as real space but as a hypothetical construction. The book was intended for non-mathematical laymen and claimed to be usable to prove processes and settings whose character might otherwise be only partly visible.²⁹⁰ The book was on the *De Stijl* editors’ list of recommended literature.²⁹¹

The mathematician, physicist and astronomer Henri Poincaré’s insights had a deep impact among artists, especially in France, his insights constructing a complete mental environment. The writings of Severini, Vantongerloo, and van Doesburg openly referred to Poincaré’s work and his book was also on the *De Stijl* reading list.²⁹² Poincaré’s insights are clearly relevant for my research, for to Poincaré the idea of beauty was re-rooted into the realm of mathematics as it is in Plato’s philosophy, since for him the correctness of the mathematical solution often shows itself by its beauty and elegance.²⁹³ In his popular and widely-read book *Science et méthode*, 1908, (*Science and Method*), Poincaré in plain words confessed his puzzlement about the new mathematical ideas, appealing to the same field of mind as artists had traditionally done, namely to intuition.²⁹⁴ He wrote that the feeling, the intuition of mathematical order, which enables us to guess hidden harmonies and relations, cannot belong to everyone.²⁹⁵

287 Aldo Camini [van Doesburg] 1921, 86.

288 Gasten 1978, 62. According to Gasten, not only artists but art historians as well used this practice when analysing the nature of their research.

289 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 40 (italics original). “The New Plastic in Painting”.

290 De Vries 1915, v–vii.

291 *De Stijl* 1919, II, 6, 1919, 70–72.

292 *De Stijl* 1918, I, 5, pp. 59–60, Severini’s *La Peinture d’avant-garde* (1917–1918); *De Stijl* 1923, VI, 5, pp. 66–70: van Doesburg’s *De betekenis der 4^e dimensie voor de nieuwe beelding* (1923); Vantongerloo’s article series *Reflexions* (1918–1920) in *De Stijl*.

293 Poincaré 1909, 57–58.

294 Poincaré 1909, 47–48.

295 *Ibid.*

Therefore, it seems that the notion of the intuitive imagination of the mathematical mind had replaced the earlier 19th century idea of genius as a contributor to a work of art. This change in the world image in the first quarter of the 20th century was rapid, bringing with it shortly thereafter a crisis in language. As Merrel points out, no language existed in which one could speak consistently about the new situation except through mathematical concepts which were beyond the capability of most people.²⁹⁶

Modelling Visual Continuity

The city environment is an inevitable contextual element in Mondrian's '*Triologue*'. Mondrian structured the *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* on the basis of a strong metaphor, namely a journey from the countryside to the city. It is possible to find a Dutch context for this setting. As Janet Beckett has noted, some of the journals which shaped modernist discourse in the Netherlands also used the same setting.²⁹⁷ However, it is important to remember that Mondrian had already 'inhaled' the atmosphere of a big city when living and working in Paris before the War. The polarity in this setting, rural countryside vs. the city, is the clue which guides my contextual choices of the meanings in the surrounding intellectual culture. As such, the oppositional setting of the city-countryside was not new. As the philosopher of urban life, Henri Lefebvre, points out, the city gives birth to the Apollonian spirit, the countryside gives birth to Dionysus. Already around the middle of the eighteenth century, Nature came into view in opposition to the City. Nature represented nostalgia and hope. Although the City was an emblem of modernity at the turn of the 20th century, a new paradise, as Lefebvre notes, it was still characterized by the need for the re-appropriation by human beings of their conditions in time and in space.²⁹⁸ Considering my basic interest in how visual perception was articulated in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* the City becomes an important meaning effect. The City immediately challenged the sensuous capacities of its dwellers, which, for example, Charles Baudelaire's poetry famously articulated.

When the world technologized and urbanized, the whole structure of human experience irreversibly changed. As mentioned, The First World War, moreover, had left its stamp on the common consciousness in the form of a general feeling of loss and transience. Even a neutral country like the Netherlands could not avoid this effect. This also awakened the compensatory need to restore experience as something that endured. This age looked to the past for stability, and as Stephen

296 Merrel 1995, 189. See also Whitworth 2001, 234.

297 Beckett 1983, 69.

298 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 106–108.

Kern points out, its thinkers found a keen sense of the personal past to be a source of identity.²⁹⁹ Philosophers tried to answer the subject's need to adapt to this new experience by developing models of perception and consciousness. In this study these models are considered, using Lotman's and Uspenskij's notion of cultural text, as systems of cultural 'metatexts'. As scientific texts, they can be considered to be objects of research. As metatexts they are attempts to cognize culture.³⁰⁰

As Walter Benjamin puts it, their common feature was that they sought to capture and preserve the real and the truest experience as opposed to that multiplicity of experiences that the city dweller faced.³⁰¹ They emphasized the notion that the perceptual experience is in fact a continuum, so that it cannot be understood merely as a series of successive but detached images. Martin Jay, who has studied the antvisual discourse in twentieth-century Western thought, characterizes, for example, Henri Bergson's (1858-1918) thinking as the first frontal attack on ocularcentrism in modern French philosophy.³⁰² Poincaré's work also introduces the idea of a continuum in space and the intuition of the perceiving person about this continuum. Often these models appealed to the idea of memory, an important aspect of Steiner's philosophy, of course. Bergson's influence as part of a general circuit of changing ideas at the turn of the twentieth century is clear, and his philosophy became famous and fashionable, arousing a reaction to the alienating and blinding experience of the age of industrialism.³⁰³ His philosophy emphasizes the structures of memory in the philosophical dimensions of perception. He also saw time as flowing, enduring time being different from linear clock time.³⁰⁴ In this new insight of time, the past came to represent a source of freedom for Bergson.³⁰⁵

Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* shared the same era as these cultural 'metatexts'. Many of them are on the *De Stijl* list of recommended reading for artists. Poincaré's *Analysis Situs* (1912), for example, considers this continuum in perception as "intuitive space",³⁰⁶ and Vink's interpretation helps us to understand this idea. Through our senses we achieve a continuous flow of perceptions, of which the human mind makes comprehensive images from the world around it. Poincaré concentrated on the extent to which one can realize that this physical space is actually a continuum. Intuitive space is a sort of a continuum in which there are no gaps or divisions. The continuum is in fact a series of perceptions

299 Kern 2003 (1983), 36–37.

300 Uspenskij, Lotman, & al. 1998 (1973), 59.

301 Benjamin 2006 (1968), 171–172.

302 Jay 1993, 110.

303 Benjamin 2006 (1968), 172.

304 Bergson 1968 (1922), 41.

305 Kern 2003 (1983), 37.

306 Poincaré 1963 (1912), 134–135.

which proceed from one point to another. Perceptions follow each other between these points, creating a series of forms so that each instant is identical with the one which follows immediately after, although the two outermost perceptions show an obvious difference.³⁰⁷

Since our physical stance never remains the same, this continuum then raises the question of how we can recognize the identity between two perceptions in this series of successive sense perceptions. According to Poincaré, this can take place only by both recognizing some common features of the perceived object and by distinguishing some irrelevant features.³⁰⁸ Poincaré's scientific method also includes the idea that only simple and real facts have a chance of recurring in the processes of change.³⁰⁹ To my mind this clearly refers to the ability of the human mind to abstract but also to the notion that perceiving is connected to our physical reality. This is not to say that Mondrian's text would exemplify Poincaré's philosophical ideas, as such. Instead I will study how Mondrian's text appeals to the meanings of memory and continuity in the surrounding culture.

Bergson's philosophy participates in the quest for continuity. It defines experience as duration (*durée*). It is the flow of time which we experience as inner duration and therefore it is different from time defined as historical moments. Bergson's aim is not to define memory as a recollection of moments which have remained fixed in history. In fact, Bergson's model focuses on quite different things from Poincaré's. As Walter Benjamin interprets it, Bergson's duration is like a Goethean afterimage which spontaneously appears when the perceiver shuts his or her eyes. Bergson's philosophy is an attempt to preserve and clarify this afterimage. As Benjamin notes, this is the kind of definition of an experience which is usually considered to belong to the poet's world. Memory is a crucial structure for the philosophical pattern of experience. An experience then is a matter of tradition.³¹⁰ But having said that, Bergson does also offer a counter-model to the oppositional experience that city dwellers and workers were facing in the increasingly industrialized post-war world. In Bergson's famous notion of the '*élan vital*', artists must have found the original impetus for creativity, freedom and for liberation from fixity in an era in which there was a real hunger for change in virtually every area of life.³¹¹ Mondrian seems to know the term since in 1914 he speaks of inspiration in this sense.³¹² According to Jay, Bergson's model was understood among artists in the

307 Vink 1990a, 9–10.

308 Vink 1990a, 10. Poincaré's discusses these models in his *La science et l'hypothèse*.

309 Poincaré 1909, 10–11.

310 Benjamin 2006 (1968), 172.

311 Segel 1998, 186, 187.

312 Mondrian's letter of January 29, 1914. Janssen's & Joosten's translation uses the term 'creative élan'. Cited in Janssen & Joosten 2002, 196.

way that the viewer's creative intuition was necessary to complete the experience and which in this way was true to the dynamism of duration.³¹³

As mentioned earlier, if Mondrian's literary text is to be studied in terms of signs, then it is important to locate it within these signifying systems that constituted the culture in which he worked. For this reason this chapter has focused on the notion of 'point to line to plane' as a cultural sign. The meaning effects it introduced were such that they urged situating the subject into new frames of macro-cosmological and macro-temporal scale in which mathematical concepts seemed to be the only way to talk about the new images of the world. These concepts manifested the laws of non-Euclidean space and how the past can be acknowledged to be present in the present moment. Hence, the concepts also exemplified the idea of continuity, either temporal or spatial. Consequently, here in the above-mentioned philosophical models of experience the idea is that we use images which stem from our memory when structuring moments in perceptual experience into one coherent continuity. The message of these models is continuity and endurance in the multiplicity of modern time and the modern environment.

313 Jay 1993, 118–119.

3 THE FLOW OF IMAGES: NIGHT SKIES

“Go out under the blue dome of heaven and look at what is present as it appears to the artist’s eye.”³¹⁴

Charles Peirce

Mondrian’s *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* relies on the visual. There the seven written images and the reader’s focalizations form the skeleton of Mondrian’s text. Therefore, besides the contents of the dialogues, my interests are also in the meaning potential of its overall form as a flow of these images. It is generally admitted that the concept of evolution has had an influence on the ‘*Triologue*’. It is no accident that this play comprises seven images, an important number in theosophical thinking, and for early abstract artists the seven stages of cosmic evolution offered an important model. Through this evolution from matter to spirit they could imagine breaking free of matter and thus becoming more receptive to abstract art.³¹⁵ However, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* does not discuss any esoteric supernatural forms of seeing, for Mondrian had reservations about these forms of seeing.³¹⁶ Thus, my thesis includes the problem of theosophical evolution rather as a form-giving principle for the ‘*Triologue*’ than as the theosophical content as such. Evolution will be discussed more in sections 3.7 and 5.3. The readers of the ‘*Triologue*’ experienced the philosophical and artistic world of the 1920s in the text’s semiosphere, which is both concrete and dynamic. In this way the images are phenomenological spaces, which become places for meaning production to start. In this chapter my study probes these written images as a forming continuity and as independent images where the reader’s existence then enters into contact with cultural models and conventions.

3.1 Beauty as an Intelligibly Continuing Recollection

In Mondrian’s text, beauty acquires continuity. Even with a quick survey it becomes obvious that the seven written images speak of harmony and beauty in vision. Mondrian’s characters, the three strollers, *X*, *Y* and *Z*, define the moonlit landscape

314 EP2, 149.

315 See Robert Welsh 1971, 48; Sixten Ringbom 1970, 78, 80; Carel Blotkamp 1994, 79, 140.

316 Mondrian’s letter to Israël Querido in 1909, cited in Blotkamp 1994, 35–36.

of the first *Scene* as beautiful, as something that expresses repose. They also discuss it as a harmonious landscape. Thus, the '*Triologue*' presents the words *beauty*, *harmony* and *repose* as more or less interchangeable terms. Here in my study I consider them to see beauty as the paradigmatic aesthetic quality, and to participate in the discussion of the beauty of art. All these aspects have a positive aesthetic value in the story's fictive world as they traditionally also have in philosophy. As such, beauty is one of the most intense topics of the '*Triologue*', making the text unique among the theoretical considerations of *De Stijl*. But having said that, the *De Stijl* manifesto does not consider beauty to be an important quality of new art or to belong to the consciousness of the era. Indeed, the word does not appear once in the manifesto.³¹⁷

Section 3.1 sheds light on the question of how Mondrian produces the theory of Neo-Plasticism. The discourse of beauty in the text is inseparably intertwined with the motif of the 'perpendicular'. This cultural sign explains the continuity of the idea of beauty between traditional art and abstract art. Mondrian's thinking can be studied in the light of Charles Peirce's "The Law of Mind", since it is applicable to human thought. It explains the continuity of ideas since it is based on the structure of memory and in this it leans on the iconic associations between flowing images in perceptual experience.³¹⁸

The Written Images of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*

In *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* a series of 'written' visual perceptions work as a prologue to the three characters' discussions which follow. Mondrian's accompanying words are few and simple:

Scene 1: Late evening – flat landscape – broad horizon – a moon high overhead.

Scene 2: Scattered clusters of trees silhouetted against a bright moonlit sky.

Scene 3: Night – stars, now in a bright sky, above a broad expanse of sandy beach.

³¹⁷ See *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, 4.

³¹⁸ Peirce wrote his essay, "The Law of Mind", in 1892, and in it he develops the doctrine of continuity according to which the one law of mind is that ideas tend to spread and affect other ideas but that, in spreading, they lose intensity as they gain generality. See EP1, 312–333.

Scene 4: A windmill seen at very close range; dark, sharply silhouetted against the clear night sky; its arms, at rest, forming a cross.

Scene 5: A garden with artificially shaped trees and hedges. A house.

Scene 6: The facade of a church seen as a flat plane against the darkness, reflecting the light of the city.

Scene 7: Z's studio.³¹⁹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is easy to recognize these *Scenes* as the motifs of Mondrian's figurative paintings, possibly from 1906–1908, even though the descriptions do not openly say this. Mondrian, in fact, nowhere brings out that the strollers would be looking at paintings. Therefore, the strollers' discussion might as well be about a real view. In this way the *Scenes* also become phenomenological lived spaces, which are essential to the existential basis of signification, as Veivo notes about descriptions.³²⁰ However, at the same time the strollers speak of these views as if they were able to compose them like paintings. Hence, the reader might also get the impression that there is a flow from one canvas to the next in the text. The spaces of these canvases, so to speak, would run through the '*Triologue*'. Apart from one photograph of a non-figurative painting, the '*Triologue*' was not illustrated. Therefore, it is only the written text which is supposed to carry the meaning.³²¹ This is meaningful, since in this way Mondrian's obscurity becomes a feature which gives way to an interpretative view.

Many of the views are of evening or night. Evening and night as a theme is present even in the last *Scene*, the *Studio*, since the strollers notice there that "the evening is over". In this sense it is noticeable that in 1919–1920, when the '*Triologue*' was published, moonlit scenes in the Dutch painting tradition were clearly an outdated subject. Mondrian's evening landscapes can be considered Mondrian's first reaction to such modernist trends as Neo-impressionism, Fauvism and Expressionism, which were gaining in importance in Holland during this time.³²² But now, introducing them as literary expressions, Mondrian makes his text refer to the past, to something already outdated. On the other hand, considering that the readers knew the motifs of these paintings, they might have been a suitable choice to engage readers' feelings of timelessness and hence continuity after the

319 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 82–123. See the pretexts for each *Scene*.

320 Veivo 2001, 21.

321 Only one of the *Scenes*, namely the third, has a photograph opposite it of Mondrian's abstract work of art, *Composition 1919*, as printed. The text does not refer to this painting in anyway whatsoever, however.

322 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 26.

War. As Janssen & Joosten have noted, as ‘real’ paintings these evening landscapes inspire a feeling of timelessness and transcendence.³²³

These seven descriptions actualize the relationship between the visual and the word as representations. They can be considered their own element. As visual perceptions their image-aspects would basically be a matter of ‘inner’ sensing, feeling and imaging.³²⁴ If they were paintings they would be functioning as the verbal representations of visual representation, that is, as ekphrasis in the text.³²⁵ The relation between an image aspect and ekphrasis is to me the same as between sensing and its outward empirical manifestation which unfolds as it will. Therefore, ekphrasis is something which immediately brings aspects of secondness with it. As the citations show, descriptions are short, mostly mere nouns listed together without any narrative elements (except in the fifth and the sixth scene). In this way, they might even bring to mind the conventions of 19th-century realistic literature, as found in the style of Balzac, Zola or Verne, where descriptions as a list of words typically interrupt the ongoing process of the narrative, as Kai Mikkonen has noted.³²⁶ In this sense, Mondrian’s *‘Triologue’* would also then seem to look back into the past. However, there might also be a more contemporary source of inspiration for this. Namely, this way of foreshortening images to a single essential word is in accordance with requests from the Italian Futurist Marinetti’s manifesto concerning literature. According to Marinetti, the perception of analogies and the images that objects evoke have become ever more natural even between distant things.³²⁷ Mondrian was clearly familiar with this and had pondered on it, especially when thinking about his own account of ‘the art of the word’.³²⁸

Moreover, the descriptions are also separated off to form their own element, because they have their own narrative voice, whereas the rest of the text proceeds with the speech of X, Y and Z. They are separated from the dialogical character of the text under their own title: *Scene 1*, *Scene 2*, etc. Thus, they are defined as their own type of linguistic genre, which is then strategically situated in the text’s overall context, which is typical of ekphrasis. Every time they occur in the *‘Triologue’*, the pre-texts bring a short pause to the otherwise intensively ongoing dialogue, as a sort of a counter-time or ‘contre le temps du récit’, as Philippe Hamon notes

323 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 123.

324 Merrell 1995, 75.

325 This is how both Genette and Mikkonen define the concept. See Genette 1969, 57, 60–61; Mikkonen, 2005, 263, 281. As the narrowest meaning of the word, W. J. T. Mitchell considers ekphrasis to be a poetic mode which gives voice to a mute art object or offers a rhetorical description of a work of art. See Mitchell 1994, 153.

326 Mikkonen 2005, 234.

327 Marinetti 1973 (1912), 103.

328 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 142–143.

about the typical features of ekphrasis.³²⁹ In the reading process at the point in the description when the dialogue ceases, the reader is offered a connection between the viewed scene, the act of seeing and the viewing author. The reader switches his or her reading to an imaginative seeing as an act of focalization.

As mentioned in the Introduction, my study understands focalization in terms of the reader's imaginative co-operation with the text. It appears only when the reader mentally constructs the fictional universe of the text.³³⁰ Each of these *Scenes* gives a certain viewpoint to the reader. According to this, the reader imagines the windmill seen at too close a range, the moon seen above in the sky, the distant city lights seen on the church facade, and the studio seen from the middle of a room. Thus, as moments of pause, the descriptions relate symbolically to the fictive world that the articles offer as a meaning about visual perception. Here vision, derived from real-life perception, becomes a means of access to the story's dialogues. *Scenes* as beautiful sights become places for acceptance, as is the case in the moonlit landscape and starry sky, or for rejections as something that belongs to the past and therefore also as places of negotiations, as shown in the *Scene* of the obscure windmill. These ideas will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, these descriptions become places where the relation between language and vision arrives on the stage, and as is known well, this relation was a delicate issue for Mondrian. Can these descriptions be understood as an effort to elucidate the limits between these two different forms of representations and to operate with a fictive visual picture in an imaginative way together with the fictive world of the text? According to W. J. T. Mitchell, this would express an author's hopeful attitude towards the possibilities of descriptions.³³¹ Or does Mondrian's famous aversion to all literal meanings in visual art appear here to threaten limitless relations? The text would then resolve them by situating these descriptions as sorts of pretexts, thus separating them from the rest of the text. In this case the description would emphasize the fear of assimilative expressions between the literary and the visual and the discourse of criticism that started already in Lessing's *Laocoon*.³³² Either way, the apparent overall feature in Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is that it constantly actualizes the relation between the word and the phenomenology of vision.

329 Hamon 1993, 176–177.

330 Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 82.

331 Mitchell 1994, 152–154. See also Mikkonen 2005, 278–279.

332 Mitchell 1994, 154–156.

Old Words, New Art and ‘Everlasting Beauty’

Above I noted that the old figurative motifs create the reference to the past in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* and that this gives an ‘air’ of tradition to the text, which is supposed to represent utmost modernity. But what kinds of words circumscribe the images? It is obvious that some words and expressions that Mondrian’s text uses attract the reader’s attention. Stemming from M.H.J. Schoenmaekers’s Hegelian philosophy, they seem to be somehow unsuitable or incomprehensible within the context of the utmost modernity of *De Stijl*. They are words with very wide connotations and abstract meanings, for example: *bepaalheid* (determination), *veralgemeening* (generalization), *het volstrekte* (the absolute), *klaarheid* (clarity), *verinnerlijking* (interiorization), *veruiterlijking* (exteriorization), *uitbreiding* (expansion). As Janssen notes, Mondrian uses these words in his own way and thus the words acquire individual meanings.³³³ The reader’s attention might also be attracted by words which sound old fashioned. Some words sound weighty and solemn: *tijdloos* (timeless), *thans* (at present), *aanschouwen* (contemplate, behold), *altos* (for aye, always).³³⁴ The same goes for the name of the aesthetic project of *De Stijl*, Neo-Plasticism, in Dutch *Nieuwe Beelding*, which is, in fact, Mondrian’s own expression. The words are too important to be either ignored or misunderstood. *De Stijl*, after all, was only the name of the magazine, and barely tells us anything about the movement and its aims. *Nieuwe* means ‘new’ in Dutch, but many researchers have tried to explain the word *Beelding*, which is not without difficulties, since the word does not exist in modern Dutch. It is a reference to the past and is virtually impossible to translate into other languages.³³⁵

With these above-mentioned expressions and by having a name (*Nieuwe Beelding*) that sounds both old and new Mondrian’s text creates an impression of continuity. Thus, the terms bring to the reader an intuition of enduring art,

333 Janssen 2011, 29.

334 Janssen 2011, 33.

335 For example, Padovan in his inquiry strives for the meaning of the word *beelden* by starting from related words and expressions in the Dutch dictionary but not simply from the history of the word, as Janssen and White do. Padovan’s philosophical approach concludes that the meaning of the word *representation* comes closest (Padovan 2002: 36–38). Overy approaches the untranslatable *beelding* by gathering together the possible nearest meanings in different languages: *beeldend* means something like ‘image forming’ or ‘image creating’, *nieuwe beelding* ‘new image creation’, or perhaps ‘a new structure’. In German *Nieuwe Beelding* is translated as *Neue Gestaltung*, which is close in its complexity of meanings to the Dutch. In French, it was rendered as *néo-plasticisme*, which is virtually meaningless (Overy 1991, 42). One of the most accurate descriptions for this term comes from Hans Janssen. It is clear that it is derived from the verb *beelden*, but this does not exist in Dutch either. The words *afbeelding* (depiction), *uitbeelding* (portrayal) and *voorstelling* (representation) are all associated with the concept of representing. But, as Janssen notes, by removing the *af-* and *uit-* prefixes, Mondrian robs the concept of any reference. However, the word can still be found in an 1881 dictionary, where it is defined as “to shape something material, with the intention of giving it form”, but it is already noted that the word is obsolete (Janssen 2011, 35). Marek Wieczorek translates the verb *beelden* as “to express plastically” (Wieczorek 1997, 41).

even though the *De Stijl* movement was supposed to manifest a consciousness of the time. Mondrian may also have followed Rudolf Steiner's insights about language, according to which the ordinary sphere of language was too much tied to the visible world and the more trouble the reader had with the words, the more his/her spiritual activity was stimulated.³³⁶ From the semiotic point of view, this means that Mondrian no longer treated language as a transparent means of communication. He handled it as perceptible, autonomous raw material, which then helped him to shape his art theory and to compensate for the deficiency of language. According to Gérard Genette, this kind of an exit from the ordinary sphere of language means to enter into fiction.³³⁷ Thus, Mondrian detached the words from Bolland's original Hegelian contexts and transported them to their new contexts in an artistic surrounding. There they acquired a certain required fictional atmosphere. They are also open for meanings on the reader's part. The reader co-operatively completes the meaning. The reference to the 'old' means that at a certain level the '*Triologue*' situates itself within the chain of tradition. The words Mondrian chose to use supports the meaning. Janssen and Joosten argue that Mondrian also wanted to include the sphere of figurative art, i.e. past art, in his articulation of an aesthetic idea of beauty. Therefore, *Nieuwe Beelding* is an idea that encompasses visualization in both forms of art, abstract and realistic.³³⁸ It gives an impression of its stemming from the deep and enduring heritage of art.

The vague generalisations, the terms, such as, '*tijdbewustzijn*' and 'plastic consciousness' in *De Stijl* provoked arguments against its use of language already in its early years.³³⁹ Therefore, the terms Mondrian used seem to suggest an interesting feature about *De Stijl*. Thus, even though van Doesburg had dreams and plans about the growth of Neo-Plasticism into an international art movement,³⁴⁰ Mondrian's terms and concepts in *De Stijl* did not serve this purpose. As already mentioned in the Introduction, Mondrian used the same concepts both in his 1917 article series and then in the '*Triologue*'. Therefore, there seems to be a certain vocabulary which evokes exclusive meanings and which, so to speak, belongs to this theory of Neo-Plasticism.

This kind of a language system can be explained with the help of Boris Uspenskij's and Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics. It helps me to articulate some of the formal qualities that characterize this 'expert' speech of modern art, so that the reader may relate to the obvious opacity of the text. Namely, a culture which is oriented

336 Van Paaschen 2017, 97–98.

337 Genette 1993, 13.

338 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 23.

339 Beckett 1983, 74.

340 The manifesto (1918) appeared in *De Stijl* in Dutch, French, English and in German. It invited all modern minds to join towards working internationally. See *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918. pp. 2–5.

towards the speaker possesses as its highest value the sphere of closed, inaccessible texts. It is a culture of the esoteric type. Prophetic and priestly texts as well as poetry occupy the highest place. Its opposite is the culture which is oriented towards the hearer and which is characterized by simple texts which are easy to understand even for a large audience.³⁴¹ The signifying systems of the speaker-oriented culture are thus characterized both by their complexity and their opacity, the very features which my study now finds in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* and by which other Mondrian texts have been characterized by Janssen and Blotkamp. The significance of such systems would have been available only to those few hundred readers who formed a privileged elite. Therefore, the words Mondrian used seem to exemplify this kind of situation. Whereas Jane Beckett notes that *De Stijl* was addressed to an elite,³⁴² in my view the meaning effect of the language in *De Stijl* served as a profiling tool. Apart from the advocacy of socially committed work and the urge to reintegrate art and life, the language in *De Stijl* did not directly serve the purpose of reintegration. This language maintained the distinction which we traditionally find between expertise language and everyday language. Perhaps it even supported the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, which is, as Harry Cooper notes, an issue tied more broadly to modernism’s attraction to the ‘Other’.³⁴³

This kind of significance has a consequence in the long term. I suggest that Mondrian’s choice of words has made his text authentic in the sense that Mondrian’s authorship can already be recognized in the features of the text. Mondrian’s letters to van Doesburg in the starting years of *De Stijl* support this argument about an ‘elite’. Mondrian intensely guarded the art-theoretical coherence of *De Stijl*, pondering quite critically on who to include in the movement, who would not be kindred spirits, and who would deviate from the common mutual principles.³⁴⁴ He also tackled Schoenmaekers’s concepts to understand their meaning and relate them to his own ideas. As is well known, Schoenmaekers was excluded from contributing to *De Stijl*. In other words, Mondrian wanted to preserve the authenticity of the movement and its texts.

The Idea of Beauty in Transition

To return now to the ‘old fashioned’ aspects in Mondrian’s text, my study takes a look at the idea of beauty. One of the most constant topics in the strollers’ discussions is beauty as an everlasting idea of art: “You want to distinguish Abstract-Real

341 Uspenskii, Lotman, et al. 1998 (1973), 41.

342 Beckett 1983, 75.

343 Cooper 2002, 166.

344 See, for example, Mondrian’s letters to van Doesburg July 9, 1918, and January 8, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

from naturalistic painting [...] Regardless of their different appearance, there is no difference in the essential nature of the two. Let us consider the origin of the work of art: the *emotion of beauty*.”³⁴⁵ By this Mondrian seems to span a connecting arch between figurative art and abstract art. The topic of beauty makes the reader pay specific attention to this mixture of modernity and an old-fashioned aspect of the art of painting. As already noticed in the context of *De Stijl*, beauty was not the primary way to address art.³⁴⁶ Here, in his words about beauty, Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’ also takes a backward-looking stance. By this I do not wish to suggest that it would cling to any kind of nostalgia. Rather, I suggest that it is a strategic manoeuvre of the text to convey meanings.

The judgments of beauty are most often evaluated with the philosophical insights of perception. From Plato through Aquinas to Kant and beyond, beauty has traditionally been considered the paradigmatic aesthetic quality. Mondrian’s article series continues this tradition. What especially makes Mondrian’s *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* so philosophically charged is that the motif of beauty appears in the text both as a spontaneous emotion, as a feeling of beauty, and as the contemplated notion of a mental image, as thinking of beauty. This becomes evident in the opening lines of the first and the last *Scene*. They suggest that an obvious change takes place in the story’s course in considering how beauty is addressed:

Scene 1: late evening – flat landscape – broad horizon – a moon high overhead.

Y. How beautiful! X. What deep tones and colours! Z. What repose!³⁴⁷

Scene 7: Z’s studio

Y. We have seen so much beauty this evening. What a pity it is over.

Z. The evening is over *but the beauty remains*. We haven’t simply “contemplated” visually: an *interaction* has taken place between us and the perceptible [...]. It has produced more or less definite *images*: images that not only remain with us but gain in power now that we are alone with them and away from nature. *Now these images* – and not

345 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 84. The italics are original in Harry Holtzman’s and Martin S. James’s English translation. They correspond to the spacings (*beauty – b e a u t y*) that Mondrian regularly used to emphasize the meanings in his original Dutch text of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*.

346 Neither *Manifesto I of “the Style”* (1918) nor *Manifesto II of “the Style”*, “*Literature*” (1920) spoke a single word about beauty in art. See *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, 4, and *De Stijl* III, 6, 1920, 49–50.

347 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 83.

the things we saw – are the true manifestations of beauty for us [...] then ultimately a single, constant image of beauty will remain with you permanently.³⁴⁸

The strollers' lines about beauty are focused in a different way in these *Scenes*. In the first *Scene* they emphasize feelings of beauty. Thus, when looking at the landscape in the moonlight, the strollers submit to the attractions of accidental form, the particular beauty of the shape of the landscape. Each stroller expresses at first a mere enjoyable quality of feeling. They do not grasp the deep, substantial type of beauty which the text suggests is acquired in the last *Scene*. This means that the judgments with which the first *Scene* starts are clearly subjective. Therefore, being beautiful is a characteristic which is as if it belonged to that object in a vision.

Therefore, there is an obvious polarity in Mondrian's '*Triologue*' in considering how it deals with beauty on the one hand as a mere feeling and on the other hand as a mental image in the thinking mind. They embrace Mondrian's text as a whole as spanned between two poles. Moreover, the '*Triologue*' develops an idea that particular, subjective emotion does not meet the requirements for deeper beauty. Y's words in the second *Scene* clarify this even more clearly: "Y: When I compare this landscape with the previous one, where these scattered clusters of trees were not to be seen, I feel that the capricious natural form cannot produce in us the profound repose to which we inwardly aspire."³⁴⁹

Therefore, in the '*Triologue*' there is a bipolar setting of traditional philosophical dualism. There is in this way an interplay between the expressed immediate feelings in the first *Scene* and the mind's concept in the last *Scene*. A symbolic journey between these ends emphasizes their co-dependence. An emotion and mind's work thus need each other, reminding me of one of Nelson Goodman's critical statements: "Although conception without perception is merely *empty*, perception without conception is *blind* (totally inoperative)."³⁵⁰

The term, 'reality', in the title *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, which to a large extent discusses beauty in art, suggests that this aesthetic quality is also thought to be objectively and actually present in abstract art, and not merely as a subjective feeling of the observer. To my mind, aesthetic utterances, such as the strollers' enjoyable feelings in a moonlit landscape might also be interpreted within Kant's frame of reference.³⁵¹ However, Z's assertion of the type "the *equilibrated*

348 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 106. Italics original.

349 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 88.

350 Goodman 1978, 6.

351 Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement, Book I, Analytic of the Beautiful*, §1 and §8, means that basically aesthetic judgments are subjective: "If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not ... we refer the representation to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure This denotes nothing in the object, but is a feeling which the subject has of itself." See Kant 1953 (1790), 41–42, 53–54.

relationship of position – the perpendicular opposition of lines and planes – is what gives the plastic expression of *repose*³⁵² is not a state of subjective feeling but a matter of objective truth or falsity. The idea of beauty, to which the ‘*Triologue*’ is striving for, needs to be interpreted within this kind of argument.

One can conclude that Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’ has a project when it comes to beauty of art. The above-cited lines of *Z* lead my thoughts to a somewhat different kind of beauty from Kant’s aesthetics. Beauty is not a subjective response or an intellectual concept, but *Z*’s words rather suggest that beauty in existing things is actually perceived through a cognitive process of seeing by taking relations into account. Mondrian’s text suggests that since there are relations to be described in vision, then there is also an existing, real object. Thus, the ‘*Triologue*’ conveys the ontological aspect of beauty, which is grounded in a sense of realism regardless of its being the beauty of figurative art or the beauty of abstract art. As Umberto Eco has said about realism in Thomas of Aquinas’ philosophy: “A thing may be said to ‘be’ in the act of combining its essence with its existence, and this act involves a proportion, a concordance, a harmony.”³⁵³ Therefore, *Z*’s above-cited reply suggests realism rather than transcendentalism.

The Continuum of Space on the Artist’s Canvas

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality participates in an epoch which could be described in many ways as an epoch of transience. The First World War robbed the world of its beauties: as Sigmund Freud recollects after the first year of the War, “it destroyed ... the beauty of the countrysides ... and shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for philosophers and artists”.³⁵⁴ Urbanization, advertisements as speeded-up impressions and shock effects meant a change in the structure of human experience and perception. Not only esoteric philosophies but also other kinds of philosophies, strove to depict the structure of human experience in the light of what it gives to the experience of its continuity. In this, as Walter Benjamin says, the structure of memory became crucial.³⁵⁵ That there were, among others, such books as Bergson’s *Matière and Mémoire*, Poincaré’s *Neue Mechanik*, Schoenmaekers’s *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld*, de Vries’s *De vierde dimensie*, and Freud’s *Über Psychoanalyse* show that to understand the experience as having continuing aspects and to have a method to describe it, was important for these pioneers of abstract art.

352 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 85. Italics original.

353 Eco 1988, 85.

354 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 307.

355 Benjamin 2006 (1968), 171–172.

I suggest that it is by this kind of consciousness of the era that Mondrian's 'Triologue' deals with its claims for beauty. Like the flow of written images, Mondrian's 'Triologue' reveals a human desire to endow the emotion of beauty with lasting value despite the transient quality of the traditional elements in the art of painting. That these kinds of models were welcomed among artists in those days and that they also channelled into *De Stijl* becomes obvious in Gino Severini's misinterpretation of Henri Poincaré's philosophical model of continuity. This leads me now to place my focus on Severini, whose articles, in fact, were also on Mondrian's own 'reading list'.³⁵⁶ Severini's articles were published in *De Stijl* between December 1917 and August 1918 and they therefore can be placed side by side with Mondrian's 'Triologue'.

Gino Severini's article, *La Peinture d'avant garde*, in *De Stijl* has clearly been influenced by Poincaré's essays. Severini's approach can be compared to an artistic interpretation of Poincaré's perceptual continuity transformed into the continuity of space on an artist's canvas. Poincaré named the continuity of physical space as a series of perceptions which proceed from one point to another. Consequently, all those perceptions which are in between these points form a series in which each perception is on average identical with the following one, although the two outermost perceptions in the line differ from each other. This means that there are no jumps or gaps in this intuitive continuum. Therefore, as H. J. Vink notes, our daily experience of space and how that space is psychologically and physically understood can be conceived of in the light of Poincaré's notion of an intuitive continuum.³⁵⁷

In the spirit of Poincaré, Severini established the art-related idea of *the intuitive continuum*. Severini in this way visualized Poincaré's philosophical continuum for artistic use. As Vink, who has studied Severini's interpretation, argues, this means that in order to measure space, an intuitive continuum must be established and this is something that an artist does every time when he picks up a canvas and starts to create form within its space.³⁵⁸ In other words, the artist's physical visual space on a canvas works as a base which reflects the philosophical idea of continuum in space. According even to Poincaré, the continuum is intuitive rather than mathematical. For this reason Severini saw here the chance to link the artist's

356 Mondrian speaks of Severini in four of his letters to van Doesburg. The first is dated September 1, 1917, the other three are also from the same year, though otherwise undated. Mondrian here shows that he has some initial reservations about Severini's ideas. Although he considers Severini to be a forerunner, Mondrian criticizes him for still wanting to preserve an object in his painting; therefore, according to Mondrian, Severini is not so *bepaald* [certain] in the way that word is understood in *De Stijl*. However, Mondrian agrees with Severini about his insights on realism.

357 Vink 1990a, 10. Poincaré speaks of a variety of perceptual continuities in his *La Science et l'Hypothèse*. See Poincaré 1943 (1902), chapter IV: *L'Espace et la Géométrie*.

358 Vink 1990a, 11–12.

intuition and Poincaré's philosophical continuum as something that "the painters of cubist and futurist art have done truly intuitively".³⁵⁹ As Vink notes, because of Poincaré's representation, Severini understood that the intuitive continuum which is opened up to us by our senses becomes a physical continuum. In this Severini comes quite close to Poincaré's ideas.³⁶⁰

On the whole, Severini's article shows a serious effort to understand Poincaré's thoughts. However, Poincaré's essays are highly abstract, so it is not surprising that Severini, although he understood some aspects of it, also misunderstood quite a lot.³⁶¹ Sometimes, however, misunderstandings may be fruitful. Severini's article in *De Stijl* might be interpreted as 'an aberrant reading of culture' which offers itself as a new model and which, therefore, is an example of the consumption of culture.³⁶² It is in this spirit that my study, too, acknowledges the flow of images in Mondrian's text, interpreting them as referring to related models of continuity.

Iconic Associations between the *Scenes*: Moving Diagrams to Think by

Mondrian's '*Trialogue*' seems to be moving in the same cultural sphere of meanings as Severini concerning the idea of the intuitive continuum on an artist's canvas. For Severini, it was tempting to see visual space as the proper kind of space where the continuity of identical perceptions actually forms. Consequently, it was also a space for thought processes by which the identity of perceptions is recognized.³⁶³ In line with this meaning, I suggest that the images in Mondrian's text are flowing verbalized visual spaces. The reader might well have a sensation that the characters in the narrative are not walking, but rather that the landscape in front of them is transforming, as Michael White notes.³⁶⁴ I am also inspired by Herbert Henkels's notion that the relationship between figurativeness and Neo-Plasticism in the '*Trialogue*' deals profoundly with the continuity in the artist's expression.³⁶⁵

Mondrian's landscapes gather into one continuum by a certain meaningful representation, which can be seen taking successive instantiations and variations in the *Scenes*. The horizontal-vertical motif plays a dynamic role throughout the narrative. In the first and third *Scenes*, *Z* verbalizes the motif via the 'point to line to

359 Severini 1918, 59–60. *De Stijl* I, 5, 1918; and pp. 94–95 in *De Stijl* I, 8, 1918.

360 Vink 1990a, 12.

361 Vink 1990a, 13.

362 Calabrese 1992, 150–151. The term 'aberrant reading' comes from Omar Calabrese's study of cultural semiopheres where meanings cross the lines between different fields of culture.

363 Vink 1990a, 12.

364 White 2003, 47.

365 Henkels 1986, 8.

plane' and then superimposes this idea on the landscape. Horizontal-vertical lines then appear in the silhouette of a windmill's sails and in the text as the concept of 'perpendicular'. Finally, in the latter half of the *'Triologue'*, horizontality-verticality no longer appears as verbalized lines on the landscape but as 'real' visible features that the structure of a church brings out as rectangular forms. In the final *Scene* the walls of the studio have replaced the landscapes. However, the focalization shows that the strollers are surrounded by objects and interior designs which obey horizontal and vertical relations.

I would suggest that the seven *Scenes* give the reader an impression of them being a form of inference. The reader gets this impression when following the change that the idea of horizontal-vertical relationship undergoes during the stroll and reading this change as the process of signification, i.e. semiosis. That something undergoes a process explains why the *'Triologue'* takes on the form of a journey. Hence the *'Triologue'* would display a strategy of thought when manifesting the principles of Neo-Plasticism. In addition, I would suggest that this impression of inference coincides with the meaning that Mondrian's often used term, *opheffing*, (lifting), known also as 'sublation', has. Mondrian acquired the term from Hegel's text as mediated by its Dutch popularizer G.J.P.J. Bolland.³⁶⁶ However, Mondrian used the idea for his own purposes to produce an art theory not a philosophy. Thus, I question if the meaning effects in the *'Triologue'* can be simply traced back to those of Bolland. Interpreting the horizontal-vertical motif as a sign and by reading its variations through Peirce's "The Law of Mind" (1892) as 'the continuity of an idea', my study introduces a semiotic viewpoint on how Mondrian 'lifts' the idea of beauty from the first landscape so that it is visible in its 'sublated' form in the last *Studio-Scene*.

The idea of 'point to line to plane' included the notion of its being a method. As a Hegelian derivation of the dialectical nature of force and thereby space determination, the 'point to line to plane' is, as Marek Wieczorek notes, an operative, logical model of inference.³⁶⁷ The idea of a method and a strategy is also graspable in the Dutch instantiations of the fourth dimension. In Holland a popularized version of the fourth dimension appeared in H. K. De Vries's *De Vierde Dimensie*, and *De Stijl* recommended it to its readers.³⁶⁸ De Vries also starts from the first postulate

366 Bois 1994, 338. See also Wieczorek 2012, 34.

367 According to Marek Wieczorek, the 'perpendicular' derives from Hegel's idea of "the spatial totality" and it is an equivalent of a logical expansive development from point to line and where "the plane" is a culmination. See Wieczorek 2012, 31, 33–34. Moreover, the advancement of Neo-Plasticism is presented as a purely logical process of Hegelian *pure reason*, where the artistic persona is a mediator. See Wieczorek 1997, 112.

368 De Vries 1915, v–vi. Introduction. The introduction offers the book to those who do not possess advanced mathematical skills but whose maturity of judgment, open mindedness and natural vision lead them to an understanding of the fourth dimension. De Vries argues that he is presenting a method in which the result of the reasoning process can actually be seen.

of Euclid: the space developing from a ‘point to line to plane’, and according to De Vries this is all that is needed, since all the other definitions can be inferred from this postulate, including the fourth dimension.³⁶⁹

The ‘point to line to plane’ is a cultural text. The way in which cultural texts behave in the collective intellectual milieu becomes understandable if we acknowledge their character as entities capable of fluctuating and modifying themselves and still mediating meanings. It is known that Mondrian was not excited about the fourth dimension as much as, for example, van Doesburg. Mondrian probably wanted to restrict his visual ideas to the known perceptual dimensions. Moreover, as Wiczorek notes, Hegel’s dialectical space determination was never meant to be used in visual arts.³⁷⁰ However, I would suggest that in the fluctuating cultural text the ‘perpendicular’ and its variations act as an instrument of the artist’s psychological activity in a manner analogous to the role of a tool. The conceptual approach of Hegelian concepts as such does not yet suggest how Mondrian modified and made them work in his written images.

Strategies are operations of reason and thus they are easily given the flavour of logical thinking. When perusing Mondrian’s *‘Dialogue’* the reader gains a sense that Neo-Plasticism does not come out of nowhere, but is the direct creation of Mondrian’s logical thought. This notion in the reader could be described as a certain kind of rationality, *redelijkheid*. Wiczorek reminds us that the word, *redelijkheid*, might be translated as the ‘reasonableness’ of Neo-Plasticism in the sense that Neo-Plasticism is a system that intrinsically bends to the operations of reason.³⁷¹

In the first *Scene*, Z explains the measured and imaginative drafts and lines of an image:

In this landscape, the horizontal – in relation to us – appears *determinately* only in the line of the horizon. In this way only the one position is expressed determinately. Neither its *opposition*, *the vertical*, nor any other position, is exactly expressed in this landscape as a *line*. Nevertheless, the opposition is expressed as a *plane*. The sky asserts itself as an indeterminate plane, but the moon appears on it as a *point*, that is, in an *exact way*. The plane is thus determined *from this point to the horizon*; this defines itself as a *vertical line*. Although it does not appear as such in nature, it is actually a line. Seen in this way, it is the opposition to the horizontal, *determinately* expressed. Thus we see that

369 De Vries 1915, 8–9, 15–16.

370 Wiczorek 1997, 52, 107. Schoenmaekers’s highly esoteric philosophy was not rightly Hegelian and consequently, Mondrian’s dialectic, too, can be called a Hegelian “vulgarization” in the sense of a popularization rather than a coarse interpretation.

371 Wiczorek 1997, 105.

the relationship of position, even if inexact, is plastically manifested in nature; and that the *equilibrated* relationship of position – the perpendicular opposition of lines and planes – is what gives the plastic expression of *repose*.³⁷²

Mondrian's text suggests that there is a formal criterion of beauty (repose) which rests on the notion of proportion and on the idea of 'point to line to plane'. Thus, it is the mutual relationship of two lines, the horizontal and vertical, that actually describes in an iconic way the features in the image. This is the 'primordial relationship'.³⁷³ It is as though it were a Poincaréan 'simple and real fact' which is a starting place for a method, and one which many scientists at that time adopted instinctively.³⁷⁴ In order to study this further I replace it, as said, by a semiotic sign, by a Peircean icon. When the horizontal-vertical proposition pictures only some relationships of the landscape but not the entire image, it is a special type of Peircean icon: a diagram. As such, it is a sign that maintains the original evidence of those features which evoked the emotions of beauty. Thus, *Z* demonstrates that the formal relation of the horizontal and vertical proportions manifests itself in physical fact. This in itself is a claim for the ontology of beauty.

Mondrian uses this diagram dynamically throughout his text. The central aspect in *Z*'s discussion is to show that certain versions of the original diagram necessarily follow from the first 'horizontality-verticality'. In the third *Scene*, it is night – the stars, now in a bright sky, are above a broad expanse of sandy beach:

Y: How harmoniously they are distributed!

Z: Plastically they *fill* the space: they *determine* it and thereby accentuate *relationship* [...]³⁷⁵

Z: The multitude of stars produces a *more complete* expression of relationship [...] the primordial relationship must be plastically expressed in multiplicity to make us see it as living reality. Simply to represent the horizontal and the vertical as a unity would naturally not be art: it would at best be a *symbol*...³⁷⁶

372 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 85. Italics original.

373 See, for example, Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 90.

374 Poincaré 1909, 10–11.

375 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 89. Italics original.

376 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 90. Italics original.

Z starts to form the continuum of variations of the ‘primordial relationship’. The idea is that it is possible to subject the diagram to this continuum without essentially changing its primary conditions. Thus, the multiplying of the ‘primordial relationship’ is also possible, which now appears as imaginary lines between the countless stars in this *Scene*. In this way, Mondrian’s text shows itself as a process of thought. It is meaningful that the primordial relationship in the first and the third *Scenes* is only represented as imaginary lines on the landscape. The third *Scene* reveals the possibility of the diagram, a feature which belongs to the ‘firstness’ character of iconicity.³⁷⁷ From this possibility it follows that diagrams are signs that can be manipulated and multiplied as long as the iconic relations of similarity with its object are not changed.³⁷⁸ Thus, in the third *Scene* the many imaginative horizontal and vertical lines in the starry sky still carry and express the feeling of beauty apart from their multiplicity, since nothing has actually changed in the original horizontal-vertical relationship. In other words, when read through Peirce’s semiotics, the text realizes the continuum of perceptual space by its inferential relationship with the diagram.

The reader in this way acquires the sense of what mathematical work entails. Like *Z*, so too a mathematician reasons and concludes new truths or the state of things by drawing a preliminary draft on a sheet of paper and then repeats it in the following drawings so that he exactly maintains the crucial features of the original drawing. Mondrian’s text ‘thinks’ in this way not by merely using the mind but by taking up pencil and ‘canvas’.³⁷⁹ Mondrian’s text relies on the type of order where a pluralistic relationship can be repeated at progressively higher levels while sustaining the same proportions.³⁸⁰ This transportation of the diagrammatical relations is possible because, by definition, diagrams are movable and fluid in nature: they can be applied, they are operative, and in this way they transport meanings. However, this inference is now in a text that speaks of art. By these means, Mondrian’s text prepares the stage for non-figurative art.

The sixth *Scene* describes an old church facade. Here Mondrian’s ‘perpendicular’ acts in a new way which differs from its ‘action’ in the first and third *Scenes*. In the sixth *Scene* the image of a church no longer allows *Z*’s imaginative visualizing acts. Instead, the horizontal and vertical lines are already there on the image picturing the structures of the church facade:

377 EP1, 248.

378 Stjernfelt 2007, xiii.

379 As Stjernfelt points out, “the fact that the diagram displays the interrelation between the parts of the object it depicts is the thing which facilitates its use in thought processes”. Stjernfelt 2007, ix.

380 Apart from the context of modernity, there is nothing really new in this process of reasoning. Eco, for example, finds this type of ordering in Thomas Aquinas. See Eco 1988, 90.

Z: Here is yet another *reality* – but it is still not an *abstract* reality.

Y: But isn't everything in it *flat* and *geometric*?³⁸¹

Z: In the starry sky we were less closely tied to form, but we could easily lapse into *creating* forms. With this church, on the other hand, our vision is more strongly determined by its form, and it becomes more difficult for us to create forms.³⁸²

The sixth *Scene* deals with actualized ideas of horizontal and vertical structures and lines. Read through Peirce's semiotics, *Z* explains the actualization of the diagram-sign so that its secondness aspect becomes visible. In this way the horizontal and vertical forms have to a certain extent already become real. Whereas the 'primordial relationship' in the first and third *Scenes* had qualities of firstness: potentiality, indeterminacy, possibility and reproducibility, here *Z* notes that the actualization of the 'primordial relationship' works at the expense of its firstness quality.³⁸³ This means that creating 'primordial relationships' freely by means of the imagination becomes more difficult at this point of the strollers' journey. At the same time the 'perpendicular' becomes stiffer and more petrified as an acting sign.

Finally, in the studio the strollers note the structures of horizontal and vertical relations all over the room:

Y: Yes, I see how all these things help to articulate the room, and so do the ivory curtains that are now drawn open.

Z: The curtains form a rectangular plane that divides the wall surrounding the window. To continue the division, I added those red, gray, and white planes on the wall. Even the white shelf with the gray box and the white cylindrical jar also contribute.

Y: The jar appears as a rectangular plane!³⁸⁴

This *Scene* represents the ideas of Neo-Plasticism actualized in the studio. It is into the Neo-Plastic studio interior that the continuum of diagrams has finally brought the object of the sign: the harmonious and beautiful horizontal and vertical relationship. It is now visible in the relations between the wall panels and the

381 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101. Italics original.

382 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 104. Italics original.

383 EP1, 248, 275.

384 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 112.

furniture of the room. The ‘primordial relationship’ has been ‘lifted’ from its original connection to the landscape and nature, but as a diagram of that landscape it is still the icon of that original beauty. It still carries this immediateness of feeling in its relationships: “The evening is over *but the beauty remains [...] images [...] not only remain with us but gain in power now that we are alone with them and away from nature.*”³⁸⁵

Therefore, when thinking of the ‘*Triologue*’ as a semiosis of the ‘primordial relationship’, the sixth and the seventh images represent actualizations and finally the conventions of meaning. In this way, the latter half of the ‘*Triologue*’ would deal with ideas of Peircean thirdness. For Peirce, the conventions that govern sign-object relations are habits and laws and belong to the category of thirdness.³⁸⁶ At this point it is important to be reminded that in Hegel’s and Schoenmaekers’s philosophy, the ‘rectangle’, the word that Y also uses, is an expression of law. It is in fact nowhere found in nature, since nature expresses itself through the curved.³⁸⁷ It is equally important to realize that in Mondrian’s use these ideas were always visualized, as they were not in Hegel’s philosophy.³⁸⁸ When read as an end-point of successive *Scenes*, the ‘primordial relationship’ emerges as a ‘law’ of the style in the studio-interior and this law stems from human culture. The objects, colours and forms in the studio follow a certain rule already established in the first *Scene*. However, in the studio the sign relation is thus arbitrary in the sense that it does not have to rely on any causal ground. The ‘rectangle’ in the wall panels reflects now the rule-bound general character of the diagram, rather than the features of the original moonlit landscape.

During the flow of *Scenes* the ‘perpendicular’ becomes a theoretical idea in Neo-Plasticism. As Peirce points out, “when a feeling emerges into immediate consciousness, it always appears as a modification of a more or less general object already in the mind”.³⁸⁹ Being based on the generic style of Neo-Plastic aesthetics, the ‘primordial relationship’ in the seventh *Scene* is now a Peircean symbol. As such, it is not determined by particular objects of vision as was the case in the first *Scene*. The objects in the studio room do not determine it either, although they are used in the discussion to refer to it.

The tradition of formal-analytical interpretation excludes contexts. Therefore, it has not considered Mondrian’s ‘perpendicular’ to be a sign when his non-

385 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 106. Italics original.

386 EP2, 269.

387 Wieczorek 1997, 44.

388 In fact, Mondrian wanted his horizontal and vertical lines to be independent; he did not want them to become subordinate to the ‘closed’ rectangular and square figures formed by the lines. See Mondrian’s letter to Theo van Doesburg dated November 20, 1915, cited in Joosten 1998, II, 105.

389 EP1, 326–327.

figurative paintings are discussed. As mentioned earlier, Wieczorek's account of the 'perpendicular' connects it to the abstract formal and operative idea about the Hegelian 'totality of space'.³⁹⁰ In the written work of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* Mondrian seems to be dealing with the 'perpendicular' motif rather as a dynamic figure, a Poincaréan 'recurrent fact'. As a 'geometrical tool' it gives the impression of being an inherent method. Peirce describes the creative potential of a diagram thus: "The reasoner makes some sort of mental diagram by which he sees that the alternative conclusion must be true, if the premise is so, and this diagram is an icon or likeness [...] it is not a dead thing, but carries the mind from one point to another."³⁹¹

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality shows the same kind of appeal to reason when each image carries the reader's mind from one *Scene* to the next and suggests in different ways the 'perpendicular' forms. Therefore, the 'perpendicular' sign in Mondrian's *Triologue* is an operating sign, as Peirce's sign always is, otherwise it would not be a sign. Observing it as a sign in Mondrian's *Triologue* sublates its meaning as a strategy. Its dynamic features can be characterized in the following way: its 'behavior' in the semiosis of the first and third *Scenes* exemplify the potential continuity of the idea of Neo-Plastic harmony, thus firstness. The sixth and seventh *Scenes* represent it as actual continuity, Neo-Plastic harmony as realized and as a style, thus thirdness.

There is a phenomenological logic from firstness to thirdness. In "The Law of Mind" (1892), Peirce presents how momentary feeling flows into one continuum of feeling, which gains generality. It is through diagrammatical relationships of similarities that we realize the continuity of feelings and finally ideas. Memory works in this way.³⁹² Therefore, Mondrian's *Triologue* as a flow of images suggests the work of memory, which also explains the continuity of ideas. Mondrian thus preserves beauty. Mondrian's constant use of the term *opheffing*, lifting, connotes with the Peircean interpretation. Mark Cheetham notes Mondrian's philosophical project as the teleological recollection of a process of origination, though, according to Wieczorek, the memory aspect remains unexplained in Cheetham's argument. Wieczorek comprehends Mondrian's project as the "Hegelian model of *expression* through recollection".³⁹³ But what my Peircean reading has brought into this dialectics is that it explains how art theory is produced by bringing past ideas

390 For example, in Wieczorek's account the 'perpendicular' is a conceptual 'planar space', a deconstructed pictorial space, which should not be understood as flatness. See Wieczorek 2012, 31.

391 EP2, 10.

392 EP1, 315, 326–327. In Peirce's model of the mind the present must now be connected with the relevant parts of the past by "a series of infinitesimal causal steps" – by continuity.

393 Cheetham 1991, 55; Wieczorek 1997, 163–164. Italics original.

into present actuality and how Mondrian's diagrammatic figures are thus directly connected to visual and mental operations of diagrammatic reasoning.³⁹⁴

Mondrian's text raises the meaning effect of memory. Its many traditional features, such as the choice of obsolescent words and the notion of beauty support this meaning. Mondrian's text acknowledges the need to show its bond with the past. Because the 'perpendicular' seen in beautiful proportions is present in the studio, its origin, the beauty of the moonlight landscape, is not completely forgotten. Mondrian's verbal texture interconnects emotion and recollection. As Evelyne Ender says about emotions related to "forgotten" memories, the text weaves them together and it is precisely because of this interconnection that beauty can finally make its way to the surface of consciousness in the studio.³⁹⁵ In Mondrian's text the idea of the 'perpendicular' is a mental projection and, as such, gives beauty a certain contour. The semiotic interpretation suggests that only by the maintenance of the original evidence which gave rise to the emotion of beauty in the first place can people secure the stable heritage of knowledge, the beauty of art, and transport it to abstract art.

What does this embedding of Peirce's model of the mind into Mondrian's text tell us about it? When reading through Peirce's semiosis from firstness to thirdness, we distillate the meaning of a progressive and creative thought in Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. Much mystification has been granted to artists' creative processes. These processes seem to be difficult to grasp, let alone to describe, because they belong to the sphere of the mind's work which cannot be handled by conceptual models. Even so, Dutch modernist discourse coincided the primary engagement with the idea of an artist's creativity.³⁹⁶ I would say that my Peircean analysis thus opens up a fresh viewpoint on Neo-Plastic theory in the '*Triologue*'.

What comes obvious then is that the impulse for new creation does not take place merely in the artist's mind, nor as the interaction of the mind and the work of art or the literary work. Instead, Mondrian creates the new in a more mediated way by integrating and manipulating cultural signs as helping tools. Behind this we find Lev Vygotsky's insight about the character of human cognition and its dependence on signs as analogical to cultural artefacts.³⁹⁷ Peirce's concepts offer the means to describe the '*Triologue*' as a mediated activity. The 'point to line to plane' and its derivative, the 'perpendicular', belongs to age-old abstract human thinking and co-operation, therefore it is as if it were analogical to a cultural artefact. This means

394 EP1, 312, 314–315, 327.

395 Ender 2005, 17, 171.

396 Beckett 1983, 73, 77–78. Beckett criticizes the concentration on the 'great artists' and the focus on specific sets of art objects, where the masculine was linked to the concept of creativity.

397 Vygotsky 1978, 52–54. In this sense signs and artefacts can be taken as analogical to each other.

that the ‘perpendicular’, be it an operative and cognitive Hegelian-based dialectical force or a theosophical sign of evolution or a simple Poincaréan ‘recurring fact in a method’ does not yet in itself tell how Mondrian manipulates it. That Mondrian integrates it into his art-theoretical thoughts in the *‘Triologue’* and infers with it, tells us that human intelligent action always takes place as a part of social, cultural and physical networks, without which this action would not be possible.

This leads me back to the recurrent question about Mondrian’s creative processes already raised in my Introduction. What comes first, painting or theory? The insight that I presented here opens the issue of creativity as simply movement within two dimensions and directs our attention on Mondrian’s theoretical thinking into a third direction, namely to the creativeness that is mediated by cultural ‘artefacts’ as signs.

3.2 Art and the Sign of the Times: Abstracted Moon Scenery

Even in Mondrian’s own text the ‘primordial relationship’ has many names, and the ‘rectangle’, the ‘perpendicular’, the ‘equilibrated relationship’ all seem to be synonyms for the figure of horizontality and verticality.³⁹⁸ However, whereas in section 3.1, I studied it as a sign which acts in a dynamic way in the text, here the purpose is to probe the meaning of this cultural sign. Marek Wieczorek reminds us that Mondrian saw his ‘compositions’ as based on certain logical principles, which are motivated and this applies even to a natural scene.³⁹⁹ However, considering arguments that Mondrian’s art deep down is never abstract, Yve-Alain Bois points out that an iconological argument about hidden natural motifs should not be promoted.⁴⁰⁰ By bringing into this discussion two of Peirce’s terms, *prescission* and *hypostatic abstraction*, I try on the one hand to take a Peircean viewpoint of Mondrian’s method as being motivated by natural forms, and on the other hand as a visual expression of a Hegelian-based modification of the cultural sign.

Several of the *Scenes* begin with spontaneous shouts from the strollers suggesting a unique, primary experience of beauty and harmony. Thus the *Scenes* manifest the firstness qualities of an experience through the image aspect of the landscape. *Z*’s generalizing words make the emotion of beauty a starting point for all art: “Let us consider the origin of the work of art: *the emotion of beauty.*”⁴⁰¹ Because the text’s strong starting point is in the feelings, my study also takes a look

398 Wieczorek 1997, 34.

399 See Wieczorek 1997, 28.

400 Bois 1994, 317–318.

401 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 84. Italics original.

at this firstness quality of an experience even though traditional semiotics does not deal with the subjective experiences of feelings. Beauty, after all, is a feeling in an aesthetic experience. It is its value, and values are not signs in semiotics. Values need to be attached to signs, which are then able to ‘carry’ them. It is the sign of the ‘perpendicular’ which Mondrian’s text associates with this emotion, as suggested in the previous section of this chapter. This also situates the text in relation to the cultural and epistemological turbulence of the era which surrounded the *De Stijl* movement. The sign then makes the reference to the consciousness of the time so that the text is able to emanate this consciousness.

Abstraction, Twice

The beauty of the first landscape inspires *Z*, the abstract-real painter, to abstract its features. As if by painting with words, he separates on the canvas the line of horizontal earth, the plane of the sky, and the form of the moon as a point and from there creates a vertical line to the horizon. These aspects he considers relevant and leaves out other features as not being so relevant. The abstraction is intended to make the other two strollers focus on the aspects that are relevant to beauty in *an exact way and determinately expressed* in relation to the observers.⁴⁰² *Z* here simplifies the landscape. Those lines that *Z* drafts from the landscape are logically possible. In this the mind’s ability to focus on relevant features becomes obvious. *Z* applies here the mind’s reasoning ability, which can be studied in terms of Peirce’s concept of abstraction, *prescission*.⁴⁰³ It is based on ordinary visual perception.⁴⁰⁴ Therefore, it is at the same time a methodological and an epistemological concept. In this sense, Mondrian’s text presents the method of abstraction in the same way as the other members of the *De Stijl* group did in its starting years. The visible reality was the starting point. As Michael White notes, by taking a motif and putting it through successive stages of abstraction, they modified the motif to the stage at

402 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 85. Italics original.

403 EP2, 270. In Peirce’s phenomenology, *prescission* must be separated from the other two Peircean modes of mental separation, namely discrimination and dissociation. According to Stjernfelt: “Discrimination merely has to do with the senses of terms, and only draws a distinction in meaning. Dissociation is that separation which, in the absence of a constant association, is permitted by the law of the association of images. It is the consciousness of one thing, without the necessary simultaneous consciousness of the other.” See Stjernfelt 2007, 457.

404 In this way, the concept pays attention to Mondrian’s own and openly-stated interests to stay within normal physiological vision. At least two of Mondrian’s letters prove that he emphasized the natural, ordinary visual perception as the starting point of his New Plasticism: “Nature (or what I see) inspires me, gives me, as it gives all painters, the emotion that brings forth creative élan, but I am seeking to approach truth as closely as possible and to abstract everything from it until I reach the foundations (always visible foundations!) of things.” (Mondrian’s letter to Bremmer January 29, 1914, quoted in Janssen & Joosten 2002, 196. “Therefore my work still remains totally outside the occult realm [...]. For the present at least I shall restrict my work to the ordinary world of the senses, since that is the world in which we still live.” (Mondrian’s letter to Israël Querido summer, 1909, quoted in Blotkamp 1994, 35–36).

which it virtually lost any visible trace of its origin but clung to its vestigial trace as memory. Among others, van Doesburg, van der Leek and Huszár all worked in this fashion and van Doesburg popularized this method of abstraction in his writings.⁴⁰⁵

The method of abstraction that the above-mentioned *De Stijl* artists used also applies to Mondrian until 1919, as Carel Blotkamp notes. This might mean that Mondrian's '*Trialogue*' situates itself just at a turning point in his artistic development where he adopted a different insight concerning abstraction.⁴⁰⁶ This would mean that the abstraction procedure, with its formal elements, was directly seen as connected to the ideas of reality and truth. In this way these formal elements would themselves become the things which composed a painting. Wieczorek notices the apparent Hegelian overtones in the terms 'opposition' and 'determination' and the idea that nature's appearance has a concrete basis comes ultimately from Hegel. However, the apparent phenomenological aspect in Mondrian's above-mentioned abstraction ("relation to us") poses a problem, since Hegel's phenomenology denoted the doctrine of "appearance" (*Schein*) which is not primarily concerned with visual appearance.⁴⁰⁷ I would suggest that this apparent phenomenological aspect in Mondrian's abstraction is graspable by Peirce's sign concept since a sign is not exclusive to Peirce's phenomenology and is thus directly in connection to the visible.

The passage in the first *Scene* introduces an evident appeal to the strollers' imagination. Here, *Z* speaks as if he were at the same time drawing lines in front of the two other strollers' imaginative viewing. The vertical line, for example, does not actually appear in the landscape; the strollers have to imagine it to be there in order to complete the figure. The imagination is also involved in Peirce's notion of *prescission* in the sense that the sensuous quality of an image cannot be imagined without some degree of vividness of mind.⁴⁰⁸ In the strollers' imagination the landscape becomes a figure of perpendicular relations and, as my interpretation in section 3.1 considered it, a diagram: "The diagram is an Icon of a set of rationally related objects. It represents a definite form of Relation. When constructed with an intention [...], the diagram-icon remains in the field of perception and imagination."⁴⁰⁹

405 White compares the method to Edgar Allan Poe's words about the composition of a poem as a work which proceeds step by step to its completion with the precision of a mathematical problem. See White 2005, 77–78, 80.

406 Blotkamp 1994, 91. Blotkamp points out that in this year there are other paintings which no longer needed successive drawings to bridge the gap between reality and the painting.

407 Wieczorek 1997, 35, 60–61.

408 EP2, 270.

409 Peirce 1906: "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism" is Robin catalogue number 293 and is also known as 'PAP' from Peirce's own abbreviation. Quoted in Stjernfelt 2007, 93–94.

Mondrian's *'Triologue'* starts with the idea of abstraction which is boosted by artistic imagination. His own words at a mature age give the impression that the mere imagination in producing an abstracted image is inadequate: "Every artist knows that plastic art is not merely a playing with forms and colours. This kind of play would only produce a fantastic expression, false toward reality. Reality shows a logical universal structure, which is the manifestation of growth."⁴¹⁰

As a sign the 'perpendicular' is a result of the abstraction of the landscape in the first *Scene*. However, my interpretation also raises the argument that Mondrian's text also contains another type of abstraction, namely the one which makes cultural and epistemological issues explicit.⁴¹¹ For this my study needs Peirce's *hypostatic abstraction*.⁴¹² Linguistically defined, it is a process of making a noun out of an adjective. In reasoning processes this is crucial, since it makes a thing out of thought.⁴¹³ As is apparent, Mondrian included the notions of the reality, truth and objectivity in his notion of abstraction:

That is for me a truth [...]. I estimate that it is possible, through the use of horizontal and vertical lines, conscientiously constructed – not in a calculated way – but guided by a profound intuition and in harmony and in rhythm, I estimate that it is possible to be able to achieve, thanks to these archetypes of beauty, completed if necessary, by other lines [...] a work of art just as strong as it is true.⁴¹⁴

Hence, the abstraction does not mean mere simplification of the motif. Instead, it is supposed to do more.

Vantongerloo, the only artist among *De Stijl* who actually studied mathematics, usually gathered his ideas about abstraction around the concepts of space and time. It was through these concepts by which visual perception was very often revealed and pondered during the starting years of *De Stijl*. Vantongerloo articulates the almost poetic meanings of the geometric conceptions of point and space from the artist's point of view. According to him, everything we see is the consequence of absolute existence. The point is absolute; it contains the unity of time and space. The point is one, the all. Time and space together equals the point.⁴¹⁵

Let us take a look at the cited passage of the first *Scene* once more. *Z's* words also suggest a cultural text, a Euclidean-related succession of the 'point to line to

410 Mondrian 1986 (1942–44), 353.

411 Stjernfelt 2007, 246.

412 EP2, 394.

413 Stjernfelt 2007, 248, 249.

414 Mondrian's letter on January 29, 1914. Cited in Janssen & Joosten 2002, 196–197.

415 Vantongerloo 1918, 21–22.

plane'. By applying these elementary geometrical units the above-cited passage in the first *Scene* at once takes infinite space into the artist's control. The way in which Mondrian's text uses these geometrical concepts suggests a wider agenda which will not stop at seeing the abstraction as a mere simplification. The order of the words reflects action, since this succession of 'point to line to plane', cannot be imagined without the idea of movement. A line is the trace of the movement of a point, and a plane is the trace of the movement of a line. Three-dimensional space is the trace of the movement of a plane. Therefore, Mondrian's words in the text depict a certain process of construction, or growth. Though *Z* simplifies the beautiful features of the landscape, this abstraction is at the same time firmly tied to those cultural ideas of space that the sign produces in it.

Whereas the Euclidean idea of 'point to line to plane' as a cultural text had already appeared in geometry and then become manifest in esoteric ideas, for example in the Dutch Hegelian derivatives, in Mondrian's *'Triologue'* it receives its third instancing, this time in the field of art. There it produces new nuances according to the meanings it already had included in it. By following Johansen's notion about the sign's behaviour, I suggest that only by knowing how a cultural sign has been used in a number of previous occasions was it possible for the *De Stijl* artists to comprehend and appreciate its new nuances of meaning.⁴¹⁶ Literary texts, too, as well as our whole communication and understanding, rely on habitual relationships between signs and objects.

The 'point to line to plane' as a cultural text is an independent sign-entity which is known by the members of that culture. It can be traced back to 2000-year-old Euclidean geometry, and to its first postulate.⁴¹⁷ In geometry it has been a sort of key or instrument for opening up space to the viewer. Vantongerloo saw this instrumental view as being tied to Euclidean geometry:

Euclid knew that his geometry was an instrument and there is no geometry in nature. Man creates geometry a priori [to] fix certain points, which he situates in space. Forward, backward, to the left, to the right, up and down are the first geometric conceptions.⁴¹⁸

The meanings of these geometric conceptions circulated as the most cosmological ideas of time and space. They were included in the dualistic categories of the world's ideas and as an instrumental tool of reasoning at the beginning of the 20th

416 Johansen 2002, 162.

417 In geometry, the 'point to line to plane' postulate is a collection of assumptions that can be used in a set of postulates for Euclidean geometry in two, three or more dimensions. Geometrical space means the aggregate of the geometrical points of which the planes, lines, spheres, etc. are constituted. See Whittaker 1958, 8–9.

418 Vantongerloo in 1958. Cited in Brett 2009, 25.

century, as discussed in my second chapter. Therefore, although the mouthpieces of these differing instantiations usually cut their ties with each other by claiming their independence and originality, here, in my interpretation, I understand these instantiations of a cultural sign to be correlates. The geometrical concepts, the point, the line and the plane, in this successive order, give birth paradoxically to the new idea of non-Euclidean space while deconstructing the old one. Superimposed into the landscape, as Mondrian's cultural sign is, the landscape signifies taking part of this space from its vague infinity into fleeting possession by momentarily defining it.⁴¹⁹

I suggest that the first image in Mondrian's '*Triologue*' adjusts the cultural sign to make it Mondrian's own tool in the text. Thus, Mondrian's text makes it possible to associate harmonious vision with the 'point to line to plane'. It becomes apparent to the reader that the harmony in vision should be aligned with the meanings that a sign brings into it. No less than the two basic philosophical concepts, namely, time and space as infinite entities, come into focus in connection with this sign. Both Robert Welsh and Sixten Ringbom have noted that, in the context of theosophy, ideas of cosmological size are included in the notion of 'point to line to plane'. Thus, it was related to a single mystical concept of life and immortality, as Welsh emphasizes, and on the other hand it was related to potential space, as Ringbom reminds us.⁴²⁰ By its sign beauty acquires status as an eternal quality which is always capable of rebirth in abstract art when the time of figurative art has come to an end.⁴²¹ As Blavatsky writes, the sign "symbolizes our human existence, for the circle of life circumscribes the four points of the cross, which represent in succession birth, life, death and immortality. Everything in this world is a trinity completed by the Quaternary, and every element is divisible on this same principle".⁴²² Welsh concludes that it is a sign of the processes of the macrocosm, which theosophy sums up by the term 'evolution'.⁴²³

419 Jan Bor in his philosophical frame of reference has concluded that Mondrian's insight is in line with the space continuum and Wiczorek connects the idea more specifically to Hegel's dialectics as the deconstruction of pictorial space. See Bor 2015, 51; Wiczorek 2012, 31.

420 Ringbom 1970, 200. Illustrations 94–97 exemplify Kandinsky's insight, where the line gives rise to a plane by a process Kandinsky calls 'condensation'. See also Blavatsky: *The Secret Doctrine*, pp. 4–5.

421 The motif in Mondrian's text is parallel to his painting from the 1910s period. Robert Welsh notices that during the period of circa 1908–11, which is Mondrian's pre-Cubist 'colouristic' period, Mondrian was especially influenced by "no lesser personages than Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner". See Welsh 1971, 37.

422 Blavatsky 1882, 508.

423 Welsh 1971, 49.

This kind of insight becomes apparent in Mathieu Schoenmaekers's thinking.⁴²⁴ For Schoenmaekers, ultimate harmony and beauty rests on cosmological relations, such as in the relation between the globe's radius and its circumference. The joint task of artists is to perceive nature in such a way that this inner absolute construction of reality is revealed. He presented his ideas as geometrical drawings, where the relation of horizontal and vertical lines, as a cross, manifested the idea of harmonious beauty.⁴²⁵ Thus the meanings of a basic physical truth and reality, and the human physical cognitive posture within this whole construction, became central. Schoenmaekers, in fact, exemplified the new cosmology on a human scale, showing that the conception of space "was a visual field oriented in relation to our human body".⁴²⁶ These are the correlates which are suggested by the abstraction in Mondrian's written text.⁴²⁷ The verticals on the horizontal surface of the earth, as radius, which only seem to be parallel with other verticals, ultimately meet at the centre point of the globe. Therefore, Schoenmaekers's idea seems to support the findings of non-Euclidean geometry, according to which light rays, when travelling enormous distances in space, curve. Thus, space is ultimately curved and it is not true to say that two parallel lines indefinitely extended would never meet.

With this sign of the 'point to line to plane' Mondrian's text makes a statement in the art world. The starting *Scene* is immediately included in and identifies itself with this new absolute reality. It signifies a certain kind of experience. It specifically wants to communicate harmony in vision, which is adapted to cosmological ideas. It denotes an absolute construction of reality to which the human eye is always inherently tied and where human beings live and move, because of the necessity of their physical habitus.

Mondrian's 'point to line to plane' passage in the first *Scene* is a solution 'at a glance'. Even though the passage is a written text, the solution is amazingly visual on Mondrian's part. He superimposes the Euclidean cultural sign, the idea of abstraction and of harmonious vision into a single passage. These notions are layered one on top of each other. It is as if Mondrian wished to make the ideas visible to the reader at a single glance and make them comprehensible in the shortest possible way. Poincaré's idea of the elegance of geometrical reasoning comes to

424 Mondrian at first was so thrilled by the thoughts of this former Catholic priest and former theosophist that, together with van Doesburg, he even had plans to ask him to join *De Stijl* as a contributor. However, finally, after some kind of personality conflict between the two men, he denied having got anything from this mystic. Schoenmaekers, for his part, was reluctant to acknowledge his intellectual dependence upon standard theosophical doctrine. Welsh reminds us that both Schoenmaekers and Mondrian maintained a worldview and employed a critical jargon patently derived from earlier texts fundamental to the international theosophical movement. See Blotkamp 1994, 109, 111 and Welsh 1971, 37.

425 Schoenmaekers 1915, 67–96.

426 Wiczorek 1997, 35–36. See also Bois 1994, 370, note 126.

427 In his essay "Home-Street-City" Mondrian writes: "But despite all relativism, man's eye is not yet free from his body. Vision is inherently bound to our normal position." See Mondrian 1986 (1926), 210.

mind. According to Poincaré, the feeling or intuition of the order in which the elements of reasoning are to be placed, make it possible to perceive the whole of an argument at a glance and to guess at hidden harmonies and relations.⁴²⁸ One can imagine how the association of elegance with intellectual and imaginative discovery must have struck home among artists who read these versions of Poincaré's texts.⁴²⁹

Considering the idea of the 'point to line to plane' it seems that Mondrian selected the signs from the surrounding intellectual milieu, then applied them as similes in his own text, thus producing a new and unique combination. Thus, the '*Trialogue*' communicates its *tijdsbewustzijn* to readers but also, as I have suggested in section 3.1, produced a strategy of creativity. According to Lev Vygotsky, this kind of use of signs in human behaviour belongs to the same category of mediated activity as the use of tools.⁴³⁰ In other words, 'point to line to plane' is a cognitive representation, produced in the culture. Mondrian transposed the abstraction of the first landscape onto the idea of a sign, which had already had correlates in related cultural signs and which bore similar meanings.

The beauty of art as immortal, and the artist's canvas as an integral part of the infinitely large distances of the cosmos are the meanings of the 'point to line to plane'. As the expansive idea of space, it also correlates to the feeling of freedom. Here an anecdote is illuminating. After looking at one of Mondrian's paintings, a viewer said to the artist, '*je respire*' (I breathe). Mondrian later wrote to a friend: "That's exactly how it should be in my view. A person breathes, feels free, though seeing a canvas. I cannot describe the impressions exactly, but it was wonderful to see that effect."⁴³¹

The Experience of Beauty, Image-Aspects

Emotion is a point of entrance into Mondrian's *Natural and Abstract Reality*. The strollers, X, Y and Z, who are looking at this moonlit landscape, are suddenly struck by feelings: "Y: How beautiful! X: What deep tones and colours! Z: What repose! Y: So nature moves you too? Z: If it didn't, I wouldn't be a painter."⁴³² This is an experience where the feelings of beauty, harmony and repose just 'happen' to the strollers without them being prepared for it. As the semiotician Eero Tarasti

428 Poincaré 1909, 47–48.

429 It is possible that Mondrian read Poincaré's original essays, but if not, several popularizations of these ideas were available, and they enhanced the appeal of higher mathematics in the imagination of young artists in Paris at this time. In 1903, a year after Poincaré's *La Science et L' Hypothèse*, a volume by E. Jouffret was published in Paris entitled *Elementary Treatise on the Geometry of Four Dimensions*.

430 Vygotsky 1978, 54.

431 Brett 2009, 26. Piet Mondrian, quoted in Hendrik Matthes, "Aphorisms and Reflections by Piet Mondrian", *Kunst & Museumjournaal*, vol 6, no 1 (1995) pp. 57–62.

432 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 83.

says, these are the typical features of an aesthetic experience. The ‘firstness’ quality – spontaneity, unpreparedness and unpredictability – are the qualities of this experience. Typically, the subject is suddenly confronted, without compulsion; there is no underlying agent, even though the trigger to this experience might be a work of art.⁴³³ It is as if Mondrian’s text wished to emphasize its starting point in a pure experience since the dialogue continues immediately afterwards with the first shouts that compare *Z*’s compositions with music, with symphonies: “X: I have called your compositions ‘symphonies’; I can see music in them...”.⁴³⁴ Mondrian’s text takes its starting point from equating *Z*’s paintings to music, which in its non-referential and abstract character was traditionally considered to be the first and most valuable art form in the age-old hierarchy of arts.

Mondrian makes the esoteric Euclidean-Hegelian-based cultural sign his own brand. This ‘using the cultural sign to work for his art theory’ is the function of Mondrian’s text, as I have suggested. The emotions are a trigger and a frame for this adaptation. From a Peircean perspective, Mondrian brings an image-aspect and the quality of firstness into his text. In classical semiotic theories the concepts of sign and signification are understood as universal phenomena, not as an individual experience. Moreover, the central aspect of structuralism is that the signification system constitutes the sign. Here the sign is a two-pole system between the signifier and the signified, a pre-established correspondence which forms the objective ground of the system. In pragmatism the ground of a sign’s function is thirdness, the prevailing rule, law or habit bound to the interpretation which makes the action of the sign possible. This is necessary, since in this way researchers can target their semiotic study to a sustainable subject. However, there are some obvious shortcomings with this research method. One of them is that some of the contextual features of the phenomenon are easily lost in this way, for example how, where and when this sign takes place. In classical semiotics these are secondary questions concerning meaning.

When considering Mondrian’s text, the need to reflect its obvious emotional features seems to be important, since the figure of the horizontal and the vertical is embedded in the conversational situation, which is rich with the feelings and experiences of the strollers. Therefore, what takes place in the abstraction process is not purely a sign as an entity, nor is it a correspondence or a mediating relation to Hegelian dialectics, even though all these belong to *Z*’s abstraction. What becomes obvious and essential is the strollers’ inner experience and the way in which this experience is related to the outer, concrete reality, to the concrete semiosis of the cultural sign of the ‘perpendicular’. Here Eero Tarasti’s concept of the existential

433 Tarasti 2000, 9.

434 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 83.

sign is useful. Tarasti's work is among the first semiotic theories which take the problem of understanding into consideration.⁴³⁵ In Mondrian's text the sign, the figure of horizontal and vertical lines, is represented as if it were a consequence of a spontaneous experience and therefore it is also subjective. It takes place in the individual art worlds of the interpreters, Mondrian's strollers. Furthermore, the sign takes place in a situation which is defined by the subjective insights about the mutual articulations of the sign, its time and its place. According to Tarasti, in every artistic sign there must be this kind of moment where the sign's inner value is pondered according "to its degree of existentiality".⁴³⁶ To my understanding, existentiality here refers to the state in which one momentarily realizes the uniqueness of one's existence and understands the universality of the moment.

The 'perpendicular', the figure of horizontal and vertical lines, carries the meanings of cultural correlates. However, Mondrian's text adjusts the sign's signification through the phenomenological aspects of an experience and the emotion of beauty. The emotion of beauty is the subjective and individual issue in Mondrian's text, but in order to communicate this meaning it has to be expressed through an objective communicative sign. At the moment when one experiences the feeling of beauty and harmony of the landscape, the overlapping sign of 'point to line to plane' marks the text's individual way to experience the sign. The interpreters, that is, the readers and the author must master the regular functions of the sign as signifying the new world image. Therefore, this Euclidean-related sign is characterized in Mondrian's text by a certain open nature, for the relation between the sign and the conceptual content of beauty is not stable or uniform, in which case it would easily be defined by the thirdness, that is, by certain steady conventions. The vague field of the strollers' subjective experience comes between. Therefore, as a beauty-related sign, this sign is impossible to be exhausted totally. Nor would it be right to give an over-rigid meaning to the 'perpendicular'.

I suggest that my interpretation of the first *image* sheds light on how Mondrian makes Schoenmaekers's *tegendeelen* (opposites) -related primordial relationship his own contribution and sign to communicate with. Mondrian's thinking deals here with the problem of how to make an emotion understandable and to communicate its meaning to readers. How to clothe the idea of beauty by *tijdsbewustzijn* is the real issue. The experience of beauty, to which Mondrian's first *Scene* thus gives birth, can be understood only through this outer objective sign, stemming basically from Euclidean geometry, which brings it into the communicative sphere of modern culture. Therefore the horizontal-vertical figure defines the principles of interpretation and invites one to engage in creative understanding. This, in its

435 Tarasti 2000, 8–9.

436 Tarasti 2000, 13.

turn, leads towards the individual situation of Mondrian's text. The 'point to line to plane' cannot be totally traced back to the acknowledged meaning system.⁴³⁷ In this way Mondrian's text objectively projects the emotion of beauty into the 'outer world' and become meaningful for itself and for other readers as an art-theoretical text. This is also the way in which some sort of unanimous interpretation can be achieved.

The 'perpendicular' as a sign of beauty is an ongoing event, which takes place in this journey from the rural countryside to the city. The dramatic form of the '*Triologue*' adjusts the original meaning, introducing tones and shades. Thus, it is possible to approach the idea of a sign as something that is 'becoming', as something that is 'taking place',⁴³⁸ The idea of beauty is a core value in art in the '*Triologue*'. In semiotics, values are abstract transcendental entities, which in a way condense themselves step by step and become concrete when they come into existence and eventually lead to something visible.⁴³⁹ A sign of beauty is seen as becoming, as taking place, because it both keeps the semiosis of the 'outer sign' of the Euclidean origin in action and at the same time it ties it to one situation in Mondrian's text as well.

Mondrian's abstraction in the form of horizontal and vertical lines works as a direct set of instructions for looking and as an instrument for thinking. It has a bodily basis in human habitus in the form of verticality on the horizontal earth. As a cultural sign the 'point to line to plane' symbolizes the pantheistic kind of urge for union with the world. It is a sign of experiencing reality as both harmonious and new. As such, this abstraction deviates from the method of gradual abstraction exemplified by the *De Stijl* group in its early years.

3.3 The Gap between the Subject and the World: Twisted Trees

In the second *Scene* Mondrian's text provides an opposite experience. The harmony and tranquillity in the vision is gone. After the calmness and repose of the landscape in the first *Scene*, the strollers now look at a restless view of the "scattered clusters of trees silhouetted against the bright moonlit sky".⁴⁴⁰ The text realizes its message

437 Mondrian's adaptation of Schoenmaekers's Hegelian concepts was not as linear as it might seem. First of all Mondrian's correspondence shows that he was critical. See Mondrian's undated letter to van Doesburg in April 1918. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD. Moreover, Bois reminds us that Mondrian digested Hegel by occasionally misinterpreting him, sometimes even ignoring him, sometimes by creating a conceptual hybrid of his own. See Bois 1994, 338. See also the note 97, p.369.

438 Tarasti 2000, 7.

439 Tarasti 2000, 18. In Tarasti's model, meaning emerges via a temporal process in the subject.

440 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87.

especially by contrasting the second *Scene* to the first *Scene*. This description serves as a way of leading the reader to the further meaning of the text, to acknowledge that there is a gap in the interplay between the observing subject and the natural environment 'out there'. Twisted branches form not one image of repose but many images, which call forth pre-established mental images, and *Y* sees "all kinds of heads and figures in them".⁴⁴¹ Thus, *Y*'s thinking mind comes between the perceiver and what is perceived and prevents the immediate experience. The tree is in this way broken into many details, plus a form of perception that needs to be kept under control, as *X* reminds the other two participants.

The meaning of the capricious branches brings to mind Rudolf Steiner's philosophical writings about perception. Beside ideas about art, Steiner also published writings about perception and consciousness and the subject-object relationship, and thus participated in contemporary discussions about philosophical dualism and monism.⁴⁴² Steiner's example of observing the branches of a tree is surprisingly close to Mondrian's text. "We look twice at the tree," writes Steiner. "The first time we see its branches at rest, the second time in motion. We are not satisfied with this observation. Why, we ask, does the tree appear to us now at rest, now in motion? [...] The something more which we seek in things, over and above what is immediately given to us in them, splits our whole being into two parts."⁴⁴³ Therefore, what Steiner acknowledges is the universal philosophical insight which acknowledges the gap between our human consciousness and the world 'out there'. However, the feeling of belonging to the world is something that we cannot deny.⁴⁴⁴ The twisted and clustered branches, which do not support a harmonious feeling about being connected to the world, but which rather break this idea, is the corresponding expression about this relationship in Mondrian's text. This insight recognizes the disharmony, the gap, between the thinking subject and the sensuous perception of the world. Historically, it has received different solutions depending on whether the interpreter is a monist or a dualist, as Steiner reminds us: "Man is aware of himself as 'I', he cannot but think of this I as being on the side of the *spirit*; and in contrasting this I with the world, he is bound to

441 Ibid.

442 Steiner's studies of Goethe, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling and Kant extended over many years and served to clarify his own concepts. He also sought dialogue with contemporary thinkers. The question of the foundations of what can be termed 'reality' was repeatedly of central importance. What is interesting, considering Mondrian, is that Steiner came to comprehend reality as no longer 'real' but as something that has been 'aesthetically constituted'. Steiner expressed doubts towards 'transcendental realism' and recognized the impossibility of acknowledging its validity. See Kugler 2011, 29–30.

443 Steiner 2011 (1894), 21–22.

444 Steiner 2011 (1894), 22.

put on the world's side the realm of percepts given to the senses, that is, the world of *matter*.”⁴⁴⁵

The second *Scene* recognizes this problem. *X* and *Z* realize that there ought to be a bridge between subject and object, or spirit and matter, but that they are unable to create it, even though *X* tries to keep the details in the landscape under control: “*X*: [...] The great difficulty in painting is precisely to keep the details subordinate to the whole [...]”⁴⁴⁶ The second *Scene* reflects the interplay between the subject and nature as object. It focalizes the readers’ imaginative vision so that a coherent single image seems to escape. It describes the moment when the subject begins to grasp itself as distinct from the object so that it would be able to manipulate it for some purpose. This is precisely what *Y* does when the shape of branches starts to resemble all kinds of other figures for him and his thinking mind begins to interfere with the immediate experience of the image.

To solve this problem, the memory aspect becomes important. As Mondrian’s text presents in its first *Scene*, *Z*, the painter of abstract art, assumes some sort of pre-established harmony between subject and object by making an arbitrary hypothesis about horizontal and vertical features. In the second *Scene*, *Y*, the layman, recalls this image:

When I compare this landscape with the previous one, where these scattered clusters of trees were not to be seen, I feel that the capricious natural form cannot produce in us the profound repose to which we inwardly aspire.

Z: True. In these trees you can clearly see that the tensing of contour and the reduction to the plane did not bring the profound repose you spoke about to *direct plastic expression*. You were right in seeing it as far more plastically apparent in the earlier treeless landscape.⁴⁴⁷

That Mondrian’s text overall is speaking of images when dealing with the issue of perception, is in itself a very philosophical approach from Mondrian’s part. This setting arouses a philosophical attitude in the reader. As the contemporary philosopher, Henri Bergson, puts it: “we can only grasp things in the form of images, we must state the problem in terms of images, and of images alone”,⁴⁴⁸ and significantly *De Stijl* had in its list of recommended books Bergson’s *Matière et*

445 Steiner 2011 (1894), 22–23. Italics original.

446 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87.

447 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 88. Italics original.

448 Bergson 2007, (1896), 13.

mémoire (1896).⁴⁴⁹ It was Theo van Doesburg under the name of I.K. Bonset who openly referred to Bergson's philosophy,⁴⁵⁰ whereas in Mondrian's texts references to such philosophers are usually scanty. The *Scene* of twisted trees suggests the need to keep one steady and enduring image in mind and to let nothing disturb it, so that the emotion of harmony would be possible at all. According to Henri Bergson, some kind of a pre-establishing of harmony, a common ground, is necessary to settle the mind-matter problem.⁴⁵¹

Ultimately, the second *Scene* probes the artist-subject's relation to nature. Mondrian's text here reflects an insight that was not at all new and was in fact 'pre-modern'. This *Scene* recognizes the need for resolving the mind-matter or the subject-object gap and offers a solution. As such, it is the empathetic impulse in man's psychological attempt to bridge the essential 'otherness' of nature. These kinds of aspirations already existed in the pre-formalistic ideas of the 19th century.⁴⁵²

3.4 Measuring Infinity: Star-bright Skies

The third *Scene* begins with a discussion about the beautiful distribution of stars in the night sky. As a countless number of shining points they cover the sky in the same way as the sand spreads over the vast beach underneath the sky. Therefore, the starting lines here immediately reflect something infinitely large and infinitely small, something uncountable and inconceivable. Mondrian was not the only artist within the *De Stijl* movement who lifted his eyes to the star-bright skies. Both Georges Vantongerloo and van Doesburg, like others in this era, speculated about the universe and believed that science, particularly physics, astronomy and mathematics, could provide a new and complete picture of the world.⁴⁵³ The universe, as incommensurable and immeasurable, aroused the idea that our sensory system, particularly our vision, is deficient and that what we perceive is only a small fragment of the 'true reality'. Yve-Alain Bois reminds us that these beliefs and interests are perfectly in line with fin-de-siècle Neoplatonic precepts. Many members of *De Stijl*, for whom the perceivable reality is nothing but a particular 'illusion', embraced this.⁴⁵⁴

449 *De Stijl* II, 6, 1919, 70–72.

450 I.K. Bonset [van Doesburg] 1920b, 91. Van Doesburg recognizes the intuitive character of Nietzsche's and Bergson's philosophy, the formless thinking where the subject identifies itself with the object.

451 Bergson 2007, (1896), 13.

452 See, for example, Vischer 1994 (1873), 25. *On the Aesthetic Contemplation of Nature*.

453 McElheny 2010, 170–171.

454 Bois 2010, 44.

Significantly, the language and topics needed to deal with the new non-Euclidean world image of physics also come into Mondrian's art-theoretical texts. In this starry-sky *Scene* Mondrian treats the idea of the perpendicular as if it were a geometrical drawing. He manipulates it with principles that give an air of geometrical reasoning to *Z*'s words. "Y: Is the primordial relationship still dominant in the starry sky? Z: I will try to show you that it dominates there just as much, and that it is even *easier for us to grasp* precisely because of the *multiplicity* of stars. Now it asserts itself in multiplicity."⁴⁵⁵ From these words the reader immediately acquires the impression that *Z* is a kind of 'geometrician-artist' who has a need to assert and testify the rightness of his hypothesis to the other strollers.

This stage of treating the basic idea of horizontality-verticality as a multiplicity is a necessary stage for understanding Mondrian's '*Triologue*' as an art-theoretical text. Consequently, to bring the motif of multiplicity into the semiosphere, these multiple perpendicular relationships must be seen as a law-bound group of signs. I hypothesize that the perpendicular relationship asserts itself in this *Scene* as an element of style: "Z: The multitude of stars produces a *more complete* expression of a relationship [...] the primordial relationship must be plastically expressed in multiplicity to make us see it as a living reality."⁴⁵⁶

Look at the Stars

The *Scene* with the starry sky aspires to the stars, both figuratively and at the text's literal level. Here the strollers' discussion is relatively long and thorough, dealing with several, quite weighty topics.⁴⁵⁷ The well-known expression *per aspera ad astra*, meaning that hard work is needed to achieve high goals, suits this *Scene* well. The ideas expressed are 'world events', and include films; cubism as the result of the projective vision; the fourth dimension, a pseudo-version of space which no longer rested on Euclidean geometry; and the recently ended World War I.⁴⁵⁸ Mondrian's text reduces the war to a play of cubes on a map surface, which symbolizes the strategic positions of military groups, as if the text wanted to distance itself from the war. The starry sky in Mondrian's text seems to be not the least of these 'world events'.

Stars played a crucial role in the discovery of new physical laws related to the principle of relativity, and it was through using measurements of cosmological

455 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 90. Italics original.

456 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 90. Italics original.

457 The third *Scene of Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* appeared in *De Stijl* in instalments.

458 In the letter to van Doesburg where Mondrian speaks about this *Scene*, he mentions that creating the fourth dimension would necessitate an occultist perspective, and therefore he considered it difficult. Mondrian's letter June 13, 1918. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

size that the new world image could be testified. Not only was a more truthful structure of the universe at stake, but also the limited view of human existence came to be clearly proved. So, through non-Euclidean space/time discoveries it became clear to laymen that there was something which fell beyond the range of the senses, something which was truer than their vision and which needed the stars to be scientifically proved. Infinitely small and infinitely large things came to form the language of the new world image, as the reader also notices in the starting lines of this third image of Mondrian's text. For example, Poincaré, as an astronomer, reasoned mathematical truths by using astronomical comparisons. He made reference to the stars when exemplifying his insights about the flow and behaviour of electrons,⁴⁵⁹ although his work maintained belief in the Newtonian notion of the all-pervading and everywhere resting medium of ether through which light rays and electromagnetic radiation passed.⁴⁶⁰ Poincaré never abandoned the ether hypothesis. He described light as "luminous vibrations of the ether", but his pragmatic and tentative attitude is apparent in many of his writings. However, he deduced that ether must be that substance which gives support to and carries light rays.⁴⁶¹ In fact, one of the few references to scientific ideas which Mondrian makes in this text concerns the notion of ether.⁴⁶² Here it becomes not a carrier of light rays but 'the carrier of the artistic mentality':

Y: We don't just *see*! A great deal reaches us through *touch*! And isn't it possible that the visible acts upon us invisibly? I have in mind a new scientific hypothesis, the ether theory, which holds that through human touch matter undergoes a permanent transformation that varies with the mental attitude of whoever touches it. According to this hypothesis, it would not be the same when an artist, so to speak, projects his emotion of beauty on a canvas or a wall and when a workman unreflectingly spreads his paint over a surface.⁴⁶³

459 In his *Science et Méthode* Poincaré constantly makes comparisons with astronomical observations and with the astronomical dimensions of the star systems. The theory of gases, for example, is exemplified through the character of the Milky Way. See Poincaré 1909, 273–291. He extends Lorentz's Principle of Relativity to the hypothesis of electrons. See Poincaré 1909, 245–247.

460 Vink 1990a, 7.

461 Poincaré 1909, 226–227.

462 Mondrian may also have heard about the ether theory through the Dutch physicist Henrik Lorentz's theory of electrons, because of his acquaintance with Mathieu Schoenmaekers, who knew Lorentz personally. This theory was the final point in the development of the classical ether theories at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1905 Poincaré eventually corrected the errors in Lorentz's paper and actually incorporated non-electromagnetic forces (including gravitation) into the theory.

463 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 117. Italics original.

Recently-uncovered scientific phenomena were explainable only by means of deductive thought, the kind of thought that Poincaré's texts encourages. When considered from a semiotic point of view, the new situation must have introduced problems of reference. Namely, how could one relate to something that cannot be experienced, let alone perceived, something that could only be measured and reasoned?

Among the list of influential books which appeared in *De Stijl* in April 1919, was *Physikalisches über raum und zeit* (1910) by Emil Cohn, who at that time was one of the leading experts in the electrodynamics of moving bodies. In its appendix, an example is given of a mathematical calculation concerning the ways in which light travels in an empty space. The finite velocity of light was an idea by which many modern writers at first encountered the popularizations of Einstein's theories. The idea was easily assimilated to traditional literary metaphors, namely the unattainability of stars. As sources of light, stars were recognized as containing the past. The idea that the past is preserved in travelling light rays gave a specific twist to the modernist texts using the comparison of stars.⁴⁶⁴ In Cohn's book the mathematical example takes its starting point from the fixed stars as a source of light. What can be understood from Cohn's presentation of mathematical formulas by a person with no mathematical education is, of course, limited. However, the necessity to use x, y and z coordinates as a measurement of points in space catches the eye in these pages, as does the need to look at the issue from two perspectives, from that of the *Erdbewohner* (earthling) and the other from the *Fixsternbewohner* (star dweller).⁴⁶⁵

Mondrian's text reflects something about the contrasting human and astronomical perspectives. The third *Scene* introduces these meanings to the art of painting. The perspective available for the human eye is no longer the starting point:

Z: Plastically, [the stars] *fill* the space: they *determine* it and thereby [the stars] accentuate the *relationship* [...] now we can *see* that there is another "reality" beyond trivial human activity [...] here all separateness ceases [...] and in contrast to the *changeability* of human *will*, we now contemplate the *immutable*.⁴⁶⁶

464 The light of a distant star travels such a long time in space that when it finally reaches our eyes, the original star may even have already disappeared. Therefore, what we see in that light, is the past of that star. See also Whitworth 2001, 176, 178.

465 Cohn 1920 (1910), 29.

466 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 89. Italics original.

Mondrian, with his use of italics, juxtaposes here the temporality of human actions and the eternal presence of the stars as a more profound state of reality. Besides giving up the human perspective and human standpoints, the words also convey meaning effects which suggest a step beyond the linear 'clock' time. In this way the starry sky refers to the simultaneity of the past and present, as I suggest, and hence to the acknowledgement of the original and immutable spirit of the world, common also in Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions, and which Jan Bor also notes in Mondrian's thinking.⁴⁶⁷

As already noted earlier, it is often difficult to know if Mondrian actually took a look at this kind of literature listed in *De Stijl*. However, since stars and galaxies can be found as motifs in the works of other *De Stijl* artists, I conclude that similar motives and tones are also present in Mondrian's text. Vantongerloo, the only artist among the group who actually had a mathematical education, probably showed the deepest interest in the issue of infinity, and this lasted his whole life. As late as the 1960s he considers the relation of astronomical galaxies and the limited view of the human perspective as something that profoundly changes the modes of perception:

While we are perceiving a phenomenon we believe we see it, yet we do not see its perpetual transformation. All is born, lives and dies for our senses, but not for the universe. But this segment of the infinite, this limited case, continues to belong to the infinite [...]. The aurora borealis, is it not magnificent? And yet we are still in our own planetary system. There are still the galaxies.⁴⁶⁸

For Vantongerloo, the sense of the incommensurable and the immeasurable became part of art making, and it was taken into possession by the cultural sign of the 'point to line to plane':

On ne peut pas déterminer la nature, c'est lui imposer un arrêt, mais si je dis équilibre, partage ou division pure du son et du silence, ou du volume avec le vide, soit l'angle, le nombre, l'harmonie, le rythme [...]. Il y a dans l'unité, le visible et l'invisible. L'invisible et une vibration ou mouvement perpétuel et peut se faire visible à notre esprit par un point, une ligne, un plan, un volume, qui en sont l'image ou le vestige de l'infini.⁴⁶⁹

467 Bor 2015, 110–111.

468 Vantongerloo's *Conception of Space II*. Cited in Vantongerloo 2009, (1960), 88–89.

469 Vantongerloo 1918 in *De Stijl*, I, .9, 1918, pp. 97–98. The English translation is my own.

(Nature cannot be determined, for that would bring it to a halt, but if I say equilibrium, distribution, or pure division of sound and silence or volume and void, or the angle, number, harmony, and rhythm [...]. In unity there is the visible and the invisible. The invisible is a vibration or perpetual motion and can make itself visible to our mind through a point, a line, a plane, a volume, which are the image or the trace of infinity.)

At the same time, the words exemplify contradiction (*tegenspraak*), where the oppositional elements in the field of vision are supposed to create a new kind of philosophical stance towards perception.⁴⁷⁰ This leads me to study the oppositional settings of *De Stijl* in terms of the semiotics of ‘silent elements’ in vision.

The starry sky motif is also present in van Doesburg’s iconic poem, *Nacht*⁴⁷¹ (see Figure 4). The poem invites readers to tune themselves to the immensity of sky space, which until now had been understood as a voiceless void and as a silent background to the visible world of objects. In this way oppositions are also introduced into the compositional setting:

Een zwarte aarde waarboven en rondom ‘n tuin met diamanten bloemen
glom, - waar perpen waren discht bestroid besprenkeld en besproeid
met glinsterend zaad, - een stille nacht bewegingloos en zonder kleuren
waarin het wonder der ontelbeerheid onpijlbeerheid in sterrenschrijf
geschreeven staat. Zoo’n nacht is dit...⁴⁷²

(Black earth, above and around which the garden of diamond flowers
glittered, where fields were densely sprinkled with glittering seeds. A
silent night, motionless, colourless, where the wonder of innumerableness
and immeasurability has been written in the stars. Such is this night...)⁴⁷³

Consequently, at the same time as the immensity, the incommensurableness of the starry sky suggests this “background” space, the universe, then being something that easily remains as unnoticed as a breeze of wind. Now this former background acquires its own voice which the reader is required to listen to:

470 According to Bor, in Mondrian’s case this kind of thinking can be compared with the Chinese philosophy of Laozi, where the world spirit, inaccessible by the thinking mind, is, however, attainable in the assemblies of oppositions (*tegenstelling*). See Bor 2015, 95, 114. Wiczorek tracks the origins of the unity of oppositions to Bolland’s writings, which in turn popularized Hegel’s dialects. *Tegendeelen* (oppositions) are coupled with each other in a unity. See Wiczorek 2012, 34–35.

471 The poem was part of the manuscript for I.K. Bonset’s *Nieuwe woordbeeldingen (kubistische en expressionistische verzen)*. It appeared in *De Stijl* in 1921. Although the manuscript is dated 1916, in *De Stijl* it is dated 1915

472 I.K. Bonset [van Doesburg] 1921 (1915), 168.

473 In my attempt to approximate the artistic content of the poem, I am grateful for the help of Rogier Nieuweboer.

Een zichtbaar stuk muziek van zwart en wit, – ’n nacht waarin de stilte als ’n oceaan dàn suist, dàn bruist dàn zingt of zoemt gelijk ’n bij die zweeft voorbij ’t oor. Hoort! Hoort! Zoo’n nacht is dit...⁴⁷⁴

(A visible piece of black and white music. A night, where silence as an ocean then is sighing, singing and rushing in the same way as a breeze passing by the ear. Listen! Listen! Such is this night...)

These citations exemplify how the movement away from the human-centred perspective and towards multiple perspectives became important within the *De Stijl* movement. In this the stars played a role in providing one possible way to talk about this shift. Starry skies brought the consciousness of immutable time into a work of art. Van Doesburg’s poem suggests listening to the spheres, which until then had remained silent. The poem brings this new view of cosmological relations alive, and the era started to understand silence as an important and creative force. William James, for example, in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) had described silence as the negative force in the flow of thoughts. Sound and its opposite, silence, was just one example among the many mutual positive and negative interrelations in the structures of the human mentality. For the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, silence like the background of white paper behind words, became an important medium of expression. Starry skies also offered a metaphor for Mallarmé, who had compared the black-on-white of printing with the “luminescent alphabet of stars” on the “dim field” of the heavens. For the sculptor Alexander Archipenko, silence spoke in the empty voids of sculpture.⁴⁷⁵

To suggest the response of Mondrian’s text to this new situation, my study will take one more look at Mondrian’s stars. It is the ‘perpendicular’ that forms the connection between the sensible world and the unreachable. The text strives to explain this by introducing the notion of the continuity of identical signs:

Z: [...] the stars are determinate sources of light no less than the moon. But the stars have the advantage of appearing as *points* and not as form, like the moon. The multitude of stars produces a *more complete* expression of relationship. As I said earlier, the primordial relationship must be plastically expressed in multiplicity to make us see it as a living reality. Simply to represent the horizontal and the vertical as a unity would naturally not be art: it would at best be a *symbol*.⁴⁷⁶

474 I.K. Bonset [van Doesburg] 1921 (1915), 168. My translation follows.

475 Kern 2003 (1983), 174–176.

476 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 90. Italics original.

I find it notable that here Mondrian's text speaks of a single case of the primordial relationship as a symbol, that is, as a sign. Furthermore, this symbol is inadequate to render the world around it if it lacks multiplicity. This suggests that the sign, the 'perpendicular', is supposed to do something by acting further in Mondrian's text, as I conceive it. Mondrian's text needs the idea of multiplicity in order to make the sign work meaningfully.

De Stijl artists brought mathematical and philosophical discourse into the realm of art. As Floyd Merrell notes, the crisis in physics brought about an unexpected crisis in language. "No language existed in which one could speak consistently about the new situation. The language available at the time was based upon old concepts of time and space."⁴⁷⁷ An irresolvable problem appeared, namely that by the 1920s ordinary and specialized language had become incompatible. Unexplained terms for which there were as yet no clear rules were used in vague and ambiguous ways.⁴⁷⁸ The artists attempted to describe this new world with the help of popularized mathematical and geometrical representations, such as Cohn's work and the pseudoscientific explanations of Schoenmaekers's books.⁴⁷⁹

The language of the dialogue reflects the need to speak in mathematical terms, so that the text changes stars into units of geometry, into points that can fix space. The text in a way comes back from the landscape to the reality of painting a canvas: "Z: As I already said, even though the isolated point is vague, these luminous points make indeterminate space determinate [...]. Y: It seems to me that the particularly serene expression of the starry sky arises from their geometric connections."⁴⁸⁰

Therefore, as in the new cosmological non-Euclidean world image, so too in Mondrian's text the definition of space begins by 'measuring' it with stars. Stars with imagined geometrical connections are like the set of lines between points on a continuous sheet of paper in a prototypical geometrical drawing. I suggest that this idea of multiplicity establishes a general sign. This would make possible the repetition of identical signs. It would also be conventional, being based on the commonly known instantiations of the 'point to line to plane'. Therefore, it would not refer to anything purely particular. The starry sky indicates the important relation between Mondrian's 'perpendicular' as an epistemological device and the signification of the continuum of signs.

As a concept, style implies something general and regular. Mondrian's text in its third *Scene* aims to establish the bases for form in Neo-Plasticism as a style. By reflecting on a starry sky, Mondrian's text makes an artistic interpretation from the idea of irreducible continuity. This grants the possibility of collecting a continuum

477 Merrell 1995, 189.

478 Merrell 1995, 112, 113.

479 For example, *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* (1915) and *Beginselen der beeldende wiskunde* (1916).

480 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 91.

of horizontal-vertical figures in one identity, which is the special characteristic of the concept of a type. According to Merrell, the kind of situation in which the new world image placed one, involved linguistic signs such as *generalities*, *regularities* and *universals*. These were vague concepts, but the purpose behind them was clear. An over-insistent drive for instant clarity would have been disastrous to the understanding.⁴⁸¹ Considering this, it is meaningful that, as mentioned, Mondrian prefers to speak using concepts that are abstract and general rather than clearly defining and unanimous in nature.

Consequently, I interpret the starry sky as a legisign, which Peirce defines thus: “A legisign is a law that is a sign. This law is usually established by men. Every conventional sign is a legisign. It is not a single object, but a general type which, it has been agreed, shall be significant. Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *Replica* of it.” Peirce provides this example to illustrate his idea: “The word ‘the’ will usually occur from fifteen to twenty-five times on a page. It is in all these occurrences one and the same word, the same legisign. Each single instance of it is a *Replica*.”⁴⁸² Therefore, the multiplicity of points with geometrical connections in Mondrian’s text is distinguished as being generic: “Z: Plastically, they *fill* the space: they *determine* it and thereby accentuate *relationship*.”⁴⁸³ Here the text gathers this continuity of single appearances into one identity thanks to the legisign, which makes possible the repetition of identical signs.

The starry sky, seen as multiplied horizontals and verticals, is like a mathematician’s geometrical solution, where the result can be seen at once without applying words. The tone and quality of the perpendicular sign was harmony and beauty. So, multiplying the horizontal-verticals is a transformation from tone to type. Consequently, it is at the same time “the transformation from the unstable pre-logic of the horizontal-vertical sign to stable logic”, as Stjernfelt says about the working of legisigns. They cover the phenomenology of logic.⁴⁸⁴ In Mondrian’s only explicitly autobiographical essay, written at a mature age in 1941, he confirms the generality of his ‘perpendicular’ as a logical outcome and a principle in art making: “Neo-Plasticism should not be considered a personal conception. It is the logical development of all art, ancient and modern; its way lies open to everyone as a principle to be applied.”⁴⁸⁵

481 Merrell 1995, 113.

482 Peirce 1903: “Syllabus”, EP2, 291. Peirce’s definition continues in the following way: “The *Replica* is a *Sinsign*. Thus, every legisign requires *Sinsigns*. But these are not ordinary *Sinsigns*, such as are peculiar occurrences that are regarded as significant. Nor would the *Replica* be significant if were not for the law which renders it so.”

483 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 89. Italics original.

484 Stjernfelt 2007, 26.

485 Mondrian 1986 (1941), 341.

Curves in Spaces

The strollers' conversation in the third *Scene* continues with the problem of curves. As can be expected, curves do not fit *Z*'s strict logic:

Z: The geometric can appear straight or curved. The straight is an intensification of the curved, which is more "natural". Many curved lines are discernible in the starry sky, giving it a naturalistic character and demanding intensification to straightness in order to annihilate this naturalism and to bring out its deepest power. In art, just as in pure conscious contemplation, we must *convert the curved to straightness*.⁴⁸⁶

These sentences are odd since the reader does not get to know what the text might actually refer to in this speech about curved lines in space. Could *Z* mean the curving brush strokes on the canvas of the painting representing a starry sky and Dutch dunes? Or are they the viewers' imaginative lines drawn with the mind's eye between the stars, which are as equally possible as the horizontal-vertical connections? Nowhere does Mondrian's text inform whether the strollers are looking at paintings in each *Scene*. Therefore, the reader easily considers the view to be a real scene, a feature that Mark Cheetham also acknowledges by calling the images 'partial fictions'.⁴⁸⁷ Here, I again find a kind of obscurity, as though Mondrian deliberately wished for some things to be left unsaid. In this way the text calls attention to itself; it is not transparent. With the talk of curved lines the text again combines geometry and the starry sky. It is as if the text lets the reader understand that the required vision does not merely apply to art, but also to other perceptual circumstances. This might evoke in the reader a wish to associate these lines about curves with contemporary findings in the field of astrophysics and to the rhetoric that made this science fashionable.

Mondrian's text might well have applied certain figures of speech as rhetorical means to show its *tijdsbewustzijn*.⁴⁸⁸ These figures of speech might have had a role as a sort of fulcrum in an artist's imagination. My study refers here to the motifs and research discoveries that already by the second half of the 19th century provided impulses to understand space as curved rather than as Euclidean three-dimensional space; in other words, the impulse towards non-Euclidean geometry.⁴⁸⁹ The issue became acute during the time when Mondrian's text appeared. Significant here is

486 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 91. Italics original.

487 Cheetham 1991, 55

488 Whitworth, for example, notices how some appropriations of non-Euclidean geometry adopted it quite casually in modernist literature, which sometimes represented speech as a kind of curve. See Whitworth 2001, 209–210.

489 Henderson 1983, 5.

Sir Arthur Eddington's famous work about curved space, which was developed in accordance with the principles of relativity. At the beginning of 1919, Eddington proved that the space near large objects, such as stars, bent or curved due to the gravity of that large object, and therefore space could no longer be understood in terms of Newtonian gravity.⁴⁹⁰ Although Eddington's observations were reported as a major story in newspapers throughout the world, the year of publication, 1920, was too late for Mondrian to refer to it in his articles.⁴⁹¹ However, the idea of curved space was already known before 1920 and Euclidean geometry was already under threat. According to Wieczorek, the "curves in the starry sky" have been influenced by Schoenmaekers's Hegelian urge to tense the curve into the straight line, *het volstreckte, volstreckte* meaning both "absolute" and "fully stretched out". Nature "expresses itself" through the curved, whereas the square (or the straight line) is in fact cultural.⁴⁹² Therefore, the rectangular relation as its "law" is a product of human culture. Nature and non-Euclidean space were both tied to the curve. The curvature in the painting hints at the cause of distortion. That space might be curved had a natural appeal to modern artists, since it invalidated the notion of linear perspective. Traditional means of rendering objects were hardly adequate any more as an object's absolute unchanging form could no longer be posited.⁴⁹³

Poincaré was famous for his pragmatism. He considered that depending on the problem that one tries to solve, and depending on the type of space that one perceives, there are different sorts of coordinate systems from which one chooses the most suitable.⁴⁹⁴ By continuing to think according to Poincaré's logic, I find myself questioning what the most suitable coordinate system for an artist might be. Here Vantongerloo's opinion can shed light on the reasons for the rejection of curves in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. Vantongerloo shows that for the *De Stijl* artists the idea of 'curves' was fundamentally tied to the dimensions of pictorial space. In the beginning years of *De Stijl*, Vantongerloo drew a clear distinction between the functions of the 'constructive straight line' and the curve,

490 Whittaker 1958, 188. In a universe such as Einstein's and Eddington's, there are no Euclidean straight lines, but the paths of rays of light play much the same part as straight lines do in Euclidean geometry, the chief difference being that they finally link together like the equator on a sphere. See also Eddington's *The Expanding Universe* (1933), chapter II "Spherical Space".

491 Eddington 1933, 1. The Dutch mathematician and astronomer Willem de Sitter was an important mediating figure between Einstein and Eddington during the First World War.

492 Wieczorek 1997, 44.

493 Henderson 1983, 5–6. 1867 witnessed the publication of Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann's now famous speech of 1854, in which the idea for another major type of non-Euclidean geometry was suggested. Riemann's broad view of geometry had suggested the possibility of surfaces or space where curvature might vary. Henderson reminds us that it was this type of non-Euclidean geometry that would be of greatest interest to artists in the early twentieth century like Marcel Duchamp and the Cubists. The proof of Euclid's fallibility could only add to the growing recognition in the nineteenth century of the relative nature of the mathematical or scientific 'truths' that man can discover.

494 Vink 1990a, 9.

which is itself 'dynamic' since it is "inconsistent at the level of a painting, as this is not itself a curve – and there, too, it is a threat to unity".⁴⁹⁵ Interpreted according to this principle, Mondrian's text forsakes curves because of the truthfulness of the artist's canvas to nature. Being flat it obviously cannot truthfully reflect a curved line, let alone curved space. It would be an illusion and therefore it would detach the painting from realism – from 'abstract realism' in Mondrian's meaning.

Until now I have considered Mondrian's starry sky only as a sign vehicle without taking the object of the sign into consideration. Let us at first look at what Peirce means by the object of the sign. According to Jørgen Dines Johansen: "It is anything that comes before thought or the mind in any usual sense. Peirce distinguishes two kinds of objects: the immediate object within the sign and the dynamical object outside it. The immediate object is the object as it is represented in, and by virtue of, the sign."⁴⁹⁶ In Mondrian's text the immediate object would merely be the representation of the geometrical figure of the perpendicular or, by thinking a little further, the diagrammatic sign of the horizontal earth and the vertical human posture derived from the sources Mondrian was acquainted with. Or thirdly, it could be the reader's memory of the first *Scene* of Mondrian's text, where it originates simply from the abstraction of the Dutch rural landscape. The immediate object is that which we see in the sign, whereas the dynamical object is the object independent of any specific representation of it: "the object as an outside force influencing semiosis", as Johansen notes.⁴⁹⁷

I suggest that the multiplied 'perpendiculars' in the starry sky have a dynamic object as its ultimate reference. They refer to the truth of the non-Euclidean nature of space as unreachable and incommensurable by the human senses. Thereby they depend on some sort of indirect representation, an immediate object, such as Mondrian's 'perpendicular', and Schoenmaekers's 'rectangle'. In other words, in order to communicate the sense of *tijdsbewustzijn*, Mondrian's text needs the idea of the sign, which is then able to arouse this dynamical object that otherwise would be impossible to render. It is a difference between what is perceived or known of the object – that is, the immediate object – and that which is not yet sensuously apprehended, as Johansen reminds us.⁴⁹⁸ Mondrian's text establishes continuity by the multiplicity of 'perpendicular' relations. When brought into the field of painting, it is this dynamical continuity on the deconstructed pictorial space of the canvas which leads to the space outside the canvas. The viewer is made to conceive

495 One of Vantongerloo's first texts appeared in the first issue of *Abstraction-Création*. According to Guitemie Maldonado, in it, Vantongerloo "stresses a knowledge of relation and ratios, the watchwords he shared with Neo-Plasticism: he seems to have rejected the curve, which was absent in his works at that time but liberally used by other members of *De Stijl*". See Maldonado 2009, 118.

496 Johansen 2002, 27.

497 Ibid.

498 Johansen 2002, 28

the artist's canvas as if it were a piece of a larger space. The harmony between the unmeasurable macrocosm and the perceiving human being can be encompassed:

Z: From the moment that we regard ourselves as part of *the whole* and no longer judge things only from our *temporary position*, and regard them from all possible positions – in short, as soon as *we begin to see universally*, then *we no longer see from one point of view*.⁴⁹⁹

The 'perpendicular' is a cultural unit and a kind of artefact, it does not belong to nature. It is popularized mathematical rhetoric to address the new world image in a situation where a more common figure of speech had turned out to be inadequate. It makes the observer aware of unreachable and incommensurable space. This former silent background has now suddenly acquired a voice of its own. The theory of relativity and the collapse of Euclidean geometry had brought this former silent element, space, into a new focus. Hence, the '*Triologue*' is an artist's text; it transforms Schoenmaekers's 'perpendicular' into the world of art. Beauty and harmony are its central aims but so too is truthfulness to the deconstructed pictorial space. Ultimately, beauty too is a reflection of cultural turmoil:

Z: It is the *beauty* of life that man is in harmony with his own vision. But even more valuable is *the truth* that man does *not remain* content with this harmony. I am sure that as your plastic awareness develops, you too will be compelled to tense the curved to straightness in your vision.⁵⁰⁰

Both Vantongerloo and Mondrian maintained into their mature age their confidence in these views. As a cultural sign, the 'perpendicular' is inevitably exposed to the changes of knowledge and therefore the relationship between this 'perpendicular' and its dynamical object may change as well.⁵⁰¹ Later in his life Mondrian, in fact, expressed his awareness openly about the cultural status of this 'dynamical object', but at the same time loaded it with the artist's eternal search for ultimate truth:

It is my conviction that humanity, after centuries of culture, can accelerate its progress through the acquisition of a truer vision of reality. Plastic art discloses what science has discovered: *that time and subjective vision veil the true reality*.⁵⁰²

499 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 99. Italics original.

500 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 92. Italics original.

501 Johansen 2002, 28.

502 Mondrian 1986 (1941), 341. Italics original.

Vantongerloo also acknowledges the meaning of this dynamical object:

Space no longer has dimensions. It is no longer our terrestrial space, it is the universe. And the beauty of all that can be expressed by means of art. Science is also aware of this. It, too, tries to approach the problem through the incommensurable.⁵⁰³

The dynamical object as a trigger brings the *tijdsbewustzijn* to Mondrian's horizontal-vertical design. By making this sign mediate between the world of senses and emotions and the new reality unreachable by the senses, Mondrian's text urges us to cope with art that reflects new cultural knowledge.

Old Light on the Canvas: Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey

As mentioned earlier, with the exception of one photograph, Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* was not illustrated at all. This photograph is placed opposite the starting page of the third *Scene*. Thus, it is as if it belonged to the *Scene* of the starry sky.⁵⁰⁴ It is a picture of Mondrian's abstract painting, *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* (1919) (see Figure 5). The name, *The Starry Sky* (*Sterrenlucht*),⁵⁰⁵ which we find in Mondrian's letters, does not apply to this particular painting as a name but as a motif, the name connecting the entire series of Mondrian's modular compositions, including this one.⁵⁰⁶ The photograph is, of course, black and white, so readers would be unable to form a complete idea of the painting. It is also quite small, and so the details of the painting are not shown. However, this photograph forms the nearest context to Mondrian's 'Trialogue' in *De Stijl*. The diamond format informally suggests that there is a link between the painting and Mondrian's text. To my mind, both the *Scene* of the starry sky and the painting ultimately probe the space as immeasurable. I also suggest that the *Composition* deals with time as an intuitive continuum. As my interpretation of the *Scene* has suggested, the motifs of starry skies were metaphors to handle the

503 Vantongerloo 2009 (1961), 90. An autobiographical essay, quoted in Vantongerloo's *Cosmology: A Selection of Texts* in *Georges Vantongerloo: A Longing for Infinity*.

504 *De Stijl*, II, 10 1919, p.108. The photograph is accompanied by the text: "Bijlage XIX van 'De Stijl' 2e jaargang No 10. Kompositie (1919), Piet Mondrian."

505 Mondrian's letters to van Doesburg April 18, 1919 and August 1, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

506 Joop Joosten in his *Catalogue Raisonné* notices that Mondrian referred in his letter to another painting (*Composition with Grid 8: Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colours*), a photo of which was meant to be published in *De Stijl* but which was then replaced by a photo of the *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey*. See Joosten 1998, II, 115. However, according to Wieczorek, the starry sky motif connects arguably to the entire series of ten modular compositions to which the diamonds belong. See Wieczorek 2012, 32.

new world image. Stars produce rays of light emanating from the distant past of those stars. When making the past seem present in our eyes, starlight introduced important metaphors into the modernist literature, as Michael H. Whitworth points out. The meaning effect here pointed to an experience of simultaneity between past and present.⁵⁰⁷ This is a cultural metaphor, the kind of meaning making that Wieczorek does not take into consideration when clarifying his conceptual approach to relativity theory in terms of relative time as opposed to absolute time.⁵⁰⁸

Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey belongs to a group of four diamond-shaped compositions dating from 1918 and early 1919 (see Figure 6). These are the first of Mondrian's paintings to be done in this special format.⁵⁰⁹ They consist of a square set on point and they are all based on a modular system of regular grids. The format is rather uncommon.⁵¹⁰ Blotkamp conceives the origin of these paintings in a manner which touches on the issue of perception. In this, the compositional problems presented by the regular grid and the heated debate between *De Stijl* artists concerning the admissibility of the diagonal line, played the biggest role.⁵¹¹

The painting gives an effect of delicate lightness. All the colours are apparently mixed with white, so that the greenish grey and ochre appear almost 'chalky'. The planes introduce a luminous effect, like light shining through the canvas. It is not only that the planes are of differing shades of grey and ochre, but that also within each plane the two colours gleam nearby and through each other. The brush strokes are heavy and visible. When these strokes bring the colours of ochre and grey into a low-luminance contrast, they set light effects in motion in the viewer's eyes. The effect is one of glowing luminosity and radiance.

Mondrian first painted diagonals in this painting. We see them faintly in the background, where they serve as a basis for the bolder horizontal-vertical figures. The silent regular background grid is more complicated than a viewer might expect at first sight. There are also faint lines within the coloured planes. The lines start from the middle point or from the corners of the planes and spread both diagonally and horizontal-vertically, thus giving the ray-impression of a star. As I read the motif in Mondrian's *Composition*, the rays of starlight evoke the meaning of posterity as simultaneously present in the current moment.

507 Whitworth 2001, 178, 181.

508 Wieczorek 1997, 181–183.

509 Mondrian writes about the the diamond-format in a letter to van Doesburg from June 1918. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

510 Meyer Schapiro, for example, compares Mondrian's diamond-form to memorial plaques or coat of arms that appear in seventeenth-century paintings of church interiors by Pieter Saenredam. See Schapiro 1978, 259 note 7.

511 Blotkamp 1994, 117.

The *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* does not refer to any particular object in the natural world.⁵¹² However, through the regularity and completeness of the grid, it arouses in the viewer an intuition of infinite continuity. In this way it probes space. The *Composition* suggests that the space of the canvas is defined. It is established and taken into the fleeting possession of the artist. The grid ties the vague single points on the canvas in the same way as one could imagine connections between the stars in the text. Mondrian's third *Scene* speaks about this as "one enduring whole": "Z: Plastically, [stars] fill the space: they determine it and thereby accentuate relationship. [...]. We see an individual whole; and in contrast to the changeability of human will, we now contemplate the immutable."⁵¹³ A little later Z says:

[...] even though the isolated point is vague, these luminous points make the indeterminate space determinate [...]. We see the primordial relationship between star and star in the changing relationships of dimension. We have only to order these harmoniously to see a true expression of equilibrium.⁵¹⁴

The painting employs not only diagonals, but also bold horizontal and vertical lines. These lines are superimposed on the regular grid, which seems to be dimming silently into the background. The two systems are at an angle of 45 degrees to each another. In line with Wieczorek, my interpretation of the pictorial space on the canvas suggests that Mondrian's lines are not symbols for the composition as a whole.⁵¹⁵ However, whereas Wieczorek argues in Hegelian terms for the deconstruction of pictorial space I would like to consider the time-experience, which, in fact, is also essential in Hegel's dialectic.⁵¹⁶ These bold horizontal-vertical lines direct the viewer's eye to the irregular movement. When following the movement the observer soon loses the image as a whole, since the eye has to concentrate on the irregularity. The experience is as if the bold lines were somehow the result of the viewer's own choice, as was Y's experience with clustered trees in the second *Scene*. The time aspect is also introduced in the viewer's perceptual

512 Mondrian wanted to avoid any kinds of systems in his paintings. The starry sky motif supported this notion: whoever saw a natural subject in it might be right, and so was he who saw him starting from an abstract motif. See Mondrian's letter to van Doesburg April 18, 1919. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

513 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 89. Italics original.

514 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 91. Italics original.

515 Wieczorek 2012, 30, 36. Wieczorek analyses Mondrian's first diamond composition, *Composition with grid 3: Lozenge Composition*, 1918, but not *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey*.

516 Wieczorek 2012, 38. Hegel's dialectic should be understood as unfolding in time and this is essential to the space idea in Neo-Plasticism.

experience. The wandering eye is lost in single moments of its horizontal-vertical movements. However, in the middle of this wandering, the observer has at the same time an intuition of continuity because of the dim grid. There is an intuition of the flow of time.

The experience of the *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* leads to a peculiar aspect of time-awareness. The bold horizontal and vertical lines produce singular moments of vision. However, because of the influence of a regular grid, these successive moments perpetually seem to be flowing into and out of each other. The wandering eye notices that when following the bold horizontal and vertical lines, no instant can resemble the next or the one before it, so that there is a perpetual change going on, but because of the influence of the regularity of the background grid this change is within one continuum. This comes close to how Henri Bergson described the idea of intuition, using the famous concept of *durée* (duration).

For Bergson stars also offered a metaphor for the new time awareness. The tail of the rapidly moving shooting star, divisible but sustaining indivisible motion, was a perfect way to represent metaphorically the concept of *durée*.⁵¹⁷ Bergson developed the notion of *durée* in his 1896 work, *Matière et mémoire*.⁵¹⁸ According to this concept, the temporal flow of changing moments within a continuum is independent of clock time. As Bergson characterizes the difference of duration from clock time, it is conceptualized as a spatial model, as a series of “states successively developed in time”.⁵¹⁹

Through this intuition the dynamical object of the painting, space/time, presents itself as a whole. Therefore, although the composition does not figuratively represent a starry sky, I would suggest that the viewer’s experience captures the same idea as Mondrian’s text in the third *Scene*. As the text says, the strollers, X, Y and Z, imagine drawing connecting lines from star to star. The time aspect is also included: “Z: [the new spirit] is increasingly capable of transforming the *moments* of contemplation into one moment, into a *permanent vision*.”⁵²⁰

The *Composition* is about simultaneity in two different experiences. Therefore, it describes this enduring aspect of time as an individual experience, as a flow of time. But simultaneously there is also an experience which only the intellect can grasp, namely time as linear. Linear time can capture a sequence of frozen frames but cannot know the flow. Instead of knowing duration, the bold horizontal and vertical lines tend to isolate moments. Only intuition – time as flowing – expressed through dim diagonals, has access to the starry sky as a whole.

517 Bergson 1968 (1922), 47–48.

518 The book was on the reading list of *De Stijl* magazine in 1919. See *De Stijl*, II, 6, 1919, p. 70.

519 Bergson 2007 (1896), 187, 243. Italics original.

520 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 90. Italics original.

The *Composition* is a synthesis. As a whole, it is about perception in its concrete form. The dim diagonals introduce an intuition of duration. It is like starlight which prolongs the past into the present and therefore partakes of memory. However, the focused attention, the bold lines, cut into duration. Bergson suggests that this kind of synthesis might work as a synthesis of the mind, since the mind is in touch with memory and instantaneous perception is in touch with matter.⁵²¹

3.5 The Turn to Non-figurative Art: The Sails of a Windmill

In the fourth *Scene of Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* the three strollers observe an image of a Dutch windmill. Mondrian's pretext emphasizes, in all its brevity, one item, a cross: "A windmill seen at very close range; dark, sharply silhouetted against the clear night sky; its arms, at rest, forming a cross."⁵²² As Gérard Genette points out concerning the role of descriptions, this pretext describes the vision, which is situated in a meaningful way in relation to the rest of the text.⁵²³ Therefore, as a starting point for the meaning effects of the dialogue, I intend to first study those meanings that the notion of a cross might introduce.

Mondrian emphasizes the motif of a cross. The motif may arouse several culture-specific meaning effects, such as those of the Christian cross, in which case the meanings implied would be sacrifice and death. In theosophy, however, the cross is a symbol of evolution and refers to the idea of life as recurrent (see my second chapter).⁵²⁴ Mondrian's text in the fourth *Scene*, in fact, acknowledges the strong cultural appeal of the form of the cross as a negative trait when speaking of the art of painting: "Z: Seen *plastically*, [the arms of the windmill] actually have a disadvantage. To the shape of the position, we readily attach a particular, rather *literary* idea. The cross form, however, is constantly destroyed in the New Plastic."⁵²⁵ However, I suggest that in the context of Mondrian's literary work, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, the term 'cross' also has a special, rather literary meaning. The meaning there is that it marks off a certain crucial moment in the action as a whole.

Using the cross motif Mondrian implies more than he lets his characters say. Take, for example, the lines where Z, the abstract artist, announces that objects have

⁵²¹ Bergson 2007 (1896), 243–245.

⁵²² Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99.

⁵²³ Genette 1969, 57, 60–61. According to Genette, the description may even be more indispensable than the narrative because it is easier to describe without narrating than to narrate without describing.

⁵²⁴ Blavatsky 1882, 508. See also Welsh 1971, 49.

⁵²⁵ Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99. Italics original.

to be discarded from painting. Here, the dialogue proposes the idea that figurative art gives way to non-figurative art. At this crucial moment in Mondrian's fourth *Scene*, the cross might well suggest ideas of death and sacrifice.

Another source concerning sacrifice that Mondrian was aware of is Giovanni Papini's novel, *Il pilota cieco* (The Blind Pilot [1907]). Papini's importance lies in the fact that Mondrian read Papini's book while he still was working on the 'Triologue'.⁵²⁶ The novel contains a fantasy story, *Il suicida sostituito*, which tells about a deed which resembles Christ's sacrifice. In the story, a friend has observed the narrator's dejection and intends to leave him with a memory that will help him discover his true self and his true destiny, proposing to sacrifice himself to save the life of the writer-narrator from mediocrity. In two days he will redeem his promise. The friend then disappears into the deserted foggy streets near the graveyard where this dialogue takes place.⁵²⁷ To speak about the new and the old in terms of life and death was not unusual. F.T. Marinetti, whose Futurist Manifesto was published in *Le Figaro* in 1909, also saw modern art to be at a turning point, comparing the old art in museums to graveyards.⁵²⁸ The notion behind Christ's sacrifice on the cross is that Christ dies in order that others might live. Mondrian's *Scene* is a turning point in the 'Triologue'. It, too, represents a kind of moment we recognize in Papini's story. In order to maximize the beauty of art, figurative art has to be 'sacrificed'.

Mathieu Schoenmaekers's thoughts on the cross are part of his philosophy of consciousness. Although Mondrian dismissed Schoenmaekers's influence, I still believe that some aspects of meaning systems always remain in the air, so to speak, at least in terms which were to some extent common to them both.⁵²⁹ In Schoenmaekers's *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* 1915 (The New World Image) human existence takes on a macro-historical scale on account of the notion of evolution, and evolution is tied to the cross construction in that "evolution as a vertical movement creates historical events as horizontal movement".⁵³⁰ Time (*tijd*) and space (*ruimte*) are also represented as horizontal and vertical movements.⁵³¹ In addition to this, Schoenmaekers also notices the general use of the cross as a religious symbol in the history of ancient Israel and Egypt. Not only is the cross, according to him, a

526 Reference is made to Papini's work in Mondrian's letter to van Doesburg on March 3, 1919. In a later letter from November 22, 1919, Mondrian says that as far as content is concerned Papini's *The Blind Pilot* is the best of the new books. The Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg. (0408) RKD.

527 Papini 1920 (1907), 253–263.

528 Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909, in Paris. See Marinetti 1973 (1909), 22.

529 Marek Wieczorek argues that the Hegelian tenets in Schoenmaekers's thinking are the primary source for Mondrian's ideas and terminology. See Wieczorek 2012, 34.

530 Schoenmaekers 1915, 83–84.

531 Schoenmaekers 1915, 72–73.

mystical explication of the recognition of expressive and creative life, (*beeldend leven*),⁵³² it is also a religious symbol of the “cross of Golgotha”. When considering the construction of the cross Schoenmaekers claims it is an exact representation of a concept (*een exacte begripvoorstelling*).⁵³³ The cross of Golgotha, however, is not yet the exact conceptual representation of perceivable reality (*aanschouwde constructie der natuurwerkelijkheid*). According to Schoenmaekers, it is an obscure archetype of perceivable reality as human beings have always dimly realized the perceivable reality of nature in terms of horizontal and vertical relations.⁵³⁴

I would suggest that what takes place in Mondrian’s *Windmill Scene* could be interpreted not only in the light of Schoenmaekers’s Hegelian modifications and their significance for creative life but also by Steiner’s ideas of conceptual knowledge, since both influenced Mondrian and were part of his intellectual milieu. Wiczorek admits this as possible but does not focus on Steiner’s conceptions concerning this matter.⁵³⁵ My purpose, however, is not to suggest that Mondrian’s text presents a Steinerian evolutionary path to ‘higher knowledge’. The stroller’s discussion, after all, is strictly about art and about a certain way of seeing. But what can be asked is to what extent does Mondrian’s text intersect with sign systems that relate to theories of consciousness like Steiner’s?

The Perpendicular Replaces the Cross

In this dialogue the word ‘cross’ undergoes a change in meaning, signalled in *Z*’s opening lines: ‘*before I...but now I...*’. *Z*’s perception of horizontal-vertical forms has changed: “In my early work [...], to return to this windmill, I was particularly struck by the cross formed by its arms. Now, however, I discern the perpendicular in everything, and the arms of the windmill are no more beautiful to me than anything else.”⁵³⁶ Steiner presents the ways in which the human mind forms conceptual knowledge from sensuous perceptions, and such ideas can help us understand the sudden shift that *Z* makes from the ‘cross’ to the ‘perpendicular’.

According to Steiner, ordinary sensory knowledge has four elements: “1) The object which makes an impression upon the senses; 2) the image which the human being forms of this object; 3) the concept through which human beings arrive at a spiritual comprehension of an object or an event; and 4) the ‘I’ which forms for

532 Schoenmaekers 1915, 82.

533 Schoenmaekers 1915, 86. The reader finds the word ‘exact’ in abundance in Mondrian’s writings. Stemming from Schoenmaekers’s ‘life-words’ it refers to his exact definition of the planes, but also in a deeper sense to the Hegelian idea of the spirit becoming self-conscious and associated with ‘life’. See Wiczorek 1997, 56–57.

534 Schoenmaekers 1915, 83, 85–86, 89.

535 Wiczorek 1997, 156–157. Note 273.

536 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99.

itself the image and concept based on the impression of the object.”⁵³⁷ Recalling that earlier in this chapter I applied Peirce’s “The Law of Mind”, in which memory plays a role, it is noticeable that the memory is also important in Steiner’s ‘concept formation’:

As long as we are looking at an object, we are dealing with the thing itself. The moment we turn away from it, we are left with only the *image*. The object is relinquished; the image is retained in the memory. But one cannot stop here at the image-making stage. One must go on to “concepts.” The distinction between “image” and “concept” is absolutely necessary if we are to be clear at this point.⁵³⁸

I suggest that what takes place in Mondrian’s *Scene* is a Steinerian ‘turning away’ from the objects of the natural world.⁵³⁹ The first sign of this takes place at the beginning of the *Scene*. Here the windmill seems to distort or vanish because the strollers are too close to it, so that they lose the windmill as an object:

Z: Indeed, I find this windmill very beautiful. Particularly now that we are too close to it to view it in *normal perspective* and therefore cannot see it or draw it *normally*. From here it is very difficult merely to reproduce what one sees: one must dare to try *a freer mode of representation*.⁵⁴⁰

Z also speaks quite openly about turning away from objects: “When the object dominates, it always limits the emotion of beauty ... *that is why the object had to be discarded from the plastic*.”⁵⁴¹ Z at first sees the windmill sails as the form of a cross. Then, looking closer, the vision is obscured but the picture of the cross is retained in the memory. So far, one has not yet acquired the ‘concept’ of the cross form. It will, however, become a concept when Z defines it more exactly by speaking of the *perpendicular*.

The ‘perpendicular’ is a term in Euclidean geometric mathematics when lines cross at an angle of ninety degrees. There are many kinds of crosses – Greek crosses, Roman crosses, crosses with lines at different angles, and so forth – but there is, however, only one concept of the perpendicular. In this way the perpendicular could

537 Steiner 2009 (1914), 2.

538 Steiner 2009 (1914), 3. Italics original.

539 Mondrian was enchanted by the metaphor of ‘blindness’, common to both the title of Papini’s book, *The Blind Pilot*, and to Steiner’s ‘spiritual seeing’. For Mondrian ‘blindness’ stood for intuition. See Janssen 2016, 58–60 and van Paaschen 2017, 17.

540 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99. Italics original.

541 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 100. Italics original.

correspond to Schoenmaekers's claim for the exact representation of a concept (*een exacte begripvoorstelling*) when considering the cross construction. In other words, the 'perpendicular' is like a visual concept for *Z* – it combines beauty-relevant sense impressions.

The accuracy associated with the perpendicular is of a mathematical kind, and this is the meaning that the text uses. It is an act of the human intellect. According to Henri Poincaré, profound beauty, the kind which comes from the harmonious order of its parts, is what pure intelligence can grasp and knows best how to handle.⁵⁴² As also Bergson reminds us in line with Peirce, the intellect bears within itself a 'latent geometrism'.⁵⁴³ But for what artistic reasons might Mondrian need that kind of accuracy? As is generally known, sense impressions cannot be distinguished from the concept which defines them. However, when a concept like the 'perpendicular' has been established, as it is in the *Windmill Scene*, then sense impressions can be ignored. Mondrian's text takes off from the idea which it sees as the most important. This it does with mathematical exactness, confidently discarding the sense impressions of objects in the natural world. In this way, Mondrian's modification of the 'perpendicular' becomes a means for logical thinking, a concept connected even to entities which are yet unrealized. It is applicable, for example, as an element of Neo-Plasticism which, as a type of non-figurative art, was considered an emerging future entity at that time.

In the *Windmill Scene* the discussion discards bit by bit all the traditional elements of painting, including perspective, imitative colours and the objects of the natural world.⁵⁴⁴ Mondrian's mathematical design, the 'perpendicular', is the thing that survives in *Z*'s talk precisely because it is a notional concept, and I would suggest that the 'perpendicular' appears here in this *Scene* for this specific purpose. Therefore, the 'perpendicular' is not the result of the abstraction of horizontal and vertical features of the landscape or windmill blades but constitutes direct access to the pictorial elements of Neo-Plasticism. As Steiner reminds us, "Understanding of a thing is attained only when we have formed a 'concept' of it".⁵⁴⁵

The topic of colours in this and in the following *Scene* is meaningful when thinking of Mondrian as a producer of an art theory. The topic of colours in terms of light and dark may be satisfactory for a black and white drawing but not for colour that calls for another colour to oppose it. With this in mind, the topic of primary colours in the next *Scene* reflects Mondrian's reborn interest in Goethe's colour

542 Poincaré 1909, 15.

543 See Bergson 2016 (1907), 195 and a quote from Peirce's "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism" (1906) cited in Stjernfelt 2007, 93.

544 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99–100.

545 Steiner 2009 (1914), 3.

theories.⁵⁴⁶ However, the paintings Mondrian created at the time he was writing the *‘Trialogue’* do not reflect these theoretical considerations of colours. Primary colours do not return to Mondrian’s paintings until 1920, when he composed a series which also included his first Neo-Plastic composition.⁵⁴⁷ This might mean that Mondrian worked with his ideas on Neo-Plasticism even earlier in his writings than in his paintings.⁵⁴⁸

The reader encounters the theme of ‘inward-seeing’ recurrently in many *Scenes*, including in this *Scene*, where it continues the discussion of colours and therefore suggests the coherence of the topics:

Z: Inwardly we see quite otherwise than visually. But inward vision is not always *conscious*, and when it is not conscious – despite the spontaneity and greater freedom of inner vision – in our expression we still cling more or less to optical vision ... particularly when our first emotion is over. [...] Let us keep in mind that aesthetic vision is something other than ordinary vision.⁵⁴⁹

In the matter of colours, Mondrian ‘inflects’ or develops the form of Goethe’s proposition by introducing the notion of ‘interiorization’. This kind of ‘inflection’ is already present in Mondrian’s earlier text, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917).⁵⁵⁰ Among Mondrian’s terms, the concept of ‘interiorization’ seems to have been one of the most difficult to interpret. It has led to various interpretations.⁵⁵¹ These interpretations usually focus on only one reference and miss the larger perspective of the contemporary cultural ethos. As discussed in chapter 2, the intellectual milieu of the time produced a number of models of perception and consciousness, Schoenmaekers’s and Steiner’s models being only one of many. These models sought to restore the experience as something that endured, as, for

546 Mondrian may have heard of Goethe’s *Zur Farbenlehre* through Rudolf Steiner’s lectures in Amsterdam in March 1908. Mondrian’s sudden interest in primary colour in a number of canvases as early as 1908–1909 might stem from these lectures. See van Paaschen 2017, 35.

547 Mondrian’s *Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray*, 1920, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. See Joosten 1998, II, 45; Bois 1994, 320.

548 Mondrian sent the fourth *Scene* to be published in November 1919. See Veen 2011, 107.

549 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 100. Italics original.

550 Bois 1994, 319.

551 Mark Cheetham takes the idea of ‘interiorization’ from the field of Neoplatonism (Cheetham 1991, 52). Marek Wieczorek notices that Cheetham does not link the idea of memory to ‘interiorization’ but situates the term merely within the Hegelian model of *expression* through recollection. According to Wieczorek, in this paradigm we can conceive of Mondrian’s abstractions as being visible ‘recollections’ of the mind or spirit coming into self-consciousness (Wieczorek 1997, 161–165. Italics original). Bor, for his part, points to the Oriental aspects in Mondrian’s ‘philosophy’ with his idea of giving up ‘thinking’ and the representational aspects of perception. Thus, ‘interiorization’ means losing oneself in perception, so that the thinking subject does not interfere with the unfiltered aspect of reality (Bor 2015, 88, 90).

example, we see in Bergson's thinking. What seems to be common to them is an appeal to memory and to continuity. The cultural ethos is not insignificant as the impetus for human beings to become interested in the ideas and thinking of other intellectual fields is widespread. Wiczorek rightly reminds us that the original Hegelian term underwent several transformations, first from Hegel to Bolland, then to Schoenmaekers and finally to Mondrian, who uses the word 'interiorization'.⁵⁵² Something is lost in the translation while new 'inflections' arose. What should to my mind be asked are what are the interpretative principles of the phenomenon which connect Mondrian's thinking to interactions among a number of human actors, even in different fields?

I suggest that the strollers' close-looking in this *Scene* signifies an inward experience. Steiner's idea of imagination depends upon the notion of 'inward-seeing':

The esoteric student has to learn – not only to look at things from outside, but also to observe them as if we ourselves were within all of them. [...] Here in the physical world we are accustomed to something quite different. Here we view all other things only from outside, but we experience ourselves only from the inside. As long as we remain in the physical world we can never see behind the surface of things.⁵⁵³

According to Steiner, the feeling of being *within* the image belongs to the imagination.⁵⁵⁴ The idea also coincides with pictures within the field of art, as Sixten Ringbom interprets.⁵⁵⁵ It is through this kind of experience rather than Steiner's supra-natural ways of seeing, that close-looking should be interpreted in the *Windmill Scene*. But Steiner's insights provide the required principles. Van Doesburg also appears to be familiar with this idea of imagination, since he wished to create works of art where he wanted "to place the man within (instead of opposite) the painting".⁵⁵⁶

Furthermore, looking closely focalizes a situation in which the conscious reflective vision is obscured. Z, for example, speaks of the difficulty of drawing. Drawing is an act which depends upon reflective vision. Therefore, the strollers' vision is here, in a way, beyond the mind's control. Oddly, the beauty of the windmill increases, as the strollers note, while the object of vision seems to vanish away. In other words, viewing from one pinpoint focus has become impossible for the

552 Wiczorek 1997, 164.

553 Steiner 2009 (1914), 29.

554 Ibid.

555 Ringbom 1970, 137–138.

556 Van Doesburg 1918. Cited in Troy 1984, 649.

strollers. It is not easy to try to visualize the ‘written image’ like this. Mondrian’s 1910 painting, *The Mill*, could arguably correspond to the strollers’ vision and discussion (see Figure 7).⁵⁵⁷ As in the text, so too the colours in this painting do not imitate the objects of the natural world, and the windmill is depicted almost without perspective. In addition, since the background is almost hazy in its darkness, one can barely distinguish here where the ground ends and the sky begins; the windmill seems to be hovering in the air, in blue infinite space without a sensation of gravity. In the psychology of artistic creativity it is acknowledged that artistic imaginative vision requires the abandonment of the single perspective.⁵⁵⁸ According to Anton Ehrenzweig’s psychoanalytic approach, the conscious attention with its pinpoint focus can attend to only one thing at a time, and this introduces difficulties into image making. Only the extreme un-differentiation of the unconscious vision can avoid these problems.⁵⁵⁹

I suggest that Mondrian’s text leads the reader to acknowledge the experience of ‘presentness’ in this theoretical pondering of the artist’s ‘interiorized’ vision. It is possible to approach this kind of experience through Peirce’s notion of iconicity. By ‘presentness’ I mean an experience of which Peirce speaks as a condition for poetic experience. Iconicity not only refers to the likeness between the object and the sign but also, like the phenomenological category, to the immediate presence of an experimental quality, the pure image-experience: “The poetic mood approaches the state in which the present appears as it is present.”⁵⁶⁰ However, what is important in the citation above is that, according to Mondrian, the search and the recognition of this kind of inward vision should be conscious in the artist. This takes me back to the critical notions of ‘the innocent eye’ and its relation to Peirce’s firstness category in my Introduction. In fact, speaking of this ‘presentness’ is possible only in the category of secondness. Therefore, Mondrian claims that the artist’s consciousness should be included in the inward vision. In this way, it would only be the aspect of secondness that gives grounds for this poetic ‘presentness’, which is perfectly in line with Peirce’s notion of the unattainable quality of firstness.

In the *Windmill Scene* Mondrian tackles the poetics of ‘presentness’. This is the paradigmatic idea which can be widely seen in the tradition of formal-analytical interpretation. It includes the claim that one can have a sheer experience of seeing. As such, it denied the possibility that the painting referred to something else and had a meaning which stemmed from outside the image. In my Introduction I discussed this as a tradition that saw painting as relying on self-referential means and on

557 See also Henkels 1986, 52.

558 Ehrenzweig 1967, xii–xiii: Up to a point, any truly creative work involves casting aside a sharply crystallized mode of rational thought and image making.

559 Ehrenzweig 1967, 21–22.

560 EP2, 149–150.

the originality of an experience. However, in this sense the idea of ‘presentness’ would seem to be rather controversial in Mondrian’s text.

Mondrian’s inward vision is not a vision applied by ‘the innocent eye’. In fact, Mondrian’s ‘inward vision’ is a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision rather than a mechanical process that would be uncontaminated by the imagination. As my interpretation of Mondrian’s *Windmill Scene* has shown, the ‘presentness’ as a condition for an experience of a work of art had to be learnt and brought into Mondrian’s thinking from elsewhere. As my study suggests, it might have been produced from paradigms, which include, for example, Steiner’s or Bergson’s statements about imagination and intuition and losing oneself ‘in the picture’ or from Schoenmaekers’s Hegelian ‘planar space’.

The focalized vision in the *Windmill Scene* is in symbolic relation to the rest of the dialogue. It cannot be separated from the other meaning effects in this particular *Scene*. In this sense, the dialogue follows the same kind of binary pattern as focalization offers to the reader. Just as I considered the painting of the windmill to be poised between figurativeness and abstractness, it appears that the dialogue, too, seems to hesitate between two worlds. What takes place in the conversation shows this in the argument between *X*, the traditional painter, and *Z*, the abstract painter. Turning away from depicting the objects of the natural world is not an easy thing to accomplish. *X*, the figurative artist, insists and tries to cling to the old idea of painting:

X: But surely we don’t see that way? [...] X: But many magnificent things have been done without this exaggeration! [...] X: We do see a great deal of exaggeration today, but it could simply be imitative. X: But to return to the windmill, if you found it satisfactory to exaggerate the colour, why didn’t you continue to work in that way, why did you discard all forms?⁵⁶¹

X’s hesitation here refers to why it is so difficult merely to start to depend on the imagination. As Steiner reminds us, the imaginative world is at first only a ‘picture world’: “ ... upon entry into that world [the world of the imagination], human beings in a certain sense lose the ground beneath their feet. The source of their security in the physical world is for the moment and to all appearances entirely lost.”⁵⁶² According to Steiner, physical reality is the ‘rock’ upon which the vision can be tested. The rock falls away when the imaginative world is entered.⁵⁶³ So, in the dialogue it is *X* who does not want to lose this ‘rock’ but weighs up

561 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 100.

562 Steiner 2009 (1914), 22.

563 Steiner 2009 (1914), 25.

things and is suspended between the two ‘art worlds’. There is also a struggle in the dialogue about weighing up between the old and the new art world. According to Nelson Goodman, this weighing is a necessary process when considering the change between the old and the new, between what is relevant in this change and what is not, and what must be saved from one world to another when building a new world.⁵⁶⁴

The *Windmill Scene* represents the crucial decision to give up picturing the objects of the natural world. It is as if the decision would not be possible without, on the one hand, the emphasis on imagination and, on the other hand, without the security which the mathematical exactness of the concept of ‘perpendicular’ offers.⁵⁶⁵ The reference to the imagination works here as the basis for artistic licence to proceed towards abstract art. It is meaningful that this *Scene* brings the elements of conscious sharply focused thought based on the old cultural co-operation of humankind, and highly undifferentiated modes of perception, into the same *Scene* and image. Hence, Mondrian shows he is able to alternate between these elements and to harness them together, which is the sign of a creative thinker.⁵⁶⁶ Chapter 5 will continue with the significance of this combination in more detail. For my study, this *Scene* confirms the notion discussed in section 3.1 that intelligent processes in human activity transcend the boundaries of the individual actor.

3.6 Human Faculties: The Shaped Garden

The pretext in the fifth *Scene* is simple. “A garden with artificially shaped trees and hedges. A house.”⁵⁶⁷ From an artist’s point of view the image is about the interaction of organic natural forms and the shapes which we usually only see in the world of human culture. This image suggests that the strollers’ journey has arrived at the point where the sharp distinction between nature and the city is abolished so that nature and the effect of human actions become intermingled. Whereas nature is usually considered a largely non-human world where much of what happens takes place independently of human agency, the garden exemplifies practical skill or the craft of producing aesthetically pleasing surroundings with plants, rocks, soil and so forth.⁵⁶⁸ Instead, the following dialogue takes the meanings of shaping into the field of art when it concentrates on the art of sculpture.

564 Goodman 1978, 10–12.

565 The idea is in line with the way that Mondrian expressed his esoteric insights. Cited in van Paaschen 2017, 98.

566 Ehrenzweig 1967, xii.

567 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 100.

568 Parsons 2008, 120.

The *Scene* is about modelling and giving forms. The shaped trees naturally lead the strollers' discussion to the character of sculpture as the art of three-dimensional space.

Z: This garden takes us from painting to *sculpture*. Sculpture deals with the third dimension in a different way than painting [...]. The sculptor has to seek straightness in three dimensions. Therefore his plastic is corporeal, although he can reduce the *roundness characteristic of all form* to the prismatic [...].⁵⁶⁹

The reply seems to reflect what Rudolf Steiner said about sculpture. Steiner presented sculpture as starting from Euclidean space whose three dimensions correspond to corporeality and the physical organism of the human being. However, Steiner also described another space beyond three-dimensionality, "as though surface forces from all direction of the universe were approaching the earth and, from without, were working plastically on the forms upon its surface".⁵⁷⁰ Mondrian's text does not speak about these kinds of supernatural spaces. Nor does this text suggest here the Steinerian principles of sculpting in which the sculptor or architect seeks the basic model for the work of art from nature's own organic growth rather than depending upon straightened forms which are man-made. Rather, in this *Garden-Scene* Mondrian's text seems to be representing the idea of turning away from nature when it replaces naturally-growing trees with man's own artificial modelling. The tendency towards de-naturalism seems in fact to characterize the *De Stijl* movement as a whole.⁵⁷¹ In addition, the difference between these two styles should be obvious when observing the finished products of sculpture and architecture within Steinerian anthroposophy and when comparing them to Mondrian's claims for straight lines and for the outcomes of real sculpture and architectural work within the *De Stijl* group in general.⁵⁷² In fact, the obvious difference in the starting points and the outcomes concerning sculpture leads me to question the influence of Steiner's ideas on Mondrian's text.

Knowing, though, how important Steiner's ideas were for Mondrian, and remembering his letter to Steiner in 1921,⁵⁷³ I find it peculiar in this particular matter of sculpture that the basic difference between the *De Stijl* style and that of anthroposophy seems to be considerable. For Mondrian, Steinerian design seems

569 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101. Italics original.

570 Rudolf Steiner: *Die Bildende Kunst*, a lecture at The Hague in 1922. Cited in Kugler 2011, 34.

571 Jaffé 1956, 188.

572 See also van Paaschen 2017, 135, 143.

573 Mondrian's letter to Steiner in 25 February 1921. One of the few remaining books on Mondrian's bookshelf after his death was Steiner's Dutch lectures from 1908.

to me remote as a form-giving principle even though Mondrian's stroller, *Z*, speaks about reducing "the roundness characteristic of all form to the prismatic"⁵⁷⁴ and even though the Steinerian style supports prismatic forms especially in the design of furniture.⁵⁷⁵ There might be a natural reason for this. According to Kugler, Mondrian's letter to Steiner was possibly the reason why Steiner first set out his theory of sculpture in a lecture at The Hague in 1922.⁵⁷⁶ However, the fact the *Triologue* was written earlier than Steiner's lecture at the Hague means of course that Mondrian could not have included these Steinerian ideas of sculpture into his text as such.

The dialogue about the sculpture in Mondrian's text is brief. Therefore, rather than considering the Steinerian references they may contain, my interpretation instead looks at the fifth *Scene* rather as a certain phase in the narrative as a whole. At this point I come back to where I started, namely, to the idea of man-made forms and to the notion of human beings as creators. I suggest that in this *Scene* Mondrian's text introduces human action as an essential part of how the relation between a human being and nature is conceived.

The *Scene* emphasizes the human faculty of taking control over the capriciousness of nature. The strollers also speak about man-made attempts to relate to nature and the intensification and generalization of forms. Again, as in the second *Scene*, the interest of the conversation is in the subject-object relationship between the thinking human mind and nature somewhere 'out there'. Instead of the hopeless gap in this relation, which Mondrian's text noticed in the second *Scene*, here another type of experience is now acknowledged. The strollers consider it to be the possible human effect and influence upon nature: "Z: [...] Man has sought to establish a connection between himself and nature, and so he has 'altered' nature. The character of this transformation shows once again man's drive toward intensification."⁵⁷⁷

In this journey from the rural countryside to the city, the place of this *Scene* is meaningful. It is situated at the midpoint of the journey, accompanied by an image representing both natural and man-made forms. It is as if two images were affecting the stroller's perception at one and the same time, as if they were superimposed on each other in the same scene; one image is of natural forms and the other of stylized and straightened, or 'tautened', forms:

574 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101. According to Wieczorek, geometry is not important to Mondrian for its forms but for the logic of the forces which can be seen at work most clearly, for example, in such simple shapes as crystals. See Wieczorek 1997, 43–44.

575 See, for example, Oswald Dubach's interiors or Herman Ranzenberger's anthroposophic style furniture in Mateo Kries 2011, 202–258.

576 Kugler 2011, 34.

577 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101. Italics original.

X: But the tautening we see here is *not* to *straightness*: notice those rounded forms.

Z: Thus the tautening is only half complete, one might say – actually we cannot speak here of *intensification* [...]. Thus we see here just as in capricious nature, relationship *through form*, not relationship *in itself* and therefore not *pure* relationship.⁵⁷⁸

The allusion to ‘tautening’ and ‘intensification’ reveals the influence of Schoenmaekers’s Hegelian-based terms to represent how natural forms can be transformed into horizontal and vertical shapes, involving ‘perpendicular’ relationships and the aesthetics of Neo-Plasticism. Therefore, this image with its shaped trees in a way cherishes the idea of a human being as a creator and as an active element that contributes to his own world.

The *De Stijl* movement cherished an optimistic belief in the faculties of human development, a consciousness of man’s own means in this development.⁵⁷⁹ Such ideas represented a small branch of a common feature in pragmatist philosophy according to which faith is a tendency to act upon a revisable ideal, or generalized *ends-in-view*, as articulated, for example, in William James’s and John Dewey’s pragmatism. This form of pragmatism had a tendency towards action.⁵⁸⁰ The Italian pragmatic philosophical circles of the 1900s also emphasized a general theory of human action. Action enfolds the idea that human beings create. They do not merely contemplate nature ‘out there’ and ‘discover’ or ‘reveal’ things and truths. As suggested in the second chapter of my study, Italian influences were current at the time when Mondrian was writing his *Triologue*. This pragmatic influence might possibly have been mediated not only through Theo van Doesburg, who was active in creating links throughout Europe, but also through Giovanni Papini’s works.

As mentioned earlier, Mondrian was reading Florentine Giovanni Papini’s *Il pilota cieco* (The Blind Pilot [1907]) at the same time as he was writing *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, Papini’s work being written in his pragmatic period and translated into Dutch in 1908. *Due immagini in una vasca*, a short story Papini included in *The Blind Pilot*, throws an interesting light on Mondrian’s text. Moreover, van Doesburg’s retrospective acknowledgement in the periodical, *Het Bouwbedrijf*, (1924-1931), suggests that *De Stijl*, as an artist group and as a style, was influenced by Italian pragmatism. To van Doesburg, Mondrian’s general aesthetics on the straight line and the orthogonal system, the promotion of this concept in

578 Ibid.

579 Jaffe 1956, 63.

580 Eldridge 1998, 141.

the *De Stijl* periodical in direct communication of practical construction and his own Elementarism represented the final historical completion of the influence of a “new pragmatic life philosophy”.⁵⁸¹

Two Images in a Pond

Both Mondrian’s fifth *Scene* and Papini’s fantasy story, *Due immagini in una vasca* (“Two Images in a Pond”), involve observing the image of a garden. In both texts we find the same kind of retrospective character. Mondrian in 1919 would seem to be reflecting on his own journey back from the bustling metropolis of Paris to a small village in the Netherlands and after the war years from there back to Paris again. Similarly, the narrator in Papini’s story is returning from the big city and paying a visit to a small town of his youth, where nothing has changed since his departure.

The narrator in Papini’s text is easily able to find again a forgotten garden with a pond, which used to be one of his most beloved places in this little town. He sits by the pond, where the leaves of the previous autumn quietly move, sink and rise. He looks at his own reflection in the water until the image seems to detach itself from his own body and becomes part of the pond for all eternity.⁵⁸² On one occasion, he suddenly sees another reflection, another face in the water beside his own. “I know that you are me – me a long time ago, I thought he was dead...,”⁵⁸³ says the narrator to this other face without anxiety or astonishment. Two images in a pond, the old self and the new self reflected at the same time. This is how I conceive of the retrospective look that Mondrian gives to his own garden in the fifth *Scene*. In Mondrian’s painting of a Dutch garden, two images confront each other, an image of nature and of human action. Two attitudes to nature are also presented – growth and pruning. Two ‘philosophical’ images, moreover, confront each here: the trees and hedges refer to nature and to the awareness of the old passive contemplative attitude of man’s relation to the world around him. Shaping and pruning, on the other hand, indicate human actions in this relation, and a fresh pragmatic theory of action of which van Doesburg had spoken.

In Papini’s short story two souls, one old one new, spend a few days of unforeseen joy together.⁵⁸⁴ The old soul is fascinated and wishes to stay a little while with the new soul since the new soul has left his soul in the pond in the garden.⁵⁸⁵ However, little by little ‘the new self’ begins to experience increasing feelings of loathing and hatred due to the ignorance and naivety of the old self. The old soul is excited about

581 Van Doesburg 1986 (1929), 229.

582 Papini 1920 (1907), 126.

583 Papini 1920 (1907), 128.

584 Papini 1920 (1907), 129.

585 Papini 1920 (1907), 128.

theories which are now defunct and has a provincial enthusiasm for people and things whose names the new self had already forgotten. The old soul is also unable to understand the more recent views of beauty, whereas the new soul cannot feel the joy of romantic moonlight scenes like the old self still could.

Mondrian's enthusiasm for the story is easy to understand. Mondrian could draw parallels with his own life – particularly the movement between the city and the 'countryside'. Two faces in a pond is a moment of self-reflection. Papini's story may also have led Mondrian to ask who he was as an artist at that particular time in his life. Papini's story also connects the city with the future from which the 'new self' momentarily returns to the old garden. Not only this *Scene* but Mondrian's text as a whole reflects in its moonlit scenes the same 'old self' as Papini's two images in a pond. In the sixth *Scene*, electric man-made light points to the city, that is, to the future in the strollers' journey. In Mondrian's articles moonlit landscapes correlate with the art to which Papini's 'old me' is attached. The night scenes evoke dreaming, whereas electric lights symbolize consciousness and waking from a dream world. Thus, van Doesburg writes that in 1914 the architecture manifesto of the Italian Antonio Sant'Elia maps the "new awareness of art": "stripped of all dreaminess and vagueness the new principle grew, chastened in practice, into a sound and real construction method".⁵⁸⁶

Thus, I suggest, there is a kind of pragmatic meaning effect in the fifth *Scene* which can be compared with Papini's short story. Mondrian's garden with its pruned trees refers to man's power to make his own world instead of standing by merely contemplating it, like the strollers observing the moon or the starry skies. Therefore, even though Steiner's influence on Mondrian is clear,⁵⁸⁷ to my mind the philosophical spirit here in this fifth *Scene* differs from that presented in Steiner's theory of sculpture. The spirit of Papini's philosophy is 'human action' and in such action art, science, religion and philosophy are, as William James puts it, nothing but instruments.⁵⁸⁸ The fifth *Scene* is an image where human beings guide their world by 'rational consciousness' towards the ideal. This view on rationality had been prefigured in one of Mondrian's earlier essays, which matches Papini's spirit even more closely:

For *consciousness* in art is another new contemporary characteristic: the artist is no longer a blind tool of intuition. *Natural feeling* no longer dominates the work of art, which expresses *spiritual feeling* – that is,

586 Van Doesburg (1986) 1929, 229.

587 As mentioned earlier, Steiner's Dutch lectures were found in Mondrian's bookshelf after his death.

588 James 1906, 339–340. James, who met Papini in 1906, adds a general theory of human action to Papini's philosophy.

reason-and-feeling in one [...] besides the action of emotion, the action of intellect becomes prominent in the artist.⁵⁸⁹

Papini's story reflects on changes within oneself, which is what we also find in Mondrian's text. It, too, concentrates on presenting changes within the field of art by using retrospection and memory. Papini's story does not end in friendship but in violence. When the faces of the two selves appear again in the mirror of the dark water, 'the new me' grabs 'the past me' by the shoulders and pushes his head under water with all the energy of hatred. So dies "the ridiculous and stupid me of past years". The narrator, 'the new me', comes out quietly from the garden. Now 'the new me' lives in "the great city of the coast" but misses something of which he has a precise recollection. Whenever joy comes over him with its silly laughter he thinks that he is the only man who killed himself and that went on to live.⁵⁹⁰ Mondrian's text reflects this kind of violent moment in its *Windmill Scene*, where the abstract painter Z, 'the new me' in Mondrian's text, discards the old elements from the art of painting and X, 'the old me', tries to resist to the last moment and then remains more or less silent for the rest of the dialogue. In Papini's story what is left for 'the new me', the narrator, is the same thing as Mondrian's text suggests – a precise memory.

3.7 The Contiguity of the Real and the Imaginary: The Church Facade

By the sixth *Scene* the three strollers have reached the point where a considerable part of the journey is already behind them but the destination still looms ahead. Here Mondrian's text directs the reader's attention to a specific place, namely the city. The city itself is still absent from this image but: "The facade of a church seen as a flat plane against the darkness, reflects the light of the city."⁵⁹¹ It is a sign that draws the reader's attention. A relationship exists between the city lights as a sign, and the city as an object to which the sign refers. According to Peirce, this kind of relation is typically an index.⁵⁹² At this point my study concentrates on the sign which works within the text. This is the kind of indexicality that belongs to the narrative itself and by which the text operates to produce meanings. There is in this way a

589 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 40–41. Italics original.

590 Papini 1920 (1907), 134.

591 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101.

592 EP2, 484. Peirce: "*Designatives* ... or *Indicatives*, *Denominatives*, which like a Demonstrative pronoun, or a pointing finger, brutally direct the mental eyeballs of the interpreter to the object in question, which in this case cannot be given by independent reasoning."

dyadic relationship between the destination, the city, and the reflecting lights on the church facade. Peirce describes this kind of indexical relation as a ‘contiguity’, where the index and its object are connected by virtue of being connected with each other as a matter of fact.⁵⁹³

This sixth image focalizes the reader’s attention to another place to come. The city lights stir up a feeling of longing. Thus, even though the strollers acknowledge the beauty of the church, this beauty remains in the background because of the promise of the more fulfilled beauty in the city to come: “Y: This church takes me back to ‘other times’ how beautiful it is! Z: Yes. Once we have passed our first aesthetic emotion, so to speak, we are restricted to *thoughts of the past*.”⁵⁹⁴ In itself, the reflection of city lights remains empty, it is not yet the city. There is always something in the index that is a sign of secondness, which blocks out the interpreter from the object. The strollers’ dialogue is in line with this, since it deals to a great extent with Neo-Plasticism, which is still absent in the present environment and its complete realization is yet to come. The reader comprehends that the journey, both at the plot and at the metaphorical level, is supposed to continue.

The image of the church provides a mixed effect of light and darkness through which meaning is evoked. When considered as a point on the journey to the city, the *Scene* presents a certain kind of dawning effect. The city and the dark rural nature are not strictly separated, but there is the thought that as the journey progresses the light gradually increases. Mondrian’s text builds upon the Neoplatonic influences of the era, stemming from theosophy. Plotinus (AD 204-270) is the founder of this re-thinking of Plato’s philosophy, but Neoplatonism differs from Plato’s way of thinking. Whereas Plato sharply divides the world into two, the world of ideas and the world of appearances, for Plotinus the system is not based on dualism. In Neoplatonism separation is flexible and in this way hierarchical relations dominate. The farther the flow of rays spreads from the origin, the world of ideas, the weaker they become. All entities are joined to the great chain of being from which, as Arthur Lovejoy describes Neoplatonism, they acquire their share of the wakening gleams of the divine rays.⁵⁹⁵ The city light as a dawning effect in a journey that is supposed to continue would thus express growing clarity connected with the idea of Neo-Plasticism.

However, the setting in Mondrian’s text also brings to mind Plato’s allegory of the cave. Like the reflections of the fire in Plato’s cave, so too the reflecting lights on the church are not yet the true light.⁵⁹⁶ This is a contradiction that is not even meant to be resolved. On the contrary, the setting of the church facade suggests

593 EP1, 7, 50.

594 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 104. Italics original.

595 Lovejoy 2001 (1936), 65.

596 Plato: *Republic* 2004 (c. 380 BCE), 514 a–c.

that longing should be accepted as an important moment in the journey. The *Scene* suggests that this tension in the mind is to be lived through so that self-understanding can grow. Thus, there is in the sixth *Scene* a dialectical movement between the two levels: the actual reality, the world of appearances and the desired reality, the world of ideas, resembling the setting in Plato's cave.

The dialogue in the sixth *Scene* reflects the past, the present and the future. On one hand, the old church facade gives the reason for the strollers to talk about old architecture and consequently about past styles and ideas. On the other hand, the references to modern city surroundings introduce the notion of the future into the dialogue. This makes the text a compound of the secondness aspects in meaning production and its nature is both dynamic and purposeful. The emphasis on indexicality makes the reader experience the text as a dynamic structure that has to be enacted in order to understand it. Thus, it is not so much a question of what indexical signs are in the text, but what they do there. This *Scene* shows on one hand the mind's desire to be elsewhere, on the other hand the strollers' place is anchored to this stage of the journey, namely to the presence of an old church. By noticing, "how those old stones do last!"⁵⁹⁷ Mondrian's text asserts its grounding on the earth and in the present moment of the existential world. The imagination and desire, stirred up by the distant city lights, return to the present reality so that a dialectical movement between a desire for the Neo-Plasticist environment and the present actual situation is born. This dynamism permits self-understanding. The sixth *Scene* holds the 'now' of the strollers' journey as an extended version, as a sort of temporally expanded present.

The dialogue in the sixth *Scene* refers to the past, not just in one way but in two. Firstly, it makes references to its own past within the narrative. The strollers recall the earlier phases of their journey, the *Scene* of the starry sky, and compare it to the present view, the church facade.⁵⁹⁸ The dialogue also refers to the existential past of the existing world: "Z: Exactly how the old will fade away we really don't know. *What matters is to have a clear image of the new!* [...]."⁵⁹⁹ The dynamic dialogue also makes references to the present, namely to the contemporary historical and experienced world:

597 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 105.

598 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 104.

599 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 105. Italics original.

Z: Consider, for instance, how beautiful is the Paris Métro; the beauty of its construction, which may be too cold to satisfy artistic feeling, becomes animated by light [...].⁶⁰⁰

Z: [...] The difficulty, however, is to create something better, and so long as we are incapable of this, it will be of little use simply to clear away the old. We see this in practice, when war-devastated towns and villages are rebuilt in the old style.⁶⁰¹

When alluding to the city, the *Scene* circumscribes the fictional universe of the future. In this way it sets this future as an invisible part of the experiential universe of the old architecture. The contiguity of the imaginary and the real is, simultaneously, accepted and denied. There is a hierarchy between these imaginary and real realms and Mondrian's *Scene* builds upon this hierarchy. The reflecting city lights also mark off an imaginary world of the future from the actual old one and of the real present-day surroundings. This kind of projection gives a hypothetical character to the sixth *Scene*. Indices function in this way.⁶⁰² Thus, by its references to the present life world Mondrian's text actually ensures the hypothetical world of Neo-Plasticism, to which the city refers: "Z: ... particularly in the villages and small towns where individual feeling – which is transitory – asserts itself too strongly for me... . In the metropolis the transitory is less assertive and the *beauty of pure utility* is more evident."⁶⁰³

The sixth *Scene* focalizes the reader's attention in a way that differs from the other *Scenes*. The text offers simultaneous views to the reader by defining what will be ahead in the journey and by looking to the past. It establishes in this way a clearly defined point of view, the reader's and the strollers' location, from where the setting is perceived. This point of view thus functions as the "deictic center".⁶⁰⁴ The reader and the strollers become the centre of this system. Thus, there is a deictic system where old church facades point to the past, the war-devastated villages point to the present, and the city lights to the imaginative reign of Neo-Plasticism. The focalization of the reader's point of view serves to organize the directions the deictic expressions indicate to match the implications of the text. As Erwin M. Segal notes, in order to grasp this configuration, the reader has to perform a

600 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 103. The Dutch text in *De Stijl* speaks about aspect, a word which Holzman's and James's translation leaves out: "*Zie eens hoe schoon b. v. het aspect der metropolitain te Parijs is.*" The Dutch meaning emphasizes that there is a certain point of view and a moment when the Metro construction is at its most beautiful.

601 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 105.

602 Johansen 2002, 124.

603 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 102. Italics original.

604 Segal 1995, 15.

“deictic shift” and transfer the deictic centre “from the environmental situation in which the text is encountered, to a locus within a mental model representing the world of the discourse”.⁶⁰⁵

I suggest that the sixth *Scene* produces a mental model which belongs ultimately to human culture. By this I mean that the text evokes a viewpoint that has meaning effects for the discourse of evolution. Meaning is derived from this dynamic reflection by a back and forth movement between the past and the future. The reader’s ‘here’ is the place in the middle of the journey, which is Mondrian’s way of alluding to the fact that we are in the midst of the evolution towards Neo-Plastic art. The discussion in the text also shows what has survived from the past and how it is visible in the present. In order to make this “deictic shift” clearer and to introduce the meaning effects of the sixth *Scene* in more detail, another important characteristic of indices needs to be discussed. Indices help to construct the hypothetical meaning of Mondrian’s theoretical idea of art, which in this case helps us to understand the reference to the idea of evolution. The existential relation that indexical signs rely on means that they refer not only to what is there, but also to what is still absent. “The actual world,” Peirce points out, “cannot be distinguished from a world of imagination by any description. Hence the need of pronouns and indices.”⁶⁰⁶

The Neoplatonic in Neo-Plasticism

In my reading of Mondrian’s text I have drafted features which on one hand could be set in Platonic and on the other in Neoplatonic categories. Peirce’s assumption about the ontology of knowledge will serve to illustrate the importance of distinguishing Neoplatonism from Platonism in Mondrian’s text.

In his “Faculties” Peirce merely assumes that our thinking involves true continua. Continua also appear especially in his concept of evolution. It is a process which develops from the vague to the definite, from the chaotic to the orderly, from firstness, through secondness, to thirdness:

Uniformities in the modes of action of things have come about by their taking habits. At present the course of events is approximately determined by law. In the past that approximation was less perfect; in the future it will be more perfect. The tendency to obey laws has always been and always will be growing. We look back toward a point in the infinitely distant past when there was no law but mere indeterminacy; we look forward to a point in the infinitely distant future when there will be no

605 Ibid.

606 EP1, xxvi.

indeterminacy of chance but a complete reign of law [...]. Moreover, all things have a tendency to take habits.⁶⁰⁷

Platonism proper contained a strong inclination towards what is finite and definite. Platonic thinking desires to build explanations on enumerations of the elements of knowledge. But Neoplatonic thinking, which Peirce's concept of evolution represents, leads us to a non-finite and non-denumerable class of elements. According to Richard Smyth, "in the case of properties, relations, and other elements that are defined in intension, it means that no listing of proximate differences can define this element."⁶⁰⁸ What is logical in Neoplatonic thinking and what Peirce's concept of evolution can reveal, is that they offer the principled explanation about the phenomena instead of a list of elements. This advanced form of Platonism had profound consequences not only for Peirce's philosophy and theory of knowledge but for modern theories of definition in general.⁶⁰⁹ For example, for Henri Poincaré establishing a rule to describe a phenomenon was a scientific method. The comparisons he made with infinitely small electrons and infinitely large astronomical objects, stars, was a way to put newly-found scientific principles to the test, since in these two extremes upsetting the hypothesized principle would become clearly visible.⁶¹⁰

In the sixth *Scene*, the different stages of Mondrian's evolutionary thinking become visible. The stroller Z, when recalling the imaginative 'perpendicular' relations in the starry sky *Scene*, brings them back into the sixth *Scene* in the following way:

Z: In the starry sky we were less closely tied to form, but we could easily lapse into *creating* forms. With this church, on the other hand, our vision is more strongly determined by its form, and it becomes more difficult for us to create forms. In short, the difference is that with the church we are limited by *something outside ourselves* but with the starry sky by nothing but *ourselves*.⁶¹¹

There are similarities in the cited passage to Peirce's Neoplatonic model of evolution. Mondrian's text offers the principled explanation about the harmony in vision, the 'perpendicular'. The earlier stage in this flow of *Scenes* was thus freer than the later stage. Thus, here the text directs the reader's attention to the

607 EP1, 277. "A Guess at the Riddle" (1887–88).

608 Smyth 1995, 59–60.

609 Smyth 1995, 60.

610 Poincaré 1909, 11–12, 14.

611 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 104. Italics original.

earlier *Scene* as an indeterminate stage and contrasts it to the present moment in the sixth *Scene*, where the situation is more fixed. Considering Mondrian's painterly idea of form as open and dynamically expanding, the fixed situation on the facade would seem to be a contradictory feature. However, I would suggest that within the narrative the *Scene* is a symbol of a certain stage of Neo-Plastic principle. Hence, the determined horizontal and vertical forms of the church facade also permit another kind of reading. The passage suggests the horizontality and verticality as actualized, though incompletely, and thus points to the idea of Neo-Plasticism which the last *Scene* confirms by the more complete principled design in the studio interior. It is in this way that Mondrian's evolution can be paralleled with Neoplatonic thinking. According to Smyth, in this thinking what must be given is a rule or law that underlies the generation of the items in a class.⁶¹²

The idea of infinity is crucial in Neoplatonic thinking. We find the idea both in Peirce's and Mondrian's passages. Peirce speaks of future as 'infinitely distant', so the supposed 'end' therefore cannot be reached. Through its indexical signs, Mondrian's sixth *Scene* also creates its own referent into the future. However, it still leaves the future of the journey open. It is merely the reflection of this future that the *Scene* reveals. That the end of evolution has not yet been reached becomes obvious in the seventh *Scene*, where *Z* still says: "For a long time to come, the new in us will fail to find its echo in our streets and cities!"⁶¹³ This means that the evolutionary development of Neo-Plasticism is left open. Hence, it always has a potential for further growth. In this the earlier *Scenes* and their different stages are still required. According to Smyth, Socratic [Neoplatonic] thinking about whatever is 'really real' proceeds from what is infinite:

Neoplatonism means a commitment to the reality of some abstract things in some (but not necessarily every) category of abstract things (for example, classes, properties, relationships, laws), but where, unlike earlier Platonism, at least some of those abstract things have logical parts or elements that are not finite in number and cannot be set out by us in a list or enumeration.⁶¹⁴

I would argue that Mondrian's '*Triologue*' presents the idea of Neo-Plasticism as being in the midst of its 'growing intelligibility'. This is the meaning that a Neoplatonic twist gives here to Neo-Plasticism. Mondrian's text presents the evolution of Neo-Plastic principles as if all stages of this universe were continuous.

612 Smyth 1995, 60.

613 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 119.

614 Smyth 1995, 60.

To present Neo-Plasticism as a state of continuing growth means that its principles are intelligible. Evolution for Peirce is an organic metaphor of growth – from chaos to cosmos – as Douglas Anderson notes.⁶¹⁵ Anderson, who has applied this principle to artistic creative work, points out that artistic creativity, so far as its goal is related to presenting ‘growing intelligibility’, must present a work of art which is capable of growth.⁶¹⁶

The meaning in which the idea of evolution works on the narrative level is that it is an instrument, a sort of ‘cultural artefact’, for understanding the process which the ‘perpendicular’ principle undergoes from figurative art to Neo-Plastic art. It is like a lens which allows one to ‘see better’ the image in each *Scene*. As such, it is not integrated into Mondrian’s text to explain new art but rather to show it as continuing the schematic-based cultural idea. In “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917), Mondrian expresses the connection between imagination and the logical explanation in Neo-Plastic art. For him, it is a tool for man’s creativeness and has thus an instrumental value:

Although the spontaneous expression of intuition that is realized in the work of art (i.e., its spiritual content) can be interpreted only by verbal art, there is also the word without art: reasoning, logical explanation, through which the rationality of an art can be shown.⁶¹⁷

The ‘*Triologue*’ produces the theoretical considerations for Neo-Plasticism through the notions of ‘continuity’, ‘infinity’ and ‘principle’. These are Neoplatonic tenets and, as such, can be set side by side with modern scientific systems.⁶¹⁸ This marks off Mondrian’s art from early modernist primitivism. Mondrian’s theoretical consideration does not seek the creative impulses stemming from the art of Africans. Instead, the connection between the imagination and logical explanation is in line with what we find in the physics of the period. As both Robert E. Innis and Michael H. Whitworth point out, the role of modern scientific inference is to understand the process itself, not to achieve or demonstrate a definitive end result.⁶¹⁹ The same antifoundational and open-ended character of deduction that Innis finds in Italian pragmatist philosophy, is I suggest present in Mondrian’s text and is exemplified especially in the sixth *Scene*.

615 Andersson 1987, 115.

616 Andersson 1987, 2, 120.

617 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 40.

618 Priest 1995, 28. From the Greek philosophers this Neoplatonic infinitism passed directly into mathematics, indirectly into medieval theology; and from theology it passed into the early modern science of space and time.

619 Innis 2002, 113; Whitworth 2001, 4.

It is in this instrumental spirit that, to my mind, the evolutionary insights in Mondrian's text act. The idea of evolution, present also in esoteric movements, offered an explainable model about processes where something was undergoing change. It is as if Mondrian's text as a devotee of this modern culture did not want to believe that an entirely new form of art had suddenly appeared from nowhere. It does not want to believe in such a miracle. Instead, it wants to show it slowly evolving and it wants to make this process apparent and explainable for the reader by laying open its rational development before the reader's eyes. As such, it does not interpret the new art but rather shows it as reasonably created from a memory image with a principled explanation.

3.8 The Embodied Subject: In the Studio

Mondrian wrote the final *Scene*, *Z's studio*, not in the Netherlands, where he started the *'Triologue'*, but in Paris, to where he had returned in June 1919. The *Scene* includes a lively description of the studio, which then becomes extended to a discussion about modern cities and 'the man of the future'.⁶²⁰ Besides the objects in the room the description also contains comments about how the strollers see the relations of these objects in the room. It is generally assumed that 'the studio' referred to in the discussion between *X*, *Y* and *Z* is Mondrian's own studio at 5 rue de Coulmiers. Mondrian had moved there after having lived for several months at a studio at 26 rue du Départ.⁶²¹ Practically no photographs from the studio at rue de Coulmiers have been preserved but, according to Blotkamp, we may assume that the description given in the seventh *Scene* provides an accurate picture of Mondrian's studio.⁶²² Thus, my first intention is to study how the literary text constructs the peculiar studio setting, which develops between a verbally described space and the imagined observer in this space. Secondly, by studying a few of the photographs of Mondrian's studio at 26 rue du Départ, I seek to find some supportive evidence for the ideas of perception manifested in this literary *Scene*. My aim is to explore the idea of the viewing subject and then apply it to Mondrian's 'new man', one of the main themes in this final *Scene*.

620 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), for example, 111–112; 119–120; 122–123.

621 Blotkamp 1994, 140.

622 Only one informal little snapshot has been preserved, showing Theo and Nelly van Doesburg in the studio during a visit in spring 1921. See Blotkamp 1994, 141.

The Vision as Relations: The Studio as Described by Y and Z

In the *Studio-Scene* there is an enthusiastic description of the room that makes the relation between the observing strollers and the space around them explicit. The starting point is to understand how the description is motivated by the act of seeing. As Veivo notes, descriptions are often merged into narrative structure through the representations of speaking and seeing actions. Often they offer double information, namely depicting the object of vision while characterizing the speaker as the focalizer.⁶²³ In this *Scene* my purpose is to understand the nature of the focalization and how it supports the meaning of the narrative. Here, the act of seeing is special, since it takes place in the middle of the room.

When describing the studio, Y, the layman and Z, the abstract-real painter, collaborate. They start from the large architectural structures of the room and then proceed to the finest details by verbally 'dropping' the small objects into the coherent, integrated visual whole. Mondrian's text uses *stichomythia*, a technique originating in classical Greek drama but since used by many dramatists.⁶²⁴ In this technique sequences of single alternating lines, or half-lines or two-line speeches are given to alternating characters. The technique is particularly well suited to sections of dramatic dialogue where two characters are in violent dispute. Hence, by intensively continuing each other's replies as if competing with each other, Y and Z 'paint' the studio room before the reader's eyes:

Z: The loft, the projecting fireplace and cupboard already provide a division of the interior space and its planes. These planes are articulated architecturally by the large skylight in the ceiling, but the studio window in the front wall subdivides into bays, and these again are divided into small panes, by the door and the loft on the rear wall, by the fireplace and the window on one side of the wall, and by the large cupboard on the other wall. Upon these structural divisions were based the painterly articulation of the walls, the placement of the furniture and equipment, and so forth.

Y: Yes, I see how all these things help to articulate the room, and so do the ivory curtains that are now drawn open.

Z: The curtains form a rectangular plane that divided the wall surrounding the window. To continue the division, I added those red, gray, and white

623 Veivo 2001, 173.

624 Etymologically the term derives from the Greek *stikhos* ("row, line of verse") + *muthos* ("speech, talk"). *Stichomythia*. See Baldick 2008, 316.

planes on the wall. Even the white shelf with the gray box and the white cylindrical jar also contribute.

Y: The jar appears as a rectangular plane!

Z: The gray cupboard in the corner is also significant.

Y: Also, the orange-red paint chest below the curtain...

Z: ...seen against the white and gray plane behind it.

Y: The ivory chair looks well against them.

Z: Notice next to it the gray-white work table, and on it a chalk-white jar at one end and a light-red box at the other, seen against the black and white planes on the wall below the window.

Y: The yellow stool looks fine in front of the black bench.

Z: We could continue in this way throughout the entire studio, but one thing I must point out: there is still a lack of unity.⁶²⁵

Z and *Y* itemize the objects of the room with such a feeling of care about details and a feeling of pleasure about doing this that it is as if their words were caressing these objects. As such, it brings to mind a traditional Dutch realist painter, who is thought to describe the realistic surroundings and the objects of the everyday world by becoming enchanted with this reality so that he describes it with sympathy and love and in this way lifts his vision and his art work to the ideal.⁶²⁶ The Dutch concept of 'true realism' had its roots in epistemological insights. It recognized the traditional split between the thought of the mind and the sensuous perception, between the ideal and realism, which 'true realism' sought to bridge.⁶²⁷ The description of *Z* and *Y* thus reflects such a spirit, which brings to mind the notion of *de ware waarheid van de werkelijkheid*, the real truth of the reality, which Dutch painters and writers were also supposed to take as their starting point still in the beginning years of the 20th century. The question was not

625 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 111–112.

626 Streng 1994, 246.

627 Streng 1994, 239. In chapter 2 I situated Mondrian's roots as an artist within this deep heritage of Dutch painting.

about material reality but about spiritualized form ‘observed, loved and fore-lived by the soulful artist’ in his human spirit.⁶²⁸

De Stijl magazine offered an influential list of books to be read by its readers.⁶²⁹ While a large part of these books are scientific and pseudo-scientific publications about contemporary discoveries and recent intellectual developments, the publication of Vincent van Gogh’s letters is also mentioned in the list. The studio description in Mondrian’s text brings to mind the corresponding one by van Gogh, who described his studio in a letter to this brother, Theo. I consider that Mondrian’s description, in a way, situates itself in this same tradition. Van Gogh describes the artist’s studio and lists its furniture, object by object in the same way as Mondrian does in his text. Van Gogh’s idea was that he had established the studio not only for himself but also for the world of the future so that other artists will someday live and work there.⁶³⁰ In other words, van Gogh includes the studio room into the chain of art works, as a work of art in its own right and as a model of a ‘real’ artist’s house to be continued by others. Mondrian’s studio, though being a place of great privacy,⁶³¹ also worked in this way as this kind of public space, as a stage for paintings and as a space to be shown.⁶³²

The *Studio-Scene* is the longest of the *Scenes* and it also has a special philosophical meaning among all the *Scenes*. It is only in this *Scene* that the description actually points to the real existing space designed and set according to Neo-Plastic principles.⁶³³ Therefore, the description here no longer suggests certain aesthetic ideas by appealing to perpendicular features in the landscapes, like in the earlier *Scenes*, but it realizes and recognizes this aesthetics in the real surroundings. Here Neo-Plastic principles are put into practice. Since Mondrian’s text points here to a place where Neo-Plastic principles are acted upon, it suggests that what connects the verbal representation to the world is action. With solely linguistics means it is not possible to reach the world outside or make the connection to the non-linguistic sphere. By referring to a real space, Mondrian’s studio, the text makes Neo-Plasticism public, a visible thing that is available for empirical

628 Blotkamp & Rijnders 1978, 78.

629 *De Stijl*, II, 6, 1919, pp. 70–72.

630 Van Gogh’s letter to Theo van Gogh. Arles, 9 September 1888. Cited in *The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition. Vol.4* (2009), 261. Edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker. See also Web-pages of Vincent van Gogh Museum and Huygens ING.

631 Postma 1995, 52. Arthur Lehning tells that Mondrian did not wish to receive people, wanting to devote his time to painting. Strangers never visited, for he would have found that highly unpleasant. Everyone knew that you were not supposed to come before a certain time. When you wanted to come for a particular reason, you sent a letter.

632 Postma 1995, 32–33. Overy 1991, 168. Blotkamp 1994, 158.

633 The contemporary reader could recognize the studio as an actual studio space (Mondrian’s studio on rue de Coulmiers) from the detailed description in the article series and because a Dutch journalist had written about it in 1920. Mondrian himself had told about it to van Doesburg in a letter on December 4, 1919. Mondrian also used it to exemplify his ideas to his visitors. See Blotkamp 1994, 141.

observation, a model. As such this corresponds to what, for example, Blotkamp, Overy, Postma and White notice about the influence of Mondrian's studios on those who visited there, especially on other artists and architects.⁶³⁴

The description of the studio does not totally exhaust itself in this act of depicting, for the description focalizes the reader's attention. The focalization reveals the cultural shaping of the idea of vision. It leads me to acknowledge that the space is always perceived from a certain point of view, the body of the perceiver. In this way, the description also characterizes the strollers as focalizers. According to Veivo, we can thus see that descriptions are of primary interest for pragmatic semiotics, since they foreground the holistic nature of literary rhetoric. According to this, the argument of the text and the existentially based imaginative activity of the reader are interconnected.⁶³⁵

In the *Studio-Scene* the reader's co-operative imagination situates the strollers into that room, which they are observing from its very centre. The reader can easily imagine that what is needed in this situation is to turn one's head around to see the whole space, and that it is impossible to see it as a whole at once, as *Z* and *Y* themselves point out about their act of observing:

Z: We could continue in this way throughout the entire studio, but one thing I must point out: there is still a lack of unity. [...] ⁶³⁶

Y: But can the same plastic expression be achieved in a room as in a painting? A painting, for instance, can be perceived as a whole all at once, but we cannot do that with a room.

Z: Relatively speaking, the room can also be seen as a whole all at once. Remember that we perceive inwardly otherwise than just visually. We survey the room visually, but inwardly we also form a single *image*. Thus, we perceive all its planes as a single plane...⁶³⁷

Rosalind Krauss characterizes the kind of vision that *Z* and *Y* here enact. It is a prototype of a fully embodied viewer: "There is no way to concentrate on the threshold of vision, to capture something – as Duchamp would say – *en tournant la tête* without situating vision in the body and positioning that body in turn, within the grip of desire. Vision is then caught up within the meshes of projection."⁶³⁸

634 Overy 1991, 168; Blotkamp 1994, 158; Postma 1995, 31–32; White 2014b, 91.

635 Veivo 2001, 173.

636 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 112.

637 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 113. Italics original.

638 Krauss 1990, 197. Italics original.

The strollers' act makes their bodies a centrepiece of looking. The setting in the *Studio-Scene* is thus fundamentally different from the other *Scenes*. It is like the idea of the embodied viewer as found in Bergson's philosophy: "*My body, an object destined to move other objects, is, then, a centre of action.*"⁶³⁹ The *Studio-Scene* in this way allows a starting point, which situates vision as existentially based.

On the other hand, Mondrian's text makes it clear that although *Y*'s and *Z*'s lines describe the vision, which surveys the room, another kind of seeing, 'inward seeing', is also needed. The idea is to see the room as coherent planes, where objects, furniture, the panels on the walls are integrated so that it is their mutual relationships which count here. Mondrian's 'inward seeing' is supposed to overcome the limits of the body of the perceiver so that the whole room somehow becomes a single image. The analysis cannot, thus, be restricted merely to surveying vision. Focalization, after all, is always a linguistic phenomenon. In this way it partakes of all the other meaning effects developed by language.

The Neo-Plastic Space Creates the New Subject: The Studio as Photographed

What would this image of a room as a single flat plane look like? Is it in any way realizable or can it be experienced in any way? The description arouses the reader's curiosity. For Mondrian, the studio was a place where the relationship between painting and the Neo-Plastic studio environment was shown and evolved. According to Wiczorek, the reinvented 'planar space' was not flat, although it was commonly mistaken as such. Instead, Mondrian's space is relationally expansive and dynamic, the idea stemming from Mathieu Schoenmaekers's and Mondrian's syncretic notion of the 'plane'.⁶⁴⁰ Thus, the 'plane' is more like an experience.

As mentioned earlier, there are practically no photographs from the studio described in the text. Therefore, I intend to take a look at Mondrian's studio in 26 rue du Départ through the 'eye' of a camera. I observe how Mondrian gives up the position of the distant single point viewer and how the idea of 'the viewing body' emerges by analysing some of the photographs taken from his studio in the late 1920s. The furniture and the items are the same as in the studio at Coulmiers. My purpose is not to focus on how the detailed design in the studio changed during the years 1926–1930 or what kind of colours Mondrian possibly applied in each

639 Bergson 2007 (1896), 5. Italics original.

640 Wiczorek 2014, 47, 58. See also Wiczorek 2012, 31.

case, as this has already been described by several researches and the photographs are, of course, in black and white.⁶⁴¹

It seems reasonable to think that photographs may also have worked as the ‘extended eye’ for Mondrian. In this he would have been in the company of such artists as, for example, Wassily Kandinsky and László Moholy-Nagy.⁶⁴² Many theoretically orientated artists during the 1920s were interested in photography because it was supposed to offer new ways of dealing with vision.⁶⁴³ In the early twentieth century, photography was considered to provide direct access to perception. It was thought to be a way to bypass language, which by its very nature was bound to conceptuality. As Bernd Stiegler reminds us, photography developed as a radical break with tradition by eliminating the veil of painting from the viewers’ eyes. It played the role of the visualizer of reality and visual truth.⁶⁴⁴ Moholy-Nagy’s words sum up the notion of this reality-based extension of the eye: “Many attempts on the part of painters to show the things of the world objectively represent an important success for the interrelationship between photography and the painter’s art.”⁶⁴⁵

There were many functions for studio photographs. Some, of course, were promotional while, as Nancy Troy reminds us, the fact that Mondrian only allowed certain visitors to photograph the studio adds something to its mythical status as a ‘sanctuary’.⁶⁴⁶ However, when the reception of photographs is considered, all of

641 Several researches and articles have been written about Mondrian’s studio, for example Nancy Troy 1983: *The De Stijl Environment*, Carel Blotkamp 1994: *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*; an article by Wietze Coppes 2012: “Het ‘wetenschappelijktechnische laboratorium’ van Piet Mondriaan. Het atelier op 26, rue du Départ ten tijde van het bezoek van Alezander Calder”; and Francesco Manacorda and Michael White (eds.) 2014: *Mondrian and his Studios: Colour in Space*. Some studies have led to reconstructing the models of the studio, like, for example, those exhibited in the Gemeentemuseum den Haag. See, for example, Frans Postma 1995: *26, Rue du Départ. Mondrian’s Studio Paris 1921 – 1936*.

642 Moholy-Nagy theorized this extended eye of the camera in his *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), presenting the key concepts of photography as technique, the passage of time and the layering of images onto a single surface. The essence for him seems to have been not the camera itself, but the chemical sensitivity of film and paper, which documents the imprint of light. See Moholy-Nagy 1969 (1925), 32. In Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) photographs of dancers in motion played an important role. The artist proceeded from these photos to sketches which showed the diagrammatical schema of the object and it was argued that this diagrammatical schema had access to reality. It would not suffer from the abstraction and conceptual ambiguity of literary expression.

643 In the 1920s, many of these artists were members of the Bauhaus movement. Paul Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925) and Wassily Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), published by the Bauhaus, tried to formulate an idea of universal visual expression. Later, in the 1940s, Gyorgy Kepes’s *Language of Vision* (1944) and László Moholy-Nagy’s *Vision in Motion* (1947) elaborated these ideas still further, now in accordance with Gestalt theory.

644 Stiegler 2008, 195–196.

645 Moholy-Nagy 1969 (1925), 34.

646 See the discussion between Nancy Troy, Hans Janssen and Michael White in *Mondrian and his Studios: Colour in Space* (2014), 131, 136.

them have both private and public or personal and collective functions.⁶⁴⁷ Thus, the photographs of Mondrian's private studio also belong to the public sphere. As published photographs, picturing repeatedly the different elaborate variations of the same space, they cease simply to be photographs of things in the room and become instead historically specific statements about the studio. They were made for the purpose of communicating information about modernity, being distributed, circulated and consumed through several art magazines, and thus within a given set of social relations. These mechanisms are important to understand when photographs are used as evidence.⁶⁴⁸

Two photographs are at the centre of this analysis. The first is taken by Paul Delbo. It dates from 1926, was frequently reproduced and, according to Blotkamp, was probably Mondrian's own favourite. To Blotkamp's knowledge, the earliest reproductions of this photograph appeared in *Das Werk*, VII (1926) and in *i10*.⁶⁴⁹ This shows the studio at its most austere, although the depth of the room is recognizable starting from the easel at the front which functions as a space divider between different parts of the apartment. A photograph by Mondrian's lifetime friend, Michel Seuphor, of the studio in 1930 is a fine example of the transformations Mondrian continued to carry out. Its sphere is larger; it shows a wider part of the back wall than the 1926 photo and therefore the whole wall with its multiple coloured cardboard planes is visible. On the other hand, this occurs at the cost of the visual depth of the picture. Therefore, I would argue, it shows a deliberate choice of priorities concerning the objects of the photograph. The earliest reproduction was in the periodical, *Cercle et Carré*, 1/3 (1930).

As mentioned earlier, the photographs of Mondrian's studio have worked as evidence, and a number of reconstructions have been possible as a result. I would suggest that Mondrian's studio space can also be reconstructed in another way, that is, through the meaning effects the photographs offer in relation to the observer's vision. They also seem to experiment with vision. When describing the relations between the objects in the studio, the characters in Mondrian's '*Triologue*' had to situate themselves as embodied viewers in order to do this. In the next section of this chapter I intend to imagine myself as one of the strollers, as a (female) layman Y, by using the real photographs of the studio as my helping tools and in this way I relate Mondrian's text to the visual expressions of his studio.

647 "Images read as private are those read in a context contiguous with the life form, of which they are extractions: meaning and memory stay with them, as in family photographs, for example. Public photographs remove the image entirely from such a context and the meaning becomes free-floating, externally generated and read in terms of symbol and metaphor." See Edwards 2001, 8–9.

648 Edwards 2001, 29.

649 Blotkamp 1994, 149–150, note 48.

“Rooms like these require new men!”⁶⁵⁰

Mondrian’s studio was a single five-sided room. As an architectonic space it was not big but even so it is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. As Beatriz Colomina notes, architectonic space is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant. The same applies to photographs of spaces.⁶⁵¹ These studio photographs contain a built-in viewing mechanism. Photographs of spaces usually let the viewer’s gaze enter the picture space or restrict it from doing so. Mondrian creates close links between the cone of vision and the imagining activity of the viewer. I apply the viewer’s sight to the space of the photograph. This also reveals the perceiver as an embodied subject. The object appears to the viewer as a function of the imaginary movements of her body.

One of the most prominent features in these two photographs is that the artist is absent from the studio. Mondrian had let himself be photographed in his studio earlier in a traditional way. In the often-reproduced photograph of 1905, for example, he is sitting in front of his easel with palette and paintbrush in hand in a rather dimly lit studio. I suggest that the idea of absence is deliberately used in Delbo’s photograph of the studio in rue du Départ (1926) (see Figure 8). This photo shows an easel in the middle of the back wall. It is empty but still gives an impression of being the focus of this photograph, whereas the back wall calls to mind the type of painting characterized by a white centre.⁶⁵²

This photo strongly emphasizes the idea of the possibility of bodily movement. Thus, looking at the photograph it is easy to imagine oneself in the precise position, usually indicated by the unoccupied furniture, as Colomina notes.⁶⁵³ Now this unoccupied place is the place of an artist in front of an easel. Access to the easel is not hampered by objects in Delbo’s photograph.⁶⁵⁴ On the contrary, everything in this particular photo seems to be positioned in a way that continuously moves the subject towards the back wall. An open place before the easel, in an otherwise furnished room, not only tells that the artist is absent, but the photo clearly suggests that this place is understood to be occupied. Even the rug on the floor marks this place of absence; someone ought to be standing there.

The traces of the occupant usually leave their impression on the interior. Walter Benjamin writes “to dwell means to leave traces”.⁶⁵⁵ But in this studio everything is

650 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 113.

651 Colomina 1992, 83.

652 By this I am referring to a group of Mondrian’s paintings from the 1920s which are characterized by a large white square, situated always a little off the exact centre.

653 Colomina 1992, 83.

654 There is another version of the same photographic setting from the same year (1926), by André Kertész, where Mondrian’s wicker chair hinders access to the easel but by being partly turned towards the viewer, it is, as it were, waiting for the viewer to enter into the picture space.

655 Benjamin 2006 (1999), 39. The essay was written in 1935 and remained unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime.

in order, clean and empty of the personal traces of normal everyday living. Arthur Lehning, with whom Mondrian became acquainted in the mid-twenties,⁶⁵⁶ recalls that Mondrian's studio was remarkably orderly and that the visitor had no idea of being in the presence of a painter. No pots of paint or brushes were in evidence. A bank director's desk could not have been better organized.⁶⁵⁷ In Delbo's photograph the viewer will not find traces of personal life either, thus suggesting that the space belongs to the public sphere. The scene opens as if it was organized and emptied for a viewer to inhabit or fill the space. The bed, which is usually a highly private and personal site, is hidden from the viewer's gaze. This is done with the help of another easel, which works as a divider of space or a cover. This easel also works as a means of orientating the view, which is directed to the back wall.

The path of viewing, the very thing that takes place between the viewer and the viewed here in this photo, gives birth to subjectivity. With a certain feeling of emptiness, or at least a feeling that highly personal objects are absent, the space is prepared for a new subject. The space without an artist becomes a freed-up space for the viewer. Thus, the viewer's body is the privileged place both for his/her inhabiting the space of the room and, at the very same time, for his/her perceptions.

I suggest that Mondrian's studio photographs have the kind of active agency which some photographs have embodied in them, as Edwards notes about the in-built tendencies of photographs.⁶⁵⁸ In this way the photograph shapes the viewer's response. It is a built in 'possibility' for every 'layman' and the layman here is the viewer who replaces the artist in these photographs: "But the layman also possesses that faculty, sometimes even to a very considerable extent. Why shouldn't he be able to cultivate an image of beauty? The identical path is open to him [...]."⁶⁵⁹

By means of photography Mondrian negotiates the traditional idea of seeing. Traditionally, vision implies the perspective cone of vision of the distant observer. The perspective links the vision with spatial and temporal aspects.⁶⁶⁰ This kind of cone of vision is still very much present in the arrangements of the 1926 photograph. However, the 1930 photograph (see Figure 9) adjusts this so that the temporal

656 Postma 1995, 51. Through his friendship with the revolutionary pacifist Arthur Lehning, Mondrian became involved in the *Internationale Revue iio*, a political-cultural magazine which published the work of the international avant-garde. Delbo's photograph of the studio appeared in this periodical.

657 Postma 1995, 51.

658 Edwards 2001, 17.

659 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 108.

660 The visual model of the modern era is in line with Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy. For convenience, Jay calls it 'Cartesian perspectivalism' since it was the dominant, even hegemonic model. The eye was considered singular, rather than the two eyes of normal binocular vision. Jay describes the model as a lone eye looking through a peephole at the scene in front of it. "Such an eye was understood to be static unblinking, and fixated, rather than dynamic, moving with what later scientists would call 'saccadic' jumps from one focal point to another." See Jay 1988, 4–5, 7.

and spatial one-point distant observer is made to disappear. Thus, when viewed as a series, these photographs show a clear tendency to adjust the perspective.

In the 1930 photograph the artist is absent. Consequently, the place of an artist no longer seems to be the focus of the photo. However, the observer has clearly come much closer to the easel and is about to take the artist's place, because he or she now inhabits the open unoccupied space of the room. The view directs now only towards the back wall. It no longer reaches the sidewalls, or the ceiling, and only a little border on the floor is visible. The photograph has lost all the guidelines which a viewer needs to have in order to form the feeling of perspective that was still present in the 1926 photograph. Therefore, the viewer, being now close to the back wall, cannot see the depth of the room either. The image is now flat but the space seems to continue infinitely outside the picture borders.

In Seuphor's photograph, the fragmentation is increased by more and smaller cardboard planes which now almost totally cover the back wall. Increased fragmentation indicates a kind of turning back to the ideas of Mondrian's *Compositions with Colour Planes* series of 1917.⁶⁶¹ The wall surface under the cardboard planes is barely visible or at least it is hard to say where the surface begins and the cardboard plane ends. Visually, this increases the tempo of the rhythmic play of these cardboard planes. The viewer has lost the focus of vision since the easel is painted completely white. Moreover, the legs of the easel have been sawn off. This has made the easel completely useless as a functional object since it cannot stand by itself. This increases the impression of flatness, as both Wieczorek and Blotkamp point out, since the easel could be now installed against the wall like a relief.⁶⁶²

The act is a symbolic one on the artist's part. Thus, the overall impression of the space visually approaches a plane. The artist's easel symbolizes the anarchy of the distant perspective observer, which by this time was receiving criticism. Moholy-Nagy's critical attitude towards easel-painting clarifies well the philosophical point of the situation: "This also puts the role of the controversial easel painting or separate optical structure [...] into its right perspective [...] for our age with its aspirations towards collective thought and action demands objective laws of creation."⁶⁶³ It is the appearance of the easel in the room that the strollers X, Y and Z in Mondrian's text also notice to be a problem: "Z: the easel stands in front of

661 Wieczorek 2014, 66.

662 Wieczorek 2014, 65. Blotkamp 1994, 150. Blotkamp has noted that already in 1926 Mondrian was no longer painting on an easel, preferring instead to lay his canvases flat on a table. He only used an easel when he wanted to subject a painting to a critical examination. Thus, the easel no longer possessed a functional meaning for Mondrian anymore.

663 Moholy-Nagy 1969 (1925), 16.

that large cupboard projecting into the room. In this studio it should be painted a neutral colour like gray; that would solve the problem here... ”⁶⁶⁴

I suggest that these arrangements stimulate the viewer’s imagination. The viewer can imagine herself to be in the studio space and occupy the free place in front of the easel. The photograph manipulates the viewer’s vision by cutting off the side-walls, the visual frames. This gives particular resonance to my discussion about these photographs. Mondrian seems to be operating with the idea of frame, removing it to free up vision. The frame is essential to the function of a photograph for it is natural to the medium, as Edwards notes.⁶⁶⁵ The intensive colour plane adjustments on the back wall arrange the back wall for the viewer’s perception, which is now able to reason from the continuity of colour planes the space beyond the room, a space which is limitless. This undermines the boundaries of the space. The view is free-floating, without being hindered by the floor or walls. This feeling of a limitless world suggests the growth of Neo-Plastic design beyond that which is actually seen.

Imagination is the prerequisite for artistic creativity. In Seuphor’s photograph the viewer is confronted with a ‘plane’, with a sense of being within the picture, the very ideas that we also find in Steiner’s philosophy and in his ideas about the imagination. In the material world, Steiner writes, colours are always connected with the things to which they seem to stick, whereas in the imaginative world colours no longer adhere to the objects but instead become free.⁶⁶⁶ But this emancipation is not yet enough to constitute imaginative perception. To achieve this, we have to observe things “as if we ourselves were within them”.⁶⁶⁷ Kandinsky, for one, was interested in this idea through Steiner.⁶⁶⁸

By this accelerated play of the coloured planes on the wall, the solid structure of the wall itself is opened. What goes beyond this, may be formed through the imagination, in which case the space becomes virtualized. The photograph awakens a desire to know that which the picture cannot show. It is this desire that is also at the base of both Benjamin’s and Barthes’s ideas on photography.⁶⁶⁹ Edwards points out that it can be just this desire that constructs meanings in photographs,

664 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 112.

665 Edwards 2001, 18.

666 Steiner 2009 (1914), 22–23.

667 Steiner 2009 (1914), 29. See also Ringbom 1970, 137–138.

668 Ringbom 1970, 137–138.

669 Photography brings the expectancy of the real and the truthful to the extent that photography allows us to believe. (See Benjamin’s *Small History of Photography*, 2015 [1931], 66). It is a kind of second sight which seems to bear the viewer forward to a utopian time. (See Barthes’s *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, 1980, 38–40).

for “we have to face the limits of our understanding to the endlessness to which photographs refer”.⁶⁷⁰

Even when constantly changing, Mondrian’s wall is a composition. Like all compositions it ultimately takes place in the phenomenological space between the work and its viewer. This wall draws the viewer into the deconstructed space between the wall of the work and the architectonic wall. This is a creative view, since it collects the possibilities of seeing and in doing so classifies them as something new. The traditional character of the subject as a separate observer distant from the object is dissolved when the viewer’s imaginative site is transformed inside into the space pictured by the photograph. The artist as a traditional promoter and mediator of the artwork is removed from his place in the work. The viewer enters this place. A new subject is born by manipulating our way of seeing. Mondrian’s own words support the odd character of the free-floating vision that undermines the cone of perspective based on traditional vision:

The new vision [...] does not proceed from one fixed point: it takes its viewpoint *everywhere* and *is not limited to any one position*. *It is not bound by space or time* (in accord with the theory of relativity). Practically, it takes its position *in front of the plane* [...]. Thus it regards architecture *as a multiplicity of planes*: once more the *plane*. This multiplicity composes itself (abstractly) into a plane image.⁶⁷¹

The studio photographs construct a new vision that does not represent the traditional humanist subject. To my mind, Beatriz Colomina’s words apply well to the photographs of Mondrian’s studio: “The split between the traditional humanist subject [...] and the *eye* is the split between *looking* and *seeing*, between being *outside* and *inside* [...]. Suddenly that figure [new subject] *sees*.”⁶⁷² What the subject realizes is his of her new position. The organizing geometry of a space escapes the perspective cone of vision, the humanist’s eye. A photograph is taken. This is precisely the moment of inhabitation of Mondrian’s ‘new man’. It is the ‘new man’s’ look that registers the new reality. The exterior is inscribed in the studio. Mondrian’s studio photographs present a viewing mechanism that creates this new subject by producing a new way of seeing.

670 Edwards 2001, 19.

671 Mondrian 1986 (1922), 171. Italics original.

672 Colomina 1992, 125. Italics original.

The Contact with the World Takes Place through the Body

In my interpretation above the object appeared to the viewer as a function of the imaginative moving body. I intend to clarify this further by applying ideas from Peirce's diagrammatical reasoning and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which recognizes an observer as embodied and for which the sensible thing is not in space, but, like a direction, is at work across space.⁶⁷³ It is also noticeable that to Wieczorek, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a more appropriate understanding of Mondrian's approach to the visible.⁶⁷⁴ As has already been mentioned, Hegel's concept (*Schein*) does not reveal this kind of phenomenological aspect since it is not primarily concerned with visual appearance, whereas Schoenmaekers's and Mondrian's adaptation is. The fact that we apply diagram-signs even in our everyday visual situations allows me to open the phenomenological basis of diagrams and to throw some light on the apparent paradox of 'planar vision' in Mondrian's text.

What my analysis of the studio photos aims to argue is that diagrammatical experimentation captures the visible and its relation to us. To my mind it is this ability with picture observation which unites Peirce and Merleau-Ponty. It can also arguably set light to the feeling of being 'in the picture' and the elimination of three-dimensional space, ideas which were understood to be connected with Rudolf Steiner's art-theoretical thinking.⁶⁷⁵ For example, Theo van Doesburg's aims for his Café Aubette design in 1929 were "to place man within painting instead of in front of it and thereby enable him to participate in it".⁶⁷⁶

What takes place in Mondrian's photographs, when observed in this way as a series, as this study does, is that viewers imaginatively extend pictorial space over their surrounding space and include themselves in the artist's place and hence become modified observers. The viewer's participation is then that of a depicted observer not that of a sympathetic observer outside the picture, as Stjernfelt interprets this kind of fictitious splitting of the ego and its appearance as a fantasy figure inside the picture. The subject finding itself 'inside the picture' also has other competences – apart from mere observation.⁶⁷⁷ In order to accomplish this, the viewer of Mondrian's photographs has to distinguish the parts of the studio space and their interrelation and then indulges in imaginative experiments with those interrelations. Thus, when the fictional observer in the picture makes a new hypothetical situation which is not explicit in the photograph and in this

673 Merleau-Ponty 1968, xlvii–xlix.

674 Wieczorek 1997, 60–61.

675 Ringbom 1970, 137–138.

676 Overy 1991, 185.

677 In this matter Stjernfelt refers to the whole tradition of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Rosch, Lakoff, etc. which saw "the fictive observer as a body possessing a whole series of characteristic ways of action which may be played with in fantasy action in the picture". See Stjernfelt 2007, 305–306.

way experiments with the matter of the image, this observer actually makes diagrammatical experiments with part of the image by connecting the spontaneous bodily relation to the pictorial space.⁶⁷⁸ Thus, we speak of a living relation between us and the visible. One can recognize here parallels with Schoenmaekers's approach: "Reality (*Werkelijkheid*) is objectivity insofar as it works, insofar as it moves, insofar as it lives, insofar as there is a living relation between its different parts and knowledgable man."⁶⁷⁹

In both of these studio photographs the observer investigates the picture in terms of diagrams, that is, the relational structures of the studio he/she may construct on the basis of bodily action possibilities offered in each photograph. In Delbo's photograph the observer still sees the structures of the ceiling, the floor and the side walls as related and as giving the diagrammatical guidelines which she needs to have to situate herself as an imaginative viewer in the picture, whereas the diagrams she may construct in her mind in Seuphor's photograph are different. What Peirce says about this kind of reasoning with icons also applies to Mondrian's photographs:

Icons are so completely substitutions for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them. Such are the diagrams of geometry. A diagram, so far as it has a general signification, is not a mere icon; but in the middle part of our reasoning we forget that abstractness in great measure and the diagram is for us the very thing. So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction between the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream –not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an *icon*.⁶⁸⁰

I suggest that Mondrian tested his idea of vision with these studio photographs. My approach applied an idea which is in line with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the visual, where the object appears to me as a function of the movements of my body.⁶⁸¹ The tendency in the photographs shows that vision for Mondrian is the place where continuity with the world conceals itself. To recall Merleau-Ponty's idea of vision, he worked to adjust vision so that we would not mistake our contact with the world for distance.⁶⁸² It is in this light of an embodied viewer that my study interprets

678 Stjernfelt 2007, 305–306.

679 Schoenmaekers 1915, 4–5.

680 EP1, 226. [from] "On the Algebra of Logic", 1885. Italics original.

681 Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136–138.

682 Merleau-Ponty 1968, 113, 127.

the symbolic reduction of the viewer's distance to the back wall, a development which took place during the years 1926-1930 in Mondrian's photographs.

I would suggest that Peirce's diagrammatical reasoning and phenomenology work with the dialogue of the '*Triologue*' since Mondrian always presents the issue of perception in the text as a relation the strollers as observers have to the visible. In the seventh *Scene* the stroller *Y* states: "However, we don't just see! A great deal reaches us through *touch*! And isn't it possible that the visible acts upon us invisibly [...]."⁶⁸³ I suggest Mondrian here feels the need to pose the question how the viewer comes to be seen as separate from the world and how the visual becomes positioned as something other than the spectator. One response can be given through a contemporary notion of the ether theory which "holds that through human touch matter undergoes a permanent transformation [...]"⁶⁸⁴ and which thus would be able to serve as a continuity between the viewer and the visual.

The changing cone of vision in the photographs towards the planar and the loss of the feeling of perspective, as well as its symbol, the artist's easel, experiment visually with the same ideas as Mondrian's text represents in the replies of *X*, *Y* and *Z*. Take, for example, the seventh *Scene*, in which *Z* says: "We survey the room visually, but inwardly we also form a single *image*. Thus, we perceive all its planes as a single plane."⁶⁸⁵ In the citation from the third *Scene*, we read:

X: But we still continue to see things from one point of view!

Z: According to an individual subjective conception, yes; but from the moment that we regard ourselves as part of *the whole* and no longer judge things only from our *temporary position*, and regard them from all possible positions – in short, as soon as we *begin to see universally* – *then we no longer see from one point of view*.⁶⁸⁶

Mondrian's photographs reflect the need to reorganize the traditional one-point distant observer, the one whose interpretation comes to interfere with the immediate, experienced vision. The photographs arouse a functional interrelation between the subject and the surroundings which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a prerequisite for the emergence of consciousness, and not vice versa.⁶⁸⁷

683 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 117. Italics original.

684 Ibid.

685 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 113. Italics original.

686 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 99. Italics original.

687 Merleau-Ponty's notion of intertwining – the chiasm between the sensible and the observer implies that the conception of the ideal cannot be defined by opposition to the sensible. Once a thing is understood as dimensional, we have already been introduced into a style, namely the typicality of that thing. See Merleau-Ponty 1968, I, li.

Refining the Sensibility, Sharpening Consciousness: The Studio as Danced by Kamares

Dance and dancing figures as a motif of the art works of the *De Stijl* artists are so apparent that it is worth taking dance into special consideration, studying it together with the corresponding topics of conversation in the seventh *Scene*. Before the starting years of *De Stijl* and also beyond its end, dance is represented in the figurative paintings of Theo van Doesburg, in the mechanical dancing figures of Vilmos Huzár, in the articles of the *De Stijl* periodical, and in Mondrian's own openly stated personal interest in modern ways of dancing.⁶⁸⁸ Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* also includes the topic of dancing and modern jazz music. There are in fact two references to modern dancing and jazz music in the text. In the first, which is in the third *Scene*, the stroller *Z*, as a representative of abstract art, exemplifies dancing as plastic expression where "*a far greater unity is formed*"⁶⁸⁹ between equivalently opposed dance steps or the rhythms of the music. The second reference is in the last *Scene*, where the stroller *Z* speaks of musical instruments and prefers the jazz band.⁶⁹⁰ This passion for the music of black jazz players coincides with Mondrian's own interest in modern dance, which has been widely noticed in the research literature. Mondrian admired, for example, Josephine Baker because in her dance "the rhythm is innate as in all blacks, powerful, sustained concentration of speed".⁶⁹¹

The idea of the moving body became actualized with the hyperspace-philosophy of the fourth dimension. However, when it comes to the fourth dimension, for Mondrian and van Doesburg the question of the perceiving body was fundamentally philosophical but their 'truths' in this matter were different. Mondrian clearly positions himself in his 1926 text: "Only the mind can know anything of the fourth dimension and detach itself from our poor physical body! As men, we must deal with *man's equilibrium*; if we upset it we create nothing! Plastic expression is determined by our physical and spiritual equilibrium."⁶⁹² These words reveal Mondrian's reserved attitude to purely 'cerebral' ideas, whereas van Doesburg showed he had immersed himself in the latest notions of relativity and dynamism. In this way, Mondrian's view is much more static when compared to van Doesburg's

688 There are several articles about works of art and dance, two by Huzár in *De Stijl* magazine. See *De Stijl* I, 2, 1917, 20–23; *De Stijl* IV, 8, 1921, 126–128; and one by the dancer, Valentin Parnac later in *De Stijl* VII 73/74, 1926, 11–15. Nancy Troy reminds us how Vilmos Huzár's *Mechanical Dancing Figures*, dolls that the artist may have begun to develop as early as 1917, coincide not only with Theo van Doesburg's several images of dancing figures but also with Piet Mondrian's early interest in dance. See Troy 1984, 645.

689 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 97. Italics original.

690 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 117.

691 Quoted in Troy 1984, 646. This is an interview by a Dutch correspondent who visited Mondrian in Paris in 1926.

692 Mondrian 1986 (1926), 210. Italics original.

later idea of Elementarism. By the mid-twenties van Doesburg had come to believe that he could represent the moving human body by purely abstract means through diagonals. Paul Overy points out that at the same time van Doesburg believed that diagonal relationships more completely realized the spiritual, because of their gravitational instability.⁶⁹³ What is common to both Mondrian and van Doesburg is the idea of dance. Dance, as an expression of a moving body in space, was a channel to express even the basically different ideas of both artists.

In the *De Stijl* periodical, artists used the motive of dance as a useful analytical tool. For Vilmos Huszár, the rhythm and interaction between the work of art and its surrounding space signified creativity. This rhythm is an element which Huszár calls the 'beeldend' [plastic] element. In Huszár's *Aesthetische beschouwingen* (1917), in his analysis of two sculptures of dancing figures, the lines and forms worked together so that they call forth a rhythm. It is also repeated constantly in sculpture that empty space participates in the creation of the work.⁶⁹⁴ That the idea is as much about the interaction with the surrounding space as it is about the figure itself becomes readily apparent in Huszár's demonstration.

The idea of rhythm had wide connotations in Mondrian's intellectual milieu. Rhythm as a supportive 'life force' for the human habitus and rhythm as 'levensfluïde' (life elixir) belonged to the new *tijdsbewustzijn*.⁶⁹⁵ My approach suggests that it is the open intuitive rhythmic beat of music, expressed especially in jazz or dance, that for Mondrian became a close comparison for the idea of 'beelding'.⁶⁹⁶ For Mondrian, jazz breaks out from the rhythmic conventions of music, it is liberated from the ties to form and from the ties to time in the same way as the city with its electric lights and advertisements is liberated from the change of night and day. Hence, they create an illusion of timeless reality. Mondrian speaks about rhythm not only in his 'Triologue' but later on he wrote an essay about the topic, where he completely fuses the meanings of the rhythm of jazz and the visual forms of horizontality and verticality:

693 Overy 1991, 70–71.

694 Huszár 1917, 20–23. Both Archipenko's abstract work and Professor Walter Schott's academic naturalistic work use dance as a subject matter. Huszár aims to demonstrate that Archipenko's work is involved in a rhythmic counterplay of forms, whereas Schott's work does not manage to express this. The intermediary empty spaces thus incorporate everything as a plastic element of the whole. Therefore, the sculpture is about capturing and interacting with the space around it. The issue of space acquires a new insight. The purpose of Huszár's seemingly opportunist demonstration is to describe an aesthetic perception and experience.

695 Van Paaschen 2017, 116.

696 Artists in Europe between the wars saw jazz metaphorically. Mondrian was probably far more aware of the freedom and spontaneity of jazz than of its strict harmonious and rhythmic structures. Among artists the primitivist-expressionist and mechanical-purist understandings of jazz were intertwined. See Cooper 2002, 167.

Jazz and Neo-Plasticism are already creating an environment in which art and philosophy resolve into rhythm that has no form and is therefore “open” [...]. Jazz above all creates the bar’s open rhythm [...]. Basic to all rhythm is the rhythm of horizontal and vertical. That is why everything is pervaded by an element of rest.⁶⁹⁷

This pulsating, syncopated rhythm, which appeals to human intuition, brings with it the issue of time. Rhythm lifts the listener above or outside of time to a timeless sphere, or to universal time. It almost seems that here Mondrian criticizes the mind’s tendency to contaminate the pure flow of time’s duration by dividing it into detached moments. In this recognition Mondrian comes close to Bergson’s duration, an experience of the flow of time intimately tied to intuition and memory.⁶⁹⁸

To go back to Mondrian’s *‘Triologue’*, I suggest that it is especially in the references to dance and rhythm where several meanings of the conversation in the last *Scene* find common expression. Mondrian fuses the topic of dance and jazz rhythm with other topics, so that the reader finds them more or less intertwined in the strollers’ discussion. For example, the subject’s perceptual relation to the surrounding space is raised as one of the most noticeable topics. Together with this comes the theme of modern technology and Mondrian’s inwardness-outwardness discussion. The discussion about “*man’s inwardness and outwardness*”,⁶⁹⁹ is a topic which ends the seventh *Scene* and thus the whole *‘Triologue’*.

In the last *Scene* the strollers also discuss technology as an instrument for making Neo-Plastic art. The lines bring to mind technological manufacturing processes. They are superior to human handcraft in their speed and accuracy:

Z: the execution that the New Plastic demands, with the assistance of technicians and machinery, will be *other* than the execution directly by the artist himself, but it will be better and closer to the artist’s intentions [...]. *The new art demands a new technique. Exact plastic demands exact means. What could be more exact than mechanically produced materials?*⁷⁰⁰

Furthermore, it is meaningful that *Z* in the last *Scene* mixes jazz, art and the idea of instruments as machines:

697 Mondrian 1927, 221, 222.

698 Bergson 2007 (1896), 72, 239, 243.

699 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122–123.

700 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 115. Italics original.

Z: We must look for new instruments – or for machines! [...] Wouldn't it be splendid – and far more reliable – if there were a machine to which the real artist, the composer, could entrust his work? [...] Old music and old violins don't mean very much to me. I far prefer the jazz band where the old harmony is broken up.⁷⁰¹

Mondrian's text recognizes the modern perceiving subject in a technologizing world with deep awareness about its requirements. The conversation between the strollers here arouses a meaning effect that the requirements for the perceptual capacities of modern man find their common denominator in dance. Dancing is also linked to modern technology through its dependence on rhythm in space-time. Thus, just as the artist and the dancer are concerned with space-time so is the technologist.

Mondrian's text offers an instrumental view. Dancing would be an instrument to deal with the profound change. As such it brings to mind the insight of action which Italian pragmatist circles, especially Giovanni Papini, conveyed and with whose literature Mondrian was familiar. According to these circles action means any change in which art, science, religion and philosophy are all but instrumental.⁷⁰²

In 1925-6, both Mondrian and van Doesburg had photographs taken in their studios, and in both cases the studio space and the motif of dancing are combined. At a time when the competitive situation between Mondrian and van Doesburg was reaching its peak,⁷⁰³ they both let either paintings or the back wall of the studio work as a background for the same dancer, Kamares.⁷⁰⁴ Albeit in different ways, both artists sought to resolve an inherent contradiction involved in an attempt to convey a sense of dance or rhythm within the limitations of a static medium such as painting or wall design.

My 'reading' of the photographs about the dancer Kamares in Mondrian's and van Doesburg's studio leans on the idea that there is a certain silently present 'grammar' in how the visual design has been arranged in these photographs. By this I do not mean merely what Mondrian and van Doesburg had purposefully intended to communicate or study by means of the settings. The audience of these photographs is alone when viewing them, and in their visual design there is an

701 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 116–117.

702 James 1906, 339–340. William James recognizes a general theory of human action in Papini's philosophy.

703 Blotkamp uses the expression 'creative rivalry'. See Blotkamp 1994, 194.

704 Kamares was a pseudonym of Willy (Wilhelmina) van Aggelen. She was also known as Tai Aagen Moro. Mondrian and van Doesburg came to know her through the painter César Domela, who had had a relationship with Kamares. The photographer is unknown in both cases as is also the purpose and use of these photographs.

implied author which is different from the real author.⁷⁰⁵ Thus, there is a visually represented overlapping area of the viewer's context and the producer's context, which lets the viewer 'in' to the meaning effects of the photographs. I hypothesize that these meanings are in line with those of Mondrian's text where, however, they remain more or less inaccessible when read. These common elements in the contexts of the producer of the photograph and the viewer encode the social interactions and social relations into these photographs. Thus, the meanings in the photograph are interpretable.

Mondrian's *'Triologue'* encourages me to 'read' these photographs as exemplifying the subject-object relation. The hint comes from the following lines, where the room, renovated in the style of Neo-Plasticism, would place the subject into the correct perceptual relationship with his surroundings; a wish which we also find in Vincent van Gogh's idea of a perfect room space:⁷⁰⁶

Y: [...] why in practice is it so difficult today to find surroundings in harmony with ourselves.

Z: Yes, the new chromoplastic in architecture is hard to find today, but I still prefer it to separate paintings in-the-manner-of the New Plastic [...] Such a room is always *just right* in its effect, even with people in it.⁷⁰⁷

In other words, Mondrian's text suggests that the space, such as the described studio in the seventh *Scene*, would ideally exemplify the perceptual subject-object relation. In fact, the photographs of Kamares reveal a setting in which a person is in Neo-Plastic space and uses the motive of dance to convey a meaning. The implicit way of 'reading' an image is relevant when considering its meaning effects. Thus, although in van Doesburg's 1925 photograph Kamares is posing in the same outfit as she is photographed in Mondrian's studio, the two photographs produce completely different meanings.

In Mondrian's photograph, Kamares's figure gives a symbolic attribute to the studio space (see Figure 10) The photograph shows coloured cardboard planes in the background, designs for which Mondrian was famous. Kamares's dance becomes a carrier of meaning, which in effect she lends to the Neo-Plastic environment. She offers an attributive meaning to the photograph. Apart from

705 Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 115. As Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen say about the semiotic interpretation of images, this implied author has no explicit voice, no direct means of communicating, but instructs the viewer through the design of the whole. It appeals to the viewer's implicit competence to understand the signs in the observed image.

706 See Vincent van Gogh's description of his bedroom in a letter to his brother, Theo, in 16 October 1888. Cited in *The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition. Vol.4* (2009), 330.

707 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 121. Italics original.

the two recognizable objects, the easel and the wicker chair, by which the viewer knows he is looking at Mondrian's studio, there is a certain feeling of simplicity and emptiness in this photograph. The coloured cardboard panels on the back wall are still at this stage simple and large. The whole setting has only one participant, therefore, the meaning she carries is intense. She is acting in the main role and all the other details in the image are de-emphasized in favour of what could be called the mood or atmosphere of the picture. Overall, therefore, the photograph represents a symbolic suggestive process.⁷⁰⁸

Van Doesburg's photograph includes narrative rather than symbolic structures even though the dancer and her outfit are the same (see Figure 11). In van Doesburg's studio, Kamares is in such a posture that her limbs and bent torso form a play of oblique lines, which coincide with the oblique lines of an Elementarist painting, *Counter Composition XVI in Dissonance* (1925), seen in the background. In this way the setting suggests that there is an active interplay between the dancer and the environment in which she moves. It is as if the Elementarist painting provides music and rhythm to the dancer. These coinciding vectors offer directions for Kamares's movements, thus the photograph arouses the meaning that her moving figure is conjoined to the idea of Elementarism. According to Kress and Leeuwen, these kinds of ideas that something is related to another thing gives a picture its narrative structure.⁷⁰⁹

There are several meaning effects that add to the timeless and generalized quality of the photograph of Mondrian's studio. Light coming from two opposite directions onto Kamares creates the overall soft tone of the picture. The lightest area is around Kamares's body so that her dark-dressed figure almost appears like a silhouette against the radiating light that surrounds her body like a halo. This adds to the symbolic character of the photograph so that the viewer finds that it depicts not a specific moment but a generalized and timeless essence of Neo-Plastic space.⁷¹⁰ Also the fact that she turns her head away from the spectator and that her eyes are probably closed removes the active elements, such as facial expressions or a challenging look of the eyes, from the picture. Even if Kamares's eyes were open so that her look is directed to the upper left, this would lead to somewhere outside of the pictured space. According to Kress and Leeuwen, these kinds of formal pictorial characteristics that can realize symbolic attributes, follow certain rules: these formal features look out of place in the same way as Kamares looks beyond the framed area. Is she already in touch with what lies beyond the space of the room, is she already anticipating the wider spaces created using Neo-Plastic style?

708 Kress & Leeuwen 1996, 106.

709 Kress & Leeuwen 1996, 59.

710 Kress & Leeuwen 1996, 105–106.

The signified time is 'now' in the photograph of van Doesburg's studio. The feeling is not generalized and timeless but considers rather the particular moment when the viewer faces the photograph's setting. The fact that there are more participants in this photograph, and more facial expressions are represented, makes this photograph different from Mondrian's. Van Doesburg himself stares straight back at the viewer but in his casual-looking sweater and with his relaxed pose, with one hand in his pocket and a pipe in his other hand, he makes the viewer feel like an invited guest rather than a challenged participating viewer. Nelly Doesburg's crouched position, her friendly smile facing the viewer, and the dog, Dada, add to the homey tone of the photograph. In this way the photograph defines who the viewer is.⁷¹¹ It is as if the host and hostess are welcoming the viewer as if he is an old friend.

I suggest that in Mondrian's case it is rhythm which is the primary attribute of the Neo-Plastic studio space. Symbolic processes are also conventionally associated with symbolic values,⁷¹² which in this case comes from Kamares wearing the outfit of a Spanish dancer. The viewer recognizes the conventions deriving from this dance culture.⁷¹³ It is the dancer's own body that is the cause of rhythmic patterns, namely the constantly repeated sharp and exact staccato rhythms of heels and clapping hands. The meaning would be in line with Mondrian's own view and well as with Rudolf Steiner's view, according to which the ethereal rhythm supports the pose of the physical body.⁷¹⁴ In dances like the Spanish flamenco it is rhythm rather than the wide movement of limbs often found in other dances that plays a major role. It is rhythm that connects the figure in the room and the space. Without the recognizable studio space in the background, the viewer's feelings about the space and dance would remain fleeting. The photograph symbolically suggests that the Neo-Plastic environment, like the studio-room here, has the power to refine modern sensibility. This notion seems to be in line with the general insight according to which Mondrian's abstract paintings can be experienced as a dynamic process in harmony with the rhythms of consciousness.⁷¹⁵ In the photograph of van Doesburg's studio the situation is different. Instead of the symbolic meaning effects of rhythm, it is rather Kamares's moving body that creates the signifying content of the setting. The fact that Kamares's head is bent down and she is looking at her own leg gives the impression that she is starting or is in the middle of her dance

711 Kress & Leeuwen 1996, 118.

712 Kress & Leeuwen 1996, 105.

713 What has naturally influenced my interpretation is the knowledge that Kamares particularly specialized in Spanish dances. See de Boer 1995, 40.

714 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 147; van Paaschen 2017, 116.

715 See, for example, Reynolds 1995, 159; van Paaschen 2017, 116.

rather than posing in a finishing position. Therefore, it is the body in the midst of its movement that here creates the perceptual relation to the surrounding space.

Finally, how would the Kamares photograph provide support for the meanings in Mondrian's last *Scene*? For Harry Cooper the formal qualities of jazz and dance coincided with the 'new man' in expressing aesthetic and athletic capacity.⁷¹⁶ Moreover, Michael White comments on the persistence of the figure in *De Stijl* production and argues that the modernized vision had an effect on the bodily movement.⁷¹⁷ These considerations encourage me to adopt pragmatic insights and consider the notion of rhythm. This insight combines the ideas of the embodied subject and its relation to his/her surroundings and technology. "Different systems of perceptual rhythms, for example balletic/somatic rhythms, are imposed and induced by different systems of artefacts, which have their own ways of materially schematizing space and time," as Robert Innis notices about technological artefacts.⁷¹⁸ In Kamares's photograph the studio wall with its cardboard panels can be considered the kind of artefact which induces rhythm into the subject. In Mondrian's text, I would argue that the written description of the studio space corresponds here to the same kind of relationship between the subject and his/her surroundings as the subject has with a technological artefact.

I suggest that by reading the motifs of jazz rhythm and dance as connected to technology and the subject's relation to its surroundings, Mondrian's conversational combinations convey meaning effects which come close to those of Dewey's words. Dewey reminds us that rhythm is a universal scheme of existence⁷¹⁹ and his notion of rhythm is to be taken quite widely. It applies both to space and time, to the external world that is perceived as well as to the structure of the perception. The shaping arts – and by extension the technological arts – heighten this search for order through processes of production that lead to improved perception wherein the artefact gives birth to "that sudden magic" that generates a sense of inner revelation as in the perceived fittingness of a tool to a task. This intuition brings moments of closure to human communion with the world.⁷²⁰

Mondrian's text suggests the intertwining of the subject with the world: "However that may be, inward and outward are deeply interwoven: what appears to us as 'an object' is also a force, just as man is a force and also an object [...]"⁷²¹ The citation seems to work meaningfully when it is read through Dewey's notions. Thus, the biological organism is a force, not a transparency. It is entwined in a dialectic of

716 Cooper 2002, 168.

717 White 2003, 39–40.

718 Innis 2002, 179.

719 Dewey 1980 (1934), 169–170.

720 Dewey 1980 (1934), 177–178.

721 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 117.

need and demand in relation to the environment.⁷²² Hence, in Mondrian's text the discussion strongly and repeatedly emphasizes the dialectic between 'inwardness' and 'outwardness' and equilibrium in this movement:

Z: [...] *a more conscious inwardness makes the new man seek a more conscious expression which lies precisely in the outward.* [...] It means that one's inwardness and outwardness are completely equivalent and so form a *unity*. Then the outward is an image of the inward that is reflected in *all* outwardness.⁷²³

To conclude, I suggest that this rhythmic organization in the structure of perception gives the unity, the equivalence, and the oneness in perception about which these above-cited lines speak. That the topics of technology, machines and rhythm appear in the same conversation in the last *Scene* produces the final meaning. According to Dewey, the products of technological arts become fine arts to the degree to which they carry over into themselves something of the spontaneity of the arts like music, poetry or dance, whose media is in contact with the body and its expressive powers.⁷²⁴ Hence, Mondrian's text represents an awareness of the effects of modern socio-technological mechanisms and shows in this way its *tijdsbewustzijn*. It adjusts its message to the effects which were marked by the perceptual fragmentation, splitting and disharmony which threatened the feeling of perceptual continuity and thus also questioned the possibilities for vivid consciousness.

722 Dewey 1980 (1934), 256–257. The intertwining of the organism with the world here provides meaning. It involves the spending of energy – motoric, sensory, intellectual – which carries the organism through a constant set of shifts, as Innis characterizes both Dewey's philosophy and that of another pragmatist philosopher, William James. See Innis 2002, 171–172.

723 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122. Italics original.

724 Dewey 1980 (1934), 236–237.

4 DIAGRAMMATIC READING: COORDINATED CONSCIOUSNESS

This chapter of my study concentrates on the conversation between the three actors in Mondrian's play-like text. They are *X*, a figurative painter *Y*, a layman and *Z*, an abstract painter. In spite of the short pretexts at the start of each *Scene* the rest of the text follows a conversational form. Conversations usually include several shifting discussions about different topics. Mondrian's text, too, represents a typical informal conversational situation. The conversations between the participants, the strollers *X*, *Y* and *Z*, report their present states as states of emotions, especially as the emotion of beauty, their fears and desires, firm opinions and hesitations. Most noticeably, the aesthetic evaluations of the observed images form the backbone of the conversations. However, moral topics are also included, such as the talk about what is good and what is bad, and about truth and love in the seventh *Scene*. The topics move, for example, from the state of old architecture in present-day cities, to the state of the contemporary individual in a vigorously industrializing society or to the interior of the studio.

As is usually the case with conversations, this '*Triologue*' is dynamic. Changes take place in emotions and opinions during the process of the conversation. Attempts at making the other participants share beliefs, judgments and reasons for Neo-Plasticism are the core purposes of this conversation. They create the contents of the conversation. As Johansen has noted, conversation often stages self-reflexivity as regards visions, narratives and wordings, leading to reflections on speech itself and its rhetorical power.⁷²⁵

Of course, Mondrian's literary text is not an ordinary everyday conversation, since it is staged like a theatrical play to an audience, that is, the reader. As such, the reader is an outsider who must be let in on what the play is all about. Johansen reminds us that it is by introducing hints about realism into the text that the reader gets some predictability to interpret the meanings in the conversation.⁷²⁶ Ordinary everyday dialogues do not do this but often remain only partly understood by an outside listener. Mondrian's text lets the reader in by imitating the way in which people talk to one another, representing accustomed speech habits to provide the conversation with some predictability.

⁷²⁵ Johansen 2002, 395.

⁷²⁶ Johansen 2002, 150.

Therefore, my approach starts from the characters, the ‘actors’ in Mondrian’s ‘play’, and from the way in which they support the self-representative capacity of the text. The actors are important as signifying elements in the text. During the reading process it becomes clear that they possess their own characteristic ways of perceiving and have different opinions and strategies. Hence they judge things differently. The way in which the strollers talk to each other and how they participate in the discussion is part of the total communicative experience, producing meanings to the whole text.⁷²⁷ After focusing on the characters, I discuss the meanings that the conversational form produces in Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’. As Hodge and Kress point out, by citing the Russian semiotician, Valentin Voloshinov, every exchange in a verbal text is in some sense co-authored by the main participants and this is decisive for communication to occur. This co-authoring can only enter into communication in so far as it is assigned meanings and made meaningful.⁷²⁸

Finally, in this chapter my purpose is to take the larger elements of the conversation into consideration as a sort of diagrammatic structure, thus bringing out the dynamic character of the conversation. This approach reveals the text’s capacity to reflect on itself, this self-reflexivity being a sort of auto-communication in the literary text. It is an essential mechanism for a semiotic text, since it means the text models itself and thus participates in the myth which the culture has of itself.⁷²⁹ Therefore, my purpose is to read the ‘*Triologue*’ as organized according to certain relational patterns. It is obvious that Mondrian had an idea about the ‘new art of the word’⁷³⁰ and to convey a structure of oppositions also in a literary piece was an urgent task which Mondrian wished to undertake.⁷³¹

Conversation indeed is a shifting and fluid form of communication. As Johansen reminds us, conversation is a collective enterprise in which the participants are dependent not only on their own states, characters and objectives but on the directions and twists and turns brought about by a collective action.⁷³² It is this reciprocal, relationally shifting character of Mondrian’s conversation that I aim to bring out.

727 For Steiner, for example, the way things were said (composition, rhythm, syntax) was more important than what was said. See van Paaschen 2017, 98.

728 Hodge and Kress 1988, 37, 39.

729 Uspenskij, Lotman, & al. 1998 (1993), 59.

730 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141–143.

731 Henkels 1986, 10.

732 Johansen 2002, 395–396.

4.1 The Actors X, Y and Z: Consciousness as an Object of Observation

Mondrian reduced to a minimum what he reveals about these characters, naming them merely X, Y and Z. The letters appear in the articles repeatedly and densely to express the lines of each stroller. Except for the short pretexts, the *‘Triologue’* lacks the explanatory elements that a separate narrator would provide. Therefore, it does not prepare the reader very much for the topics discussed in the dialogue. This means that in order to be readable at all, the readers as an audience must have already been familiar with the issues, expressions and language of the text. In this sense, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* works in the same way as Plato’s dialogues, which also abbreviate the names of the participants to mere letters, have few descriptions about the context of the dialogues and required a certain amount of philosophical expertise from its readers.⁷³³

The names of Mondrian’s characters, X, Y and Z, require the reader to identify the reference with an ontologically different universe when compared to the universe of normal, realistic conversational situations. Deciding about the status of this universe also necessitates background knowledge, which leads to the philosophy of mathematics. During the years 1915–1925 the theory of relativity became a principle focus of interest within philosophy, even though it introduced new and baffling concepts.⁷³⁴ This interest did not only remain within the science of physics, for the theory was of such significance that every philosopher sought to interpret Einstein’s work in the light of his own metaphysical system. Accordingly, space-time coordinates were no longer a merely mathematical designation. The relativity of coordination meant that the real existed.⁷³⁵

Mondrian’s insights about perception participates in this same tendency. Conventional emblems of Euclidean three-dimensional space coordinates come immediately to mind from the letters x, y and z in the *‘Triologue’*. As Mondrian writes in “The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today” (1922): “The new vision [...] does not proceed from one fixed viewpoint: it takes its viewpoint *everywhere* and is *not limited to any one position. It is not bound by space or time* (in accord with the theory of relativity).”⁷³⁶ Moreover, the publication of Mondrian’s text in the *De Stijl* periodical encourages the reader to think in this way. The mathematical tone is strongly present in *De Stijl* as in, for example, the mathematical symbols of I.K. Bonset’s [van Doesburg’s] iconic poems,

733 Thesleff 2011, 52, 53.

734 Ryckman 2005, 3–4.

735 Ryckman 2005, 14, 31.

736 Mondrian 1986 (1922), 171. Italics original.

X-Beelden. Also, Vantongerloo's article series, *Reflexions*,⁷³⁷ gives a special place to the geometrical importance of the point in space. Adopting a poetical tone, Vantongerloo describes its meaning in a creative work: "The point is the All, so if one wishes to express oneself, to think, or to create, it is necessary to understand the unity of time and space: the point."⁷³⁸ There was in addition a clearly spoken request to purposefully use mathematical symbols in literary texts to accentuate certain movements and indicate their directions. *De Stijl* artists may have found this in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912), which was in the *De Stijl* reading list.⁷³⁹

It is the naming of these characters which clearly ties Mondrian's 'Triologue' to the fictional, whereas the dialogue otherwise could be seen as a normal conversation, probing the present state of art in a contemporary world.⁷⁴⁰ I suggest that the naming of X, Y and Z is instrumental, since it gives the textual surroundings a certain emotional coating. This naming makes these surroundings mirror the author's desire to tie the text to the epistemological crises of the era, which was actualized as mathematically-related space/time issues.⁷⁴¹ As Johansen reminds us, forming this concord with the help of naming is also the aim of literature.⁷⁴² A person's name has a special status, for we usually think of it as an essential feature of a being. It is also a means to control the person to whom it refers, a way of mastering the absence of this being since the person is vicariously present in his or her name.⁷⁴³ What becomes obvious in Mondrian's 'Triologue' is that these names refer by implication to whole fields of art.

Mondrian's text uses the meaning value inherent in the coordination principle, a principle which has the best access to the 'real'. The 'real' now leans on the relativity of coordinates included by the fourth aspect, time. Therefore, the setting in the text implies a certain kind of division. Mathematical language and the use of the letters x, y and z gave a sense of exactness to Mondrian's 'Triologue'. However,

737 See, for example, *De Stijl*, I, 9, 1918, 97–102; *De Stijl*, II, 7, 1919, 77–79; *De Stijl*, III, 9, 1920, 77.

738 Vantongerloo 1918, 22. "Le point est l'image de l'infiniment grand et de l'infinitesimal et contient tout et rien. Comme tout peut naître de rein, rein contient donc tout. Le point est absolu, il contient l'unité du temps et de l'espace. Le point est un, le tout. Temps et espace unis, forment point. Le point, le tout, la force, commande par sa puissance et crée temps et espace. [...] Le point est le Tout, si donc on veut s'extérioriser, se dire, si donc on veut créer, il faut comprendre l'unité du temps et de l'espace: le point." See *De Stijl*, II, 2, 1918, 21–22.

739 Marinetti presented Mondrian with a copy of *Les Mots en liberté futurists* (1919) and he may also have found the idea here.

740 Johansen 2002, 115. As Johansen reminds us, names and naming play a crucial role in deciding about the fictionality or non-fictionality of a non-linguistic phenomenon. Having said that, readers often classify texts as literature although they clearly refer to former or present states of affairs in the world.

741 Wieczorek 1997, 57. As Wieczorek notes, Mondrian's work does not coincide with mathematics in the sense that it would have something to do with measuring or formulas.

742 Johansen 2002, 277.

743 Johansen 2002, 276.

notions of time and space had become fluid and these letters were a means to handle the situation, something to lean on. *X*, *Y* and *Z* become a tool to control something that will be processed in the text's course by means of these symbols and the journey. Let us consider how a mathematician defines a point in space. The mathematical values he gives to *x*, *y* and *z* are a way to control exact points in space. This is how, for example, Poincaré explains his notions of 'amorphous space' in the introduction to his *Pourquoi l'espace a trois dimensions* (1912), a text that van Doesburg later cited in *De Stijl*.⁷⁴⁴ Here Poincaré adopts mathematical 'language' to describe more exactly the nature of that space, using the symbols *x*, *y* and *z* for points in two separate coordinate systems.⁷⁴⁵ Poincaré's essay concerning perception in space was important for mathematicians, theoretical physicists and artists alike.

Mondrian clearly gave certain characteristics to the strollers and he wrote their lines accordingly. The first lines of *X*, *Y* and *Z* immediately reveal what is typical of their responses and attitudes, in a word, their characters: "Y: How beautiful! X: What deep tones and colors! Z: What repose!"⁷⁴⁶ *Y* is usually the one who expresses the first spontaneous impression, a pure feeling when observing the images in the story. *X*, on the other hand, often sees the view through other things, such as colours and relations. *Z* introduces a concept that aims to combine the former two in mutual relation. In addition, *Y* sees things as themselves without reference to anything else, whereas *X* tries to understand how the impression elicited has been composed. *X* is shown to be aware of how to make that impression one of beauty. His lines, thus, imply the act of thinking. *Z* then brings both *X*'s and *Y*'s positions into mutual relation. Perhaps the following lines on the starting pages of the text reveal this typicality in the strollers:

Z: But the disagreement is only superficial. You *emphasize* tone and color, whereas I emphasize what these express – repose. But we are all *trying to do the same thing*. Repose *becomes plastically visible* through the *harmony of relationships*, and indeed, that is why I emphasize the *expression of relationships*. Your expression of color and tone is also an *expression of relationships*. You express relationship just as I do, and I express color just as you do.

744 Poincaré's 1912 article as quoted in *De Stijl* VI, 5, 1923. pp. 66–70.

745 Poincaré 1963 (1912), 136. "Il est *amorphe*, s'est-à-dire qu'il ne diffère pas de celui qu'on en déduirait par une déformation continue quelconque. Je m'explique en employant le langage mathématique. Voici deux espaces *E* et *E'*; le point *M* de *E* correspond au point *M'* de *E'*; le point *M* a pour coordonnées rectangulaires *x*, *y* et *z*; le point *M'* a pour coordonnées rectangulaires trois fonctions quelconques de *x*, *d'y* et de *z*. Ces deux espaces ne diffèrent pas au point de vue que nous occupé."

746 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 83.

Y: Relationship? [...] what do you mean by “relationships of position”? [...].

X: And what about the relationships of color?

Z: The various values of color as color and color as light and dark are indeed prerequisites for equilibrium [...].

Y: Color *itself* always affects me strongly. A yellow alone, just like blue, opens up a whole world of beauty for me!

X: But color achieves its value only through opposition with another color, through color *relationship* [...].⁷⁴⁷

I brought out this basic setting of Mondrian's text in my master's thesis. Now my purpose is to proceed with the insight further.⁷⁴⁸ I suggest that with these characters Mondrian's text is playing with the idea of the faculties of human consciousness. Thus, the roles of these actors mirror the two main ways of acquiring knowledge of the world: sense perception and thought. Although this distinction is a universal insight in philosophy, the ways in which their relation is conceived has varied over the centuries. That the '*Triologue*' aligns itself according to this thematic insight became obvious to Mondrian. When writing about his afterthoughts to '*Triologue*', he came to realize that the 'new art of the word' should be a unity of oppositions, of 'feeling-in-beauty' and 'thinking-in-beauty'.⁷⁴⁹

It is also possible to see the Dutch historical roots of the term 'realism' in Mondrian's characters. The term 'realism' was strongly linked to the philosophical dimensions of perception which suggested that the sensuous world could be reached by perception but the world of ideas could only be reached by inner reflection.⁷⁵⁰ Mondrian's characters reflect this division. However, by the time Mondrian wrote his articles, the term had acquired a meaning which bridged this dualism.⁷⁵¹ In Mondrian's text, *Z* typically makes a relation between *Y*'s and *X*'s opinions and perceptions by often bringing a concept into the conversation. This is supposed to unite these two trains of thought. For example, *Z* conceives everything as relational instead of contemplating a thing merely for its own sake:

747 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 84–85. Italics original.

748 Pääsky 2007, 66.

749 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141, 143.

750 Streng 1994, 239.

751 Streng 1994, 248.

Z: Yes, all things are a *part* of the whole: each part obtains its visual value from the whole and the whole from its parts. Everything is expressed through *relationship*. Color can exist only through *other* colors, dimension through *other* dimensions, positions through *other* positions [...].

Y: And yet If, for instance, I contemplate the moon for its own sake, it is already so beautiful in shape and color.

Z: Everything one contemplates for *its own sake* is indeed beautiful, but it has a *limited* kind of beauty. When we see something as a thing-in-itself, we separate it from the whole: opposition is lacking – we no longer see relationships but only color and form. We observe one color, one form [...]. When we see things as *particularities*, as *separate entities*, we drift into vagueness and uncertainty, into all sorts of fantasy. *One thing can be known only through another* [...].⁷⁵²

Z is in this way a mediator in the action: he shares *Y*'s feeling and at the same time acknowledges *X* in thinking how and why this feeling is aroused. Z speaks as if observing *X* and *Y* as an outside listener and is therefore able to consciously combine the notions of the previous two into one concept. Z strives to express the ideal, *the universal*, which traditionally, in the Netherlands, had been linked to 'real art' and to 'realism', as discussed in my second chapter.

X, Y and Z: One Consciousness

Given Mondrian's roots in the philosophical inclinations of the Dutch discourse on realism, it seems understandable that Mondrian was attracted by Steiner's ideas since Steiner, too, recognizes this universal philosophical insight and suggests his own theory of perception in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 2011 (1894).⁷⁵³ Steiner discusses the elements in our cognitive experience: the immediate sensuous perception which is present or given to the mind and an interpretation which represents the activity of thought. As mentioned, this is one of the oldest and most universal of philosophic insights. However, the manner in which these elements

⁷⁵² Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 86. Italics original.

⁷⁵³ Originally published in German in 1894 under the title *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*.

and their relation to one another are conceived becomes an interesting solution if we consider Mondrian's *Z* as a mediator.⁷⁵⁴

Steiner acknowledges a third component in the idea of human consciousness rather than the traditional two.⁷⁵⁵ Steiner, whose writings Mondrian had explored keenly, notes that human thinking as a target of observation differs considerably from all other objects of our observation. As Steiner exemplifies, I can immediately have a perception of a tree or a table as soon as they appear in my field of perception. However, I cannot immediately notice what I think about these objects. Yet, when viewing a table and when forming opinions about it, I cannot observe this latter action at the same moment. I have to step outside of my perceiving action if, in addition to directly perceiving the table, I want to perceive my thinking considering the table. Thinking is a sort of an exception when talking about perception. This is a fact that has to be taken into consideration when defining the relationship between thinking as an object of observation and all the other objects of perception.⁷⁵⁶ Both subject and object are concepts formed by thinking and the vehicle for thinking is human consciousness.⁷⁵⁷

Therefore, what in Mondrian's text forms subjectivity is literally the compound of the three actors, the strollers, in the text. Their characters, actions and reactions become clear through their positioning vis-à-vis each other. Subjectivity functions together as the diagrammatic positioning of the characters *X*, *Y* and *Z*. Therefore, as mentioned in the Introduction, Christina Ljungberg's notion of subjectivity is useful for understanding subjectivity in Mondrian's text.⁷⁵⁸ The subjectivity is performatively established in the conversational interaction between the strollers.

As a play with three actors, the '*Triologue*' refers to human consciousness. It is a text where consciousness has been made an object of observation. When applying Mondrian's characters to this frame, seeing them as one conscious mind, the setting in the '*Triologue*' suggests that when we are thinking we appear as acting beings to ourselves. In this sense, *Z* as an actor who mediates, connects and finds continuities, refers to the Steinerian idea of consciousness. According to Steiner, we consider the focus of our thinking to be an object, and ourselves to be

754 Steiner 2011 (1894), 22–23. Steiner discards dualism, according to which the human consciousness sees itself as separate from the perceived world, no matter whether this separation is conceived as a separation between subject and object or between spirit and matter or between thinking and the phenomenal world. Steiner considers the dualist attempt to bridge this gap to be futile. Steiner explains that when I conceive myself as 'I', I must conceive this to belong to the side of spirit and all the other perceptions of the senses must be included in this side of the world. Monism, on the other hand, tries to find the unity between 'I' and the world by somehow explaining the gap away. According to Steiner, both of these insights do not do justice to the fact that such different elements as matter and spirit can ultimately influence each other.

755 Steiner 2011 (1894), 42–43.

756 Steiner 2011 (1894), 33–35.

757 Steiner 2011 (1894), 42, 43.

758 Ljungberg 2009, 87, 88.

subjects.⁷⁵⁹ In this way we have consciousness about objects and when directing our notion to ourselves we have consciousness about ourselves. Therefore, as Steiner concludes, thinking is superior to a subject and to an object when it forms these two concepts. It is not the subject who links the concept to the perceived object but the thinking. Nor do subjects think because they are subjects, rather their subjectivity appears to them because they can think.⁷⁶⁰

This organization in the roles of the strollers could correspond to Steinerian metaphysical realism. However, in order to situate the idea of consciousness within the frame of scientific philosophy, I will read the three strollers through Peirce's phenomenological categories. These categories offer a tool to study the three actors further. The categories are best explained as ways of being and as characteristics which are evident in phenomenological reflection.⁷⁶¹ Christopher Hookway has researched Peirce's categories especially from this perceptual point of view.

As the former citations of Mondrian's text reveal, *Y* represents firstness, a category "which is as it is, independently of anything else".⁷⁶² *Y*'s feeling of beauty emerges as a simple feeling. *Y* aims to embody qualitative characters, 'qualities of feeling' in the perception. This feeling is for *Y* something positive and *sui generis*, being how it is quite regardless of how or what anything else is. For example, *Y* admires colour as itself and the form of the moon as such, as can be seen from the earlier citations. Hookway notices that, in Peirce, the feeling of unity, which is a feeling of quality, is the first perceptual judgment we have and this firstness of perception is logically independent.⁷⁶³ *Y*'s vision 'as itself' suggests the fact that once we see an object to be of a certain kind, our awareness of the details of parts and the structure is likely to be reduced. Instead *X*'s feeling of beauty is a logical product of the properties of the parts, such as colours and tones: "But I don't see any details!" says *Y* in the second *Scene* about the scattered clusters of trees, whereas *X* sees them as the coalescence of details.⁷⁶⁴

759 Steiner notes the 'given' character of our sensuous perceptions. In this respect both Peirce and Steiner conceive our perceptual judgments to be compelling when we form them. They thus have a kind of 'initial credibility'. Hookway notes that especially after 1900, we can acknowledge Peirce's stress upon the importance of the 'outward clash', that is, the initial credibility as an attempt to forge a link between perception and cognition. This can be used as a premise for the argument for pragmatism: it is because we encounter reality through perception that the application of the pragmatist principle clarifies the whole meaning of the term 'outward clash'. See Hookway 1985, 153; Steiner 2011 (1894), 22, 28, 40.

760 Steiner 2011 (1894), 33–35.

761 Hookway 1985, 155. Peirce considered that the methodological grounds for defining the list of categories was provided by science. He called this 'phaneroscopy', which meant the observational and descriptive study of "the collective total of all that is in any way or in any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not".

762 EP1, xxx.

763 Hookway 1985, 157, 158–159. Hookway uses the word 'percept' for the first impression in perception, as Peirce also did.

764 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87.

I would argue that *X*'s experience belongs to a category of secondness. It refers to causes, and represents the confrontation involved in the human experience of existing things.⁷⁶⁵ Thus, *X* does not only feel the impact of the landscape but reacts with it and demonstrates that interaction by his words. When observing the landscape in the first *Scene*, he makes causal explanations about how the sense of beauty in the landscape is aroused. *X* introduces a dyadic relation between the whole and its formative parts when considering this particular landscape. *X*'s character is explainable through Peirce's discussion of demonstratives. The general term that Peirce uses for the referent of the demonstrative is an 'individual'. As Hookway reminds us, all perceptual judgments are singular judgments which make reference to individuals; and it is a mark of individuals that reference to them must be indexical. Indexical reference, secondness and individuality go together for Peirce.⁷⁶⁶

As the above-cited lines from Mondrian's text show, *Z* is not satisfied with *Y*'s experience of "the shape and colour as such" as the source of beauty. *Z* notices "the vagueness and fantasy" of this mode of perception which, in fact, are the same characteristics that Peirce gives to firstness.⁷⁶⁷ It is a category of possibilities. Its reference is undetermined and thus possible and merely potential. Therefore, it is also characterized as monadic, which I consider to be an adjective that can be connected to fantasizing as a quality of the mind's work. Nor is *Z* satisfied with *X*'s dyadic demonstrative perception: the relationships between tones and colours are only prerequisites to something more important:

Z: Thus everything that is regarded as a thing in itself, as *one*, must be viewed as a *duality* or *multiplicity* – as a *complex*. Conversely, everything in a complex must be seen as *part* of that complex: as part of a *whole*. Then we will always see *relationships* and always know one thing through the other. [...] In this *mutability* of relationships there is one *immutable* relationship: Plastically, it is manifested by the *perpendicular* position. Plastically, this gives us stability.⁷⁶⁸

Z embeds both of the perceptions of *X* and *Y* into a wholeness, which *Z* characterizes through the concept of 'repose'. *Z*'s notion of repose mediates between the feeling of *Y* and the relational options of *X* and makes these options intelligible to everyone.

765 Hookway 1985, 170.

766 Hookway 1985, 167.

767 EP2, 4, 149–150; EP1, 275.

768 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 86. Italics original.

Peirce's triadic action is involved in each case of perceptual experience. It is the character of *Z* which hence completes the Peircean triadic action in the '*Dialogue*'. *Z* by his general notion of repose finds a concept by which continuity is brought to the perception and in this way *Z* shows himself to be an operative character. Thirdness is operative in nature. "It is found wherever one thing brings about a Secondness between two things."⁷⁶⁹ *Z* represents the thirdness which constitutes regularity by bringing separate elements of the other two strollers into relation with each other in ways that cannot be reduced to simple dyadic associations. Continuity is generally seen as one of the forms of thirdness.

But what does Mondrian's text tell us about perception when the characters are observed through Peircean categories? Observing the characters through Peirce's phenomenology reveals the claim about vision in Mondrian's text, which otherwise might remain hidden in the fluidity of the conversation. I suggest that the idea of perception that Mondrian's actors represent can be said to exemplify realism in Peirce's meaning of the term.⁷⁷⁰ Peirce links his realism with views about continuity. Thus, to use Hookway's example, to Peirce whether generals are real is the same as the question whether there are true continua.⁷⁷¹ In Mondrian's text *Y* says that it is possible to experience something as an aesthetic unity without intellectually noticing how its elements are mediated in the whole. However, an intellectual understanding of the whole, represented by *Z*, will require a grasp of the mediating relations as well, which are represented by *X*.

It is noticeable that during the course of the story *X*, *Y* and *Z* seem to maintain their characteristic features.⁷⁷² This similarity of the elements in the text might be considered a repetitive patterning in which the text reflects itself, as Johansen points out.⁷⁷³ This repetitive model is a rhetorical device by which Mondrian's text lays claim to the validity of the text. As a whole, the three characters tell us something crucial about the self-representation of Mondrian's text. When interpreted within the scientific frame of Peirce's philosophy, Mondrian's '*Dialogue*' shows that ultimately it is a text where the observing subject itself becomes the target of observation. All ways of conceiving matter by perception are here, in this play, considered.

769 EP2, 269.

770 Hookway 1985, 172–173. According to Hookway, it is important to remember that thirdness is also linked with realism; the generalization covers all possible cases and is not simply a report of a regularity among those cases that have actually occurred. If this is accepted, then the connection between realism and thirdness can be seen.

771 Hookway 1985, 174.

772 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 89. See, for example, the starting lines in the third *Scene*.

773 Johansen 2002, 185. Jakobson calls this structural device parallelism. See Jakobson 1981, 90–91. Johansen calls the same mechanism analogical and speaks of analogy rather than parallelism.

Mondrian, in a way, splits the human consciousness into its basic elements and submits it to examination. As such, the idea of consciousness in Mondrian's 'Triologue' thus corresponds to Schoenmaekers's 'Hegelian' idea according to which consciousness is the mystery of force which we must fully experience 'on' matter.⁷⁷⁴ The 'Triologue' and the actors *X*, *Y* and *Z* work in the same way as Plato's dialogues. Thus, when Socrates enters into a discussion, the result is always the outcome of all the participants. Plato's dialogues work like one mind that divides itself into separate speakers, where one asks and the other answers but both depend on each other.⁷⁷⁵

Mondrian's 'Triologue' gives the impression of being an interior monologue. Mondrian furthers the impression by not intervening as a describer or by not tidying the sentences of the characters into too logical an order. As Dorrit Cohn reminds us, the inner voice itself is a generally accepted psychological reality, and is by no means merely a literary invention. This is a way to flavour the text with the realism of what a monologist "really thinks" to himself.⁷⁷⁶

4.2 The Conversational Form of the 'Triologue'

Mondrian expresses his message in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* by means of dialogue, and this has meaning potential for his project of Neo-Plasticism. The conversations the characters engage in are dynamic and are the means by which the theory of Neo-Plasticism is mediated to the reader. Elements whose meaning is not clear from the linguistic text itself can become clear through dialogue. My starting point is that in dialogical situations not only what is said but also how it is said create meaning. By using the conversational form, Mondrian is able to make his characters ask each other about meanings, ask for explanations, and improve their arguments. It is clear, therefore, that the dialogical form, as such, needs to be interpreted as a text in its own right.

In this part of my study I discuss how the identity and the positions of the participants become apparent in mutual conversational interaction. This takes place by rhetorical systems that operate through messages about their identity and relationships, signifying status, power and solidarity. My analysis relies on the modification of Roger Brown's and Albert Gilman's famous study, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity" (1960). With the help of Robert Hodge's and Gunther Kress's generalizing approach to Brown and Gilman's analysis, I study the interaction

774 Schoenmaekers 1915, 59–60.

775 Thesleff 2011, 47.

776 Cohn 1978, 76–78. Interior monologue is simply a mental activity, inner speech, *endophasy* and, as such, does not imitate the Freudian unconscious, Bergson's inner flux, nor even William James's stream of consciousness.

between *X*, *Y* and *Z* in order to reveal the dynamic character of the dialogue, which is a crucial part of the text's meaning.⁷⁷⁷

As Hodge and Kress note, behind Brown and Gilman's analysis lies Emile Durkheim's social theory. Durkheim had posited two fundamental dimensions of any form of social organization, solidarity (cohesion and dis-cohesion, alliances and antagonisms, bonds and barriers) and power (order, control hierarchy). These abstract categories have the virtue of scope and flexibility and can apply to both macro and micro levels of society. They are also applicable to the relations between and within social classes in a class society or to the constitution of smaller groupings such as family, kin groups and so on.⁷⁷⁸ In Mondrian's text, the set of messages which organizes the exchange of the meanings between the characters implies a generalized version of social relations and introduces ideological content into the dialogue. This approach leads my analysis to the field of social semiotics and thus away from the neutral and phenomenological aspects of Peirce's signs. The three characters, *X*, *Y* and *Z* express different attitudes and competences in the conversation and this represents common features of social relationships. At the same time, their names, *X*, *Y* and *Z*, suggest an authorial operative control acting outside of the dialogue.

When applying Brown and Gilman's insights in a wide sense, my reading is able to detect several different signs of power and solidarity. Firstly, signs of power and solidarity organize and give meaningfulness to the relations of the participants.⁷⁷⁹ Secondly, as Hodge and Kress point out, this system of signifiers of power and solidarity are based on the assumption of both opposition and identity between these dimensions, leading to systematic ambiguity and multiple redundancy.⁷⁸⁰ The signs of solidarity are based on a number of principles, including analogies with equality, reciprocity, self-reference, and simplicity or lack of transformational modification. These can also signify the absence of power. The signs of power, on the other hand, are based on the analogies with asymmetry, self-suppression, magnitude and elaboration. They can also, of course, signify absence of solidarity. Hodge and Kress conclude that these systems specify and assume relations of power and solidarity between categories of participants so that an ideological vision of reality is revealed.⁷⁸¹

777 Hodge & Kress 1988, 40–41. Brown and Gilman's study started from the well-known fact that many European languages have two different forms of pronoun for the second-person singular, with complex rules for their use. At first glance, the scope of this article seems extremely limited, as Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress note; however, it has implications for many other semiotic codes. I will apply Brown and Gilman's method in the way Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress do in their own research and widen the scope.

778 Hodge & Kress 1988, 40–41.

779 Brown & Gilman 1960, 253, 255–259.

780 Hodge & Kress 1988, 46.

781 *Ibid.*

As might be expected, the layman, *Y*, usually expresses relatively spontaneous, spoken language, not the language of expertise, when contrasted to the language of the two professional painters. *Y*'s language is simple, sentences are usually short, sometimes even insecure and marked by hesitation, which is characteristic of spoken language in relatively spontaneous, informal situations:⁷⁸² “*Y*: Relationship? *Y*: What do you mean by “relationships of position”? *Y*: I readily grant that, but... *Y*: And yet ...If, for instance, I contemplate the moon for its own sake, it is already so beautiful in shape and color.”⁷⁸³ *Y*'s language is very speech-like with a clausal structure which is loosely ‘chained’ rather than strongly integrated as written language usually is. *Y* also initiates each exchange almost always with a question, a fact which brings to mind Plato's dialogues. However, to initiate a conversation with a question generally signifies power,⁷⁸⁴ but here it is combined with the simplicity of *Y*'s thoughts, which usually deal with only one thing at a time and often seek confirmation. *Y* probes and checks if he has understood correctly by using single words. When questioning he prefers to use the polite pronoun ‘*u*’ (‘you’). So, in spite of *Y*'s signifying power, linked with his initiating role, the shortness and simplicity of his questions signify a lack of power. On the other hand, these questions could be understood as an attempt to seek reciprocal contact with *Z* and *X*. Together with the speech-like informal talk and seeking to create contact by addressing the other participants with a pronoun ‘*u*’, this leads to an equivocal signal as an indication of both power and solidarity. *Y* shows interest and wants to create a relationship to the other participants. There is occasionally a puzzled tone in the clauses of this layman, signifying that at least at this beginning stage of the dialogue, and as a non-expert, he is a little bit ‘out of it’.

However, towards the end of the dialogue, in the seventh *Scene*, for example, when the discussion is no longer merely about art but also about modern life, modern cities, modern man, goodness and badness, then *Y* is given ‘the stage’. At the end of the ‘*Triologue*’ *Y* is very much part of the discussion. All his hesitation seems to have gone. Questions have changed to shouts of understanding. This is not to say that *Y* would no longer ask any questions, and there are indeed a few in the seventh *Scene*, but the tendency is clearly to suggest *Y*'s growing understanding. This, in turn, gives room to the idea of ‘abstract-real painting’ in *Y*'s mind and attitudes. He is now more secure with his thoughts:

782 Hodge & Kress 1988, 49.

783 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 84, 86.

784 Hodge & Kress 1988, 48.

Y: Now I understand your apparent dualism, and I feel that painting must adopt for its plastic means an equivalent duality which replaces natural form and natural color.⁷⁸⁵

Y: Now I can *really* see the abstract in this room. I have the sensation of being surrounded by flowers, or rather I experience the beauty of flowers even more strongly than if I actually saw them! [...] Y: When you see things this way, everything is far more beautiful ... everything is more joyous! [...] Y: These things you said about line and color are *universal truths*! How strange that their truth has not been universally recognized!⁷⁸⁶

Thus, during the dialogue *Y* enters into a process of change and comes to take the side of Neo-Plasticism: “Y: You are giving me a vision of the joy that life could be! [...] Y: Then the necessity for a NewPlastic expression for the new era is clear [...]”⁷⁸⁷ Y: Equilibrium between inward and outward – yes, that is what we must find.”⁷⁸⁸ Apart from this change, *Y*’s basic character as a representative of feeling and first impressions prevails. He is still the firstness character of the text, indicated by an exclamation such as this: “Y: But surely color is something very special!”⁷⁸⁹ Therefore, the dialogue must be seen as a process on *Y*’s part. *Y* expresses solidarity by trying to create contact by addressing politely and by showing that his mind is not closed to the new ideas. This is the way it must be, since only by signs of solidarity is it possible for the layman to enter into this process of change.

The stroller *X*’s competences are different. Judging by the starting *Scenes* the naturalistic painter, *X*, shows a limited view, but his limitedness is different from *Y*’s competence. In order to explain how this view is limited, it is necessary to go deeper into the secondness character of *X*. The idea which *X*’s speech especially emphasizes is that his analysis always concerns the particular *Scene* which is in the strollers’ vision at any one time. By this I mean that because *X* has competence as an artist to determine the reasons that have caused the emotion of beauty in that specific image, his speech deals with actualities: “X: [...] Still using this landscape as an example ... I see the relationship of the shining moon, the sky, and the earth. I also see the position of the moon in the landscape is a matter

785 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 96.

786 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 118–119. Italics original.

787 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 120, 121.

788 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122.

789 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 114.

of relationship [...].”⁷⁹⁰ Thus, *X*’s speech gives the impression that his aesthetic judgments are tied to actual existing things.

In each *Scene*, *X* notices the causal relationships, the main idea behind secondness, through which colours and forms create an impression. *X*’s experience emerges through dyadic causalities.⁷⁹¹ *X*’s view is limited since he fails to see the generality in the features of the landscape: “*X*: But I still can’t reconcile myself to the idea that plastic expression must be sought outside of nature, outside of reality [...]. *X*: But assuming we could see nature so abstractly, then would not everything seem dead and meaningless to us?”⁷⁹² These words show that *X* understands the painting’s connection to realism as its dependence on an imitation of nature. Moreover, he fails to see the logic in its forms that leads to understanding the viewed landscape as an example of some generality. *X*’s understanding in such terms does not invoke systems of laws to which he could expect the individual landscape to conform. Thus, although *X* always expresses thinking and not mere feeling in his replies and in this way conveys more elaborated ideas than *Y*, he also shows the lack of transformational modification by this limitedness to dyadic relations in his thinking. *X* shows a lack of power in the dialogue as he cannot detach himself from dyadic thinking. Like *Y*, *X* too is often a questioning participant and in this way challenges *Z*. But the expression of power suggested by initiating discourse is not maintained since the ensuing dialogue often ends in *X*’s disagreement with *Z*.

There is a large number of asymmetries in the exchange of opinions between the naturalistic painter *X* and the abstract-real painter *Z*, which all carry the same message. Real solidarity and reciprocal interactions are not to be expected between these two, since *X* sees the two forms of art, naturalistic and abstract, as different worlds. Thus *X* opposes *Z*’s ideas, as can be seen from the previous citations. Mondrian’s text even emphasizes this difference of opinion in the fourth *Scene* of the text, where *Z* and *X* enter into intense dialogue.⁷⁹³ Here *X* openly manifests his oppositions and suspicions through shouts and questions, resulting in the dialogue becoming asymmetrical, with *X* as the apparently dominant voice. *Z* finally puts an end to the discussion simply by stating that objects of the natural world have to be discarded from painting, which signifies that *Z* also has power, since he does not seek reciprocal symmetry with *X*.

Something peculiar takes place in the dialogue after the fourth *Scene*’s debate and *Z*’s final remarks. From this *Scene* onwards until the end of the ‘*Trialogue*’

790 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 84.

791 Peirce’s indexicality in perception shows itself as a ‘brute’ dyadic interaction. Hookway explains Peirce’s meaning of the term ‘brute’: “Since our control of existents is limited, they can cause us perceptual surprise and can lead our plans and projects to be disappointed.” See Hookway 1985, 170.

792 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 97–98.

793 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 100.

X says less and less. Thus, in the seventh *Scene*, *X* takes the floor only 25 times whereas *Y* does so 85 times. Of course, these numbers as such do not say everything about the lines themselves, and this is not to say that *X* is totally excluded from the dialogue. However, the reduction implies that *X* is not directing or constructing the dialogue. In the last *Scene* of the text he concentrates mostly on briefly questioning *Z*'s ideas: "X: You are very persuasive, but that doesn't help me understand why the mature culture, which is visually apparent in our big cities, has to disappear. [...] X: That is essential only for your man of the future! [...] X: You are indeed revolutionary!"⁷⁹⁴ *X*'s apparent reduction to the margin from the intense centre of the dialogue signifies, of course, a lack of power. Here, silence is not a sign of agreement with *Z*, for *X* speaks just enough for the reader to realize his dissent, but perhaps it might be best interpreted as *X*'s feeling of powerlessness and alienation. Considering that *X* represents the realm of figurative painting, it is reasonable to extend this signification. It would seem to imply that figurative art will fade away with the emergence of abstract art.

Even a quick perusal of *Z*'s lines reveals his role in the dialogue. This abstract-real painter usually occupies a position in which he is expected to answer *Y* and *X*'s often critical questions. Hence, he usually does not initiate the topics of discussion. Almost always *Z* participates in the dialogue using relatively long and elaborate answers. *Y* and *X*'s simple questions, which usually concern only one thing or aspect, receive theoretically sophisticated and thorough answers. This is characteristic of *Z* from beginning to end, suggesting a process going on throughout the dialogue. Even though *Y* and *X* often signify power by using questions, their simple and sometimes even naive tone is emphasized when contrasted with *Z*'s extended answers. In this way *Y* and *X*'s initiating power collapses each time *Z* answers. Therefore, the relations of power and solidarity change all the time, as is usually the case in a debate. By this ongoing process the text constantly reinforces the signification of power, which abstract art is given here in the representative of *Z*.

Concerning style, *Z*'s answers are the opposite of *X* and *Y*'s. *Z*'s starting point is to communicate solidarity since he never answers by negation or criticizes the other two. *Z* often continues from the already expressed thoughts of *Y* and *X* and then directs them towards the point of view required in the theory of Neo-Plasticism. In this way, he does not have to stand against the other two at all, except in the fourth *Scene*. He leads the other two strollers towards Neo-Plasticism through their own thoughts. This feature becomes obvious, for example, in the following lines:

794 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 120.

X: But then we would lose an art!

Z: The time will come when we will be able to dispense with all the arts as we know them today. Their beauty will have matured into something that is concretely real. Mankind has nothing to lose from this [...].

Y: But surely color is something very special!

Z: Just as stone, iron, or wood are set into place in architecture, so *panels of color* could be placed in the painting [...].

Y: But that would not be the same. From the moment that colour is applied mechanically or applied by a non-artist, it would become something *other*.

Z: Precisely. In order to achieve that “otherness,” the New Plastic seeks a method of execution that is other, another technique. [...] For the beauty it will bring into being will be of another nature.

X: Certainly it would be “colder.”

Z: Colder for individual feeling, perhaps, but more intense for universal feeling [...]. The execution that the New Plastic demands, with the assistance of technicians and machinery, will be *other* than execution directly by the artist himself, but it will be better and closer to the artist’s intentions. At present it usually falls short of his intentions. For the artist always has difficulty in making himself a *pure instrument* of intuition of the universal within him. He is constantly obliged to weary himself with technique and execution; and this effort more or less dilutes the universal with his individuality.

X: But isn’t the artist’s hand all important?

Z: In terms of the old art, yes. Then the hand of the artist was everything – Precisely because the individual predominated and the universal remained *veiled* [...].⁷⁹⁵

795 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 114–115. Italics original.

I suggest that this lengthy citation reveals several transparent signifiers of power on *Z*'s part. Firstly, *Z*'s speech is elaborate and he uses many subordinate clauses. In his dialogue the principles of magnitude and elaboration are transparent signifiers of power.⁷⁹⁶ Secondly, *Z*'s measured words also bring to mind the tones of theoretically oriented speech, since his speech is oddly neutral, whereas *X* and *Y* express more personal feelings in their more spontaneous speech. When *Z*'s lines are placed in contrast with the simple lines of the other two strollers, a clear asymmetry between the participants is revealed. This neutral and objective tone in *Z*'s speech is to my mind meaningful. Even though *Z* in this citation refers at one point to his own self, the general feature in the text is that *Z* seldom actually refers to his own self or even to the other two strollers. The implication is that *Z* suppresses his own self, which signifies power.⁷⁹⁷ *X* and *Y* on the other hand often refer to their own selves by using the pronouns 'I' or address *Z* by using 'you', thus they seek reciprocity in the discussion. In this way they signify solidarity, though by the same token their lack of power becomes apparent.⁷⁹⁸

Z's neutral manner of talking proves that he has adopted the expertise of his own professional field, that is, of abstract art. When thinking about the theoretical and neutral tone in his speech and about the fact that he is suppressing his own self, the signification of power does not in fact seem to originate from *Z*'s own person. Instead, it seems to come from the topic (Neo-Plasticism), which he is patiently introducing. The cool and instructive tone of the abstract-real painter, his thorough and elaborate speech, his self-suppression, which remains unprovoked by the occasionally sharply critical questions of *Y* and *X*, brings to mind an expert's way of talking and the special type of language which belongs to expertise.⁷⁹⁹ The fact that Mondrian includes in his text such a person as the 'layman' suggests to the reader that there must also be an expert. This reference to expertise further supports my earlier argument about Mondrian's language; his discourse appears as if it were isolated from the 'public' and meant for the few. One of the targets of this modern vision of art must have been contemporary Dutch art criticism, which Mondrian found to be not quite up-to-date.⁸⁰⁰

796 Hodge & Kress 1988, 46.

797 Ibid.

798 Ibid.

799 Ketola, Pesonen & Sjöblom 1998, 109–110. The expertise systems of different professional fields in society have roots in the Enlightenment and reflect the effect of secularism. By secularism I mean here the reduction of traditional empirical religious expressions in Western society. It can be described by such terms as rationalism, specialization and worldliness. By specialization I mean the process where each different life field has its own institutional structures. According to this, economics, commerce, media, health care, science and art have been separated into their own institutions and in this way detached from the sphere of traditional religion.

800 Henkels 1986, 12.

The dynamic character of Mondrian's dialogue brings to mind the classic tactics of argumentation found in Plato. We find in both that the signifiers of solidarity and power are unsteady and constantly fluctuate during the discussion. In the corresponding pairs of questions and answers the systems of power and solidarity are constantly turned upside down. As presented earlier, in the dialogue *Y* enters into a process in which his mind starts to move towards Neo-Plasticism, and at the end of the text he shows understanding and enthusiasm. This movement signifies solidarity. The abstract-real painter shows power because he can make this change take place.⁸⁰¹

Plato's rhetorical strategies are based on the specific concept of argumentation called refutation (*elegkhos*).⁸⁰² This implies at least two participants. The discussion starts with a thesis presented by Socrates to the other participants, who approve it. Socrates opts to show, however, that the other participants possess ideas which are not in line with the initial thesis. Socrates signifies power with the assumption that there cannot be two theses which contradict each other therefore the other participants have to discard the incorrect thesis even though it might at first be approved.⁸⁰³ Thus, through this tactic the other participants' argument undergoes a process of transformation directed by Socrates and his overruling argument. There is always a leader in the Platonic dialogues, namely the philosopher.⁸⁰⁴ Since *Z* makes the other participants change their opinions or silences them, he also shows the power of argumentative tactics like those used by Socrates, and thus becomes the leader.

To conclude, I have reasoned that *Z*, the abstract-real painter, combines and mediates between the opinions and notions of the two other actors. My analysis has brought out how *Z* has the ability to widen *Y*'s thoughts into the new context of Neo-Plasticism. He constructs continuities from *X* and *Y*'s short clauses into his own wider views of Neo-Plasticism. *Z* also aims for generalities, that is, for universals. Whatever Mondrian means by universal aspects, whatever they consist of, I suggest that they are in any case objects of thought which are basically infused with laws and regularities, that is, with thirdness features. The character of *Z* refers in many ways to ideas of thirdness.

It is thirdness which both creates continuity and is directed towards the future.⁸⁰⁵ Both these features can be applied to *Z*, who is strongly orientated towards the future world, especially in the seventh *Scene*. In Peirce's phenomenological philosophy the categories to which I have compared the mutual actions of *X*, *Y*

801 Hodge & Kress 1988, 46.

802 Tuominen 2001, 11.

803 Tuominen 2001, 11–12.

804 Thesslef 2011, 69.

805 EP1, 297, 314, 323.

and *Z*, are not mutually exclusive.⁸⁰⁶ This means that thirdness always includes aspects of firstness and secondness. They are merely different aspects of dealing with perceptual material and there are continuities between their spheres. This means that *Z*'s needs both *X*'s actuality and dyadic relations and *Y*'s feelings as a starting point for his own views. That is why *Z*'s role in the conversation is to comment only after *Y* and *X* have spoken.

Mondrian's *X*, *Y* and *Z* represent an inner dialogue of the mind. It is a dialogue which the consciousness attends with the faculties in mind. This is a dynamic dialogue since it deals with power relations between the strollers, expressed through tensions and changes in the dialogue. This brings to mind Peirce's categories. Mondrian's dialogue resembles the Platonic model, but Peirce, following Plato, also considers that thinking is a sort of inner dialogue whose form is borrowed from outer communication along with the evolution of self-consciousness.⁸⁰⁷ Mondrian's *X*, *Y* and *Z* can thus be understood in connection with Peirce's theory of communication and the common mind, an approach which would then have several interpretative consequences.

As previously mentioned, interpreting the characters *X*, *Y* and *Z* as categorical modes of perception reveals that the ultimate signification of Mondrian's text is to exemplify consciousness. This is in line with Rudolf Steiner's idea of consciousness, which Mondrian probably knew. As a representation of an inner dialogue of mind, Mondrian's text would abolish the dualistic gap between thinking and sensuous perceptual elements. Peirce's philosophy establishes this kind of continuity with its phenomenological categories.

To make communication possible at all, discussions need a common starting point. In Mondrian's text the common starting point is usually an emotion. Be it an emotion of beauty, of grandeur, or of tranquillity, *X*, *Y* and *Z* all agree about the intuition although they deal with this intuition using different competences. An example from the second *Scene* demonstrates this: *Y*: How capricious! *X*: How majestic! *Z*: Yes ... capricious and grandiose at the same time! In the grandeur of the contours, the randomness of nature is very clearly apparent [...].⁸⁰⁸ This excited admiration and enchantment, which Mondrian often weaves into his text, is meaningful when thinking about its Platonic features. According to Holger Thesleff, Plato does not argue merely by using a certain type of logic, but by adopting other kinds of persuasive linguistic and rhetorical means, including the use of emotions.⁸⁰⁹ Mondrian's text also has Platonic features in the sense that by using three different

806 Veivo 2001, 35–36. As Veivo points out, the terminology invented by Peirce for the categories expresses an order of presupposition, not the temporal order of perception, as his categories are often understood to do.

807 Thinking as a kind of dialogue is one of the premises of Peirce's philosophy. See EP2, xxxvi.

808 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87.

809 Thesleff 2011, 59.

participants, Mondrian constantly juxtaposes three different viewpoints. The form of a conversation allows him to bring all these viewpoints together at the same time and consequently the topic of the strollers' discussion is always illuminated from three perspectives.⁸¹⁰

As I have concluded, Mondrian's dynamic dialogical structure follows the rhetorical form found in Plato's dialogues. There is a crucial moment in the middle of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* in which the roles of the characters change and where the signs of power and lack of power intensify. The *Windmill Scene*, the fourth *Scene*, marks off a crucially important moment in the whole text, after which *X*'s participation fades away. According to Thesleff, this kind of structure is typical in Plato's dialogues. Like in the *tympanum* of a Greek temple, where the most significant figures are situated in the middle, so too in Plato's dialogue the most important figure of thought and the concluding note is found in the midst of the dialogue, in the *Windmill Scene*.⁸¹¹

To conclude further, even though Mondrian's text strives to popularize the ideas of Neo-Plasticism to all laymen, *Z*'s use of the discourse of expertise suggests that the new art seems to conform to the modernist trend to divide 'reason' into distinct disciplines. Therefore, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* ultimately introduces a hierarchical model, based on the modernist idea of distinct professional fields, running vertically from top to bottom, in which the division between the expert and the layman is fully apparent. Despite its Platonic traits, Mondrian's text should not be read solely as a power battle between *X*, *Y* and *Z*, though this a common way of interpreting Plato's dialogues. Although *Z* is obviously a leading figure, there is still a strong sense of the characters working together towards a common goal. Therefore, apart from his long instructive replies, *Z* seems more like a philosopher-supervisor than an instructor. His purpose is to open up the minds of the other participants and of the readers. Hence, I suggest that Mondrian's dialogue represents a kind of 'both-and' thinking that should be read as a constructed whole in which the roles of all the participants should be evaluated together. Like Plato's Socrates, so too Mondrian's *Z* always finds his way to the goal, to the studio in the city, but he does not do this without the support or resistance of the other participants. In this way, Mondrian's text is like thinking. As Socrates says about the nature of thinking in *Theaitetos*, it is an inner dialogue.⁸¹²

810 Thesleff 2011, 61.

811 Thesleff 2011, 56–57.

812 See Plato's work, *Theaitetos* 189e–190a.

4.3 The Diagrammatic Contours of the ‘Triologue’

Apart from being a dialogue, Mondrian’s text is also a narrative about a stroll to the city. Both Blotkamp and Janssen point out that Mondrian’s writings are not easy to fathom.⁸¹³ However, a written text can be representational in many ways. It can, for example, represent through its literary form whether it is a fictive text or aims to present its content factually. Among Mondrian’s literary production there are only a few texts which are written in a fictive dialogue like this one. A fictive text usually arouses a readerly response to understand the text as a work of art. It is also interpreted as conveying meanings, as works of art do. A text can also suggest meanings through the language it uses. It may, for example, use a form of specialized language, such as the professional register of certain fields of science, or use conventional symbols such as those found in physics or geometry, as this study has suggested. In this part my study I consider the most prominent structural features of the dialogic elements of the ‘*Triologue*’, especially its thematic oppositions.

A work like the ‘*Triologue*’ can be read both as an open and as a closed text. By its openness I mean that the topics in the strollers’ discussions constantly change and fluctuate, and the reader easily loses the original starting points in the dialogue and the aims of the argumentation. Read in this manner, the text imitates the typical way in which everyday conversations progress, namely lightly without any deeper delving into topics. In other words, this gives an air of realism to the text. However, it also means that the conversation seems to leave some of its many topics more or less open, and the reader feels that the conversation should be continued. Its quality emphasizes the fact that the text is a work of art, a piece of drama. This too evokes the spirit of Plato’s dialogues.⁸¹⁴ Not only by its dialogical rhetoric, but in its open character, Mondrian’s text reminds us of one of Plato’s dialogues.

By its closed character I mean that when Mondrian’s text is read in an ordinary way without no attempt to focus on anything in particular, one notices the sweep and span of the text. Through one’s floating attention it is possible to detect the different elements, meanings and arrangements and discover the possible connections in the text. This is how fictive literary texts function within strictly defined boundaries.⁸¹⁵

813 According to Carel Blotkamp, the arguments are so laborious and long-winded that the reader’s staying power is often sorely tested and the text remains unclear (see Blotkamp 1994, 9). Hans Janssen points to the complexity of Mondrian’s writings. Their obscurity and incomprehensible terminology make them inaccessible and to date most authors have avoided any attempt to summarize their contents. See Janssen 2011, 27.

814 Thesleff 2011, 44. Holger Thesleff points to the openness in Plato’s dialogues in that they emphasize their artistic character as a work of drama and not as a logically proceeding essay.

815 Stjernfelt 2007, 336. Stjernfelt uses the expression *the floating attention*. It is on the basis of this immediate conception of the text that the floating attention sets in.

The most obvious arrangements in Mondrian's text are the oppositions set up between the rural environment and the city. The stroll begins from the Dutch rural countryside and ends in Paris. There is also the opposition between beauty as a sensuous perception in the first *Scene* and beauty as the mind's mental image in the last *Scene*. Another noticeable feature is the consistent rhetorical modes of the three strollers. These reflect their basic characters and the nature of their relations in the conversation. Finally, since the action is a chronologically ordered arrangement of successive landscapes and city surroundings, it foregrounds the idea of a journey as a continuing process.

It is within these boundaries that my interpretation moves and establishes internal systems, meanings and coherences. My interpretation deals with the diagrammatic structure of the text before it crosses over into a search for more profound meanings. As Johansen points out, a diagrammatic structural analysis is a kind of abstractive undertaking whose purpose is to create new meanings, not by virtue of the semantic content of words but through the novel juxtaposition and combination of the elements already there in the text.⁸¹⁶

Iconic Poems and Diagrammatic Stories

In the second chapter I presented the relevance of the iconic potential of literature within the *De Stijl* group. Most often this iconic capacity is exemplified by van Doesburg's iconic poems, which he started publishing as I.K. Bonset in May 1920.⁸¹⁷ I will probe the possibility that Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, as a whole, could also be seen as a diagrammatic representation of its own theme, namely consciousness. First, I shall take a look at iconicity in one of van Doesburg's poems to exemplify the difference between two ideas of iconicity, that is, the very apparent iconicity of van Doesburg's poem and the more hidden diagrammatic setting of the elements of Mondrian's text. Van Doesburg's *X-beelden* is a series of poems which appeared in *De Stijl*.⁸¹⁸ Both van Doesburg and Mondrian use mathematical symbols and in this way refer to mathematical language. As Carel Blotkamp has suggested, the title itself in Doesburg's poem, *X-beelden*, stands for an unknown quantity or for x-rays.⁸¹⁹ This would seem to be a metaphorical reference to the deepest essence of an experience, in the same way as the deepest essence of bone structures is seen in x-ray pictures. However, when interpreting

816 Johansen 2002, 334.

817 Van Doesburg's pseudonyms were intended to mystify Mondrian, who did not realize who was behind these names, unlike Kok and Oud, who knew about them practically from the beginning. Hiding behind a pseudonym gave van Doesburg an opportunity to express his differing opinions without confronting Mondrian. See Blotkamp 1982, 29 and Janssen & White 2011, 36, 128.

818 Bonset, I.K. [Van Doesburg] 1920a, 77.

819 Blotkamp 1982, 30.

X as a mere sign of an unknown quantity, Blotkamp captures only a part of the symbol's mathematical character. By this I mean its character as a variable with a capacity for constant change.⁸²⁰ This brings a more dynamic meaning to the symbol of *X*. Mondrian's text reveals the status of *X*, *Y* and *Z* as "variables" who are able to alter their relative share in the total "function" of the story.

I.K. Bonset's [van Doesburg] *X-beelden*

In *X-beelden* (*X*-images) van Doesburg evoked a dynamic world in a way that reminds one of Futurism⁸²¹ (see Figure 12). The relevance of visual appearance, of how letters and lines appear on a white piece of paper, is obvious and calls for interpretation. Van Doesburg uses lineation here as a device for expressing the meaning of his poem, including different lengths of line, staggering and line-breaks. In this way, van Doesburg uses lineation to suggest a typographical icon for the shape of the object and the experience about which the text speaks. The paragraph speaks about physical experience. The poem is more to be seen than read. Its iconic potential reveals the utmost moving and changing character of this experience at every level. Van Doesburg situates words both in diagonals and horizontally in the ordinary way. The size of the letters, the use of bold letters and the fonts of the letters vary throughout the text. In the first paragraph van Doesburg sounds an alarm with three *hē's* (ohoh! beware!). A crescendo is expressed through the length of the lines, as well as by stressing syllables using a bold font. In addition to this, the emphasis becomes stronger in every line of the first paragraph. Van Doesburg iconizes here the accelerating tempo of the aesthetic experience in the modern world. This experience rises from the multiplicity of the industrialized and urbanized world, hence the semantic connotations of the words *automobile* and the Italian *uomo electric* in the text. Van Doesburg is addressing his readers in an old-fashioned way as if wishing us, the readers of the poem, who are coming from 'the past' to project ourselves into the middle of modernity, to surrender our bodies and souls to the rhythms of modernity.⁸²² The poem arouses a physical experience as if the body of a subject was moving in space (*lichaamlijk ervaren*).

820 'Variable' comes from the Latin *variabilis*, with 'vari(us)' meaning 'various' and '-abilis' meaning 'able', so 'variable' means capable of changing. According to the modern notion, a variable is simply a symbol representing a mathematical object, which is either an unknown quantity or may be replaced by any element of a given set, for example, a set of numbers. The three axes in three-dimensional coordinate space are conventionally called *x*, *y* and *z*. See Schwartzman 1994, 234.

821 See Blotkamp 1982, 30.

822 In the poem the words *gij* (you) and *beelding* (imaging) are used to suggest links between the past and the present. The Flemish word *gij* is used in modern speech but also has associations with old Dutch biblical language. *Beelding* is highly unusual in Dutch, being the rarely occurring present participle of the Dutch verb 'beelden'. Both *gij* and *beelding* can still be found in an 1881 Dutch dictionary. Janssen & Joosten conclude that the use of the word *beelding* is a sort of regressive archaism on Mondrian's part. See Janssen & Joosten 2002, 23.

Nothing remains constant, hence the constantly varying letter types. Van Doesburg is inviting us to place ourselves within this movement and change. These elements of acceleration suggest that time is not constant either, and hence the poem starts with the notions ‘minus time’ and ‘minus space’. Time is no longer like it used to be, steadily proceeding in the same manner for everyone. Everyone has a different clock. The diagonal spacing of the text and its dynamism reflect van Doesburg’s idea of Elementarism. The poem shows its *tijdsbewustzijn* in the era of relativity theory.

The poem comes close to the notions of the philosopher Henri Bergson, to whom van Doesburg occasionally referred in his writings.⁸²³ According to Bergson, in order to advance with the moving reality, one must place oneself within it. Here, a direct possessing is necessary. One must install oneself within change in order to grasp “both the change itself and the successive states in which it *might* at any instant be immobilized”.⁸²⁴ Van Doesburg’s expression “*mijn klok staat stil*” signifies this central invariable position of one’s body. Bergson writes that this is the ground of all our perceptions. “Here in the midst of all images there is a certain image which I term my body [...]. My body then acts like an image which reflects others [...].”⁸²⁵

The last two lines of the poem, which are quite traditional in appearance, actually sum up the idea of van Doesburg’s Elementarism: the cosmos, mathematical symbols, space and time. This reflects the reign of relativity in the 1920s, when this principle became a model for the character of the human mind and the epistemology of perception as a cultural application of the theory. These poems under the pseudonym of I.K. Bonset, are the first symptoms of van Doesburg’s differing attitude towards issues of perception and by them he could express himself in *De Stijl* in a way which Mondrian, notwithstanding his general respect for Dadaism, would probably not have accepted from van Doesburg.⁸²⁶

Iconic capacity in Mondrian’s *Natural Reality* and *Abstract Reality*?

The visual appearance of Mondrian’s literary texts is traditional. They do not exemplify the kind of open iconicity of van Doesburg’s poems and they proceed straightforwardly with one type of font, lineation and paragraphing. However, the way in which my study sees icons as framing Mondrian’s text, is somewhat different. In my study iconicity is a methodological tool, a way to approach the text and can

823 For example, in his “Het andere gezicht” van Doesburg prefers “the philosophy of our times”, which is exemplified through Nietzsche’s and Bergson’s intuitive philosophy rather than “the parliamentary philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Fichte etc.” See I.K. Bonset [Van Doesburg] 1920b, 91.

824 Bergson 2016 (1907), 308. Italics original.

825 Bergson 2007 (1896), 46.

826 See Blotkamp 1982, 30.

also be applied to a literary text which has a standard appearance. Furthermore, apart from one picture of Mondrian's abstract painting on the opposite page to the starting page of the third *Scene*, the 'Triologue' itself is not illustrated at all.⁸²⁷ In fact, when viewing the appearance of the layout of Mondrian's text in its original context in the *De Stijl* periodical, one cannot avoid a feeling of puzzlement. The cover of *De Stijl* would suggest clarity and sharply focused content, as are Mondrian's own abstract works of art, which are characterized by precision and careful construction.⁸²⁸ The layout is, in fact, exhausting in its density: every page is stuffed with dense text with little sense of cohesion. Moreover, being scattered over twelve instalments of *De Stijl*, the 'Triologue' must have been quite difficult to apprehend as a coherent and complete structure.⁸²⁹ As the text proceeds in the form of the dialogue of three abstractly named characters, the appearance of the letters, X, Y and Z, at the beginning of each piece of dialogue is the main thing which emerges to the reader's eyes from the densely flowing background of the text.

When presenting my semiotic approach in the Introduction, I mentioned that my primary purpose is not to search for the author's intention but to investigate the meaning effects aroused by Mondrian's text itself. However, contrary to this basic approach, here in this part of the study my approach leans heavily on Mondrian's own explicit intention. This suggests that even in a literary work of art, Mondrian has been interested in the possibility of expressing the same principles as in his visual works of art.⁸³⁰ Like all creative writers, Mondrian, too, obviously wanted to say more than is apparent on the surface. This is also the case in his 1921 essay, "Neo-Plasticism", where Mondrian wrote about the 'new art of word' and concluded his after-impressions of 'Triologue'. He also suggests that a certain structure is realized in a work of literature. The proportion of 'thinking-in-beauty and feeling-in-beauty' was supposed to be a ruling structure in a literary text.⁸³¹ "Depending on the emphasis, either attitude may predominate in the work of art, or both may

827 *De Stijl* II, 10, 1919, 108.

828 Typographically and aesthetically the periodical was meant to be austere and unpretentious. It was printed on cheap paper and had poorly reproduced illustrations, see Overy 1991, 46. On the other hand, the coversheet, especially the logo, was always a delicate matter of design and a focus of special thought. The first logo was Huszár's carefully composed typographical abstraction, where the 'letter blocks' were supposed to interact with the background so that typography and the ground had equal value. The new logo of the *De Stijl* cover in 1921 was a target of disagreement between Huszár and Mondrian and van Doesburg, who had designed it together in close consultation. The logo featured the large red letters NB (Nieuwe Beelding). See Blotkamp 1982, 92–93.

829 Lodewijk Veen points out that *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* should be seen as a coherent whole, with *De Stijl* as the 'base text', the only thing which actually bridges the separate parts of Mondrian's text. See Veen 2011, 109.

830 Henkels 1986, 10.

831 Also during his time in the Netherlands during the First World War Mondrian gave attention specifically to the written word. See White 2003, 25.

be united in a single entity. The first mode produces *prose*, the second, *poetry*, and the third, *the new art of the word*.”⁸³²

The Self-Representative Capacity of the ‘*Triologue*’

Mondrian’s artistic intention leads my study to consider the possibility of a diagrammatic reading in Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’. In this way, it is possible to bring out the self-representative capacity of the text, that is, its aesthetic effect. As Johansen has noted, the self-representation of a text means a constant relationship within the elements of the text. If a literary text is represented by its diagrammatic form, it may be considered a type of inference of the text. It represents a cognitive process to readers by virtue of which readers learn to know what they did not know before, because they draw conclusions from the similarities they perceive in the text.⁸³³

In this part my approach differs from that found in the third chapter, which considered the mere horizontal-vertical relation as a diagram-sign. There my analysis followed its ‘course’ in the narrative, as a sort of intra-textual sign. Here, however, the purpose is to understand the entire text as a structure of proportions. This kind of interpretation relies on the idea that Mondrian’s text spans oppositional themes that are situated symmetrically at the two poles of the text. As Max Nännny points out, the representative function of iconicity in literary texts can only be perceived if the reader moves from meaning to formal elements and recognizes the analogical structure.⁸³⁴ Moreover, even though literary texts may have a range of potential iconicity, this is merely a latent potential. Iconicity can never be independent of meaning. Iconicity will only appear if the meaning of the textual passage is compatible with it. The semantic content has to activate and focus this imitative potential.⁸³⁵

As mentioned earlier, Mondrian’s text is structured upon oppositions. I suggest that by this structure it is also possible to see the text as a diagram which expresses its own epistemological theme of consciousness. The ideas of painting arrange themselves according to these poles: figurative painting as a moonlight landscape and abstract painting as the wall design of the studio. Thus, in the first *Scene* the strollers are looking at the moon as a point on the image, whereas in the final *Scene* they are observing the room while they are in it, while they themselves

832 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 143. Italics original.

833 Johansen 2002, 185.

834 Nännny 1986, 200.

835 Nännny 1986, 199.

are ‘in the picture’.⁸³⁶ In the first *Scene* the strollers express feelings of beauty, in the final *Scene* beauty is a mental image in their minds, i.e. they are thinking of beauty, as this study emphasized when discussing Mondrian’s project of beauty in section 3.1. The text in this way offers an icon of the symmetrical oppositions of two differing insights of perception and painting. The stroller’s co-operative work of basic human mentalities is also the static element of the text that is available for my interpretation.

Reading the text as a diagram shows it to be almost a plastic manifestation, as something that hovers between the word and the image. The constantly ongoing dialogue of *X*, *Y* and *Z* connects the symmetrically opposed ends. It provides a continuum between the rural countryside and the studio in the city, between ‘feeling-in-beauty’ in the first *Scene* and ‘thinking-in-beauty’ in the seventh *Scene*. In other words, basic human mind-sets operate between these oppositions. The setting shows the entire text as a diagram-icon and this icon needs now to be studied through contextual reference. Here Rudolf Steiner, a possible influence on Mondrian’s text, again provides a model. Mondrian like Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint and Jacob van Heemskerck, all occupied conceptually similar areas in their writings and would seem to have been influenced by Steiner.⁸³⁷

Steiner often gave a visual form to his idea of human consciousness.⁸³⁸ Introduced in 1914 in his anthroposophy, cognition was understood through such oppositions as, for example, human being – world, perception – thought, but these oppositions were not clear-cut entities but were in contact as a reciprocal continuum. Steiner visually exemplified this in his lectures by drawing a lemniscate, i.e. a recumbent figure of eight in which the crossing point signified inversion. In Steiner’s anthroposophy this was a metaphysical means to form a connection between the physical and the spiritual world.⁸³⁹

836 Here it is worth remembering Steiner’s idea of imaginative perception, which includes the feeling of being ‘in the picture’, as opposed to the Cartesian notion of a single-point distant observer. What Steiner describes as inner experience resulting from imaginative knowledge is directly echoed in Mondrian’s *Studio Scene*. Both the elimination of three-dimensional space and the feeling of being inside the image belong to Steiner’s notion of *Bildungskraft*, i.e. visionary inner creation as a common aspiration of art and inner knowledge. See Steiner 2009 (1914), 29.

837 Kugler 2011, 33.

838 Brüderlin 2011, 120, 122.

839 Simply put, the principle of ‘inside-outside’, inversion, describes the coexistence of the spiritual and the material world not as separate, individual entities but as an organic, loop-shaped interconnection – like a glove turned inside out. Brüderlin describes how wide the applications of this principle are in Steiner’s thought. Inversion “serves as an illustration for the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms, the interior and exterior and allows the perception of both spheres in a specific reciprocity. This refers not only to the dynamic connections between inside and outside, liquid and solid, spirit and matter, but also to the experience of simultaneously being inside and outside. In turn, this describes not only the relativity of body and spirit, but also reassesses the relationship between man and his environment, even the cosmos as a whole.” See Brüderlin 2011, 122–123. For an illustration of Steiner’s principle of inversion, the graphic designer Emma Volquardsen has drawn a complex set of crossing lemniscates around a head shown in profile, labelled with these dual terms. See Brüderlin 2011, 125.

I would suggest that Mondrian's text also took part in this kind of 'modelling'. As far as the diagrammatic form of Mondrian's *'Triologue'* is concerned, it also exemplifies the oppositions of 'feeling-in-beauty' and 'thinking-in-beauty' in its total structure. There is a kind of inversion which takes place in the dialogues of *X*, *Y* and *Z*. Thus, the dialogue between *X* and *Z* intensifies a couple of times in the first half of the *'Triologue'*, whereas the conversation between *Y* and *Z* predominates in the latter part and *X* remains a more or less silent partner.⁸⁴⁰ Considered in this way, the text reverses its order in the middle in the *Windmill Scene*. According to a diagrammatic interpretation, the strollers' share in participation can be juxtaposed as inversion and as rough symmetry.⁸⁴¹ Hence, the re-arrangement of the dialogic elements of *X*, *Y* and *Z* can be understood as an inversion in relation to the chiasmus in the *Windmill Scene*, as if it were the point in the Platonic dialogue where the important conclusive acts are placed.

This inversion becomes meaningful when *X*, *Y* and *Z* are read as phenomenological attitudes. *Y* in a way stands for sense data because of the firstness quality of his character; the interpretative mind is *X*'s realm; *Z* brings the notions of *X* and *Y* into mutual relationship. Thus, *Z* represents the idea of consciousness, which is able to connect the other two. Through the mediating figure of *Z*, Mondrian's text represents consciousness by a representation that differs from "the parliamentary philosophy of Kant", as van Doesburg would put it.⁸⁴² By representing human consciousness as coordination, Mondrian's text anchors itself to the relativity principle of coordination, thus to the modern idea of the 'real'.⁸⁴³ As such, human consciousness is not being based on the Kantian 'thing-in-itself'. Rather it is constituted through categories of perception just as coordinates define scientific objects in physics.⁸⁴⁴ Mondrian seems to introduce validity and the concerns of the 'real' into his idea of a 'new vision'.

840 The dialogue between *X* and *Z* is intense, especially in the second *Scene* and in the fourth *Scene*. See Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87–88; 99–100. The dialogue between *Y* and *Z* increasingly dominates towards the end of the text, especially in the seventh *Scene*. See Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 106–122.

841 In the second *Scene* *X* strongly challenges *Z*: "X: But is the planar really necessary? If the broad contour dominates the whole, doesn't it essentially destroy the volume? [...]. Then does the artist never depict ordinary vision? [...]. But that again is an extreme. This is what the plane and the straight line do in the New Plasticism." See Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 87–88. In the fourth *Scene* we have this exchange: "X: But surely we don't see in that way? [...]. X: But many magnificent things have been done without this exaggeration! [...]. X: We do see a great deal of exaggeration today, but it could simply be imitative. X: But to return to the windmill, if you found it satisfactory to exaggerate the colour, why didn't you continue to work in that way, why did you discard all forms?" See Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 99–100.

842 I.K. Bonset [Van Doesburg] 1920b, 91.

843 Mondrian, Piet 1986 (1922), 171.

844 Ryckman 2005, 30, 31. The reign of relativity brought in reformulating cognition as a coordination. The great advantage was that coordination exploits the precise sense of a mapping between two sets of Kantian insights of experience. In this reciprocity of coordination the existence of the real is expressed. It is entirely indifferent whether one speaks of a thing-in-itself or whether one opposes doing so.

Some of Y's lines deal, in fact, in an emotional way with philosophical insight, which seems to be hopelessly imprinted in the artist's mentality. With a sense of strange alienation Y argues that the world is 'out there' and that the experiencing mind is hopelessly detached from it:

Y: Natural vision ... indeed, the beauty of nature never satisfies me completely; nature often makes me feel melancholy despite its great harmony and beauty. I can never unreservedly enjoy a fine summer evening, for instance, it makes me feel clearly how perfect everything could be but at the same time my powerlessness to make it so in my life.⁸⁴⁵

In these words I see the longing for the idea of perception that could somehow be more immediate. The words express how the thinking mind sets the subject apart from the object of observation. Therefore, it is meaningful that it is the actor Y, the figure of immediate feeling and first impressions, who recognizes this need for unmediated perception. That these ideas were circulating in the intellectual culture in which Mondrian worked becomes obvious in the thoughts of the French mathematician Poincaré. Poincaré's words capture well how the idea of harmony, the philosophy of perception and mathematics became intertwined in those days. Poincaré's words are in fact close to those of Mondrian cited above concerning the world 'out there' in a "fine summer evening":

Does the harmony the human intelligence thinks it discovers in nature exist outside of this intelligence? No, beyond doubt, a reality completely independent of the mind that conceives it, sees or feels it, is an impossibility. A world as exterior as that, even if it existed, would for us be forever inaccessible. But what we call objective reality is, in the last analysis, what is common to many thinking beings, and could be common to all; this common part [...] can only be the harmony expressed by mathematical laws. It is this harmony then which is the sole objective reality [...].⁸⁴⁶

Mondrian's '*Triologue*' participates in the spirit of Poincaré's insight, namely that mathematics is able to grasp the fundamental structure of reality. The geometrical terms and Z as a voice of expertise suggest that a scientific way of talking has now been imported into the field of art. According to Michael H. Whitworth, there is an unwritten rule in science that scientific disciplines must remain isolated from the

845 Mondrian 1986, (1919–1920), 93.

846 Poincaré in *The Value of Science*, 1905. Cited in Ryckman 2005, 242.

‘public’ in order to ensure their purity.⁸⁴⁷ Not only do the mathematical meanings in Mondrian’s text point to Plato’s philosophy, which argues that beauty has a mathematical basis,⁸⁴⁸ but the meaning effects that expertise language introduce ties the text to the intellectual culture of 1915–1925.

Diagrammatic analysis shows that Mondrian’s *‘Triologue’* iconically represents its own theme, namely ‘modern consciousness’. The conversations speak about perception and consciousness in the narrative, while the total structure ‘pictures’ the two parts of human consciousness, here mediated by a third actor. This third actor implies that there is no split between the two basic faculties of thinking and feeling. As Johansen notes about this kind of a representative capacity, by reflecting on its own content Mondrian’s *‘Triologue’* stresses the universality and validity of its suggested meaning.⁸⁴⁹ Thus, the reciprocal interrelations of the sensuous world and human mental ideas are dramatically staged in the *‘Triologue’*. In this drama a solution is provided, so that the world ‘out there’ in a “fine summer evening” ceases to be a problem.

847 Whitworth 2001, 27–28.

848 See Plato’s *Timaeus* 53b.

849 Johansen 2002, 185.

5 METAPHORICAL READING: DARK AND ILLUMINATED NIGHTS

Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* appeared in *De Stijl* in twelve instalments. Scattered among the several other articles in *De Stijl*, it must have been challenging for the reader to apprehend as one coherently continuing dialogue. However, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is a coherent story, or a play to be more precise, since the order of the *Scenes* is important for thinking about the theoretical project of Neo-Plasticism. At the beginning of each *Scene* there is a little pretext, right after the notion of a 'trilogy' (*trialoog*) is introduced. It informs the reader that the conversation takes place while strolling from the rural countryside to the big city.⁸⁵⁰ It is only in this way that the text emphasizes the idea of a journey, otherwise the conversations between the strollers concentrate merely on the observed images and do not in any way comment on their being headed somewhere. Furthermore, only the motif of landscapes reveals that the strollers are viewing mostly night views: a broad horizon under the moon, trees silhouetted against the bright moonlit sky, a sandy beach under the starry sky, a windmill silhouetted against the clear night sky, and the facade of a church seen as a flat plane against the darkness, reflecting the light of the city. The landscapes bathe in natural moonlight or starlight, whereas the city glows with electric light. Therefore, the journey takes place at late evening or night-time.

The motifs in the '*Trialogue*' seem to continue Mondrian's project of night landscapes from the 1910s, since they refer to the paintings with dune, church and mill motifs. Mondrian painted his evening landscapes in 1907 and 1908, during his stay in Twente in the Netherlands. They were followed by the dark blue night landscape paintings painted in Zeeland in 1909–11. He preferred sketching in moonlight or in dark weather, when the density of the atmosphere obscured the details of the landscape.⁸⁵¹ These are also the paintings which Janssen and Joosten consider to be Mondrian's first reaction to modernist trends.⁸⁵²

What is said about Mondrian's paintings at the end of the 1890s applies well to the 'literary paintings' in Mondrian's '*Trialogue*' as a threshold and gateway to abstract art:

850 That the destination of the journey is Paris can be concluded from the fact that in the sixth and the seventh *Scenes* the strollers mention it, and the studio *Scene* gives an accurate description of Mondrian's own studio in rue de Coulmiers, in the French capital.

851 Mondrian 1986 (1941), 338.

852 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 26.

withdrawn and self-sufficient, with the attitude of one who is awaiting and whose wait, however, is not a cautious approach, but hard labor, even extending into the night. His was a particular kind of wait, filled with certitude and a firm, steadfast confidence.⁸⁵³

Patient waiting, the faith to see even in the darkness: the meanings, which immediately arise from these words inspire me to approach *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* as a drama which enacts the process of thought. Therefore, in the total structure of the play, the reader picks out as the most prominent features the ideas of a journey, night views and an illuminated city. These may be taken as metaphors of Mondrian's text, which urge the reader to comprehend it in a generalized manner. We grasp not only the particular content it seems to convey but interpret it as pointing to some more general claim than is evident on the text's immediate surface.

Metaphors are the third and last class of icons in Peirce's semiotic system. Reading Mondrian's text by means of metaphors completes my approach, which is based on similarities between the message of the text and the surrounding culture. As Johansen points out, a metaphor makes the reader perceive the unity of the text both as a material texture and as an argument.⁸⁵⁴

These night-time scenes form a theatre where the art of painting, sculpture and architecture dramatically reflect each other. The metaphorical meaning of the night brings to mind a period between evening and morning, when all the daily duties have ceased and new ones, having not yet begun, are still waiting for the dawn. It is the time of seeing illusionistic dream images stemming from an already lived day which will then disappear when the dreaming person wakes up. It is about the faith to find one's way when strolling in the darkness. My study tries to connect these meanings to the field of art, which is the abstract target domain of these metaphors in Mondrian's text. A night-time journey is a source domain of easily understood meanings, and Johansen reminds us about its concrete and familiar character though also about the more abstract and cerebral character of the target domain.⁸⁵⁵ Night and a journey as metaphors project a complex conceptual structure onto the field of art. The metaphorical meaning is potentially eternally productive because new versions can be included. One meaning Mondrian's text evokes is that 'the evening of figurative art is over'.

The journey in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is metaphorical and suggests a state of transition. In this, Mondrian uses the Romantic motif of a

853 Janssen & Joosten 2002, 47. Janssen quotes here a few lines of a letter from Albert van den Briel to J.M. Hartoorn.

854 Johansen 2002, 199.

855 Johansen 2002, 195.

journey in which meanings emerge through the subject's wandering. This teleological thinking originates with the Romantic philosophy of nature and, according to this philosophy, both nature and the self develop in accordance with their own internal logic.⁸⁵⁶ In other words, nature's progress towards evermore ordered state and man's progress in knowledge are thought to carry the seeds of their own development within them.⁸⁵⁷ Journeys are always about leaving something behind, about not being at home, about heading somewhere and aspiring to a final destination, and possibly about avoiding dangers during the journey. The 'Triologue' contains all these potential meanings that the journey includes as a general source of meaning effects. The metaphor, 'art as a sort of night journey', thus has an ability to perform two operations simultaneously. Firstly, it connects different cognitive domains, art and night journey, and in this way brings different spheres of experience into relation with each other. Secondly, it uses this linking to produce an understanding of transition in the field of art.

This leads me to ask how the journey at night in Mondrian's *Scenes* could be seen as analogical to the radical new ideas that were circulating at this time. Mondrian's 'Triologue' represents this journey as a flow of images, and dealing with certain issues in terms of images was an idea that became crucial not only in esoteric philosophies but in other fields as well. Thus, the flow of images could be analogical to the way in which dreams always represent themselves to us,⁸⁵⁸ and it is not without significance that the budding field of psychoanalysis developed in tandem with the growth of abstract art in the Netherlands in the 1910s. The 'Triologue' may also signify the attitude of a philosopher when articulating his message in terms of images. According to Henri Bergson, whose book, *Matière et Mémoire* (1896), is mentioned in the *De Stijl* reading list, an image has a certain existence which is more than just a representation. This suggests that images are a sort of privileged material for dealing with the philosophical issue of matter in perception.⁸⁵⁹

The idea of Neo-Plasticism evolves in Mondrian's text, as my Peircean interpretation suggests. The analysis in the previous chapters has brought out that the text can be understood as a process of thought, and my study of *Natural*

856 By this motif I mean a whole series of art works in the fields of literature, music and painting. For example, *Wanderer's Nightsong* (*Wanders Nachtlied*) is the title of two poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (written in 1776 and 1780). Eero Tarasti mentions Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* (Tarasti 2000, 18). I would also include such works as Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Mists* and Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*.

857 Cusack 2008, 80–81.

858 Freud considered dreams to be the 'royal road to the unconscious'. In the psychoanalytic process, "therapeutic use of dreams thus means using dreams to help discover unconscious mental contents and integrate infantile fantasies, their underlying drives, and the resulting conflicts and defenses with the current latent content of manifest behavior and transference." See *Psychoanalytic Terms & Concepts*. 1990. Ed. by Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine, 58.

859 Bergson 2007 (1896), 9–10.

Reality and Abstract Reality as a metaphor continues within the framework of Henri Bergson's creative evolution. In this, my reading of Mondrian's text develops an interpretation which relies heavily on knowledge which is external to Mondrian's text. Here I approach a situation in which the line between pure metaphor and semantic parallelism is hazy, which is often the case with metaphors. In all types of icons, metaphors may well move far from the thematic level of the text.

5.1 Art in a Transition Stage

Mondrian's *Scenes* use what might be called 'the languages of the night'. Although the viewed landscapes vary, the night sky stays a constant theme in the first, second, third, fourth and sixth *Scenes*. Through this kind of repetition, Mondrian's text continually refers to itself. This is a necessary precondition for comparison, parallelism and analogy. Johansen claims that on the abstract level the fact that repetition leads to the birth of meaning is also one of the ways in which the aesthetic effect of the text may be born.⁸⁶⁰ When the reader recognizes Mondrian's pretexts in this way as similar in some points to each other, whereas the conversation between the strollers varies constantly, then the reader discerns the night skies as a possible sign. A single reference to the stroll and to night would, however, probably not signify anything. The constant reference to night becomes a claim on the text's part and is an important element in the general meaning of the text.

The metaphor, 'the emergence of Neo-Plasticism as a night-time stroll', sums up the text as a whole. The text sets a claim that the evening of figurative art is over and therefore the evening, the night and the stroll, work here as a textual strategy. It is also significant that Mondrian uses related figurative language for rhetorical purposes in the dialogue. When the stroller *Y* sighs in the final *Scene* that now, at the end of the journey, all that was beautiful during the stroll is over, *Z* answers: "The evening is over, *but the beauty remains [...]. Now these images – and not the things we saw – are the true manifestations of beauty for us.*"⁸⁶¹ The lines not only use the metaphorical meaning of evening to refer to art, but they are also very Bergsonian. Namely, that the mind always makes an image of any situation it encounters.⁸⁶² After the evening comes the night, the reader concludes, and therefore the city, as the journey's destination, is a city at night. Mondrian's '*Trialogue*' establishes a setting in which imitative illusionistic art is considered

860 Johansen 2002, 200–201.

861 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 106. Italics original.

862 Bergson 2007 (1896), 13.

to belong to the past. It is something from which *X*, *Y* and *Z* walk away from in order to achieve something truer.

The familiar and concrete logic of evening and night apply here; in Mondrian's text the night refers directly to the imaginary world which is already past. This is in line with Blotkamp's insight that Mondrian is an artist who, for all his apparent modernity, has his roots in nineteenth-century ideas.⁸⁶³ Metaphors are signs of thirdness, therefore, they easily achieve symbolic dimensions. Night is a common symbol in Romantic literature and Joachim Schlör points to the connotations of night as a long-drawn-out social debate in the nineteenth century.⁸⁶⁴ Schlör claims that although the language used is not stable and the meanings of the connotations of 'night' often vary, the imaginary world and associations of the word 'night' are still held in the minds of those living through the dawn of electric lighting.⁸⁶⁵ Therefore, when the above-cited lines of Mondrian's text speak of 'retaining images of beauty', the night becomes in this way a bearer of memory. It becomes a reminder of the past even if the modern reason is little by little killing it off like the electric light reflected in the church facade of Mondrian's text.

The *'Triologue'* thus associates night with memory. This brings the meaning effect that the memory of figurative art does not disappear so quickly even if the coming of the modern world suggests otherwise. Metaphorically speaking, this memory image could be said to behave like an 'after-image' of the human eye. It is a phenomenon which Goethe described in 1810, namely the image on the retina as a counter image after the eyes are closed. Walter Benjamin uses the metaphor to define the modern period and considers Bergson's memory-based philosophy to exemplify that 'afterimage'.⁸⁶⁶ Thus, the notion of keeping a memory alive and enduring was part of the philosophical climate and appealed to contemporary artists. But whereas 'afterimages' are spontaneous by nature, Mondrian's use of 'memory images' is purposeful.

Night-time is a time for the creative imagination and imaginative acts can take place in the counter-world of the night. Schlör writes that night in the big cities means the birth of a new order: "Paris la nuit, London by night, Berlin bei nacht nobody is untouched by these words; for they have the effect of a whiplash on the imagination, because they promise a short period of infinite possibility."⁸⁶⁷ It is in this spirit that the stroller *Z* says: "Consider, for instance, how beautiful is the Paris Métro; the beauty of its construction, which may be too cold to satisfy artistic

863 Blotkamp 1994, 12.

864 Schlör 1998, 24.

865 Ibid.

866 Benjamin 2006 (1968), 172.

867 Schlör 1998, 290.

feeling, becomes animated by light [...] .”⁸⁶⁸ Mondrian’s night *Scenes* become a permitted place for negotiations and arguments in which the old and the new in art are thoroughly pondered by the strollers. Night has taken on the status of a counter-world, a world which not only has its own laws, but which also tends to overturn the rules which are valid during the day. ‘The artificial sun of metropolitan lighting’ is, for example, no enemy to sensuality, as Schlör points out.⁸⁶⁹

Art is in a process of transition. My argument stemming from the third chapter of this study is that there is a certain schematic memory image, the perpendicular relationship, which is retained from the first to the last *Scene*. The metaphorical meaning of night as a transition stage completes this reference. Mondrian’s text would appear to present the historical meanings of modernization in terms of darkness and light, and readers of *De Stijl* probably acknowledged that the advent of illuminated cities, as one of these signs of modernization, was not a simple, sudden or uncomplicated thing. As Schlör points out, the advent of gas or even electric lighting did not shake off the historical memory of threatening darkness in the city streets when they became artificially lit. Rather, the old darkness and the new brightness intermingle.⁸⁷⁰

When brought to the domain of art, the reflecting city lights in the *Church Scene* suggest a hazy yet dramatic transition stage from figurative art to Neo-Plastic abstract art. The image focalizes the reader’s attention to this special atmosphere in which light does not necessarily triumph: “The facade of a church seen as a flat plane against the darkness, reflecting the light of the city.”⁸⁷¹ However brightly the glow of the distant city lights may shine on the church facade, this light gains its effect only through the darkness of the night sky. Light creeps into an image of darkness but does not yet conquer it. Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’ represents the conflictual nature of the ‘night-day’ relation in a subtle way. It is not a mere clash with the night representing negation. In the glowing lights of the *Church Scene* Mondrian’s text presents a sort of ‘day-ing’ of the night, so what the text metaphorically acknowledges is not simply the rejection of the ‘old order’ of art. As Schlör continues, “what is so clear when ‘night’ and ‘day’ confront each other, presents itself with less clarity at dawn”.⁸⁷² The dawn of city lights stands as a metaphor for subtle change. Mondrian’s text still preserves both the nocturnal elements and memory, as noted earlier.

868 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 103. As noted earlier, Holzman’s and James’s translation leaves out the word ‘aspect’: “*Zie eens hoe schoon b. v. het aspect der metropolitan te Parijs is.*” The Dutch meaning emphasizes that there is a certain point of view and a moment when the Metro as a construction is at its most beautiful; the English translation speaks merely about the Paris Metro.

869 Schlör 1998, 211.

870 Schlör 1998, 239.

871 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 101.

872 Schlör 1998, 286–287.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality is especially sensitive to the meanings of transition in art. To support this suggestion I will take a look at Giovanni Papini's fanciful short stories in his *Il Tragico Quotidiano* (1906). Mondrian very likely had not read Papini's *Il Tragico Quotidiano*, but I suggest that the meaning effects of transition that these stories exemplify is something which was very current in that era. Like Mondrian's '*Triologue*', Papini also represents transition through the use of metaphors of night and dawning. Through his reading of Papini's *Il Pilota Cieco* 1907 (The Blind Pilot) Mondrian was acquainted with this spirit of Papini's stories, many of which exploring the experience of time, the changes in one's self over time, and articulating the overcoming of this transience.

One of the stories in Papini's *Il Tragico Quotidiano* uses the conflictual relation of night and dawn. Time in the early twentieth century was marked by shame in the lack of achievements of earlier centuries and by a certain new spirit.⁸⁷³ It is in this spirit that the metaphors of night and dawn work in Mondrian's text. Like Papini, Mondrian, too, recognized how the old Europe confronted the growing influence of the modern world, often stemming from America. Metaphors are icons which may move far from the thematic level of the text and Papini's fiction. Similarly, the output of the *De Stijl* artists, conveyed an idea of change in which the new replaces the old, which is doomed to death, but in which love for the old is nevertheless recognized.

Fading Illusions, Dawning Morning: Metaphors for the New Order

Like Mondrian's '*Triologue*', Papini's short story, "The Sick Gentleman's Last Visit", takes place at night. It is a fantasy story which uses a first-person narrator. An old and odd friend, of unknown name, visits for the last time the narrator's room when dawn is just beginning to break. Accustomed as the teller is to his strange visits and talk, he allows the gentleman to speak his thoughts. The words, said in a great despair, reveal the essence of this visitor:

I am not a real man. [...]. I am but *a figure in a dream*. In me, Shakespeare's image has become literally and tragically exact: I am *such stuff as dreams are made on!* I exist because someone is dreaming me, someone who is now asleep and dreaming and sees me act and live and

873 In 1928 several European writers, including Theo van Doesburg, Max Ryhner, Eugene Jolas, Georges Hugnet collected their thoughts into an article, "Inquiry among European writers into the spirit of America". In the article Europe, as an old continent, received, among other things, metaphors of "sickness, an old windmill with immobile sails, a lady who drags her past along with her". See *Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment*. Number 13, summer, 1928, 248–270.

move [...]. When this *someone* began to dream me, I began my existence. When he wakes I will cease to be. I am an imagination, a creation, a guest of his long nightly fantasies [...].⁸⁷⁴

Like Papini, Mondrian, too, uses the ‘the languages of the night’. The figurative landscapes in Mondrian’s *Scenes* are sort of ‘visitors’ from the past, which have entered as night images into Mondrian’s text. They, too, could be considered such stuff as dreams are made on. Therefore, like Papini’s odd visitor, their time to disappear seems to have come in Mondrian’s text. This is why the stroller *Z* so determinedly announces that the representation of objects has to be discarded. According to this new insight, the purpose of painting is not to project imitative images, for they only have the same reality as dreams do.

In the third chapter, when studying Mondrian’s *Garden Scene*, I showed how a consciously manipulating attitude stealthily replaces the ‘old’, purely contemplative attitude towards nature. The consciousness of the time, *tijdsbewustzijn*, suggests that works of art are supposed to be embedded into conscious rationality. Papini’s way of describing the character of a dream and the contemplative attitude is to personify them, using the metaphor of old art, and old attitudes towards art making being like a “Sick Gentleman”:

We all called [him] the Sick Gentleman. Since his sudden disappearance everything that was his has vanished as well, everything except the memory of his unforgettable smile and a portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo, which shows him half hidden in the soft shadow of a fur coat [...]. A few of those who loved him truly – and I count myself as one of the few – also remember his remarkable skin of a transparent and pale yellow hue, the almost feminine lightness of his step [...].⁸⁷⁵

It is as if Papini were saying that dreams are attractive. One becomes trapped in their smiles. Half hidden, they may be secret, caressing your mind like a fur coat against the skin. They come and go easily, like light steps. There is charm in dreaming. Likewise, Mondrian’s text grants charm to figurative night images when they are observed and described. Shouts of wonder start many of the *Scenes*, but like the images of night they, too, finally retreat into the soft shadows.

Papini’s visitor does not feel well. On the contrary, he is very sick. His last night becomes a metaphor of the dying old order:

874 Papini 1983 (1906), 274–275.

875 Papini 1983 (1906), 273.

I realized, seeing his red eyelids, that he had been awake all night, and that he must have waited for dawn with great anxiety because his hands were trembling and his entire body seemed to shake with fever [...]. One could see he was suffering terribly. [...]. The soft gloved hand shook mine, for the last time.⁸⁷⁶

The dawn and the last minutes of the old order of art appear together here. Dreams are not in an 'energetic condition' anymore but, driven by the dawn, are fading away. Dreaming, as a passive contemplative enterprise of building worlds, 'has fallen sick'; dreaming as the stuff of human endeavours is useless, dreams as a form of philosophy are inefficient.

Judging from the publishing year "The Sick Gentleman's Last Visit" (written 1906) coincides with Papini's pragmatic period. At that time Papini was writing in the Florentian magazine *Leonardo*, founded in 1903, about his pragmatic principles concerning the new consciousness of time. These principles were supposed to inspire human activity, in short, they would be different from other philosophies: "The common denominator to which all the forms of human life can be reduced is this: *the quest of instruments to act with*, in other words, *the quest of power*."⁸⁷⁷ At the dawn of this new action philosophy, which relies on man's own power as a creative being, endless dreaming about better worlds had to be given up, be allowed to disappear, just like the Sick Gentleman in Papini's story.

This kind of pragmatic tone is also found in the '*Trialogue*'. This is the dawn for man's power to make his own world instead of merely standing by and contemplating it. In Mondrian's text human rationality creeps onto the stage like dawn does on the Sick Gentleman's last night. The reader understands that the reflecting electric lights on the church facade and the shaped trees of the garden in the '*Trialogue*' are metaphors. The images in Mondrian's text are bathed in natural night light, by the light of the moon, the stars, the clear night skies, until in the sixth *Scene* and finally in the *Studio Scene*, man-made electric light prevails. This type of light stays on all the time, both night and day. Since the change between night and day has disappeared, so too the need for dreaming disappears. Thus, in Mondrian's text, electric lights symbolize consciousness and waking from the dream world.

Mondrian's thinking relies on a metaphor for human faculties. As such, it reflects the same kind of consciousness of the era as in Papini's stories. This insight suggests that human beings guide their world by 'rational consciousness' towards the ideal. In fact, Mondrian's words of an earlier essay, "The New Plastic

⁸⁷⁶ Papini 1983 (1906), 274, 277–278.

⁸⁷⁷ James 1906, 339.

in Painting”, 1917, collects the ideas of this rationality together and matches even more exactly Papini’s spirit:

For *consciousness* in art is another new contemporary characteristic: the artist is no longer a blind tool of intuition. *Natural feeling* no longer dominates the work of art, which expresses *spiritual feeling* – that is, *reason-and-feeling in one* [...] besides the action of emotion, the action of intellect becomes prominent in the artist.⁸⁷⁸

The pragmatic idea of human faculties shows itself in the shaped trees and in the dawning city lights in the fifth and sixth *Scene*. There it works as a man-made instrument of change of which man-made forms and electric lights are a sign. Finally, in the *Studio Scene*, the striving for the instrumental faculty is even more explicitly stated: “The execution that the New Plastic demands, with the assistance of technicians and machinery, will be *other* than execution directly by the artist himself [...]. For the artist always has difficulty in making himself a *pure instrument* of intuition of the universal within him.”⁸⁷⁹ Here, Italian pragmatism needs to be looked at in more detail. Papini’s philosophy conveyed a theory of human action in which an action is seen as any change in which art, science, religion and philosophy work as instruments. As James notes about the kind of utilitarianism found in Papini’s pragmatism, action is conscious and independent of nature.⁸⁸⁰

Van Doesburg was highly active in creating links in Italy and throughout Europe. While Mondrian, to my knowledge, did not correspond with Italian pre-futurist and futurist circles directly, it would seem that van Doesburg recognized the new awareness of art and architecture. In spirit this new awareness seems to be similar to that found in Papini’s *Sick Gentleman*. For van Doesburg the new principle grew, adapted through practice, into a sound and practical construction method “stripped of all dreaminess and vagueness”.⁸⁸¹ In this same essay in the periodical *Het Bouwbedrijf*, van Doesburg skilfully gathered together Mondrian’s general aesthetics upon the straight line and the ‘perpendicular’, his articles from *De Stijl* and his own notion of Elementarism as final historical completion, into what he called the “new pragmatic life philosophy”.⁸⁸²

I would argue that the metaphors of night, dawn and electric lights in Mondrian’s text are an expression of this kind of *tijdsbewustzijn*. They convey the point at

878 Mondrian 1986 (1917), 40–41. Italics original.

879 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 115. Italics original.

880 James 1906, 339.

881 Van Doesburg 1986 (1929), 229.

882 Ibid.

which the practical interaction between the perceiving person and his surroundings replaces the former idea of knowing and contemplating the world 'out there'. In this the artist's consciously applied action replaces the former blind intuition and a 'dreamy' illusion of nature, although the loved memory stays.

5.2 Modern Experience Comes to Art-Making

Mondrian's three strollers head towards the illuminated city. The lights from the city falling on the church facade give a sense of 'another nature' different from that of the Dutch rural landscape. The fact that the text only points to the city, but never actually enters into the experience of the city, is meaningful. It is as if the text hesitated to make the final step into the city. It avoids describing the spectacle that the Paris boulevards of those days would offer the strollers. However, the city experience is implicitly present in Mondrian's text. In the seventh *Scene*, for example, the dialogue presents its awareness of the city experience. This is not stated explicitly, but the reference to the 'new man' at the end of the last *Scene* shows that Mondrian acknowledges that the city dweller is constantly faced with perceptual challenges in the modern city.

As Jane Beckett notes, the bipolar setting of the rural—the city in fact coincides with a whole bundle of texts in the Netherlands in which the debate of modernist discourse functioned by means of a town-country opposition.⁸⁸³ However, what does not come out in Beckett's essay is that this setting also had metaphorical dimensions. Mondrian's text not only aims to thematize the metropolitan experience but the setting of the rural - the city inevitably brings with it mythical and metaphorical connotations into the urbanist discourse. According to Joachim Schlör, between 1840–1930 big cities such as Paris, Berlin and London exhibited the stages of modernization and became symbols of modern life. They became metaphors of modern experience.⁸⁸⁴

Light was the big city's mark of modernity. Illumination by electric street lights brought a crucial change in how the city was conceived. According to Schlör, artificial light was a necessity of life in modern society and it symbolized progress as distance from nature.⁸⁸⁵ However, it was not a simple progress forward but a shifting relation between light and darkness, in which the moonlit magic of night was driven out to the realm of mythology when it gave way to the luxury and

883 Beckett 1983, 69. The texts consisted of published statements, government reports, novels, exhibitions and popular journalism, issued between 1880 and 1919 in the Netherlands.

884 Schlör 1998, 16–17.

885 Schlör 1998, 66.

security of lights.⁸⁸⁶ Behind the immediate emotion-related meanings lay a variety of ancient myths which articulated the oppositional setting between the rural and the city. As a philosopher of modern urban society, Henri Lefebvre, has pointed out that these myths incorporate elements, themes and signifying units borrowed from nomadic and pastoral life into a new context.⁸⁸⁷ In the new context of the city, these agrarian mythical elements represent something to be believed in, at least to a certain extent.⁸⁸⁸

The old philosophical themes, the world and the cosmos, meet here in Mondrian's night-time journey. The city affirms its presence as the distant city lights, otherwise the path in Mondrian's *'Triologue'* heads through the shadows of evening and night in the *Scenes*. This setting makes use of cosmological models which are already known from Plato's mature work.⁸⁸⁹ In Plato darkness and light are incorporated as structural elements in myth but these elements are found again and lived in in the image of the city. In myth the world is a path taken through shadows, or, as Lefebvre describes it, when considered as the hieroglyph of the mind, the path becomes a tunnel or a tortuous corridor, whereas the illuminated city represents harmonious scaffolding with illuminated contours.⁸⁹⁰

Mondrian's *'Triologue'* rises as a metaphor of the mind's work which undergoes a struggle through shadows into a luminous revelation. Here, the virtual urban world that looms in the form of city lights, but not yet as the city itself, is a representation of nostalgia for the city, for the mature ideas of abstract art. It is a longing for paradise, which also brings to mind the artificial paradise of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, where paradise is no longer located in nature but has its origin in an urban setting. In this meaning the word 'paradise' in fact occurs in the dialogue of the last *Scene*, where *Z* applies it to the future city environment: "Paradise always evokes the joy of living! ... don't regard it simply as a daydream. The city of children will one day be a city of mature men [...]."⁸⁹¹

The idea of the city and the urban mentality had a strong symbolic meaning for the era. For Georg Simmel, 'the first urban sociologist', the urban space was the space of modernity, it was a place of cultural productivity which increased innovations.⁸⁹² However, Mondrian's distant city also arouses associations with truly ancient but still enduring Christian meanings. The themes of darkness and

886 Schlör 1998, 25, 57.

887 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 103

888 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 105. For Lefebvre a myth could be defined as a non-institutional discourse, which is not then subject to the limitations of laws and institutions.

889 Plato made use of the cosmological model of the astronomer and geometrician Eudoksos (c. 390–338 BC) from Knidos. See Thesleff 2011, 261.

890 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 108–109.

891 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 120.

892 Simmel 1997 (1903), 180–182.

light; illusion as a false world contrasted to the true world; copying versus creating, are based on oppositions. Such ideas can lead to associating Mondrian's settings with early theological ideas that we find, for example, in Saint Augustine's (354-430) *City of God*.⁸⁹³ Thus, we can perceive the Neo-Plastic realm as a future city, as a metaphorical *civitas dei*, whereas the dark, old church facade would represent the sick, devastated, false world of *terrena civitas*. But without such darkness the brightness of the new art and the new world could not shine.

What Schlör notes about the solitary strolling in the night of a big city also applies to Mondrian's text. Night-time reaches certain sensors in the consciousness which are not available in the day. In this way the stroller is able to keep alive the traces of the past through the experience of present-day nights.⁸⁹⁴ Mondrian's motifs of figurative paintings from the 1910s in the '*Triologue*' must have appealed to the reader's recollection when reading the text when it was published in 1919–1920. By strolling through the dimly-lit landscapes *X*, *Y* and *Z* are constantly in a dialogue with the experience of nature. This relation is conflictual. Thus, the conversation in the second *Scene* in particular is climactic because it represents a sort of gap between the observing subject and capricious nature. The text revives feelings that were once thought to be lost in the modernizing experience of the city and which find no expression in the daytime or in the brightness of the illuminated city. The strollers metaphorically distance themselves like the awakening mind for which these landscapes were once familiar but now suddenly seem unknown to the modern world.

It is the reflection of the city lights that cast their urban glow over the experience of nature. The beauty of these old landscapes becomes re-evaluated in that glow. This is the 're-presentation' of nature, an idea which Lefebvre includes in the urban experience.⁸⁹⁵ As mentioned, Mondrian's reconsideration is retrospective and emanates from the experience of modernity. Considering Mondrian's way of taking his own figurative landscape motifs as his subject matter, he not only represents them in words but reconsiders them as the representations of the natural world. This fact tends to be easily forgotten in those studies and representations which juxtapose Mondrian's actual landscape paintings of corresponding motifs to Mondrian's *Scenes*. Thus, the reader may directly associate the painting with the

893 Augustine defines the Christian concept of the righteous society in terms of 'the city' ('*civitas*'). In his *Catechizandis Rudibus*, written about 400, Augustine develops the motif: "So two cities, one of the unrighteous, the other of the saints, persist from the beginning of the human race until the end of time; now they are mixed bodily, one with another, but separate in their wills..." Cited in O'Daly 1999, 63. Lefebvre introduces the concept of the City of God as a metaphor for the modernizing city. See Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 105.

894 Schlör 1998, 274.

895 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 107–108.

Scene. Although this setting has its own merits, the juxtaposition is not the same thing as is the image by which the written text creates ‘mental eyes’ for the reader.⁸⁹⁶

These thoughts lead my study to one of the main topics in the last *Scene* of Mondrian’s text, namely, the topic of the ‘new man’ which implicitly includes the experience of the modern city dweller and thus completes the rural – city oppositions that underlie the text.

The New Man

The experience of the modern city dweller is included in the dialogue about the ‘new man’. The idea mainly appears in the seventh *Scene*, which takes place in a studio located in Paris. The text drafts the idea of the ‘new man’ as a combination of topics: “Today the worker’s production is and must be mass-production [...]. The worker is too much of a ‘machine,’ and, like the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, he is too exclusively preoccupied with material things [...]. Only the new man can realize the new spirit of the age as beauty, both in society and in plastic expression.”⁸⁹⁷ This optimistic and proud ‘spirit’ finds its corresponding expression in a contemporary poet, Guillaume Apollinaire’s, text, according to which new artists demand an ideal beauty, disengaged from whatever charm man has for man. It is an expression of the universe, humanized by light.⁸⁹⁸ Not only do these words suggest the modern experience of the technologized world as such but also that the re-presentation of beauty and plastic expression can no longer be elaborated except through this urbanized reality.

Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’ acknowledges the constant need for the understanding to grapple with the city experience. In this the ‘*Triologue*’ belongs to those theoretical texts which recognized the importance of perception in the modern world. Mondrian’s text considers sensations and perception, spaces and times, images and concepts in its conversations. As such it testifies that the experience of the city dweller was not merely a social phenomenon but that the city challenged the human perceptual capacity in special ways. This was, as Schlör notes, because of the sensual stimulation it offered to the dwellers.⁸⁹⁹ According to Lefebvre, the messy, noisy city experience arouses the need to arrange concepts, that is, the need for understanding and for knowledge. The city is a phenomenon where there are always new phenomena coming along which demand explanation. There are also always

896 See, for example, Herbert Henkels’s edition of Mondrian’s ‘*Triologue*’: *Gedurende een wandeling van buiten naar den stad* (1986).

897 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 121.

898 Apollinaire 1950 (1913), 28. The book was on the *De Stijl* reading list.

899 Schlör 1998, 19.

individuals left behind, who cannot cope with the new demands.⁹⁰⁰ Mondrian's text also notes a certain degree of uneven development in this understanding: "Z: [...] Once again, you see that the spirit of the age, through which the universal becomes clear, manifests itself, even if only in a few [...]."⁹⁰¹

Mondrian's career as a painter also underwent similar returns back to earlier subjects. Mondrian's ambiguous interest in the Dutch landscape tradition, for example, was a firm feature of his artistic development. Thus, scholars point to Mondrian's night landscapes as a relatively rare instance in the history of painting whereby an artist's development suddenly went into reverse and he produced paintings that were far less modern than those he had created previously.⁹⁰² However, before the First World War, Mondrian lived and worked in Paris from 1912 to 1914. There in 1914 he drew several sketches based on urban facades of nearby churches and buildings covered with advertising billboards or scaffolding. Overy notes that these sketches are among the relatively few major works associated with Cubism that address the notion of Parisian modernity. In these works the fabric of the city acquires a structural representation.⁹⁰³ This leads my study to the 'literary fabric' of the city experience, which I suggest is also implicitly present in Mondrian's notion of the 'new man'.

With its *new man* discourse *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* links itself with a long tradition. The modernist city experience has been conceptualized in many famous works of literature and poetry.⁹⁰⁴ The city experience is what I suggest is also inherent in Mondrian's 'planar' vision. Therefore, visual experience in the city acknowledges that nothing exists without proximity and without relationships. The city is thus a place of simultaneous differences. As Lefebvre observes, "the city creates a situation, the urban situation, where different things occur one after another and do not exist separately but according to their differences" and where it is the city that finally binds them together.⁹⁰⁵

Mondrian provides the 'new man' with a certain perceptual capacity, which he characterizes as the relation between the inward and outward. In my previous chapter I cited the strollers' conversation where they described the studio. The

900 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 28. See also Schlör 1998, 22.

901 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 120–121.

902 See, for example, Bois 1994, 336 and Susanne Deicher 1999, 17.

903 Overy 1997, 120–121. The preceding drawings of urban views in Mondrian's sketchbook show a connection with Cubist paintings.

904 As Lefebvre notes, Victor Hugo uncovered the symbolic dimension of the city as we think of it today. See Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 107. Baudelaire characterized the urban by a set of oppositions, such as mobile, immobile, the crowd and solitude. Georg Simmel studied the sociological aspects of the mental life of the modern city dweller, not to mention several other poets and writers, among them T.S. Eliot's poem *the Waste Land* (1922); Guy de Maupassant's story *La nuit. Un cauchemar* (1887), Emile Zola's *The Three Cities Trilogy* (1894–98), Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927) and Honoré de Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* (1830–1847).

905 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 117–118.

description exemplified the kind of seeing which implies relationships in the vision and at the same time simultaneity. Consequently, in the seventh *Scene* Mondrian writes:

[The new man] is also interiorized *outwardness*. And his other side, *a more conscious inwardness, makes him see a more conscious expression, which lies precisely in the outward. In fact, the new man is precisely distinguished by the complete attention he gives to all outer things [...].* What I was saying applies only to the *new man* who has learned to see plastically [...]. It means that one's inwardness and outwardness are completely equivalent and so form a *unity*.⁹⁰⁶

The strollers are discussing how one's personality accommodates itself to adjustments in external forces. Simmel's analysis about city-subjectivity will help me to approach this dialogue. According to Simmel, the metropolis demands from the human mind a different degree of consciousness than rural life, where the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flow more slowly and habitually.⁹⁰⁷ It is concerned with the mechanism of protection, where intellectuality, not emotions, plays a crucial part. "He reacts with his head instead of his heart", says Simmel, presenting the new kind of attitude the city dweller requires to protect him from the discrepancies of his external environment which otherwise would uproot him.⁹⁰⁸ By this demand to sharpen the consciousness of the city dweller Mondrian's 'new man' resists being levelled down by modern socio-technological mechanisms. The conversation openly remarks: "It is from the *new man*, emerging from worker, bourgeoisie and aristocracy *but altogether different from them*, that the New Plastic must arise to whom it belongs."⁹⁰⁹

To see how visual perception is accommodated with the consciousness, a look at another literary work by Mondrian, "Les Grands Boulevards" (1920), is in order. It belongs to the two vignettes of urban life that Mondrian wrote after his return to Paris. According to Harry Holzman, it reflects Cubist fragmentation as well as Futurist simultaneity concerning the visual and the auditory.⁹¹⁰ It was also published only a year after *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. "Les Grands Boulevards", therefore, is a useful text to explore further Mondrian's city-nature opposition, and his discussion of the 'new man' in the last *Scene*. The main aim here is to understand how Mondrian articulates visual perception in relation to

906 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122. Italics original.

907 Simmel 1997 (1903), 175–176.

908 Ibid.

909 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 121. Italics original.

910 Holzman's introduction to the *Two Paris Sketches*. See Mondrian 1986, 124.

the city experience, experiences which are already found in the studio *Scene* and in the studio photographs.

In “Les Grands Boulevards” the boulevards themselves are strangely irrelevant. Mondrian does not write about the buildings or the visual appearance of solid objects. Instead, the text surveys the street-space without solid limits, the life that is endlessly floating by in the streets, the noise, the traffic and the pedestrians that Mondrian includes in his sketch. It is these elements which bring a new temporality to the scene that goes beyond a sense of limitedness. The recurring sounds of vehicles and walking Parisiennes and shouting newspaper boys subsist as a perpetual present in this urban sketch:

Ru-h ru-h-h-h-h-h. Poeoeoe. Tik-tik-tik-tik. Pre. R-r-r-r-r-uh-h. Huh! Pang. [...] a multiplicity of sounds, interpenetrating. Automobiles, buses, arts, cabs, people, lampposts, these all mixed [...] Ru-ru-ru-u-u. Pre Images are limitations. Multiple images and manifold limitations. Annihilation of images and limitations through manifold images [...]. On the boulevard one thing follows another but yet they dissolve into one another. Days form centuries, and the airplane has abolished distance. Time and space move: the relative moves and what moves is relative [...]. *L’Intransigeant, La Liberté, Le Populaire*. [...] The kaleidoscope shows us the most diverse things.⁹¹¹

This is a collage of images in which differences finally melt together as a single frameless picture. It is juxtaposed to the writer-observer, who is wavering between immersion into the crowd and the feeling of social solitude which also Baudelaire conceptualized in his poetry so well.

That child over there is watching the boulevard. I too am watching. Parisienne. She would not be at home in the desert. One belongs to the other. Why can one never leave one’s “own kind”? Is that why it is so hard to find one’s “own kind”? Parisienne. Officer. Captain. Parisienne. Parisienne alone. Two Parisiennes alone. Why is the foreigner sitting there alone?⁹¹²

Here the observer, the subject, is made the outsider to the crowd, an onlooker who observes from a position of exclusion. This is a lonely onlooker who achieves his identity against a backcloth of manifold images through his realization that he is

911 Mondrian 1986 (1920a), 126–128. Italics original.

912 Mondrian 1986 (1920a), 126–128.

not part of the crowd and yet he has opened himself up to the street life. Jonathan Crary, who has studied modern attention and habits of seeing in the industrializing society, points out that to inhabit this world of manifold images means enduring a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation. It is a losing of self which shifts between interiority and distance, involving incorporation into a variety of assemblages in the surroundings.⁹¹³ Mondrian's onlooker similarly fluctuates between these two poles and recognizes the need for rhythm:

The sidewalk under the awning is a refuge. The sidewalk – under the awning or not – the car, the policeman, all organize outward rhythm. Who organizes inward rhythm? Is the stroller moved or is *he* the mover?⁹¹⁴ [...]. The boulevard is the physical turning outward and the spiritual turning inward. The spiritual sublimates the physical, the physical sublimates the spirit.⁹¹⁵

In Mondrian's "Les Grands Boulevards", the city means the state of creativity and 'interiorized outwardness' is the precondition for artistic creativity. In the lines we find the need to rearticulate vision as 'interiorized consciousness' in which flowing manifold images presuppose constant absorption and withdrawing. This means understanding things through their relationships and not as single isolated objects. Thus, merely focusing one's attention does not accomplish the required relation to the surrounding modern world. The qualities of Mondrian's 'new man', which the '*Triologue*' finds to exist in artists and which make him the forerunner of a whole generation of modern men, can also be read in "Les Grands Boulevards": "The artist *causes* to move and *is* moved. He is policeman, automobile, all in one. He who creates motion also creates rest."⁹¹⁶

Mondrian situates this vision in the concrete, contemporary experience of the surrounding world. Therefore, I would argue that the coherence of 'interiorized outwardness' does not derive exclusively from philosophies but also derives from the modern experience and the needs of the modern city dweller. The illuminated city in the '*Triologue*' is a metaphor for the 'new vision'. It fluctuates between darkness as metaphorically bearing the memory of old times and as the illuminated revelation of the new art. Nothing in the city exists without exchange, without relationships.⁹¹⁷ Therefore, this 'new vision' does not start from a single viewpoint

913 Crary 1999, 370.

914 Mondrian 1986 (1920a), 127.

915 Mondrian 1986 (1920a), 128.

916 Mondrian 1986 (1920a), 127. Italics original.

917 Lefebvre 2003 (1970), 117–118.

but is everywhere, as Mondrian himself concludes in one of his later essays.⁹¹⁸ Mondrian's onlooker in "Les Grands Boulevards" resists this kind selection and allows images to flow into his consciousness. The city as a metaphor and the 'new man' as the perceiver, stand as a counter-model to focused attentiveness. They reverse what Crary describes as the 'searchlight' kind of attention: "It presumes an ideal state in which one could redistribute one's attention so that nothing would be shut out, so that everything could be in a low-level focus but without the risk of schizophrenic overload."⁹¹⁹ In the same way, Mondrian's observer in "Les Grands Boulevards" lets Parisiennes, newspaper boys, automobiles all pass by in low-level focus.

This model of perception had a larger cultural significance. To impose a measure of cognitive control on an unassimilable excess of information did not merely concern the city dweller. It could also be applied to the apparently chaotic syntax of dreams, as Sigmund Freud did. Crary notes that "Freud sought to fashion himself into an apparatus capable of engaging a seemingly random sequence of signs, whether they were language, gestures, intonations, silences".⁹²⁰ Freud's *Über Psychoanalyse* was in the 1919 *De Stijl* magazine reading list and it was recommended to artists. Blotkamp points out that Mondrian valued intuitive or unconscious action in the arts. But here too he did not go to extremes. Mondrian did, however, oppose the uncontrolled domination of the unconscious that he notices in several French writers in proto-Surrealist circles.⁹²¹ Thus, he was obviously aware of the techniques which at least resembled those of Freud.

5.3 The 'Triologue' as a Mind's Journey

The reader finds the words 'unconsciousness' and 'consciousness' in Mondrian's text,⁹²² terms usually associated with psychoanalysis. In the Netherlands in the 1910s psychoanalysis was a budding field. The crucial question here is how familiar was Mondrian with their proper psychoanalytical meaning. To answer this question, it is necessary to take a look at the field of psychoanalysis in the surrounding intellectual culture. As Michael White points out, the development of abstract art and the emergence of a psychoanalytic theory of art took place simultaneously.⁹²³

918 Mondrian 1986 (1922), 171.

919 Crary 1999, 368.

920 Ibid.

921 Blotkamp 1994, 135.

922 The reader finds these words most frequently in the seventh *Scene*. See, for example, Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122–123.

923 White 2006, 98.

Artists, for their part, often used the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to justify their departure from depicting the visible world. White argues that the responses of artists to psychoanalytical insights were numerous, reflecting the unestablished position of psychoanalysis at this time. One line of development was for artists to ponder the role of the unconscious as a source of creativity,⁹²⁴ and in 1915 some of them applied the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious in the aesthetic sense rather than as referring to pathological states of mind.⁹²⁵

In this unsettled situation, the way in which psychoanalytical considerations were represented was significant. Fictional literature seems to have played a role in introducing psychoanalysis into general awareness. Frederik van Eeden, for example, a leading Dutch physician and Freudian theorist, represented the psychoanalytical model of the mind in his 1909 novel, *The Bride of Dreams* (*De nachtbruid*).⁹²⁶ According to van Eeden, he had condensed the ideas of dreams into a work of art, because the fictitious form enabled him to deal freely with delicate matters and it also had the advantage that it expressed rather unusual ideas in a less direct way – esoterically, as he said. He also avoids the words ‘consciousness’ and ‘unconsciousness’ since, as he said, he “had no idea what ‘unconsciousness’ as a substantive might stand for”.⁹²⁷

My main attention at this point is the mode of representation. Van Eeden’s novel represents a succession of images which describe the ‘counter’ life of night. In dreams, thought processes and affects are represented in visual form⁹²⁸ and van Eeden’s *the Bride of Dreams* follows this principle when it links together the separate images and elements of a dream into a relatively coherent story and transforms thoughts into sensory symbols and images.⁹²⁹ *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* also proceeds in a coherent and meaningful way by means of images. It too relies on metaphors of night, as my study has suggested. Since it,

924 Freud’s *Über Psychoanalyse* was on the *De Stijl* reading list and Van Kok directly refers to sublimation and the libido in his *De Stijl* article, “Scheppen” (To create) in 1918. See *De Stijl* 1919, II, 6, pp. 70–72; and *De Stijl* 1918, II, 1, 5–7.

925 One of these artists was Theo van Doesburg, who began to formulate theories to explain intuitive processes in artistic creativity, leading ultimately to the conception of the role of the unconscious. See White 2006, 102.

926 Van Eeden wrote about Mondrian’s painting, accusing him of mental illness. This compelled Mondrian to defend himself. See White 2006, 99.

927 From van Eeden’s 1913 essay, “A Study of Dreams.” The Web-pages of the Lucidity Institute.

928 In Freud’s theory of dream work, archaic modes of thinking, “particularly *displacement*, *condensation* and *substitutions*, serve to transfer the latent dream thoughts into the manifest *dream*. Two other elements of dream work are plastic and symbolic representation, that is, the transformation of thoughts into sensory symbols and images; and *secondary elaboration*, where the elements of the dream are linked to a relatively coherent story.” See *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*. 1990. Ed. by Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine, 57.

929 According to van Eeden, all that the perception during sleep teaches us, demands as much “scientific thought and comparison, critical analysis and selection, and building up into fixed, universal and lasting truth, as do all our waking perceptions.” See van Eeden 2010 (1909), 119.

too, is ultimately a flow of figurative images, night illusions, it may have aroused meaning effects about the representation of psychoanalytical ideas. For readers of the article series the notion that it is from the dreamy world of the unconsciousness that the new art movement is emerging would be suggested.⁹³⁰

It is not unlikely that the readers of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* interpreted Mondrian's images as metaphors of the unconsciousness providing a 'new source of creativity'. As signs, the words 'consciousness' and 'unconsciousness' may well have communicated appropriate meanings even if the concepts were not thoroughly understood, or even though their meanings were only starting to be established. But what is required now is an examination of the conversational situations in which Mondrian uses these words.

In the seventh *Scene* Mondrian introduces a number of concepts which are characteristic of his critical vocabulary. At the end of the *Scene*, for example, the strollers discuss the inward and outward man (*innerlijk en uiterlijk mensch*) and the notion that the new man is 'interiorized outwardness' (*verinnerlijkte uiterlijkheid*).⁹³¹ In chapter 4 I discussed these concepts from the point of view of consciousness and in this chapter they have been seen from the perspective of the city experience. The term 'interiorized outwardness' brings to mind Rudolf Steiner's concept of 'inside-outside', which may have had an influence on Mondrian's insight about human consciousness. Apart from being a biological and cosmic principle, this principle of inversion, 'inside-outside', was for Steiner a method of consciousness. Steiner developed this approach to thinking and feeling while endeavouring to depict the relationship between the external physical world and the inner spiritual world:

I wished to say to you [...] about the kind of experience we have, when we are in the spiritual world, – so very different from our experiences in the physical Suppose that you could take the human being as you see him here and turn him inside out ... taking hold of him in the inmost heart and turning him inside out like a glove, then man would not remain man as we see him here; he would enlarge into a Universe.⁹³²

Steiner's principle here also seems to be meaningful for Mondrian's seventh *Scene*, where the conversation blends together several concepts. Mondrian intertwines

930 Some of the literary images in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* can be paralleled in Mondrian's landscape paintings made before 1909. Mondrian's friend, Israël Querido, described their dreamy and inward character as positive qualities when he was defending Mondrian against van Eeden's accusations of mental illness. See White 2006, 99.

931 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122–123.

932 Rudolf Steiner's lecture in Oxford, August 22, 1922, "The Cosmic Origin of the Human Form." Cited in Brüderlin 2011, 120.

the speech on inwardness and outwardness with the terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘unconsciousness’, presenting them in terms of a balanced relation. Because of these interconnections, the terms acquire their own meaning effects in Mondrian’s text:

Z: [...] the old era, the old art sought equilibrium by means of *form* ... isn’t that even more outward? All the suffering of all the artists of the past was caused by their inability to give the inward its pure expression *within form*.

X: But is that really what they sought?

Z: It was, *unconsciously*. It is what intuition, the source of all art, always seeks. [...]

Y: Equilibrium between inward and outward – yes, that is what we must find [...]

Y: So must our inwardness and outwardness become one in order for us to recognize the life force in its purely plastic expression?⁹³³

Z: What I was saying applies only to the *new man*, who has learned to see plastically and who is more *completely* man. To be without this need is to be incomplete, one-sided. To be complete is to be *totally* “true.”⁹³⁴

The excerpt illustrates Mondrian’s personal way of expressing his thoughts. He expresses wide and abstract meanings by using a few general concepts. In Mondrian’s concept of ‘form’, for example, its meaning is evoked in relation to certain other words. As Altti Kuusamo has noted to be particularly the case with the concept of ‘form’ when it is considered as a sign, its meaning is determined by the context of its use.⁹³⁵ For Mondrian, the ‘form’ was something which emanated from the inside, *innerlijk mensch* (the inner man), which could well be described metaphorically as ‘the glove turned inside out’. I suggest that this was also the idea when Mondrian recognized that Schoenmaekers understood the idea too much in terms of exterior form, whereas his own idea encompassed something related to inward experience. In this way the ‘form’ would not be the same thing as the

933 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122, 123.

934 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122. Italics original.

935 Kuusamo 2011 (2005), 88.

spatial limits of an object. Limits would only provide the shape of an object. This kind of rendering would be merely visual, whereas the form radiates from within.

In this sense, the discussion of 'form' confirms Mondrian to be an artist who, despite his modernity, seems to reach back to the 19th century. Ultimately, the idea of 'inner form' stems from Goethe, Willhelm von Humboldt and from the Romantic tradition. As Kuusamo points out, theoretical discourse on artistic form widely recognizes the duality of the concept of 'form'.⁹³⁶

Mondrian's concept of 'inwardness' cannot be understood without the concept of 'consciousness'. As such, it suggests that the mind may have consciousness about the surrounding world but equally it may have a consciousness of itself in a state of experiencing its own being. However, the way in which the text uses the term 'consciousness' does not explain the purposeful use of the word 'unconscious' in the excerpt cited above. After all, Steiner's 'inside-outside' model refers only to a conscious human mind. White traces the roots of these kinds of conceptions in Mondrian's vocabulary to psychoanalysis. According to White, Mondrian's phrase 'inner transformation' comes from Mondrian's effort to explain the difference between what an artist perceives and what he represents. This is brought out by psychoanalysis.⁹³⁷ White points out that Mondrian's understanding of the psychoanalytical model departs in any case from the model of sublimation.⁹³⁸

When reading the descriptions of night images, the reader has to deal with the spheres of unconsciousness and consciousness in a metaphorical way. The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.⁹³⁹ The *'Triologue'* introduces this old material, not as such, but as a recollection of memory images, into the permanent light of consciousness from the darkness of unconsciousness. Therefore, it is as if these old figurative motifs became the 'material' for the Neo-Plastic interior design of the studio.

I suggest that Mondrian's *'Triologue'* is a representation which recognizes a sense of loss and transience and refers in this sense to the work of recollection. As Evelyne Ender reminds us, memory is not really the counterpart to a 'lost' emotion – it is, rather, the emotion itself.⁹⁴⁰ In this way Mondrian's text participates in the many philosophical and perceptual ideas of that era which tackled how the human mind accomplishes the continuing aspects of perceptual experience. My study

936 Kuusamo 2011 (2005), 74–75.

937 White 2006, 98.

938 White 2006, 106. According to White, the roots for Mondrian's view on this matter stem from August Stürcke, who did not base the understanding of sublimation on the idea of repression but on ideas that can be found in Freud's concept of narcissism. However, Stürcke's lecture in 1922, *Tweede Kongres voor Moderne Kunst* (The Second Congress for Modern Art) along with *De weg terug* (The Way Back), where he presented his ideas, came out too late to have been a source for Mondrian's text.

939 Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 5.

940 Ender 2005, 171.

considers these many models and trends as ‘metatexts’ of the era. They seem to offer a counter reaction to the general feeling that the old world has been lost, a feeling that belonged to the consciousness of that time and a common experience for sensitive minds after the First World War.

One of Sigmund Freud’s essays about his own experience is revealing as it concerns the common consciousness of the time, exemplifying in the form of a story how a feeling of transience cut through the epoch. It might well have been noticed in the Netherlands because of Freud’s preceding open letter in a Dutch newspaper.⁹⁴¹ Although I do not know whether Mondrian read Freud’s essay or not, I would still suggest that the meaning effects about transience present in Freud’s essay can also be found in Mondrian’s text. Mondrian’s text speaks of war-devastated towns and villages.⁹⁴²

The setting in Mondrian’s text resembles that found in Freud’s essay.⁹⁴³ In Freud’s essay, “On Transience” (1915), Freud recalls how he went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around but felt no joy in it. As Freud recalls, the proneness to decay of all that is beautiful and perfect led to the aching despondency felt by the young poet.⁹⁴⁴ In that same instance Freud speaks of the loveliness of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside in the sense that in some way or another this loveliness must be able to persist and to escape the powers of destruction. Mondrian wrote his ‘*Trialogue*’ with the purpose of showing “the direct connection between art and nature”⁹⁴⁵ and it also seems to acknowledge this same feeling of transience. *Y* speaks about how “[...] nature often makes me feel melancholy [...]. I can never unreservedly enjoy a fine summer evening. It makes me feel clearly how perfect everything could be but at the same time my powerlessness to make it so in my life.”⁹⁴⁶ It is as if Mondrian’s layman were here expressing his sorrow about unattainable.

To distinguish my account from merely acknowledging the resemblance, I wish to emphasize the special retrospective character of both Freud’s and Mondrian’s texts. They both turn towards their own personal past instead of just towards some

941 A few months after the outbreak of the First World War, Freud sent a letter to van Eeden, which was later published in *De Amsterdamer* on January 17, 1915. It gives a picture not only of Freud’s feelings about the war but also his conviction about his theory of human primordial instincts. See Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 301–302.

942 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 105.

943 White in his 2014 essay, “Farbe und Erinnerung bei Mondrian”, sees Freud’s essay and the dialogue between Mondrian’s three strollers as parallel in terms of the theme of recollection. See White 2014a, 49–50.

944 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 305.

945 Mondrian’s letter, cited in Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 82.

946 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 93.

general historical past. Mondrian introduces a fresh insight into the previously meaningful experience of the beauty of old landscapes and Freud's essay is an autobiographical representation of the theory of mourning.⁹⁴⁷ Freud claims that the transience of what is beautiful does not involve any loss in its worth. On the contrary, it undergoes an increase. As Freud says: "Transience value is scarcity value in time."⁹⁴⁸ As an explanation of the poet's spoiled feeling of enjoyment, Freud sees the revolt against mourning to be in the poet's mind as well as his inability to accept the transience of beauty. According to Freud, why this detachment of the libido from its loved objects should be such a painful process is still a mystery.⁹⁴⁹

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality has both an autobiographical and a metaphorical basis. Mondrian's text clings to the beauty of art with intensity although it manifests the loss of its figurativeness. It is therefore also meaningful from the viewpoint of the unconscious. The unconscious uncovered by psychoanalytic investigation contains the entire previous life of the individual.⁹⁵⁰ Mondrian's roots lie deep in Dutch realistic landscape painting, and the '*Triologue*' manifests poetically its love and affection for the landscapes described. In other words, Mondrian makes expressions of sympathy and enchantment a starting point for the strollers' viewing and in this way also an entrance to each dialogue. In this respect, Mondrian's text is in line with Freud's wartime essay. According to Freud's essay, what was precious to us has not proved to be lasting and we are simply in a state of mourning, while our libido has clung with ever greater intensity to what is left to us.⁹⁵¹

Freud would probably say that Mondrian was going through a state of mourning. Although Mondrian himself as a person is not the primary object of my study, he did deal with the feeling of transience by making it a personal process, and there are, in Mondrian's production, canvases which can be considered 'works of mourning'. As I have already suggested in section 3.5, Mondrian would seem to present the theoretical considerations of Neo-Plasticism in the '*Triologue*' slightly earlier than we see them emerging in his paintings. At the time of writing the text, Mondrian was working with his 'checkerboards', paintings with a modular grid that were last canvases he painted in Holland. They are, as Yve-Alain Bois points out, threshold works in the sense that Mondrian worked on these pieces to achieve

947 The theory of mourning contained later in Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917).

948 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 305.

949 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 305–306.

950 Freud's essays on sexual development in human life point out the pertinacity of early impressions: memory traces, for example, are attached to recent impressions. See Freud 2001 (1901–1905), 242.

951 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), 307.

his 1920 canvases, which culminate in Neo-Plasticism, where Mondrian mourns what he has rejected.⁹⁵²

To my mind, coping with the changing situation also precludes acts of integration of the self, not as an isolated need of mastery but as a synthesis of new experiences and memories as an identity process. The abstract artist, who rises as the leading figure from the text, tries to assure the other two participants about the justification of abstract art. Therefore, the text produces signifying effects about a creative thinking process that paves the way for Neo-Plasticism.

This leads me to consider this transitional process in art as a representation of creativity. As important a new development as both psychoanalysis and abstract art were in the Netherlands at this time, the combination of these two topics on the last pages of the *'Triologue'* directs the reader's attention towards another comprehensive idea, namely the idea of evolution. Several versions of the idea of evolution were circulating in the philosophical culture in which *De Stijl* artists worked.

The *'Triologue'* as a Creative Thought Process

I would argue that Mondrian's *'Triologue'* is an expression of the theory of Neo-Plasticism. By this I mean that the text makes known the idea of Neo-Plasticism as a process, as something that will develop over time, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the term 'process'. As sections 3.1 and 4.2 show, Mondrian's text comes close to metaphorical autobiography, but above all, as Dorrit Cohn notes about memory monologues, it creates the illusion of the "uninterrupted unrolling" of a thought process.⁹⁵³ Therefore, I also suggest that the notions of creativity and intuition are important when reading the 'journey' as the metaphor of the production of an art theory. Mondrian's text claims that "intuition is a source of all art"⁹⁵⁴ and the New Plastic should be seen "as a pure expression of the life force".⁹⁵⁵ While it was common in those days to ponder the sources of creativity from the point of view of psychoanalysis, the *'Triologue'*, however, seems to point in another direction here. Hence the terms, 'life force' and 'intuition' inevitably bring to mind not only Hegel's philosophical terms⁹⁵⁶ but also the key ideas of Henri Bergson's philosophy.

952 Bois 1994, 316, 320.

953 Cohn 1978, 185.

954 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 122.

955 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 123.

956 In the Hegelian frame, force equates with consciousness; it is an effect of spirit becoming self-conscious. See Wieczorek 1997, 147–150.

The *'Triologue'* considers proceeding to non-figurative art by speaking of this proceeding as a journey. The journey and the artist's theoretical thought are sign vehicles here. When two sign vehicles are brought together side by side a metaphor can result. In metaphors, two vehicles are found to be similar because the third factor, the meaning, is common to both of them. As Peirce defines it, metaphors "represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else".⁹⁵⁷ Therefore, it is the journey which introduces meanings to a more abstract target domain, which in this case is a theoretical thought in progress, and this implies the aspect of time.

This thought undergoes a certain path through which the art theory of Neo-Plasticism emerges. Lakoff and Johnson argue that our thought processes are largely metaphorical. Linguistic metaphorical expressions are possible precisely because metaphors are inbuilt in people's conceptual systems.⁹⁵⁸ We often conceive of the idea of change through the conceptual structure of a journey. Like journeys, changes also involve time, they define a path, they may even be developmental movements as things from the past remain and accumulate in the memory.

As mentioned in the Introduction, metaphors are those kinds of meanings which may be situated at some distance from the apparent content of the text. In this sense they are, as Merrell reminds us, the most 'impure' form of icons since they also bring a heavy burden of indexical and symbolic baggage along with them.⁹⁵⁹ The meanings of change, movement, time and recollection are the kind of connotations that are not only included in the metaphor of 'journey' but may also gather under cultural models as a thinking strategy. My study has already used the term 'evolution' in this meaning when following the 'journey' of the 'perpendicular' as a sign in Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*.

Up to this point my study has found many features in the text, in the light of which Mondrian's theoretical considerations can be seen to participate in wider contemporary discursive formations during the turn of the century. The meanings of recollection; an enduring sensation in transition; simultaneity in the experience of time; the idea of dealing with images when speaking of perceiving; and the experience of the modern city dweller all suggest the modern experiential world beyond a particular nationality.

Before the First World War Mondrian lived and worked in France, where the modern consciousness entered philosophy most notably in the writings of

957 EP2, 274.

958 Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 6.

959 Merrell 1995, 83.

Henri Bergson.⁹⁶⁰ The *De Stijl* movement also noticed them. Even though *De Stijl* recommended Bergson's *Matter and Memory* to its readers, I do not know whether Mondrian ever read any of his books, and he does not mention Bergson in his text. However, he did speak of inspiration in the spirit of Bergson's term 'creative élan' in a letter, as mentioned in chapter 2. As pointed out in the Introduction, semiotics applies to situations in which a verifiable contact between the context and the research material cannot be shown. If there were a verifiable contact, there would be no need to study the mediation of meanings as signs. Bergson's widely popular metaphysics of time addressed itself most explicitly to the question of value. Hence, there are certain values that I find in common both in Mondrian's text and in Bergson's philosophy. From this it follows that the similarity does not have to be an openly philosophical kind but can function through certain metaphors.

Metaphors are the third class of icon signs and they deal with the ideas of thirdness, such as rules, laws and principles. Thus, I suggest that what the '*Triologue*' has in common with Bergson's philosophy rests in the similarity of some key principles and values. This kind of mediation would bring the '*Triologue*' closer to the sphere of all that took place in the international avant-garde at this time. In other words, I would argue that evolution as a clear-cut concept exclusively linked to the Dutch esoteric context does not constitute a broad enough range of modern experience to provide a scheme for the entire cultural record of Mondrian's art-theoretical considerations.⁹⁶¹ Yve-Alain Bois, moreover, reminds us that Hegel's influence in Mondrian's terminology and art is not unambiguous and unchanged during his career.⁹⁶²

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality is a 'mind's journey'. It is about the work that the mind has to undergo to break into new ideas. It struggles through the shadows and is drawn by the hope of clarity. Plato's inner dialogue of mind and the cosmological journey comes to mind. The meaning of the transitory in the rapidly technologizing world is here at stake and in this way Mondrian included a certain implication into his text. Therefore, what takes place in the *Church Facade Scene* encompasses at one glance the past, the present and the future. As Guillaume

960 Bergson's influence as part of a general circuit of changing ideas at the turn of the twentieth century is clear, since his philosophy became famous and fashionable. Bergson also had a considerable impact on his younger contemporaries within the avant-garde. See Mark Antliff's study, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1993).

961 Wieczorek 1997, 156. According to Wieczorek, the principles for Mondrian's evolution are to be found in Schoenmaekers's concept of *beelding* and this, thus, distinguishes Mondrian's art from a purely Darwinian concept. This Hegelian derivation, *beelding*, is 'plastic expression' which exposes the elementary principles of creation in nature (expansion/limitation), and thus *nieuwe beelding* for Schoenmaekers represents a new stage of form, a 'mutation'.

962 Mondrian occasionally misinterprets, sometimes even completely ignores Hegel in G.J.P.J. Bolland's text. See Bois 1994, 338.

Apollinaire noted, in this way the painter may contemplate his own divinity.⁹⁶³ On the other hand, this ‘mind’s journey’ represents also a transition from figurative art to Neo-Plastic art, suggesting that the process is purposefully guided.

The idea of evolution was one of the cultural texts which several intellectual fields adopted, as already discussed in chapter 2. Bergson was convinced that time is at the heart of life and we must learn to live it, for everything else turns on time.⁹⁶⁴ Bergson and Mondrian seem to share certain values in their work, for example the conviction that the past has a positive effect on the present as a source of beauty, identity and freedom. The new time consciousness did more than express time as flux. Bergson’s concepts of ‘duration’ and ‘creative evolution’ help one to understand the strategic meaning of evolution.

Mondrian himself ends his text with a strong metaphor: “Through evolution – and mutation – this much is clear: *evolution outwardly prepares a new form, but by mutation the new suddenly emerges as something quite other.*”⁹⁶⁵ Here Mondrian introduces the scientific terms ‘evolution’ and ‘mutation’ into a field of art, where on the one hand they suggest completely new ideas, and on the other the ties to tradition. In this sense, Mondrian’s borrowings may have been quite purposeful, for as he says: “The man of letters will make use of all that comes to him from life itself, from science, and from beauty.”⁹⁶⁶ However, the idea of evolution is not about mere continuity. Evolution as mere continuity of the old would not create anything new. In this transformation, Y’s words suggest both continuity and discontinuity at the same time: “Although the new era has *evolved* out of the old, the two are absolutely distinct!”⁹⁶⁷ Mutation is a metaphor for the creative impulse which finally makes unforeseen things visible. The clues, stemming from the above-mentioned terms, have to be studied further in the light of the signification of the entire text.

Journeys are usually directed, they proceed somewhere, and this is important for the metaphorical meaning. Mondrian’s journey, too, proceeds from the past figurative images to the present modernity of the studio and accumulates the emotion of beauty in its *Scenes* as enduring experiences. The recollection conveys something of the past in the present, and the direction the journey takes refers to the evolution of the mental stage. As such, this suggests Bergsonian duration, which contains the meaning of direction. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which expands as it advances. Duration

963 Apollinaire 1950 (1913), 10.

964 Kern 2003, 45-46.

965 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 123. Italics original.

966 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141–142.

967 Mondrian 1986 (1919–1920), 123. Italics original.

is irreversible.⁹⁶⁸ As Bergson maintains, memory does not consist in a regression from the present to the past but in progression from the past to the present.⁹⁶⁹

As the mind's journey, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is necessarily about the intuitive aspects of the mind. The mind proceeds but at the same time it keeps the emotion of beauty alive since, as an idea, it does not belong solely to old art. In this insight Mondrian is in line with Bergson: "Then our past, as a whole, is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of a tendency, although a small part of it is only known in the form of an idea."⁹⁷⁰ Therefore, as in Bergson's duration, so also Mondrian's old images produce the meaning that perception remains attached to the past by its deepest roots. Mondrian's text includes the hypothesis of an original impetus, an internal push that has carried the life of art in new forms. Bergsonian intuition works in this way.⁹⁷¹

I argue that Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* expresses the theoretical considerations of Neo-Plasticism as a creative process. However, if this process were only based on the enduring aspects of art it would not be able to produce anything new. Bergson's concept introduces the idea of evolution as being especially 'creative'. It is a metaphor for creative thinking. Throughout his 1907 book, *Creative Evolution (L'Évolution créatrice)*, Bergson's crucial point is that life must be equated with creation, as creativity alone can adequately account for both the continuity of life and the discontinuity of the products of evolution. Thus, Bergson's creative evolution of life includes two contradictory aspects.

In the *Windmill Scene* my study noted the obvious contradictory meanings: the intuitive undifferentiated perception and a sharp, rational act of human intellect. The close-looking of the strollers and the idea of the 'perpendicular' are found in one and the same *Scene*. This setting produces a crucial meaning in the entire text. The close-looking, the feeling as if one is within the image, verifies that the horizontal and vertical features of the windmill blades do not need to correspond, like a simple visual perception, to an unvarying external object. As my interpretation has brought out, close-looking refers to an experience with which the reflective mind does not interfere, yet the emotion flows. This quality of an experience has in fact the same features that are also found in Bergson's notion of duration.⁹⁷² However, in spite of the message about a flowing emotion of beauty, something else also takes place in the *Windmill Scene*, namely a certain manipulative act by

968 Bergson 2016 (1907), 4–6. For Bergson, our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were there would never be anything but the present – no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration.

969 Bergson 2007 (1896), 96–97, 243.

970 Bergson 2016 (1907), 5.

971 Bergson 2016 (1907), 102.

972 Bergson 2016 (1907), 2.

Z. It is here, I suggest, that the purposeful guidance of a thought is most precisely introduced into the journey. Thus, when the *Windmill Scene* defines the horizontal-vertical relation by the mathematical concept of ‘perpendicular’, the mental field as intelligence takes control. For Bergson, intellect is the faculty in the human mind that always cuts the flow of duration. Intellect can only conceive of time as linear mathematical time.⁹⁷³

This journey of the mind depends on recollection, as I have already shown in my analysis in section 3.1. Like Peirce’s evolution, so too Bergson’s evolution of life depends on recollection. Recollection as the duration of the mind is an inseparable element of perception and thought.⁹⁷⁴ However, as a mathematical concept the ‘perpendicular’ belongs to the field of abstract human thought and therefore to human culture. Even when considering Schoenmaekers’s ideas derived from Hegel, it is noticeable that these ideas are originally related to an old co-operative understanding of mankind, to a Euclidean cultural text, but adapted to non-Euclidean notions of space. According to Bergson, evolution is creative when men intelligently co-operate:⁹⁷⁵ “If consciousness has split up into the intuition and intelligence, it is because of the need it had to apply itself to matter at the same time as it had to follow the stream of life.”⁹⁷⁶ We find the Dutch reference for these conclusions in Schoenmaekers’s esoteric ‘Hegelian’ philosophy, according to which we must fully have an experience ‘on’ matter, until we finally experience consciousness as the expression of creation ‘of’ and ‘in’ matter.⁹⁷⁷ Therefore it is the ‘perpendicular’ as a mathematical concept and as a ‘cultural artefact’ that produces the meaning of intelligent co-operation, the moment of ‘mutation’ into Mondrian’s *Windmill Scene*. This moment ultimately makes Mondrian’s expression in the narrative signify meanings related to creativity and to Neo-Plasticism as creation.

Mondrian’s text is a journey that expresses many meanings and many layers, representing the metaphor of the mind’s creative work. It is a mind’s journey where meanings that were at first in the shadows of the mind come to light as usable forms. More concretely, it takes the form of a journey from the Dutch countryside to Paris, and in this way it also becomes Mondrian’s own personal journey. His vision is about understanding life as a flow of inner time into which he wishes to situate his own point and development. When thinking in this way, the meaning of a creative process also becomes relevant. Mondrian creates his own self as an artist of non-figurative art – for a conscious being to exist, change must take place, and to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.

973 Bergson 2016 (1907), 154.

974 Bergson 2016 (1907), 23.

975 Bergson 1944 (1907), xvii. See the foreword by Irwin Edman.

976 Bergson 2016 (1907), 178.

977 Schoenmaekers 1915, 59–60.

Mondrian's text uses the idea of evolution as a mode of expression. In this way Mondrian shows that he does not just cling to tradition but genuinely renews art. The creative process itself is required to point to Neo-Plasticism as an artistic creation of modern times. In this thinking the text participates in the spirit of the times and shows its *tijdsbewustzijn*. As discussed in chapter 2, in that era the idea of evolution clearly produced principles by which all kinds of processes could be explained.⁹⁷⁸ The surrounding culture, especially in Italian pragmatic circles, seemed to hold within it the notion that understanding a scientific process was more important than certainty about a final result.⁹⁷⁹ Evolution offered a model by which it was possible to make creative processes as explicable and reasonable as possible.

Journeys usually have destinations. I suggest that Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* wishes to show the growth of Neo-Plasticism. As I have already discussed in my interpretation of the *Church Facade Scene*, Mondrian's text expresses Neo-Plasticism as a process in the midst of its formation and, above all, shows the principles which guide this formation. Mondrian's text puts itself in a position where its purpose is not to show this or that particular end of the evolution of Neo-Plastic ideas, but instead presents the potentiality of Neo-Plasticism itself. This means that there is always an element of continuity and potentiality for further development.

I started my study by citing Sixten Ringbom's notion of the impression of freshness aroused by Mondrian's abstract painting. He argues that it constantly seems to be pointing to the world of tomorrow. This is a special destiny for an aesthetic style: to be constantly modern in our contemporary world. Styles usually fluctuate. We recognize time passing when a style has become out-of-date. Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, however, points to the world of tomorrow since it shows that its project is unfinished. This 'being-in-the-midst-of-the-process' would seem to be in keeping with the ever-fresh, enduring impression of Mondrian's art that Ringbom acknowledges.

978 See, for example, Herman Bavinck's critical essay, "Evolutie" (1907). Bavinck notes that the contemporary understanding, which is connected to the term 'evolution', is unstable and varying and therefore proposes even contradictory insights. See Bavinck 1907, 21.

979 Innis 2002, 113.

6 CONCLUDING NOTIONS: A LITERARY PIECE BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality is a literary text which explores transition in the field of art over time. It is about the ripening of the idea of Neo-Plasticism and the self-reflective role of art. It has been said that Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* does not easily disclose its meanings. The philosophical tone and very general and abstract conceptions in which it speaks do not transparently refer to known unambiguous meanings. Instead Mondrian's conceptions tend to call for the reader's specific attention to the expressive meanings of the text. In a semiotic reading *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* works as a 'voice' of its own era, allowing the reader to introduce not only one but several meaning effects that are found in the intellectual milieu in which it was written. What *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* opens up to readers is the idea of process and of progressive thoughts. The text shows that the new must be infused with the old in order to make the transition comprehensible. *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is also about the idea of perception and consciousness, depicting thought as working from sensuous experience to a mental image. My conclusion is formed around these considerations.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality reveals a strong emphasis on the philosophical issues of visual perception. This is not to say that the text would have the status of a philosophical text; it is after all a text about art. However, the research history shows that Mondrian's art and writings constantly inspire researchers to see it in the light of philosophy.⁹⁸⁰ My study reads Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* in the light of Charles Peirce's philosophy and semiotics. From this perspective Mondrian's text introduces the reader to the idea that thinking is not just an aggregation of mental operations somewhere above and beyond the sensuous world, but that thinking is thoroughly visual. My research questions thus centred on considerations of vision. As a number of commentators have noted, the epoch in which *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* appeared was one in which epistemological concerns reached a crisis.⁹⁸¹

My study aimed to find answers to a number of questions. Firstly, how does *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* reflect the awareness of the perceiving subject? Secondly, in what ways is the collapse of Euclidean notions of space

980 Cheetham 1991; Bois 1994; Wieczorek 1997; Bax 2006; Bor 1915.

981 Freud 2001 (1914–1916), Benjamin 2006 (1968), Lefebvre 2003 (1970), Kern 2003 (1983), Jay 1993, Crary 1999, Innis 2002, Ryckman 2005, Whitworth 2001.

represented in the text? Thirdly, how is the change from conventional linear time to subjective time represented? Finally, how does *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* convey its message as an art-theoretical text? One conclusion reached was that even though Mondrian's text is an article series in *De Stijl* and thus shares the aims and claims of the *De Stijl* movement, nevertheless the answers to the above questions often had personal and independent formulations.

The approach in this study was not historical-critical. Rather, the purpose was to understand the text in terms of mediated activity within the *De Stijl* movement and the surrounding culture, culture here meaning a collective intellectual environment which preserves, mediates and creates memory and knowledge. The answer to my initial question in the Introduction, 'What made this article series possible?' would be the culture as the mediator of meanings. Mondrian brings his thinking into the communicative sphere of modern culture by means of dynamic cultural signs. Mondrian wrote that each artist "will use equally all that life, science, and beauty offer",⁹⁸² and in his article series Mondrian shows himself to be an active participant in his epoch by doing precisely that. My study especially relies on Roman Jakobson's poetic function of literature which points to the kind of relation that a fictive text has to its context and to the surrounding world.⁹⁸³

As Jan Bor reminds us, research into Mondrian's art and art theory has suffered from one-sided approaches,⁹⁸⁴ and previous researchers have investigated the philosophical dimensions of Mondrian's art in terms of Platonic, esoteric, Oriental and Hegelian philosophy. I would argue that by using a semiotic approach and semiotic methods a more nuanced picture of Mondrian's art can be produced. My reading completes Herbert Henkels's insight of the '*Trialogue*' being a text which should be read in many different ways to apprehend its message.⁹⁸⁵ The semiotic viewpoint more readily reveals the avant-gardist features in the *De Stijl* movement, transcending the division between the arts and between art and other aesthetic and cultural activities, such as popular culture and science. What takes place in Mondrian's art-theoretical considerations is that other external cognitive processes, such as cultural signs, are to be taken as integral parts of the cognitive process in Mondrian's text. This is the view in which individuals' cognitions are situated *within* the cultural knowledge and memory rather than just interacting with them. This viewpoint differs from the one that is based merely on artists' 'sharing ideas' or on 'mutual stimulation'.

This view elucidates the idea of creativity in a new way. In my Introduction I referred to the frequently asked question about Mondrian's creative process. Is

982 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141–142.

983 Jakobson 1981, 27.

984 Bor 2015, 78.

985 Henkels 1986, 16.

painting primary to writing or is it the other way around? Instead of understanding creativity solely as the inner, stable structures of the mind, where intelligence is a 'possession' of an individual, my study has tried to show that Mondrian's creative activity takes place not only in the processes of an individual mind but also by integrating and using cultural signs, such as the idea of evolution or the cultural sign of the 'perpendicular'. They are vehicles of thought. By these kinds of 'cultural artefacts' Mondrian is able to conduct his own activity as a creator of Neo-Plastic art theory. By integrating and manipulating them as signs, he produces the theory of Neo-Plasticism within and for the modern culture of the 1920s.

This study situates the '*Triologue*' within a methodological field which rethinks creative activity in the light of 'the new'. For example, how do we understand creativity in an artist, or perhaps in an entire artist group and its work as a collective effort? Creativity is traditionally seen as a somewhat mystifying part of the human mind, and as difficult to reach by conceptual means. Moreover, we have traditionally thought of knowledge and cognition as being located within the individual mind. In Dutch modernist discourse, the artist was represented especially in terms of creativity and masculinity. However, the meaning effects in Mondrian's text and in his intellectual milieu make me think that cognition and creativity could be considered more like a communal feature, being distributed in different situations and in different activities, even in different intellectual fields. I would argue that the semiotic approach offers many usable concepts to deal with creativity and 'communal cognition'. Although Mondrian's text creates an impression of an inner monologue and presents itself as a thinking process, it still creates this by leaning on cultural artefacts as signs. Therefore, it rather points to the idea where knowledge and thinking, that is, cognition, can be understood as distributed and not merely as individual.

The approach and method used in my study primarily focuses on Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, although my reading also follows several paths from the text to the philosophical milieu that surrounded Mondrian's work. In fact, the basic tenet of studying the text as a culturally mediated activity could be expanded to the entire work of the *De Stijl* movement. I would suggest that this study encourages future research of this kind on the *De Stijl* movement. The movement was a collective enterprise and it is within this movement that mediated activity as a kind of communal cognition would be most interesting and useful to research. Until now an oversimplified picture has been constructed in many modernist accounts by circulating and illustrating a small number of often-reproduced paintings, artefacts and designs.⁹⁸⁶ The group was not homogenous, let alone unanimous. The disagreements and divisions between the artists are well

986 Overy 1991, 15.

known. I would suggest that to study this kind of collective activity in terms of mediated meanings would allow us to see whether the *De Stijl* movement should be thought of as something more than the sum of its individual actions. Hence, the object of the research should not be based on an individual artist's thoughts about the movement's theory, nor even on the mutual understanding of its members. The approach that I am suggesting here would be based on mediated interaction in which the theory of Neo-Plasticism developed more or less outside the immediate monologues and disagreements of individual minds. On the other hand, individual and distributed cognitions should still be distinguished from each other but taken as being interdependent in order not to overlook certain individuals. Thus, I suggest that the target of this kind of analysis should be the joint socially mediated activity of the group seen within their cultural context.

6.1 The Idea of the Subject as Variable

One of the fundamental motifs of Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is concerned with the stages of human consciousness. Notions of consciousness are distilled in many layers of Mondrian's text. Mondrian's text is a representation of the thought process in which not only Neo-Plasticism, but also the perceiving subject, have self-reflective roles.

The journey in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is a metaphorical road that the perceiving mind undergoes to adapt to modern society. In itself a journey is a well known Romantic motif which sees life and time as a process. The text represents how Neo-Plasticism unfolds via a kind of 'journey' made by the subject's inner dialogue within the consciousness, as my fourth and fifth chapters have shown. It also provides a representation of the "uninterrupted unrolling"⁹⁸⁷ of the thought process. In this sense, the subject is formed as the self-expression in the textual performance by the author, Mondrian. The pictorial ideas of Neo-Plasticism develop through this process.

In Mondrian's text, the observing subject itself becomes a target of observation. In this sense, subjectivity is played out as the diagrammatic positioning of the characters vis-à-vis one another. Through this arrangement Mondrian is not only able to be in a dialogue with the Dutch art criticism, which he found to be not quite up-to-date. By arranging and dealing with modes of perception in the way that a mathematician arranges his objects of observation within a coordination system, Mondrian also makes his text 'intelligible'. The characters *X*, *Y* and *Z*, exemplify the elements of consciousness but also refer to the principle of relativity inherent

⁹⁸⁷ Cohn 1978, 185.

in the coordination principle. This study argues that Mondrian's text mirrors the awareness of the era in which the world is seen in terms of relational rather than exclusive truths.

Thus, the perceiving subject is formed in constant mediation and interpretation of the intellectual milieu.⁹⁸⁸ Mondrian's vision is based on the 'real' and on the most recent scientific findings about the nature of the mind. Relativity as a principle of the mind's functioning reached deep into the collective psyche. Thomas Ryckman, for example, in discussing the epistemological crises of the era, starts his book with an illustrative citation: "It is only a world embodying the principle of relativity, in the form which the doctrine entails, that can be said to exhibit the character of mind, with its exclusion of disconnected fragments and relations."⁹⁸⁹ The mathematically sensitized minds of the *De Stijl* artists clearly recognized these inclinations as belonging to the cultural signs of the era, which saw the collapse of the Euclidean idea of space. This leads to my basic interest in what the gain for an art theory might be when it borrows ideas from science. By suggesting the relativity of perception, Mondrian's text integrates cultural knowledge into his own text which, for its part, suggests that cognition is not solely a possession within an individual but that it is distributed. This integration brings the art-theory into the communicative sphere of modern culture.

Mondrian's 'new vision' recognizes the new ideas in a perceptual subject-object relation, but *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* produces these meanings in a veiled and subtle way. It does not declare its considerations about subjectivity as openly as, for example, I.K. Bonset [van Doesburg] in his poems, where the subject's experience is presented as constantly and rapidly changing and where this idea is immediately seen in his poems. Thus, Mondrian's text produces subjectivity in the way that the text focalizes the reader's imaginative vision in each *Scene*. Wiczorek notices Mondrian's "attempt to bridge through his art the gap between the viewer and the artwork".⁹⁹⁰ I find this bridging also in the focalizations where the narrative connects the reader/viewer with the 'life' of the composition, as in the *Windmill Scene* and in the *Studio Scene*. My interpretations of the studio photographs supported the idea of subjectivity, where the physiological operations of the body enter into the experience. Thus, my Peircean approach brought a phenomenological viewpoint to the dialectic of 'interiorized outwardness'.

I suggest that in the notion of 'interiorized outwardness' Mondrian articulates an experience which might anticipate the discourse of the 'poetics of presence'.⁹⁹¹ This discourse, which was common in modernist formal-analytical criticism, defined the

988 See Ljungberg's notion about subjectivity. Ljungberg 2009, 104–105.

989 Ryckman 2005, 3.

990 Wiczorek 2012, 43.

991 Kuusamo 2011 (2005), 87.

appropriate way to adapt to modernist works of art. As Altti Kuusamo argues, the culture of form, formalism, was above all a culture which showed a firm awareness of form as a certain momentary presence.⁹⁹² My purpose was not to proceed any further into this long discourse of formal-analytical criticism, which avoids the contextual elements in the experience of a work of art. Instead, my study probed Mondrian's own idea of new vision which, however, seems to provide some routes for formal-analytical thinking. 'Interiorized outwardness' is a kind of aesthetic experience which aims at the immediateness of that experience. The text presents it as an inevitable state of perception which is useful in an artist's work. However, contrary to formal-analytical insight, this study shows that ultimately Mondrian's 'inward vision' is a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision rather than a mechanical process that would be uncontaminated by cultural meanings.

By its almost plastic approach *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* lets the reader see Mondrian's text as a claim which suggests the dynamic character of the human consciousness. According to this, the perceiving subject is a compound of shifting relations. When producing this meaning Mondrian's text can be said to be self-representative. *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* becomes a representation of its own theme of consciousness when read as a diagram of oppositions. The experience of beauty is not represented as being dualistic in character but rather as a sort of reciprocal continuum. The text particularly exemplifies Mondrian's effort to produce a literary piece that would be apprehended as an entity and in terms of form. When Mondrian was considering 'the art of the word' he maintained that "the essential is that *the principle of opposites rules the work as a whole* as much in its composition as in the equilibrated relationship of its plastic means".⁹⁹³ The aesthetic effect that *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* conveys is of 'one unity'.⁹⁹⁴

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality shows the modern insight of perception which differs from the traditional Kantian dualistic insight and its stable subject, which distinguishes only the two mental faculties of sensibility and understanding.⁹⁹⁵ If we wish to look at this principle of shifting relations before the 1920s, we should look at the work of William James, who may even have offered this new model of thinking, as a complementary principle, to scientists, as Michael H. Whitworth

992 Ibid.

993 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 141. Italics original.

994 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 143.

995 According to Kant, "Our entire faculty of cognition has two realms, that of natural concepts and that of the concept of freedom [...]. The function of prescribing laws by means of concepts of nature is discharged by understanding and is theoretical. That of prescribing laws by means of the concept of freedom is discharged by reason and is merely practical [...]. Understanding and reason therefore, have two distinct jurisdictions over one and the same territory of experience. But neither can interfere with the other." See Kant 1953 (1790), 12–13.

suggests.⁹⁹⁶ According to James, one and the same experience can participate in so many ways to all the other elements involved in that experience that it can even be considered to belong to multiple oppositional contexts, although the overall experience is one of wholeness.⁹⁹⁷ Thus, in some of these contexts the experience would be processed by the interpretative mind and consciousness, and in another context it would be sensuous. In this thinking the question whether the human mind and the world are a unity or whether they are separate is no longer an either/or question.

Time as Subjective Inner Flow

Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* deals with the idea of time in an unusual way. As I have noticed already in the Introduction, Mondrian minimizes the time-span of his text. The journey seems to take only one evening. However, metaphorically the whole life of an artist and his history is compressed into this single evening with the interior monologue expanding the moments of each *Scene*. Reading Mondrian's text, a strong impression of the simultaneity of past and present is suggested. Old figurative motifs form the skeleton for the theoretical insights of abstract art. As an interior monologue the text is about a temporally thickened present. This technique underlies Mondrian's affirmation of the extended present as the location of the subject's experience.

According to Stephen Kern, this kind of rendering of simultaneity can be recognized in the narrational technique of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but cinema offered new techniques to express it.⁹⁹⁸ I have already introduced the meaning of simultaneity into my discussion of Mondrian's *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey*. I subsequently widened that view of simultaneity to include Mondrian's 'Triologue'. I started my study by associating the flow of images in Mondrian's text with the cinematic method. The cinema is also able to extend the present. A film brings together distant images and arranges them into a unified whole when the film is cut in an appropriate way. Mondrian's text functions like a cinematic montage, where any moment can be pried open and expanded at will by the three discussing strollers, giving the reader an understanding of the motives, viewpoints and a variety of responses when dealing with the viewed figurative images.

996 Whitworth 2001, 147. On the complementarity principle, see also Merrell 1997, 125. Merrell refers here to Rom Harré, who gives the example of Bohr's complementarity principle, a theory of fictive nature that matured when all attempts to reconcile the wave and the particle nature of the electron had ended in failure. Under the complementarity view, consistency was in a roundabout way preserved, since of the two incompatible pictures both are true when applied separately.

997 James 1947 (1912), 12–13.

998 Kern 2003 (1983), 86.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality is an expression of self-reflection, for, following the Hegelian principle, only by means of self-consciousness does the self have a history.⁹⁹⁹ Mondrian looks to the past, but not to the historical past. Instead, the old motifs in the flowing images of his text suggest that he presents this look as a turning towards his own personal past. As Dorrit Cohn notes about memory monologues, the text undertakes less to produce a story than to preserve the imprint left by the images in the memory and the sensibility.¹⁰⁰⁰ The reader apprehends the ideas of Neo-Plasticism in this way not as exclusive time but as woven into a timeline which proceeds like a stroll. In this way Mondrian cancels out the impression of repetition and stagnation that the new art might otherwise evoke. Mondrian aims at depth and at providing a sort of sounding board to the emerging Neo-Plastic ideas. At the same time he questions the later formal-analytical tradition which saw non-figurative art as ahistorical.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality also includes meanings which recognize time in the sense of enduring, inner time. In this, Mondrian's text is in line with the philosophies and literature of the era, and his focus on the personal past is in tune with the change from homogenous public time to the notion of private time.¹⁰⁰¹ The focus on the immediate personal past over the historical past becomes a way of freeing oneself of that historical past. These meanings permit me to consider Mondrian's vision in relation to Henri Bergson's concept of duration. When dealing with the idea of beauty, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* conceives of an experience as enduring. Mondrian's text acknowledges the notions of rhythm and an intuition about perceptual constancy as a consolidating solution to maintain a vivid consciousness and prevent the psychic dissolution in the modern world. It is the intuition given by the pulsating rhythm of modern dance and jazz music that lifts the perceiver beyond linear time into a timeless sphere. The motif of a starry sky in the third *Scene* and the painting, *Starry Sky* also supports this. The incommensurable starry sky produce the effects of enduring time, an intuition about flowing time in which the past can be present in the current moment.

999 See Cheetham 1991, 53.

1000 Cohn 1978, 184.

1001 Kern 2003 (1983), 64, 68.

6.2 The ‘Perpendicular’: A Sign for Aligning Immensity

A strong research line exists in which Mondrian’s work is situated in relation to Hegel’s idealistic philosophy and its dynamic, expansive dialectical principles, mediated by Schoenmaekers to Mondrian. Starting from ‘point to line to plane’, as Hegel analysed, the plane was the culmination of a logical expansive development which led to what Hegel called ‘the spatial totality’ and which gives abstract formal, operative dimensions for Mondrian’s paintings.¹⁰⁰² In this study, the ‘perpendicular’ is a cultural text, a geometrical and literary concept. As in culture so in Mondrian’s *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, this Euclidean-related sign represents the co-operative intelligence of humankind. This sign acquired highly acute culturally specific meanings in this era of non-Euclidean proceedings. It is by this sign, therefore, that Mondrian brings the emotion of beauty and abstract art to the communicative sphere of that culture. Mondrian’s text as a symbolic inner monologue and a creative thinking process, does not consist of ‘happenings in the head’ but of traffic in significant cultural signs, such as the adoption of the idea of the ‘perpendicular’, a non-Euclidean adaption of the Euclidean ‘point to line to plane’.

The ‘perpendicular’ is also a new rhetorical form. A new image of the world requires a new language. My study argues that *De Stijl* artists used the most appropriate language that was available at a time when physical science was increasingly dealing with phenomena that were inaccessible to human perception. The new reality presented itself as chaotic and demanded a ‘conceptual turn’.¹⁰⁰³ The talk of the ‘perpendicular’, characters like X, Y and Z, the Euclidean pictorial elements of point, line and plane, and the theme of the starry sky all belong to that conceptual world. They conform to “the new wisdom in life in an exact manner”, as the *De Stijl* manifesto required.¹⁰⁰⁴ The new world image showed itself first through mathematical measurements and these measurements needed to be made by using the fixed stars.

However, where abstract painting is concerned, the formal-analytical interpretation tradition excludes references to contexts. As my Introduction points out, starting with the theoretical considerations of Clive Bell, the formal-analytical tradition leans on a philosophical kind of system. In it the artistic form is ahistorical and general, rhetoric is overall hostile to the concept of form and the ‘poetic presence’ of a modernist work of art is ultimately in itself a figure of speech. Therefore, as a rhetoric of its own, it needs to be contextualized.¹⁰⁰⁵ In Wieczorek’s

1002 Cheetham 1991, Bois 1994, Wieczorek 1997, 2012.

1003 Whitworth 2001, 84.

1004 *De Stijl* 1918, II, 1, p.4.

1005 Kuusamo 2011 (2005), 86.

interpretation, for example, the 'perpendicular' as an operative principle leads to a conceptual idea of space in Mondrian's paintings, but it is not a symbol. Therefore, the formal-analytical tradition has not considered Mondrian's 'perpendicular' to be a sign when his non-figurative paintings are discussed. In *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, however, Mondrian clearly deals with the 'perpendicular' motif as a sign and as a dynamic figure in his text. I have argued that in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* the 'perpendicular', when viewed as a Peircean diagram, takes us on a journey from the figurative to the non-figurative and thus is a tool for logical continuum. Mondrian ties the 'perpendicular' intimately to its phenomenological foundations in the same way as Peirce's diagrams are tied to their phenomenological prerequisites as my analysis of the studio photographs has shown.

The approach of this study could be developed further by including Mondrian's abstract paintings. This approach would study the 'perpendicular' motif in Mondrian's visual works of art as a sign. When a motif repeatedly appears in a painting, it eventually becomes a sign. While this is clear in figurative art, it is natural to ask if the same thing also applies to non-figurative art. It, too, has pictorial motifs. The art of the *De Stijl* group repeats the motifs of the grid and the 'perpendicular'. The formal-analytical tradition, however, primarily pays attention to the 'originality' of an art work. Therefore, it does not focus on the paradigmatic series of motifs and the variety of meaning systems that non-figurative paintings might contain. Whether the motif of the 'perpendicular' in a non-figurative painting is just an expressive pictorial element or whether it is a sign, depends on two differing discursive dimensions.¹⁰⁰⁶ On the one hand, it would be necessary to study the relations of the 'perpendicular' to a paradigmatic series of forms, stemming from the surrounding culture, and this is what my study has primarily focused on. On the other hand, the relation of the motif to systems of art criticism also needs to be defined. In other words, the value that the 'perpendicular' has in the formal-analytical interpretation tradition needs to be considered. This would imply research on the art criticism on Mondrian's abstract paintings and this approach has only been preliminarily touched upon in my study. By applying both of these views it is possible to draft the potential meanings of a sign within the visual elements of non-figurative painting.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Kuusamo 1996, 146.

6.3 *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* as ‘the New Art of the Word’

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality has been acknowledged as an art-theoretical text, not as literature. Likewise its content has not been seen as autobiographical.¹⁰⁰⁷ However, I would like to question this view since my reading finds the text conveys aesthetic effects in its form and in the way oppositions are set up. Moreover, Mondrian’s use of metaphors creates aesthetic effects and reflects autobiographical elements, not to mention the use of acts as we find in drama. The Platonic tenets of Mondrian’s ‘philosophy’, which have already been recognized in many studies, can also be found in the ‘*Triologue*’. My study does not produce anything new in this sense, but what it does focus on is the ways and nuances of the Platonic tenets in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. In this work Mondrian weaves the idea of visual perception into his art theory. That the text is both a piece of the ‘new art of the word’ and a theoretical text situates *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* as a unique enterprise among Mondrian’s other writings, which are mostly factual essays.¹⁰⁰⁸ It is possible to see in Mondrian’s text some of the cultural meanings which also inspired other modernist writers and philosophers, such as modified time, transitional stages, an interest in the personal past, modern urban experience, and the idea of non-Euclidean space. However, this is not to say that *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* would be part of the Dutch literature canon, but simply that Mondrian clearly had ambitions to contribute to the philosophical discussion of his day as both a writer and a painter.

Mondrian’s *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is a personal and unique enterprise within the *De Stijl* movement. The *De Stijl* manifesto of 1918 did not say a single word about the beauty of art, nor did its literature manifesto in 1920. Mondrian, however, recognizes the thought that art is in one way or another profoundly connected with emotion, and thus connects himself with Romantic ideas of beauty. In this sense, my study sees Mondrian in the same way as Carel Blotkamp in his research, namely as an “old-fashioned artist who has roots in nineteenth-century ideas”.¹⁰⁰⁹ Or, to put it metaphorically, the idea of beauty in Mondrian’s text is like starlight emanating from the past, simultaneously bringing that light into the current moment of the viewer. It is with this kind of metaphorical exploration of the simultaneity of the past and the present that Mondrian’s discourse on beauty can be read. Here, Mondrian differs, for example, from the Futurists, who simply tried to delete the past. Like Papini’s three stories,

1007 See the table of “Classification of Mondrian Writings”. Web-pages of *2017 Piet Mondrian Writings*.

1008 There are two exceptions: *The Two Paris Sketches* (1920) and *The Dialogue on the New Plastic* (1919) show ambitions to be works of literature.

1009 Blotkamp 1994, 12.

Mondrian does not delete the past but delicately focuses on moments of transition. Papini's metaphorical figures either disappear down foggy streets, violently drown or suffer from sickness but, before that, they all came into contact with the figure of the present, the narrator. The *'Triologue'* does not stay in the past, but as in the Platonic philosophical tradition it, too, seeks not that which is beautiful, but what is *beauty*. In this night journey, beauty returns from the Romantic idea of beauty to the Platonic notion of *kalon* as beauty and right reason.¹⁰¹⁰ The contemporary reference would be found within the Poincaréan frame of beauty.

Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* provides a special ontology for beauty. The 19th-century idea of beauty undergoes a transition from beauty to the idea of form, which, as Altti Kuusamo argues, is a general tendency at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰¹¹ In this, Mondrian's text participates in the paradigm of significant form, an idea that had its origins in Walter Pater's essays and in the German pre-formalistic ideas of Konrad Fiedler, Theodor Lipps and Robert Vischer, to mention a few.

Natural Reality and Abstract Reality is a literary work that introduces the notion of thoughts in progress. Bergson's notion of the creative evolution of life also finds parallels in *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, where it is associated with the creative process of an artist. Thus, Mondrian's text responds to the challenge of transience. It strives to shape the mood of the era through idealized retrospective fictions, through verbalized images which lead the reader's thoughts to the past as if these retrospective fictions were memory images. They create the feeling of enduring experience. Thus, the new art is created only in relation to the old. Mondrian does not even question the beauty of art. In this respect, his text is an effort to participate in the considerations of an entire philosophical climate. This climate is articulated especially in Bergson's philosophy in which our present fashion of thinking is modelled by the simple law, "*the present contains nothing more than the past, and what is found in the effect was already in the cause*".¹⁰¹² These kinds of 'metatexts' of the era were responses to tragic and quickly-changing conditions.

Mondrian's text is a play in which art has a self-reflective role, and evolution is allied to self-reflection as a supporting frame. I suggest that evolution and the 'perpendicular' are cultural signs, tools without which the new art would not be distinguished from the old. Mondrian represents the new art as an explicable and hence 'reasonable' process. A work of art is no longer an outcome of an artist's blind 'inspiration'. It is instead the articulation of the new art that would result

¹⁰¹⁰ *Kalon* is usually translated as 'beauty' and is often understood in terms of mathematical properties, especially the concept of proportion. See Plato's dialogue *Philebus*, 51 c–d.

¹⁰¹¹ Kuusamo 2011 (2005), 73.

¹⁰¹² Bergson 2016 (1907), 14. Italics original.

from the general creative impulse visible elsewhere in the culture and in nature as a major principle of productive life. When in the *Windmill Scene* the age-old cultural co-operative intelligence as the sign of the ‘perpendicular’ is integrated with the enduring subjective experience of ‘interiorized outwardness’, where figurativeness disappears, yet the emotion of beauty flows, art can once again be seen to renew itself. Or to put this in Bergsonian terms, thought may in this way relive its own genesis.¹⁰¹³ Mondrian’s text, in fact, raises notions of productive creativity as a sort of corrective counter-reaction towards feelings of transience, and in this way reacts in accordance with the ‘collective’.¹⁰¹⁴

As an art-theoretical text, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* resembles the shape taken by modern theoretical formulations. The Neoplatonic features in the text confirm this. As in Neoplatonic formulations, Mondrian above all presents a principle on which his idea of the new art is supposed to be based. The meaning of a modern theoretical formulation also rises in another way. The parallel between the literary and the scientific preference for form worked by means of metaphoric comparisons, as Whitworth notes.¹⁰¹⁵ As my chapter 2 discussed, formal innovation was particularly prized by modernist writers, as well as contemporaneous artists. The diagrammatic shape of *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* projects into the text the meaning effects of complementary and indeterminacy, which were common metaphorical ideas in modernist histories, as Whitworth notes.¹⁰¹⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century the idea of relativity also brought new insights concerning the ways in which the plausibility of scientific theories would be conceived. Truth is claimed to reside only in the relations of phenomena.¹⁰¹⁷ In Mondrian’s text, the dynamic meaning of coordination mediates between the two sides of the text, feeling-in-beauty and thinking-in-beauty, which in effect complete each other. This would be in line with Wieczorek, who argues that in Mondrian’s pictorial idea, oppositions do not cancel each other out but are meant to be apprehended simultaneously as a unity.¹⁰¹⁸ The ultimate significance is the relativity of these two oppositions. As Mondrian says, it would “depend on the emphasis”.¹⁰¹⁹ This dynamic thus refers to the literary complementary character of *Natural Reality and*

1013 Bergson 2016 (1907), 191.

1014 Benjamin 2006 (1999), 32. Mondrian lived in the epoch that was midway between the old and new. As Benjamin notes, the images that were produced in this situation were hopeful images where the collective sought to overcome the “immaturity of the social product”, yet they are firm efforts to distance themselves from all that is outdated.

1015 Whitworth 2001, 230–234.

1016 Whitworth 2001, 147.

1017 Merrell 1997, 124–125. Merrell notes that during periods of crises scientific theories take on a certain character. When there is little resolution of issues, then the search for truth, the confirmation of one theory at the expense of others, is abandoned.

1018 Wieczorek 2012, 35.

1019 Mondrian 1986 (1920b), 143.

Abstract Reality, which seems to adopt meaning effects from the scientific spirit of the times. Mondrian was clearly an alert and intuitive observer of what was going on in his era since modern ideas on complementarity in quantum theory did not appear until the mid-1920s and, hence, after the publication of Mondrian's text.

As a theoretical formulation, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* does not solely rely on the significance of continuity and relativity. It is also persuasive in a third way in that it tested its own message about Neo-Plasticism at the same time as it conveyed this message to its readers. This 'testing' is done in the last *Scene*. Mondrian's text represents the studio as a Neo-Plastic space, and this is central to the truth claim of the text. It provides the reader with the 'conceived consequences' of accepting the concept of Neo-Plasticism. Thus, the final *Scene* acts like Peirce's pragmatic 'maxim' within the message of the whole text. According to the 'pragmatic maxim', a statement is reformulated as the product of some conception, which when applied to that statement in terms of the practical consequences in the concrete world of experience, will either support or deny it.¹⁰²⁰

The *Studio Scene* is a test to weed out ideas which have no consequences and which might thus be condemned as unimportant. Without the *Studio Scene* Neo-Plasticism as a theoretical statement would only be an idea 'inside somebody's head'. To my mind this gives an additional philosophical meaning to *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*. Namely, it suggests that Neo-Plasticism does not solely exist in a Platonic world reachable only by thinking. By making the 'perpendicular', 'visible' and 'real' in the setting of Mondrian's famous studio, the perpendicular principle becomes both thoroughly sensory and intellectual. Therefore, in this matter my study does not entirely agree with Hans Jaffé. Jaffé argues Mondrian's notion of Neo-Plastic art was merely a utopian vision and that other *De Stijl* artists realized this vision. I on the other hand argue that for Mondrian the realization of the vision was as important as it was for other artists in the *De stijl* movement.¹⁰²¹

I would argue that by reading Mondrian's text through Peirce's philosophy, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* shows itself to be an argument where the *Studio Scene* comes to have a special meaning which otherwise could not be apprehended. Contrary to Hegel, Peirce's philosophy is not idealistic and instead represents scholastic realism. For Peirce, regularities, patterns and tendencies, may possess a real existence, independent of any observer.¹⁰²² Thus, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* would seem to argue, not only with its title, but throughout the narrative, that abstractions possess a real existence, or as *Z* says: "What was real just a while ago is still real, [...]. Has the connection between you and the things

1020 Merrell 1997, 343, 345. EP1, xxxiv.

1021 Jaffé 1956, 146.

1022 In Peirce's letter to the Italian pragmatist circles lies the core of Peirce's insistence on 'real possibilities'. See Sjternefelt 2007, 39–40.

we saw ceased to exist just because you do not see them anymore, or because you see other things?”¹⁰²³

The consciousness of the era was central to the *De Stijl* movement. As a very philosophically inclined writer, Mondrian conveys a great many insights about perception and about the subject-object relation which were in turmoil at this time. Mondrian's *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* is a piece of literature which bears some tones of pragmatist philosophy stemming from the American continent though mediated through Italian pragmatist circles and resembling especially Bergson's philosophy. On the other hand, it shows its roots in 19th-century ideas. In this way it is a literary text that strives to situate itself in the midst of two world focuses, the old Europe and the new American continent. Mondrian's *tijdsbewustzijn* anticipated the confrontation between the old and the new earlier than those European writers who recognized and wrote about it in 1928. As Max Ryhner, citing Ortega y Gasset, notes: "Europe still has a past; she carries, or drags it along with her [...]. This duality, the need to remain connected with yesterday and still be followed by the utopia of tomorrow, has made of Europe a revolutionary country [...]."¹⁰²⁴ Van Doesburg was aware of this, too: "The influence of pragmatism in Europe, to be sure, has led the artist into the maze of 'utility' (Russia, Germany, Holland [...])."¹⁰²⁵ The metaphor of the *Sick Gentleman* was not only used by Papini, for among others the French-German poet Yvan Goll also refers to: "The new bacillus, *L'Eurocoque*, causes the sickness and the slow death of Europe."¹⁰²⁶ It is within this consciousness of the era that Mondrian's text is to be comprehended. When recalling the strollers' hazy vision of a windmill in the *Windmill Scene* one wonders whether it is purely a coincidence that Goll in 1928 writes: "For you Americans, Europe is no longer anything but a beautiful Nordic mill whose immobile arms stretch out toward a symbolic twilight."¹⁰²⁷ It is in this kind of symbolic twilight that Mondrian's text makes its way towards the world of tomorrow, a world which seems to remain constantly open to Neo-Plasticism. Mondrian's words "the evening is over but the *beauty remains*" reconcile the present with the world of yesterday, beauty being the loved emotion that stays in the mind, linking the two.

1023 Mondrian 1986 (1919-1920), 106–107.

1024 Ryhner, Max 1928, 257.

1025 Van Doesburg 1928, 259.

1026 Goll, Yvan 1928, 255.

1027 Ibid.

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APPENDIX:

Slaan wij een blik op den afgelopen jaargang, dan moet het ons met bewondering vervullen dat uitvoerende kunstenaars de denkbeelden waartoe zij al arbeidende kwamen, zoo uitnemend helder wisten te formuleeren, waarmede zij veel tot verklaring van het nieuwe kunstbewustzijn hebben bijgedragen. Van dit laatste immers getuigt genoegzaam de toenemende belangstelling, — ook in het buitenland, — voor den inhoud van dit maandschrift, welke inhoud niet naliet, zoowel bij de jongere als bij de oude generatie, zijn invloed te doen gevoelen. Zoo voorziet deze inhoud, voor den tot dieper aesthetisch bewustzijn gerijpten mensch, in een behoefte.

Dit mag dus een aansporing zijn om, ondanks de moeilijkheden, die door de tijdsomstandigheden de uitgave van periodieken belangrijk verzwaren, met dezelfde zekerheid ons aesthetisch beschavingswerk voort te zetten.

October 1918.

REDACTIE.

MANIFEST I 1) VAN „DE STIJL”, 1918.

1. Er is een oud en een nieuw tijdsbewustzijn.
Het oude richt zich op het individueele.
Het nieuwe richt zich op het universeele.
De strijd van het individueele tegen het universeele openbaart zich, zoowel in den wereldkamp als in de kunst van onzen tijd.
2. De oorlog destructieveert de oude wereld met haar inhoud: de individueele overheersching op elk gebied.
3. De nieuwe kunst heeft naar voren gebracht hetgeen het nieuwe tijdsbewustzijn inhoudt: evenwichtige verhouding van het universeele en het individueele.
4. Het nieuwe tijdsbewustzijn staat gereed zich in alles, ook in het uiterlijke leven te realiseeren.
5. Traditie, dogma's en de overheersching van het individueele (het natuurlijke) staan deze realiseering in den weg.
6. Daarom roepen de grondleggers der nieuwe beelding allen, die in de hervorming der kunst en kultuur gelooven op, deze hinderpalen der ontwikkeling teniet te doen, zóó als zij in de nieuwe beeldende kunst — door natuurlijke vorm op te heffen — hebben te niet gedaan, hetgeen de zuivere uitdrukking der kunst, de uiterste consequentie van alle kunstbegrip belemmert.
7. De kunstenaars van heden hebben, gedreven door éézelfde bewustzijn over de geheele wereld, op geestelijk terrein deelgenomen aan den wereldkamp tegen de overheersching van het individualisme, de willekeur. Zij sympathiseeren daarom met allen, die, hetzij geestelijk of materieel, strijden voor de vorming van een internationale eenheid in Leven, Kunst en Kultuur.
8. Het orgaan „De Stijl”, dat zij met dat doel hebben opgericht, tracht bij te dragen de nieuwe levensopvatting in het licht te stellen. Medewerking van allen is mogelijk door:
9. I. Als blijk van instemming, toezending (ter Redactie) van uw naam (volledig), adres, beroep.

1) Dit manifest zal, zoodra het verkeer met het buitenland weer hersteld is, afzonderlijk, in een groote oplage vanuit de verschillende kunstcentra in het buitenland worden verspreid.

Red.

2

Figure 1a: The Manifesto of *De Stijl*, 1918, in *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, page 2
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä

II. Bijdragen in den uitgebreidsten zin (kritische, filosofische, architectonische, wetenschappelijke, literaire, muzikale enz. alsmede reproductieve) voor het maandblad „De Stijl”.

III. Overzetting in andere talen en verspreiding van de denkbeelden gepubliceerd in „De Stijl”.

Handteekeningen der medewerkers:
THEO VAN DOESBURG.
ROBT. VAN 'T HOFF.
VILMOS HUSZAR.

ANTONY KOK.
PIET MONDRIAAN.
G. VANTONGERLOO.
JAN WILS.

IIÈRE MANIFESTE DE LA REVUE D'ART „LE STYLE”, 1918.

1. Il y a deux connaissances des temps: une ancienne et une nouvelle.
L'ancienne se dirige vers l'individualisme.
Le nouvelle se dirige vers l'universel.
Le débat de l'individualisme contre l'universel se révèle autant dans la guerre du monde que dans l'art de notre époque.
2. La guerre détruit l'ancien monde avec son contenu: la domination individuelle à tous les points de vue.
3. L'art nouveau a mis au jour ce que contient la nouvelle connaissance des temps: proportions égales de l'universel et de l'individuel.
4. La nouvelle connaissance des temps est prête à se réaliser dans tout, même dans la vie extérieure.
5. Les traditions, les dogmes et les prérogatives de l'individualisme (le naturel) s'opposent à cette réalisation.
6. Le but de la revue d'art „Le Style” est de faire appel à tous ceux qui croient dans la réformation de l'art et de la culture pour annihiler tout ce qui empêche le développement, ainsi que ces collaborateurs ont fait dans le nouvel art plastique en supprimant la forme naturelle qui contrarie la propre expression de l'art, la conséquence la plus haute de chaque connaissance artistique.
7. Les artistes d'aujourd'hui ont pris part à la guerre du monde dans le domaine spirituel. poussés par la même connaissance contre les prérogatives de l'individualisme: le caprice. Ils sympathisent avec tous ceux, qui combattent spirituellement ou matériellement pour la formation d'une unité internationale dans la Vie, l'Art, la Culture.
8. L'organe „Le Style”, fondé dans ce but, fait tous ses efforts pour placer la nouvelle idée de la vie dans la lumière. L'assistance de tous est possible, par:
I. Comme preuve d'assentiment envoi de votre nom, adresse, profession à la rédaction.
II. Contributions (critiques, philosophiques, architecturales, scientifiques, littéraires, musicales etc., ainsi que reproductions augmentatives) pour le journal mensuel „Le Style”.
- III. Traduction dans toutes les langues et publication des idées données dans „Le Style”.

Souscriptions des collaborateurs:
THEO VAN DOESBURG, Peintre.
ROBT. VAN 'T HOFF, Architecte.
VILMOS HUSZAR, Peintre.

ANTONY KOK, Poète.
PIET MONDRIAAN, Peintre.
G. VANTONGERLOO, Sculpteur.
JAN WILS, Architecte.

3

Figure 1b: The Manifesto of *De Stijl*, 1918, in *De Stijl* II, 1, 1918, page 3
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä

ABONNEMENT
BINNENLAND 4.50
BUITENLAND 5.50
PER JAARGANG
BIJVOORUITBETA-
LING. VOOR AN-
NONCES WENDE
MEN ZICH TOT DE
ADMINISTRATIE.



MAANDBLAD GEWIJD AAN DE MODER-
NE BEELDENE VAKKEN EN KULTUUR
REDACTIE: THEO VAN DOESBURG.

ALLE STUKKEN DE
REDACTIE BETREF-
FEND: K. GALGE-
WATER 3, LEIDEN.
ALLE STUKKEN
VOOR DE ADMIN.
ADRESSEERE MEN
MORSCHWEG 20,
LEIDEN, HOLLAND.

2e JAARGANG.

JULI NEGENTIENHONDERDNEGENTIEN.

NUMMER 9.

NATUURLIJKE EN ABSTRACTE REALITEIT.

DOOR PIET MONDRIAAN.

TRIALOOG (gedurende een wandeling van buiten naar de stad).

Y. Leek. X. Naturalistisch schilder. Z. Abstract-realistisch schilder.

2e Tooneel. Grillige boomgroepen teekenen zich tegen de heldere maanlucht af.

Y. Hoe grillig!

X. Welk een majesteit!

Z. Inderdaad . . . grillig en grootsch beide! In deze grootsche contouren komt het grillige van het natuurlijke al zeer duidelijk uit.

Y. Ik zie er allerlei koppen en gedaanten in.

Z. Men ziet nu duidelijk het betrekkelijke van vormverschijning: alles komt ons nu anders voor dan bij daglicht.

Y. Wellicht omdat we de détails nu niet zien . . . maar wat zou eigenlijk ons thans alles zoo indrukwekkend doen voorkomen?

X. Vooreerst de aaneensluiting der détails, zooals U reeds opmerkte. Wij schilders kunnen daar een voorbeeld aan nemen. In schilderkunst is het juist de groote moeielijkheid om de détails ondergeschikt aan het geheel te houden.

Y. Maar ik zie geen details!

X. Dat lijkt maar zoo: overal is nog beweging, vorm, kleur, maar alles wordt gedomineerd door de groote contour.

Z. Ja, de samenvattende lijn der contour doet hier in dit landschap zeer veel. Maar bovendien: steeds maakt het licht, vooral als het sterk is zooals nu, optisch de verhoudingen anders. Daaruit volgt dan ook, dat wanneer we de verhoudingen fotografisch-natuurgetrouw maken, zonder te rekenen met de vorm- en kleurverandering, die door de verlichting veroorzaakt worden, we niet diè schoonheidsontroering zullen teweeg brengen welke we van de volle realiteit ervaren.

97

Figure 2. The first page of the second Scene in "Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit" in *De Stijl*
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä

ABONNEMENT
BINNENLAND 6.00
BUITENLAND 7.50
PER JAARGANG
BIJVOORUITBETA-
LING. VOOR AN-
NONCES WENDE
MEN ZICH TOT DE
ADMINISTRATIE.

DE STIJL

MAANDBLAD GEWIJD AAN DE MODER-
NE BEELDENE VAKKEN EN KULTUUR
REDACTIE: THEO VAN DOESBURG.

ALLES TUKKENRE-
DACTIE ZOOWEL
ALS ADMINISTRATIE
BETREFFEND,
TE ADRESSEEREN
HAARLEMMERSTR
73A TE LEIDEN.
DEPOT TE ROME 10
VIA CIRO MENOTTI

3^E JAARGANG.

APRIL NEGENTIENHONDERDTWINTIG.

NUMMER 6.

MANIFEST II VAN „DE STIJL” 1920

DE LITERATUUR

het organisme van onze hedendaagsche literatuur teert nog geheel op de sentimenteele gevoelens eener verzwakte generatie

HET WOORD IS DOOD

de naturalistische cliché's en de dramatische woordfilms
die de boekenfabrikanten ons leveren
per meter en per pond
bevatten niets van de nieuwe handgrepen van ons leven

HET WOORD IS MACHTELOOS

de asthmatische en sentimenteele ik- en zij-oesie
die overal
en vooral in holland
nog gepleegd wordt onder de invloeden van een ruimteschuw individualisme
gegist overblijfsel van een verouderden tijd
vervullen ons met weezin

de psychologie in onze romanliteratuur
slechts berustend op subjectieve inbeelding

de psychologische analyse
en meer belemmerende spraakrethoriek
hebben ook de **BETEEKENIS VAN HET WOORD GEDOOD**

de netjes naast en onder elkaar geplaatste zinnen
deze dorre **FRONTALE** zinsbouw
waarin de vroegere realisten hun tot zichzelf beperkte ervaringen
uitdrukten

49

Figure 3a: The Manifesto II of *De Stijl* concerned literature, *De Stijl*, 1920, III, 6, pp. 49-50
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä

NACHT

Een zwarte aarde
waarboven en
rondom 'n
tuin
met diamanten bloemen
glom. —
Waar perken waren
dicht bestrooid
besprenkeld en
besproeid
met glinsterend zaad. —
een stille nacht
bewegingloos en
zonder kleuren
waarin het wonder
der ontelbaarheid
onpijlbaarheid
in sterrenschrijf
geschreven staat.

Zoo'n nacht is dit.

Een zichtbaar
stuk muziek
van zwart en wit. —
'n nacht waarin
de stille
als 'n oceaan
dàn suist

168

dàn bruiſt
dàn zingt
of zoemt
gelijk 'n bij
die zweeft
voorbij
't oor

Hoort! Hoort!

zoo' n nacht is dit.

Een zwarte aarde.
'n Stille nacht.
'n Menschelijk brein.
'n Menschelijk hart.
'n Denkend brein.

Wit.

Zwart.

Wit.

Zwart.

Wit-Zwart.

Zwart-Wit.

Komen.

Vergaan.

Komen.

Vergaan.

Groot.

Klein.

Groot.

Klein.

Wat is dit?

Wat is dat?

Wat is hier?

Wat is daar?

Dag.

Nacht.

Dag.

Nacht.

Dag.

Nacht.

Een stille nacht
waarin op eens
'n slapend zwijn
geluiden
van gelijke lengte
en kleur
met diepen
diepen bas
uitstaat.

De aarde bromt.

De hemel zingt.

De aarde zwart.

De hemel wit.

De mensch in grauw

Zoo 'n nacht is dit.

(1915)

TREIN

Klètſen

Klètſen

Klètſen

Klètſen

Klètſen

Klètſen

Rood

Zwart

Groot

Hydra

Waterstromen

Ruischen

Bruisen

Suizen

Waterval

Storten

Storten

Yzeren ballen

Vallen

Vallen

Yzeren platen

Yzeren bouten

Duizend bouten

door elkander

Rollen

Rollen

Boisen

Yzeren bouten

Vallen op

elkander.

Beuken

Bonken

Bonken

Beuken

Bonken

Beuken

Stompen

Stampen

Bonken

Snuiven

Brommen

Grommen

Brommen

Schuren

Beuken

Bonken

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Bonk

Figure 4. I.K. Bonset's [van Doesburg] Nacht (1915) in *De Stijl* IV, 11, 1921, p. 168
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä



BILLAGE XIX VAN „DE STIJL“ 2. JAARGANG
 No. 10. KOMPOSITIE (1919), PIET MONDRIJAN.

ABONNEMENT BINNENLAND 4.50
 BUITENLAND 5.50
 PER JAARGANG
 BIJVOORUITBETA-
 LING. VOOR AN-
 NONGES. WENDE
 MEN ZICH TOT DE
 ADMINISTRATIE.
 2e JAARGANG. AUGUSTUS. NEGENTIENHONDERDNEGENTIEN. NUMMER 10.

DE STIJL

ALLE STUKKEN DE
 REDACTIE BETREFF
 FEND: K. GALJE,
 WATER 3, LEIDEN.
 ALLE STUKKEN
 VOOR DE ADMIN.
 ADRESSEEREN MEN
 MORSCHWEG 20,
 LEIDEN, HOLLAND.

NATUURLIJKE- EN ABSTRACTE REALITEIT (III).

DOOR PIET MONDRIJAN.

TRIALOOG (gedurende een wandeling van buiten naar de stad).
 Y. Leek. X. Naturalistisch schilder. Z. Abstract-realistisch schilder.

3e Tooneel. Nacht — de sterren staan nu aan een helderen hemel boven een wijde zandvlakte.

Y. Welk een serene! Hier is dan weder de stille rust van zeeven, toen we zagen enkel maan en land, zonder de grillige boomgroepen.

Z. Mij dunkt, we zien nu echter nóg completer uitgebeelde rust, in vorm zoowel als in kleur.

X. Ja, bijvoorbeeld de kleur van het zand brengt nu een anderen indruk teweeg.

Z. Ook dat: het groene land van zeeven gaf ons wel een gevoel van volheid en rijkdom, maar dit koude zand beelde nóg diepere schoonheid. Doch ik bedoelde eigenlijk dat de sterren nu zoowel doen.

Y. Ja, wat zijn zij harmonisch geplaatst!

Z. Beeldend vullen zij de ruimte: zij bepalen deze en prononcereen daardoor verhouding.

X. Hoe dan ook... wat zijn we nu vér van alle klein-menschelijkheid!

Z. We zien nu dat er een andere „realiteit“ is dan het klein-menschelijke beweeg.

We zien nu duidelijk hoe niëtg dat in alle afgescheidenheid heeft opgehouden te bestaan.

We zien één geheel, en, tegenover het veranderlijke menschelijke willen, aanschouwen we nu het onveranderlijke.

Y. U althans... ik benijd U dit aanschouwen; ik aanschouw eigenlijk nog niet.

Wel voel ik, vaag, het schoone.

Z. Het aanschouwen, het beeldend zien, is inderdaad van groot gewicht; hoe meer bewust we het onveranderlijke, het universele, daardoor zien, hoe niëtiger het veranderlijke, het individuele, alle klein-menschelijkheid in ons en buiten ons, voor ons wordt.

Figure 5. The starting page of the third *Scene* of *Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit* (Natural Reality and Abstract Reality) on the right and the photograph of Mondrian's *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* (1919) on the left
 Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä



Figure 6. Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Planes in Ochre and Grey* (1919). Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm.
(The Composition with Grid 5: Lozenge, *Composition with Colours* in the Catalogue of the Kröller-Müller museum)



Figure 7. Piet Mondrian's *Molen* (the Mill), 1910. Oil on canvas, 150 x 86 cm
The Hague, Gemeentemuseum, bequest of Salomon B Slijper, 1971

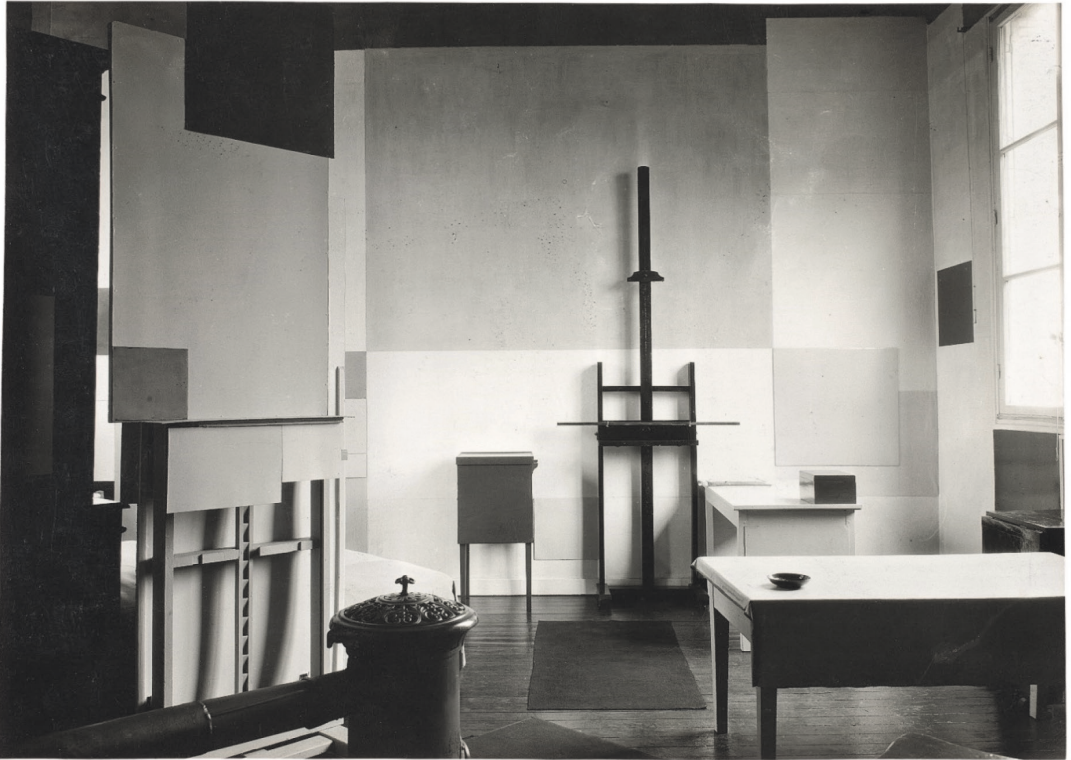


Figure 8. Piet Mondrian's studio at 26 rue du départ, 1926, photographed by Paul Delbo. Collection of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), The Hague

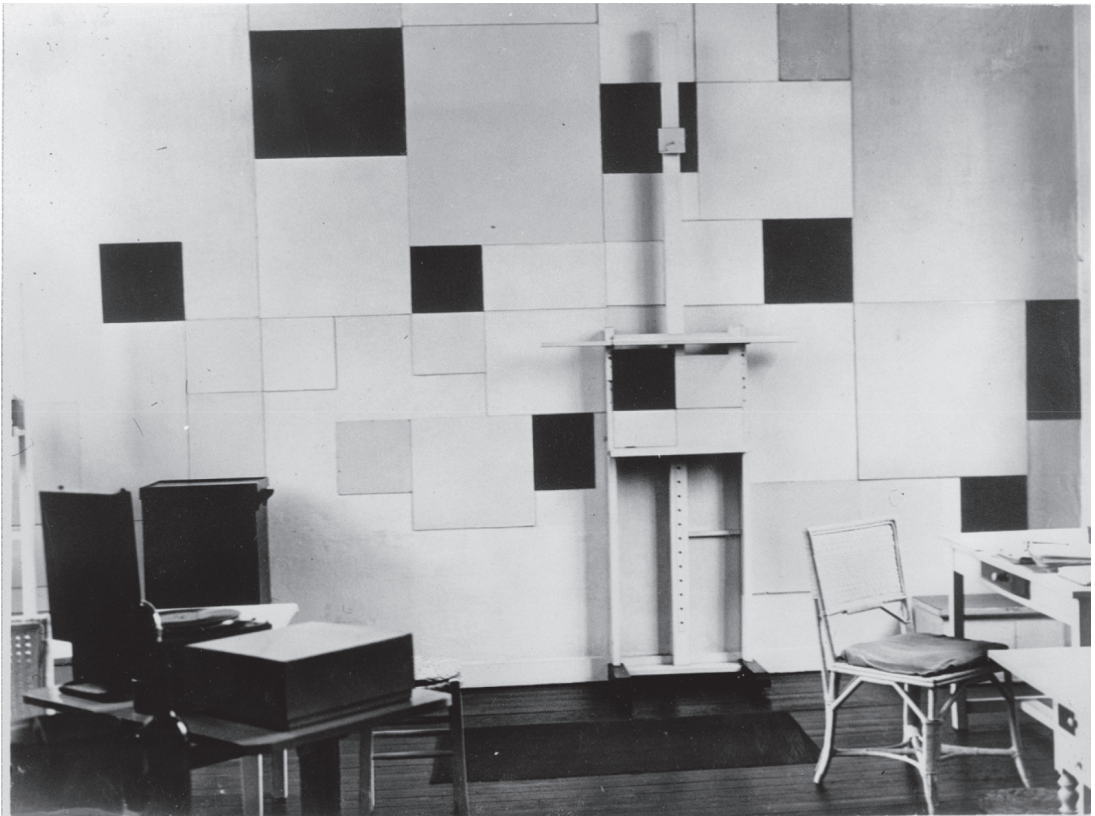


Figure 9. Piet Mondrian's studio at 26 rue du Départ, 1930, photographed by Michel Seuphor
Collection of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), The Hague



Figure 10. Kamares in Mondrian's studio, 1925-26
The photographer unknown
Theatre Collection Special Collections UvA (TiN foundation)



Figure 11. Kamares in van Doesburg's studio, 1925–26
Photographer unknown
Collection of the Netherlands Institute for art History (RKD)
The Hague Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg

X-Beelden.

DOOR I. K. BONSET.

Oⁿ

hé hé hé
hebt gij 't lichaamlijk ervaren
hebt gij 't lichaamlijk ervaren
hebt gij 't li **CHAAM** lijk er **VA** ren

— ruimte en
— tijd
verleden heden toekomst
het achterhierenginds
het doorelkaar van 't niet en de verschijning

kleine verfrommelde almanak
die men ondersteboven leest

MIJN KLOK STAAT STIL

uitgekauwd sigaretteteindje op't
WITTE SERVET

ZIG - ZAG

vochtig bruin
ontbinding
GEEST
346

VRACHT AU TO MO BIEL

DWARS

trillend onvruchtbaar middelpunt

caricatuur der zwaarte
uomo electrico

rose en grau en diep wijnrood

de scherven van de kosmos vind ik in m'n thee

Aanteekening: Oⁿ: te lezen nulⁿ; — ruimte en — tijd: te lezen min ruimte en min tijd.

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Figure 12. I.K. Bonset [van Doesburg]: X-Beelden in De Stijl III, 9, 1920
Photographed by Tuomas Heikkilä

