

Piet Mondrian on the Principles of Neo-Plasticism

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Abstract:

Piet Mondrian was not only a painter, but also a prolific writer. He wrote more than a hundred essays on the subject of art and society in Dutch, French, and English. Mondrian was absolutely convinced that the structuring daily life according to the visible simplicity and the tangible balance of his Neoplastic paintings, would result in an enhanced moral and physical wellbeing of mankind. In his French writing 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' (General Principles of Neo-Plasticism), Mondrian explained, short and to the point, the basic principles of his art and its profound importance for human society. This Mondrian essay is the subject of the present article. First and foremost Mondrian was a painter and not a writer, and consequently his theory had arisen from the practice of painting, and not vice versa. Hence it is very illuminating to look also at what he painted when he worked on the 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme'.

Keywords: Mondrian's writings, Neo-Plasticism, Principles of Neo-Plasticism (1926), Neoplastic paintings.

1. Introduction

From the beginning of 1914 until his death, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) wrote more than a hundred essays on the subject of art and society, some brief, some very extensive. He wrote in Dutch, French and English, his choice of language often depending on his place of residence: Laren (the Netherlands), Paris, London, New York. In his essays Mondrian envisaged a future society based on the principles of his self-invented style within abstract art: 'Neo-Plasticism.' Mondrian was absolutely convinced that the structuring daily life according to the visible simplicity and the tangible balance of his Neoplastic paintings, would result in an enhanced moral and physical wellbeing of mankind. In his French writing 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' (General Principles of Neo-Plasticism), Mondrian explained, short and to the point, the basic principles of his art and its profound importance for human society. Michel Seuphor (1901–1999), Mondrian's friend and biographer wrote on the 'Principes' in his book:

"The little essay he wrote with my help in 1926 for the magazine 'Vouloir'. ... I think it is the best formulation of his fundamental ideas about Neo-Plasticism. It also has the merit of being brief." (Seuphor, [1956b], p. 166). This Mondrian essay is the subject of the present article. But first I would like to inform you further about Mondrian's unique thoughts on art and society.

2. Mondrian's ideas on establishing a new society based on Neo-Plasticism

In Mondrian's view, human misery and social injustice were the result of inequality, not only socio-economic but also psychological. He felt that man suffered from an inner imbalance caused by a lack of equality between the material and the spiritual. In order to characterize the inequalities he perceived everywhere, he uses the terms 'tragic' and 'tragedy': "Tragedy exists in both the social and the inner life. The main form of tragedy is the original (unequal) duality of spirit and nature, but there is also tragedy in social life. Because of a mutual imbalance, there is tragedy between the male and the female, between society and the individual." (Mondrian, 1917–18; Veen, 2017, p. 107.) Later, in his essay 'De Zuiver Abstracte Kunst' (Pure Abstract Art), Mondrian phrases it somewhat differently:

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

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(Mondrian, 1929; Veen, 2017, p. 297.) Mondrian's concern regarding inequality is at the centre of his art theory. He contends that inequality results from both internal and external factors. Physical and moral factors lead to internal imbalance; externally, the individual is put off balance by political, economic, and social rules and regulations. These internal and external factors put great pressure on the equality of relationships inside and outside the individual.

However, Mondrian maintains that in abstract art a harmonious composition is always possible, irrespective of size and color of the elements, as long as they are equivalent. In this way, Mondrian says, art shows life how things can be: "Plastic art shows that real freedom is not mutual equality but mutual equivalence. In art, forms and colors have different dimension and position, but are equal in value. In the same way, through greater mutual equivalence of individual elements, our life can be better than it is now. By its freedom, art always creates a certain mutual equivalence of its composing forms, and shows the need for this freedom in human life." (Mondrian, 1942; Veen, 2017, p. 519.) According to Mondrian, there are two distinct stages within the elimination of inequality through art. First of all, art will liberate itself from its shackles, which creates the possibility of showing equivalent relations in a clear and undiluted manner. Secondly, the pure relations of 'liberated art' will be transferred to man and social life. Mondrian is convinced that, as a first step towards equivalence, traditional art should do away with all kinds of redundancies. Conventional art is full of forms with specific meanings, i.e. symbolic and figurative references to something outside the painting. In addition, there are conventions, such as the use of perspective to suggest three dimensionality, the use of foreground and background to suggest depth, and the use of light and shadow to suggest plasticity. By doing away with subjective, symbolic, and narrative elements, as well as with artistic 'tricks', the liberated art will be able to show us pure equivalent compositions, which may serve as a blue print for a new society. Neo-Plasticism has succeeded on this point.

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

"The realization of equivalent relationships is of supreme importance for human life. Socially and economically, unity, peace, happiness, and prosperity can only be attained through equivalent relationships." (Mondrian, 1929; Veen, 2017, p. 297.) According to Mondrian, this second stage has yet to be realized, and 'the culture of pure relationships' is still far away. This is why he dedicates his brochure 'Le Néo-Plasticisme' 'Aux hommes futurs' (To Future Man) (Mondrian, 1920). Mondrian's idea to use art as a blue print and guide for a new society gives him a unique position not only within the history of art, but also among utopian thinkers. Mondrian was well aware that his ideas about art and society could not simply be deduced from his pictures – they needed to be explained in words, and the ambition to clarify the meaning of his paintings was the driving force behind his writings. In an interview Mondrian stated: "It is hard to explain the intention of my paintings. In the works themselves I have expressed things as well as I could ... The reverse side, what remains unspoken, can be better set forth in an article". ([Loon, van], 1922.)

This fragment makes it clear that Mondrian was of the opinion that the ideas behind his paintings could best be expressed in words. Unfortunately, many of Mondrian's attempts to explain and clarify may have had quite the opposite effect, since he often got bogged down in complex formulae and unusual terms. This may have been the reason that in several instances Mondrian was unable to find a publisher. His very essential text 'L'art nouveau – la vie nouvelle' (The New Art – The New Life) for instance, was not published during his lifetime, which was a matter of grave disappointment to him. (Mondrian, 1931) The many deletions and additions in Mondrian's manuscripts are evidence that his words often failed to satisfy him. Like a teacher trying to find new ways to present the subject matter, Mondrian was always looking for new terms and phrases to express his ideas about life and art in an ever better way. Concerning this, Mondrian's essay 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' makes very transparent – apart from the specific Mondrian-terms – what the artist has in mind to make the world better.

3. Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme

In December 1925 Mondrian shows two pictures on the exhibition 'L'Art d'aujourd'hui. Exposition internationale' in Paris (Joosten, 1998, p. III 32). Félix Del Marle (1889–1952), editor of the French magazine 'Vouloir' (Lille), gives a favorable opinion of Mondrian's work in the January 1926 issue of his periodical, and sends a

copy to the artist. Mondrian answers immediately: "Cher Monsieur, thank you for sending me the magazine 'Vouloir'. I read your article with enthusiasm. When you are in Paris, I hope to meet you. Mes salutations sincères, P. Mondrian."(1) Del Marle visits the artist's studio at the Rue du Départ in Paris in February 1926. During the visit an interesting conversation occurs, and at the farewell Félix asks Mondrian to write an essay for his magazine.

Some weeks later the artist sends 'L'art purement abstrait' (Pure Abstract Art) (Mondrian, 1926a) to the editor, which appears in the March issue of 'Vouloir', however with a different title: 'ART – Pureté + Abstraction' (Art – Purity + Abstraction) (Mondrian, 1926b). Apparently Del Marle is well-pleased with the article, for he asks the painter a second one. Mondrian decides to translate a previously written Dutch essay into French; this second 'Vouloir' essay has the title: 'Le Home – La Rue – La Cité' (Home – Street – City) (Mondrian, 1927). In this essay Mondrian writes especially on the effect of the urban environment on the well-being of man. Because of this essay Del Marle dedicates a whole issue – January 1927 – to the subject of 'Ambiance' (Ambience).

Short time later, Félix gets the idea for a special edition about Neo-Plasticism. In preparation, he circulated a questionnaire among some contributors of the Dutch art periodical 'De Stijl'.(2) Except for Mondrian's answer, neither the questions of Del Marle nor the replies of the others have survived. The special issue of 'Vouloir' on Neo-Plasticism never appears; the periodical ceases to exist for financial reasons. The 25th issue – January 1927 – was the final one. From a letter to Félix Del Marle we learn that the text 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' is Mondrian's response to the editor's questionnaire concerning the Neo-Plasticism edition. It counts three written pages.(3) By the way, 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' has never been published during Mondrian's lifetime. The first publication – in facsimile – took place in December 1949 in the French periodical 'Art d'aujourd'hui'.

Figure 1 First page of Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme.

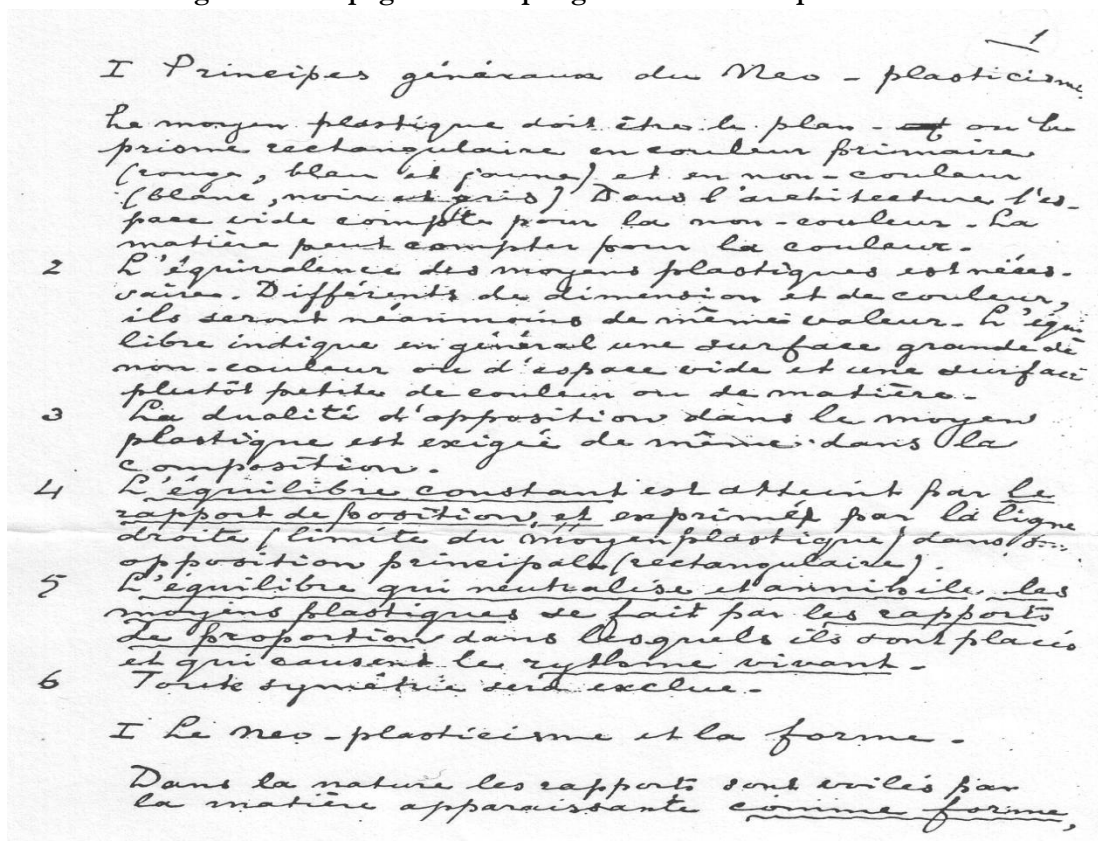


Figure 2 Second page of Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme.

2

comme couleur ou comme son-naturel.
 C'est cette « morphoplastique » qui a été sui-
 vie inconsciemment dans le passé ~~et~~
~~par~~ par tous arts. Ainsi, dans le passé,
 l'art était « à-la-manière-de-la-nature ».
 Durant des siècles la peinture a exprimé plas-
 tiquement les rapports par la forme et la cou-
 leur naturelles jusqu'à ce qu'elle arrive, dans
 les temps présents, à la plastique des rapports
seuls. Durant des siècles elle a composé au
 moyen de la forme et de la couleurs natu-
 relles, jusqu'à ce qu'elle, actuellement, la com-
position elle-même devint « l'expression plas-
 tique », « l'image ».

III Le Neo-plasticisme et la couleur.

Malgré son expression plastique « intériorisée »
 le neo-plasticisme reste « peinture ». ~~La~~
~~par toute la profondeur~~ quelle contient elle
 n'est pas néanmoins ~~pas~~ peinture d'écriture.
 Son ~~Il s'agit d'un~~ moyen-d'expression ^{est} la cou-
 leur pure et déterminée ~~elle~~ dont les plans
 restent équivalents au surface du tableau
 c.a.d. la couleur reste plane dans le plan.
 Elle n'est pas affaiblie en ouvrant les mo-
 dulations de la forme, donc plus ca-
 forte ~~forte~~ que dans la morphoplastique. La cou-
 leur trouve son opposition équivalente dans le
 non-couleur, c.a.d. le blanc, le noir et le gris.

Figure 3 Third page of Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme.

que l'art, avançant l'évolution humaine, a montré 3

IV Conséquences psychologiques et sociales
du Néo-plasticisme.

L'équilibre par l'équivalence de la matière et
de l'esprit, de ce qui est individuel et de ce qui
est universel, des féminin et du masculin,
~~est le principe~~ le principe général du
Néo-plasticisme, ^{est} non seulement pour la
plastique mais encore il est réalisable dans
l'homme, et donc dans la société. Dans cette
dernière l'équivalence de ce qui concerne la
matière et de ce qui concerne l'esprit peut
créer une harmonie jusqu'ici inconnue.

Par intérieurisation de ce qui est connu com-
me matière et par extériorisation de ce qui
est connu comme esprit - jusqu'ici trop
séparés! - matière - esprit devient une
unité.

Le Néo-plasticisme démontre l'ordre exact.
Il démontre l'équité, parce que l'équi-
valence des moyens plastiques dans la com-
position indique les devoirs d'une même
valeur mais quand-même différents.

L'équilibre par une opposition contrarian-
te et neutralisante annihile les indivi-
dus comme personnalité particulière et crée
donc la société comme une véritable
unité.

II

Paris dec. 26. P. Mondrian.

*à l'apparition matérielle de l'art
l'équilibre plus de clarté dans l'expression
féminine de nos jours: celle présente l'ère
des binaires!*

pour tous

L'future

Photocopied manuscript. The Hague, RKD - Netherlands Institute for Art History, Mondrian Correspondence Project, Folder 23.

Mondrian's essay 'Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme' consists of four sections, numbered by Roman numerals. In the first section of the 'Principes' Mondrian displays the Neoplastic laws. Neo-Plasticism is a trend within abstract art that aims to show the relations of a composition in a pure way. Therefore, Mondrian calls his Neoplastic pictures 'representations of relationships'. In order to obtain such images, one is required to adhere to six strict rules.

I General Principles of Neo-Plasticism (4)

- 1 The means of imaging must be the rectangular plane or prism in primary color (red, blue, and yellow) and in non-color (white, black, and gray).(5) In architecture, empty space is considered as non-color. Material may count as color.
- 2 The equivalence of the means of imaging is necessary. Size and colors may differ, but they must be of equal value. In general, equilibrium results from large surfaces of non-color or empty space, and rather small surfaces of color or material.
- 3 The opposing duality is required within the means of imaging and also within the composition.
- 4 The constant equilibrium is achieved by the relationship of position, and is expressed by the straight line (limit of the means of imaging) in its principal opposition (rectangular).
- 5 The equilibrium, that neutralizes and annihilates the means of imaging, is possible by the relationships of proportion in which they are placed and which create the living rhythm.
- 6 All symmetry shall be excluded.

In his writings Mondrian often makes use of self-made words or groups of words. I think, four terms out of the first section need a short explanation: ‘the means of imaging’ (*‘le moyen plastique’*), ‘the opposing duality’ (*‘la dualité d’opposition’*), ‘the relationship of position’ (*‘le rapport de position’*), and ‘the living rhythm’ (*‘le rythme vivant’*). To create a work of art the artist cannot do without material and tools. If he wants to make a painting, he takes a canvas, brushes and paint. During the act of painting he uses line, shape and form, space, color, texture and composition (the so-called ‘elements of art’). Mondrian calls these elements ‘means of imaging’; they are the ‘building material’ to realize a work of art. In Mondrian’s view the most important ‘means of imaging’ is the rectangular plane, because this ‘building material’ is universal: comprehensible for everyone, for all time and in all places.

In a Neoplastic composition the rectangular planes are provided with a primary color (red, yellow, blue) or with a non-color (black, white, gray). In his magnum opus *‘De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst’* (New Imaging in painting) Mondrian writes about the ‘doctrine of opposites’ of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 540 – c. 480 BC) (Mondrian, 1917-18; Veen, 2017, pp. 98-100). The philosopher understands the world as a continuous interplay of opposites: there can be no day without night, no white without black, no good without evil. (His ideas are comparable to the ancient Chinese principle of Yin and Yang.) These antitheses maintain a constant interaction, a movement towards balance and harmony. Heraclitus calls this motion *‘panta rhei’*, all entities move and nothing remains still.

The ‘doctrine of opposites’ has a tremendous appeal for Mondrian. The ‘opposing dualities’ he used in his Neoplastic compositions are: color vs non-color, horizontal vs vertical, small vs large, and matt vs glossy. Additionally he wants to achieve a constant interplay between the ‘opposing dualities’ in his paintings. In his later English-language texts – to refer to this particular interaction – Mondrian uses the terms ‘dynamic equilibrium’ or ‘dynamic movement’.

His writings also show numerous examples of the use of opposite concepts, such as: universal vs individual, inner vs outer, matter vs spirit, temporality vs perpetuity, determined vs undetermined, objective vs subjective, relative vs absolute, male vs female.

For the straight lines which are in perpendicular position to each other, Mondrian uses the term ‘the relationship of position’. The lines meet or intersect at an angle of 90 degrees and run parallel to the sides of the rectangular or square canvas.(6)

‘Living rhythm’ is achieved by the diversity of the length and width of the colored and non-colored rectangular planes, and by the diversity of the length and width of the black straight lines. ‘The living rhythm’ is established intuitively by the artist or architect. A regular and systematic rhythm has to be avoided, just like symmetry.

II Neo-Plasticism and Form

In nature, relationships are veiled by matter appearing as form, color, or as natural-sound. This ‘morphoplasticism’ was unconsciously followed in the past by all the arts. Thus, in the past, art was ‘in-the-way-of-nature’.

For centuries, painting plastically expressed relationships through natural form and color, until it came to the imaging of merely relationships in our time. For centuries she was composed by means of natural form and colors, until now, the composition itself has become ‘the plastic expression’, ‘the image’.

In the second section Mondrian uses ‘home-made’ words too. The following terms require a short explanation: ‘morphoplasticism’ (‘morphoplastique’), ‘in-the-manner-of-nature’ (‘à-la-manière-de-la-nature’), and ‘the imaging of merely relationships’ (‘la plastique des rapports seuls’). ‘Morphoplasticism’ is the name Mondrian gives to traditional (figurative, naturalistic) art. This art makes use of recognizable forms and ‘tricks’ to create ‘realistic’ representations on a canvas. With ‘tricks’ he means painting techniques to suggest a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. For that reason Mondrian labels morphoplasticism as a fake art. It contrasts with the art that is straightforward ‘Neo-Plasticism’ or ‘the imaging of merely relationships’.

In this connection, Mondrian says that when an artist paints the reality exactly as it occurs to him, he works ‘in-the-way-of-nature’. When he does not use recognizable shapes or representations and shows only the pure relationships on the canvas, then an artist works ‘in-the-way-of-art’.

III Neo-Plasticism and Color

Despite its ‘interiorized’ plastic expression, Neo-Plasticism is still ‘painting’. Its means of expression is pure and determinate color, through which the planes remain equivalent with the surface of the picture, that is to say, color remains smooth within the plane. It is not weakened by following the modulations of form; therefore it is stronger than in morphoplasticism. Color finds its equivalent opposition in non-color, that is to say, in white, black, and gray.

In this third section Mondrian uses three self-invented terms, which need some explanation: ‘interiorized’ (‘intériorisé’), ‘means of expression’ (‘moyen d’expression’), and ‘the pure and determinate color’ (‘la couleur pure et déterminée’). In Mondrian’s view the word ‘interiorized’ means entering into the essentials of things. For this action he also uses other words: to abstract, to denaturalize or to deepen. In his English texts he sometimes calls it ‘seen from inside’. In his writings Mondrian often utilizes the terms ‘means of imaging’ or ‘means of expression’ interchangeably. They both mean the same, namely the rectangular color or non-color plane created by horizontal and vertical lines meeting or intersecting at an angle of 90 degrees. In Neo-Plasticism the colored rectangles are painted with a ‘pure and determinate color’. ‘Pure and determinate’ means that the color is smooth (plain) without any variable hues and without any imitation of light and shadow.

It also means that the Neoplastic artist has to use colors in their most essential capacity: the primary colors. These colors are the principal or ‘final’ colors with which theoretically all other colors can be created. Mondrian calls red a primary color. But what is primary red exactly? Alizarin crimson? Anyhow, when we set a number of Neoplastic Mondrian paintings next to each other, we see that the red in one picture is not the same as the red in another. Apparently he does not use paint directly from ‘the primary red paint tube’ – whatever that may be – but he mixes and repaints till the red fits perfectly – in his opinion – into that very composition (Asperen de Boer, 1994, pp. 26–30). At the point of primary colors we can say that Mondrian’s theory and practice are not in agreement with each other. However, Mondrian is very well aware of the discrepancy, as early as 1918 he writes: “In abstract-real painting [= Neo-Plasticism] primary color only signifies color appearing in its most basic aspect. Primary color thus appears very relative – the principle thing is that color be free of individuality and individual sensations, and that it express only the serene emotion of the universal.” (Mondrian, 1917–18; Veen, 2017, p. 89.)

IV Psychological and Social Consequences of Neo-Plasticism

Equilibrium through the equivalence of nature and mind, of that which is individual and that which is universal, of the feminine and the masculine, the general principle of Neo-Plasticism is not only that for plastic art, but moreover it is also realisable in man, that is in society.

In the latter, the equivalence of what pertains to matter and what pertains to mind, can create a harmony unknown until now. By interiorisation of what is known as matter, and by exteriorisation of what is known as mind – until now, too much separated! – matter-mind becomes a unity. Neo-Plasticism demonstrates exact order. It demonstrates equity, for the equivalence of the means of imaging in the composition indicates to everybody, rights of the same value differ though. Equilibrium, through a contrasting and neutralizing opposition, annihilates individuals as particular personalities and thus creates the future society as a true unity. Natural appearance unveiled in art signifies more clarity in human consciousness in our time: that fulfils the human evolution!

In this last section, Mondrian writes that ‘interiorisation of matter’ and ‘exteriorisation of the mind’ creates an equivalent unity of the material and the spiritual, the feminine and the masculine, the individual and the universal. This is the basic idea of Neo-Plasticism: it wants to show the equilibrium between the material and the spiritual world. Neo-Plasticism demonstrates that such a unity is possible in painting, on the one hand by imaging the essence of things, and on the other by depicting the spiritual in an observable capacity. Till now, Mondrian says, matter and mind are separated too much, and therefore harmony within and outside man is not possible. Neo-Plasticism illustrates that though the elements of its compositions are different in color and size, they are always mutual equivalent. The Neoplastic paintings demonstrate how the future society has to be organized.

4. A loose end matter

At the top of page 3 of the ‘Principes’ Mondrian has written part of a sentence. It looks like a dependent clause, because the first word begins with a small letter. In translation the sentence goes: ‘... that art advances in human evolution has been demonstrated’ (“... que l’art, avançant l’évolution humaine, a montré”). (See Figure 3.) However, Mondrian does not indicate what main clause the incomplete line belongs to. In his Mondrian French biography Michel Seuphor has left out the phrase in question (Seuphor, 1956a, pp. 164–6). Apparently he could not discover where the dependent clause belonged, although his command of French was very good. I did not find the right place either, and have omitted the sentence in my translation as well.

5. Mondrian’s contemporary paintings

First and foremost Mondrian was a painter and not a writer, and consequently his theory had arisen from the practice of painting, and not vice versa. However, we must realize that Mondrian’s ‘image and word’ are complementary. That is to say, for a good understanding of the meaning of the Neoplastic pictures, Mondrian’s writings are indispensable, and inversely, to understand his writings, his paintings are essential. Hence we will look at what he painted when he worked on the ‘Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme’.

We learned that Mondrian wrote the ‘Principes’ in December 1926. In letters to several friends we read that at the end of 1926 he was preparing nineteen paintings for an exhibition at library-gallery ‘L’Esthétique’ at the Boulevard Montparnasse. The exposition was supposed to begin on Friday, 15 April 1927 (Joosten, 1998, pp. II 328–38 (B182–B200), and p. III 34). Two months before the opening, Mondrian was invited by the Dutch cultural association in Paris ‘De Klomp’ (Wooden shoe) to show some paintings on one of its cultural evenings. He loved to present his new work, so he agreed. The association rented a little hall in the American Girls Club on Saturday, 26 February 1927, and in the afternoon Mondrian set down the nineteen ‘L’Esthétique’ pictures on the paneling of the four walls. A few days later the Paris correspondent of the Dutch newspaper ‘Het Vaderland’ paid much attention to the cultural event, and also to Mondrian’s paintings:

“The most aggressive of this evening was the contribution of Mondrian, who lent twenty of his last canvasses to decorate the hall. Some people fulminated, others laughed and thought of mystification or pure idiotism. However, there is no more serious and logical human being in the world than Mondrian. These ‘comprimés’ of the plastical thought – as nutritious as La Rochefoucauld’s maxims – each represent a world by itself. What was damaging however, was their multitude. It must be Mondrian’s intention, if the architecture has come so far, to solve rhythmically entire walls according to his ideal and the photographs of the interesting magazine *Vouloir* – of which he is one of the main collaborators – show that important modern environments have already been realized in that spirit.

For that matter, Mondrian’s magnificent studio close to the Gare Montparnasse, full to overflowing with plastical poetry, is the best evidence that this lonely prophet with his ideas of ‘denaturalisation’ is in the right, against our whole imitating Old World.” (Roëll, 1927)

The correspondent in Paris – W. Röell – calls Mondrian’s pictures “as nutritious as La Rochefoucauld’s maxims”. The duke of La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680) was a noted French author of maxims (Rochefoucauld, 1665). To explain, a maxim is: “Generally any simple and memorable rule or guide for living.” (Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy). A Rochefoucauld maxim might clarify this description: “Mediocre minds usually dismiss anything beyond their understanding.”

Apparently, Röell sees a similarity to Rochefoucauld's maxims and Mondrian's paintings, in the subheading of the review he calls the pictures 'image maxims'. In my opinion, the journalist hits the nail on the head with this name. As we have seen, the Neoplastic canvasses also represent a very succinct formulation of a 'rule or guide for living'. However, the meaning of the paintings is so heavily compressed that – unlike the 'verbal maxims' – the intention of Mondrian's 'image maxims' is not immediately transparent, and they have to be amplified with words.

In his report on the Dutch cultural evening, Röell also refers to the magazine 'Vouloir': "the interesting magazine Vouloir ... show that important modern environments have already been realized in that spirit." Indeed, in the January 1927 issue of 'Vouloir' we see three Mondrian wall designs for the 'Salon de Madame B..., à Dresden', quite in the spirit of Neo-Plasticism (Joosten, 1998, p. II 131, and pp. II 320–1 (B167)). In a letter to his friend, the Dutch architect Bob Oud (1890–1963), Mondrian writes: "I could not have done it [the design] without the preliminary study of my own interior."⁽⁷⁾ One of the three designs published in 'Vouloir' is the 'Plan développé' (Exploded Box Plan):

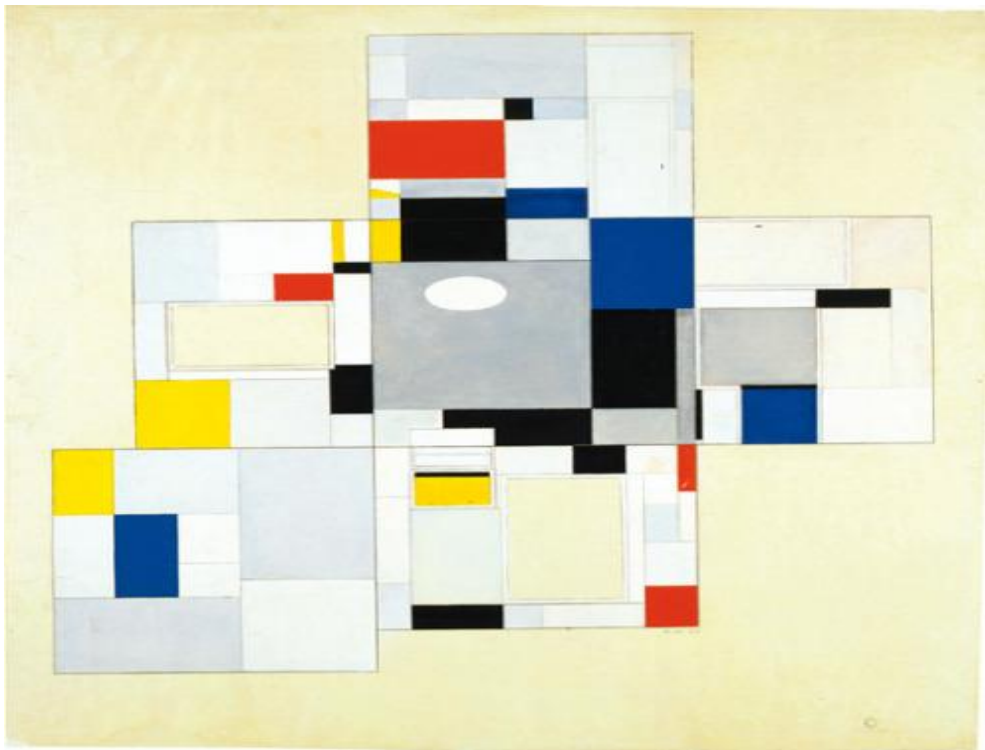


Figure 4 'Design for the 'Salon de Madame B..., à Dresden', by Piet Mondrian, 1926. Pencil and gouache on paper. 75 by 75 cm. Pencil and gouache on paper. 29.5 x 29.5 inch (75 x 75 cm). Provenance: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

We learn from a letter to his friend Bert van de Briel (1881–1971) that Mondrian was very upset about the rough handling of his paintings after the cultural event .

"Bert, thanks for your letter. ... I made an appointment to fetch up my paintings Monday morning at 10 o'clock. When I arrived, there was not a single Dutchman, it appeared that the hall was rented for one evening and it was tidied up by French employees immediately after the event. I found my canvasses stacked–up in a laundry room. All damaged with impressions of nail heads and one with a tear. I had such a fright! In this bad condition the paintings could not be exhibited at the gallery L'Esthétique. So, I start immediately to make good the damage and worked till 3 o'clock that same night, and painted over the canvasses within a week. The advantage is that the paintings have become much better, and that is the main thing. ... Heel veel goeds van je Piet." (Henkels, 1988, pp. 12–15.)

In retrospect, we can say that the series of canvasses which Mondrian was working on in December 1926 was ‘the first state’ of the paintings, because late February and early March 1927 he painted over all nineteen pictures due to damages incurred. In conclusion, only ‘the second state’ of the December paintings is known to us. However, I take for granted that the canvasses have remained the same for the greater part, though on the other hand Mondrian writes: “... the paintings have become much better.” I like to discuss two of the nineteen paintings. My choice is arbitrary.

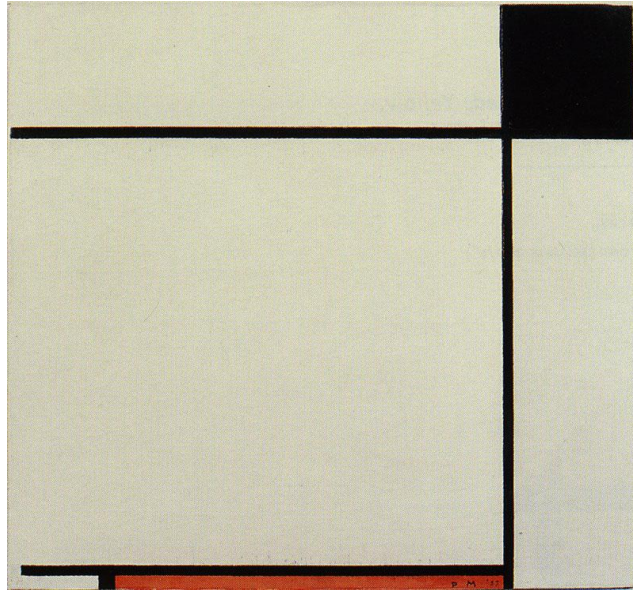


Figure 5 ‘Composition, with black, red, and gray’, by Piet Mondrian, 1927. Oil on canvas. 22 x 22 inch (56 by 56 cm). Provenance: Private collection. (Joosten, 1998, p. II 332 (B189).)

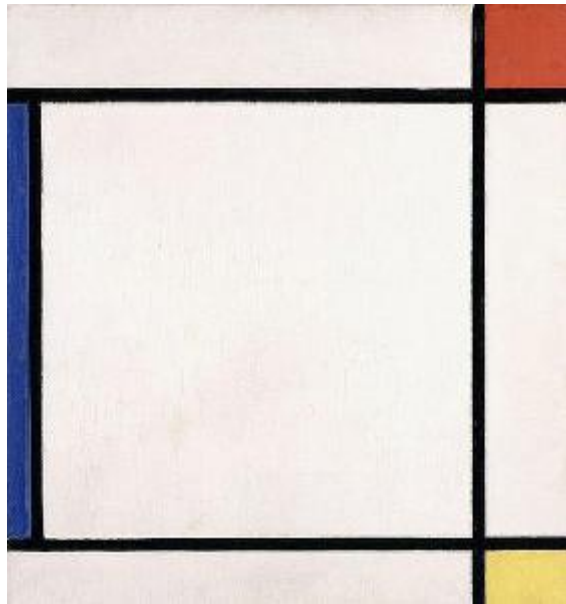


Figure 6 ‘Composition: no. III, with red, blue, and yellow’, by Piet Mondrian, 1927. Oil on canvas. 15 x 14 inch (38 x 35.5 cm). Provenance: Private collection. (Joosten, 1998, p. II 336 (B194).)

If we compare these two paintings with the six rules of Neo-Plasticism, we see that the appearance of these paintings meets what Mondrian writes. For example, as required by the fourth law, the constant equilibrium in these paintings is visualized by the straight line in perpendicular opposition.

However, the first painting (Figure 5) shows that the artist uses the non-color black for a rectangular plane. This rarely occurs in Mondrian's Neoplastic work, for the black is exclusively reserved for the straight lines. The non-color rectangular planes are always in gray or white.

The second painting (Figure 6) is symmetrically composed – if we leave the colors aside. According to the sixth Neoplastic law (“All symmetry shall be excluded.”) this painting is not in conformity with Mondrian's words.

However, for the most part the second state of Mondrian's nineteen paintings and his ‘Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme’ do correspond. But ... Mondrian's message stays invisible in the Neoplastic paintings for the common spectator, and that is: the equivalence of the material and the spirit as visualized in the paintings can also be realized in society.

6. Conclusion

When we look at Mondrian's writings, his texts are almost all about the mission of Neo-Plasticism to come to a ‘culture (society) of pure relationships’. The questionnaire of monsieur Félix Del Marle prompted Mondrian to summarize very concisely the principles and intentions of his Neoplastic canvasses. Although we cannot say that the ‘Principes généraux du Néo-plasticisme’ is a maxim, the painter had never been so pertinent.

I have written this article to enable a better understanding of Mondrian's ‘visual maxims’.

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Notes

1. Photocopied letter. Provenance: RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague. Mondrian Correspondence Project, Folder 23, ‘Letters to Del Marle, Felix, 1925–1927.’
2. Dutch avant-garde periodical ‘*De Stijl*’, founder and editor Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931). It appears from October 1917 till January 1932; in the beginning monthly, later irregularly. Print run: between 120 and 300 copies per issue. Del Marle sent his questionnaire to: Georges Vantongerloo, Vilmos Huszár, Bob Oud, Cornelis van Eesteren, César Domela, and Piet Mondrian.
3. Photocopied manuscripts. Provenance: Mondrian Correspondence Project, Folder 23. (Transcription: Veen (2017), pp. 282–3.)

4. The present translation from French into English has been constructed by the author, and he has tried to be as close as possible to the French wording and punctuation. Other English translations are:
 - Seuphor, M. (n.d. [1956b]). *Piet Mondrian. Life and Work*. New York: Abrams, pp. 166 and 168.
 - Holtzman, H., and M. James (eds). (1984). *Piet Mondrian: The Wall Works 1943–44*. Dallas: Carpenter & Hochman Gallery, pp. 27–9.
 - Holtzman, H., and M. James (eds). (1986). *The New Art – The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Boston: Hall, pp. 214–5.
 - Holtzman, H., and M. James (eds). (1988). *PRO – pro art and architecture* 3 (March 1988), pp. 49–51.
(The 1984 and the 1988 translation are identical.)
Translations in other languages, see Veen, 2017, p. 282.
5. Mondrian is of the opinion that the only legitimate ‘means of imaging’ in painting (two–dimensional) is the rectangular plane. However, in sculpture and architecture (three–dimensional) the rectangular prism (box–shape) is the most important ‘means of imaging’.
6. The parallelism of the lines to the canvas sides does not apply the seventeen diamond paintings. See: Carmean, E. (1979). *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions*. Washington: National Gallery of Art.
7. Photocopied letter. Mondrian Correspondence Project, Folder 63, ‘Letters to Oud, J.J.P., 1920–1935.’ (Photocopied letters.) Mondrian’s studio: 26 rue du Départ, Paris.