

Mondrian's abstraction: chrysalis or colony?

A psychoanalytic and feminist reading

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This essay attempts to interrogate the notion of the female as 'other' in the abstract compositions of early twentieth century Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, notions also addressed in his writings. The existing (Freudian and post-Freudian) psychoanalytical reading of Mondrian's abstract compositions by critic Donald Kuspit, interprets Mondrian's work as sublimation, relating to the *id*, ego and super-ego aspects of the artist's psyche. Kuspit's reading of Mondrian's abstract compositions as a form of sublimation, posits the art work as heroic personal and social redemption. In response to such a reading, feminist critique (specifically feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's third wave feminist discourse around the notion of the 'female as other') is used to dismantle Kuspit's model, and to read Mondrian's abstract works as well as his writings from an alternative (feminist) perspective.

Key words: Abstraction, Freud, Irigaray, Kuspit, Mondrian, Sublimation, Third Wave Feminism

Mondrian se abstraksie: kokon of kolonie? 'n Psigoanalitiese en feministiese interpretasie

Hierdie skryfstuk behels 'n poging om 'n beskouing wat beskryf kan word as die 'vroulikke as die ander' te ondersoek soos wat dit aangetref word in vroeë twintigste eeuse Nederlandse skilder Piet Mondrian se abstrakte komposisies, sowel as in sy skrywe. Bestaande Freudiaanse en post-Freudiaanse psigoanalitiese interpretasies van Mondrian se abstrakte komposisies, soos aangetref in die analise van kuns kritikus Donald Kuspit, word ondersoek. Kuspit interpreteer Mondrian se komposisies as 'n vorm van sublimasie soos wat dit herlei na die *id*, ego en super-ego aspekte van die kunstenaar se psige. In terme van Kuspit se interpretasie kan Mondrian se pogings as heldadige persoonlike en sosiale oorwinning beskou word. In reaksie op laasgenoemde interpretasie, word feministiese konsepte (spesifiek soos wat aangetref kan word in die sogenaamde 'derde golf' feminisme van Luce Irigaray) ingespan om Kuspit se model te ontleed en 'n alternatiewe (feministiese) interpretasie van Mondrian se kuns en idees te bereik.

Sleutelwoorde: Abstraksie, Derde Golf Feminisme, Freud, Irigaray, Kuspit, Mondrian, Sublimasie

We must determine mediations enabling communication and exchange between the genders. But there will be no final synthesis (Luce Irigaray - I love to you: sketch of a possible felicity in history).

As the themes around current notions on gender studies (such as addressed by for instance the conferences "Men and madness: representing male psychopathology and mental disorder in modern and contemporary culture", Manchester Metropolitan University, June 2007; "Masculinity and the other", Balliol College, Oxford University, August 2007, and the 7th European feminist research conference: gendered cultures at the crossroads of imagination, knowledge and politics, Utrecht University, June 2009) seem to indicate, the polarising convention of male privilege, ossified in twentieth century artistic and critical practice, is alive and well, and as such eliciting critical response at present. This paper seeks, in like response, to address the notion of the female as 'other' particularly with regard to the abstract paintings and recorded theories of early twentieth century artist Piet Mondrian. In order to interrogate the role of the female as 'other' in Mondrian's art (a construct which also surfaces in his writings), two theoretical models are brought to bear. The first model entails a Freudian and post-Freudian interpretation (explained below) of art production, specifically as implemented by critic Donald Kuspit, where he adopts the notion of sublimation¹ as it pertains to the *id*² (as propounded by Freud) but also investigates sublimation in terms of the ego and super-ego (which, Kuspit argues, Freud neglected to do). Kuspit's post-Freudian analysis of Modernist abstraction, including his reading of Mondrian's work, is based the premise that art is above all redemptive, individually as well as socially.

The second model implemented here falls within the so-called third wave of feminist critique, of which the work of feminist Luce Irigaray is representative.³ Irigaray's critique of the masculine *versus* feminine construct found in patriarchal structures, (where the masculine

and feminine are represented as specifically *opposite* and sometimes ‘equal’), is useful in an attempt to deconstruct the notion of the female as ‘other’ in Mondrian’s art from a feminist perspective. Thus, two readings of Mondrian (namely Kuspit’s post-Freudian ‘redemptive’ reading of Mondrian versus the feminist, specifically Irigarayan reading implemented here) are juxtaposed in order to answer the question: Is Mondrian’s abstract art redemptive (in terms of rising above certain intra-psychic as well as social ills or neuroses), or merely another instance of the entrenchment of patriarchal hegemony? Mondrian’s *oeuvre* is contextualised in terms of a post-Freudian and feminist reading, respectively, in an attempt to answer this question.

Abstraction above all else

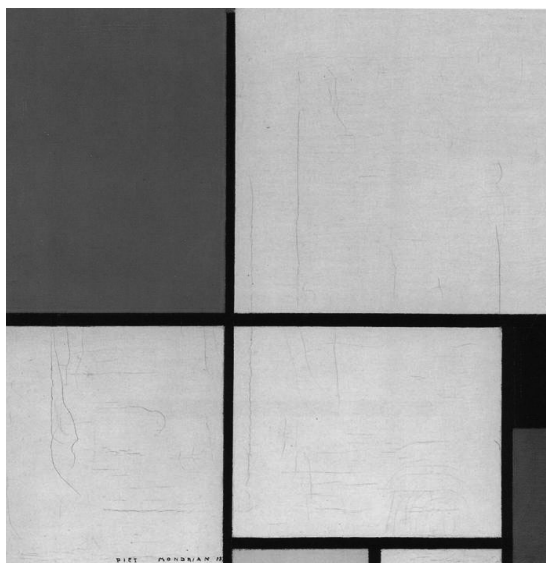


Figure 1
Piet Mondrian, *Composition with red, yellow and blue*, 1928, oil on canvas, 42.2 x 45 cm, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Germany (<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian77.html>).

Mondrian is the co-founder, along with Theo van Doesburg, of the short-lived but influential Dutch art movement known as De Stijl. Mondrian’s mature compositions are among the earliest purely abstract artworks of the twentieth century, banishing even the residual traces of naturalism seen to linger in the fragmented Cubist object. Visually, Mondrian’s mature abstract works (dating from c. 1920) can be described as compositions consisting of red, blue and yellow rectangles, interspersed with white spaces, all delineated by means of straight vertical and horizontal black lines (see figure 1). This ‘style’ was based on a meticulously considered and described theoretical system Mondrian called Neoplasticism. A post-Freudian analysis of Mondrian’s work, as formulated by Kuspit, articulates Mondrian’s abstract language and preoccupations as an attempt at intra-psychic self-integration.⁴ Mondrian’s own view of the role of art seems to substantiate such a reading.

Mondrian’s drive toward total abstraction is linked to his Platonic worldview, a rejection of concrete materiality in favour of an idealised transcendent state. Plato’s Forms, described by Plato (1969: 16) as the abstract essence and ground of all that is tangible, are also taken by Mondrian to represent the ‘real’. The essence of reality is, hence, abstract. Mondrian concluded that only abstracted visual elements – essentialised and extracted from the material environment until no further reduction seemed possible – were suited to conveying a sense of the transcendent state he regarded as the culmination of social evolution. Mondrian’s conflation of the transcendent with the abstract is reflected in his statement (in Holtzman & James 1986: 14) that “art can ...

provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm, perhaps erroneously; for I have read that whatever has form is not yet spiritual ... [art] is nonetheless the path of ascension: away from the material". As to the purpose of his life's work, Mondrian conceived of the artist's social responsibility as pertaining to humanity as a whole. For Mondrian the purpose of art was to transcend physical reality, in lieu of which it could be of no value to mankind (Holtzman & James 1986: 17). Abstract art was for Mondrian the means to a transcendent end. Thus, a non-negotiable metaphysicalist/materialist binary forms the foundation of Mondrian's thought and art. This binary, in which the metaphysical is privileged, is tirelessly explicated and elaborated upon in Mondrian's writing, and repeatedly embodied in his paintings.

The ascetic quality of Mondrian's paintings is mirrored in his personal life (von Wiegand in Sylvester 1997: 132). As regards Mondrian's urge to withdraw from the world – his "militant forgetfulness of the world" as Kuspit (1993: 175) describes it – stemming from, but also contributing to, the artist's feeling of alienation, Sylvester (1997: 133) notes that even when the artist still painted objects, he would paint "one amaryllis ... one tree ... a solitary tower, often with its entrances as if blocked, like a fortress, refusing disruption of its monolithic intactness, its immaculate otherness, its self-sufficient singularity". From a psychoanalytic perspective, a painting such as *Red Mill* (1910-11) (see figure 2) can be interpreted as exaggerated 'over-representation' of the 'self', an exclusionary, defensive 'barricade'. The mill in effect has become a fort. (The *feminist* implications of a representation such as this are addressed below).

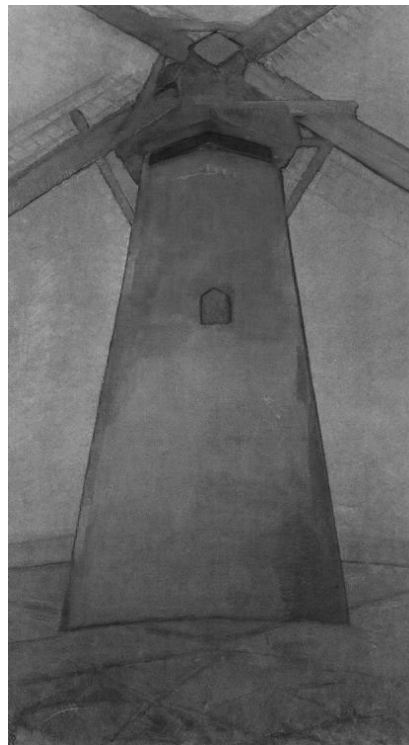


Figure 2
Piet Mondrian, *Red Mill*, 1910-11, oil on canvas.
150 x 86 cm. Gemeentemuseum, the Hague, Netherlands
(<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian23.html>).

Mondrian describes his compositions as articulations of a specific conception of utopia, defined as the manifestation of 'equilibrated relations' in all spheres of life (Kruger 2006: 142). His paintings were intended by the artist to awaken consciousness of this potential utopian state in the viewer, so doing expediting its onset. As such, Mondrian's efforts can be described as a form of 'worldmaking'. James DiGiovanna's ⁵ conception of worldmaking as a kind of conceptual art, where "worldmaking is the goal, and the particular form is the means to worldmaking"

(DiGiovanna online 2007: 115) could be applied to an understanding of Mondrian's abstract works. Mondrian's works, in other words, were not formulated as ends in themselves, but as intimations of a radically new world order, based on a model as different from the extant order as was conceivable by the artist. DiGiovanna (online 2007: 117, 116) describes how, in artworks which detail a world "least like or own", a stronger element of worldmaking is present. Mondrian's efforts might be regarded as an extreme form of this mode of artistic expression, "a form of creative 'projection' that lays out a world". The Platonic element in this approach is evident: for example, Plato's philosopher in *the Republic* is aware that an ideal state of affairs does not exist as yet, but nonetheless acts as a citizen of such a projected country (DiGiovanna online 2007: 118). From an epistemological point of view, and linking this kind of activity (worldmaking) to the psychological dimension of art-making as sublimation and self-integration addressed by Kuspit, DiGiovanna (online 2007: 115) posits the creation of alternative worlds as a way "of coming to know the actual world". One might add that it is also a means of *coming to terms with* perceived shortcomings in the actual world. The particular way in which Mondrian formulated his alternative to the 'real' world, could be regarded as indicative of those aspects of his environment which he found problematic, or threatening, and felt compelled to react against. These aspects can be seen to relate to Mondrian's external environment, as the threat of a material world at war, and equally (or more so) to the artist's intra-psychoic problematisation of the female 'other'. The way in which these discernable 'others' can be seen to manifest in Mondrian's work, is discussed below.

Inner and outer 'others'

For Mondrian, the threat of the 'other' is multifarious. In this essay it is argued that the artist has to fight a battle on not one, but two fronts, namely against (as one might term them), the outer 'other' (or the artist's hostile external environment), and the inner 'other', or fear and/or dread of the feminine.⁶ Attention might be called to Mondrian's art as the product of "spiritual suffering and aspiration" (Kuspit online 2000b) because Kuspit regards the artistic result of Mondrian's psychological strain as testimony to the ability of the psyche not only to survive, but to transform suffering into culturally significant artifacts. Mondrian's conflict with the outer (material) 'other', and his reaction, namely retreat from and an attempt to reform or to neutralise the threat of the material world and society, was shared by a substantial number of his contemporaries. Mondrian, though, seems to have risen above the collective endeavors of his contemporaries. Critic Mathew Shadbolt (online 1996) notes: "[M]any artists attempted ways in which to remove themselves from wartime activities [but] [t]he notion of transcending world disorder ... was arguably no better explored in these [inter-war] years than in the work of ... Piet Mondrian".

Historically, Mondrian found himself in the midst of a society increasingly unable to take refuge in traditional religion, and at the same time suspicious of the positivist doctrine that took its place. In an effort to escape the ensuing dread, early twentieth century artists and writers took to various forms of internationalism, anarchism, new religious utopias and mysticism (Long 1986: 206). The socio-political angst of the era was compounded by the outbreak of the First World War, and it was during this time that Mondrian formulated his theories around the purpose of art. His art (devoid of reference to the material world and redolent of a yearning for the sublime), as well as his intense fastidiousness, are mirrored in his writing, in the role he accords "precision, exactness, orderliness ... concentration, thought, [and] reflection" in 'man's' physical and spiritual transformation (Mondrian 1986d: 263). These aspects of Mondrian's art, life and writing can be interpreted as a struggle to come to grips with the physical environment. Thus the artist can be seen to have sought withdrawal from a world he found to be brutal, but, at

the same time, pro-actively, to have formulated his theory and art as a response to threat in the belief that his abstract art would be a catalyst (Kruger 2006: 145) for the harmonious universe he longed for.

Critic John Berger (in Kuspit 1993: 42) speaks of a new kind of suffering emerging in the first two decades of the twentieth century, where “men fought with themselves about the meaning of events, identity, hope ... [and] became lost within themselves”. The nature of material reality and society were being reconceived, with a resultant disintegration of the psyche, as evidenced for instance in the splintered compositions of the Cubists. The sense of being ‘modern’ entailed reaction to a world so dynamic that it contravened any sense of wholeness for the individual in the world (Kuspit 1993: 90). The tenuous grip on wholeness was further threatened by the very notion of what it meant to be ‘modern’ – increasingly, belief in the self could only be attained at the cost of belief in the ‘other’, resulting in alienation. (Conversely, to be postmodern means to be cynical about the self as well as the ‘other’) (Kuspit 1993: 187). The early twentieth century, with its intensification of a positivist, instrumentalist materialism, was psychically and socially traumatic (Kuspit 1993: 99), resulting in an effort to “turn the world upside down, [creating] ideal projections that put a constructive aura around technology out of a desire that it be socially integrative rather than disintegrative”. In this sense, Mondrian’s representation of harmoniously balanced opposites are psychically conceived as images which are capable of wielding magical power over life (Kuspit 1993: 109).

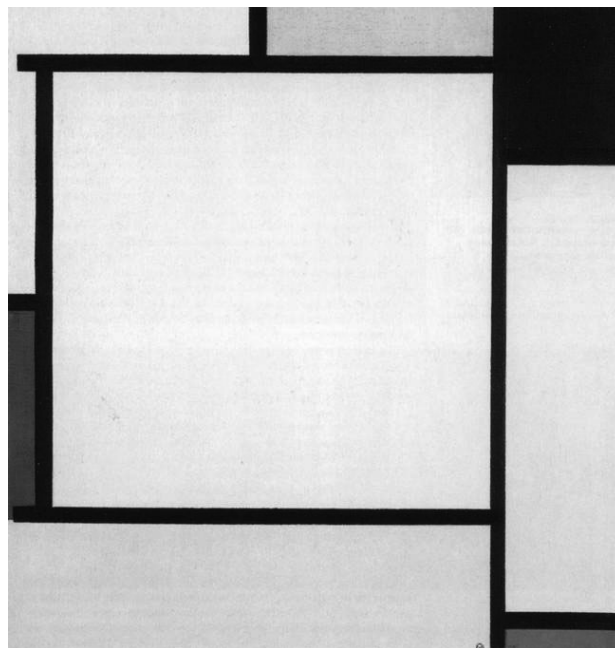


Figure 3
Piet Mondrian, *Composition 2*, 1922, oil on canvas. 55.5 x 53.5 cm.
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, USA
(<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian76.html>).

From the artist’s account of the purpose of art, (namely to make visible Platonic Form which lurks beneath the contingencies of everyday life, and thus ignite universalist consciousness in the viewer and ultimately society), a painting such as *Composition 2* (1922) (see figure 3), is to be read as a physical representation of the transcendent. It is as such a mediation between the ‘Absolute’ and the material world, or, a ‘concrete universal’ (Desmond, 1986: 22).⁷ The horizontal and vertical lines represent the material world at its most stringently distilled, no further reduction of these ‘universal’ constituents seeming possible. Mondrian employs primary colours (plus black and white), for the same reason. The primary colours irreducibly constitute

the visible spectrum. Lastly, Mondrian insisted on the use of the ninety degree angle in his abstract compositions. For Mondrian, the configuration of the ninety degree angle represents the *primary, universal* relational paradigm. Mondrian (1970: 38) states:

In nature, we perceive that all relationship is governed by one relationship above all others: that of extreme opposites. The abstract plastic of relationship expresses this basic relationship determinately – by duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship of position is the most equilibrated because it expresses the relation of extreme opposition in complete harmony.

Thus, the perpendicular, conceived as a catalytic sign and formed by the convergence of the vertical and the horizontal in Mondrian's art, was arguably formulated as a talismanic device to bring about a safe, harmonious utopia.

Mondrian persistently expresses in his writing (spanning three decades, from c. 1914-1944), his yearning for the development of humankind toward a harmonious state, and his art, by Mondrian's own account, was made in a response to this yearning. In 1918 Mondrian (1986a: 43) declares: "If we ... see in today's awful turmoil a storm that will bring our outer life into harmony with our inner life ... [then] we can see *the consciously abstract spirit* at work behind all concrete phenomena" (artist's emphasis). In 1931, in an essay tellingly intermingling the heroic fate of abstract art with the meaning of existence (*The new art – the new life: the culture of pure relationships*), Mondrian (1986d: 258) states: "[I]f we fail to see life's deformations as so many transformations, it is most difficult to say: whatever is, is right". This statement also confirms Kuspit's (1993: 99) description of early abstraction as reflective of the 'principle of hope'. Lastly, against the background of the Second World War, Mondrian (1986b: 375, 378) notes: "If we are living at present [in] perhaps the most terrible time we can image [sic], we must see this as the destroying of oppressive forms and false mutual relations in the world ... At present, true reality – equilibrium of opposite forces – is veiled by oppressive powers". These statements opine that the world is in turmoil, 'unbalanced', but that it is on its way to becoming harmonious. For Mondrian abstract art was central to this transformation.

The Freudian 'other': art as chrysalis

Psychoanalytic theorist and critic Donald Kuspit utilises post-Freudian theory in his analysis of Mondrian's art in order to focus on Mondrian's work as a psychological as well as aesthetic response to early twentieth century social phenomena. In terms of Kuspit's analysis, Mondrian's formulation of a pure, abstract art can be read as an attempt to cocoon the suffering psyche, a sign of human struggle to transcend alienation through transformation and sublimation of the 'other'. From this point of view, Mondrian's seemingly impersonal, abstract compositions point precisely to his most personal vulnerabilities. As such, these compositions can be seen to cushion or contain the threat of the 'other' and the artwork becomes a nest, or a shell, created to house the psychological elements of strain. Or the artwork can be described as a chrysalis, which not only contains but also transforms personal dread into culturally significant visual images.

The psychoanalytic link between existential angst and abstract art is also explored by twentieth century art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), who bases his explanation of the creation of abstract art on exactly this phenomenon of a feeling of unease in the world. According to Worringer (1967: 15), naturalistic art, or art which depicts, for instance, fruit or athletes, is based on the 'urge to empathy', the outcome of a "happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world". The naturalist artist, in other words, sees himself wherever he looks and finds his natural environment pacifying and beautiful. On the other hand, the 'urge to abstraction' is explained as the result of great inner

unrest. Worringer (1967: 16) describes the bewildered abstract artist as “[t]ormented by the entangled inter-relationship and flux of the phenomena of the outer world ... dominated by an immense need for tranquility ... and a refuge from appearances”.⁸ In this way Jackson Pollock’s action painting can be described as an “arena for self-creation” (Rosenberg in Kuspit online 2000a). Here, the artwork becomes a psychological self actualisation within a sanctified and safe space. Mondrian’s carefully formulated, purposefully abstract art can similarly be read as a compulsive urge to create a ‘landscape’ of tranquility – a space far removed from angst caused by confrontation with the outer ‘other’.

Kuspit’s use of Freudian, and later post-Freudian theory, in his analysis of Modernist abstraction is not unproblematic. Not only was Freud singularly unsympathetic toward artistic endeavor to begin with, but his theory is also ludicrously skewed toward the centralisation of male sexuality and the phallus in all matters human: child development, the unconscious motivations behind cultural phenomena, the personal psyche of the individual, ‘neurotic’ behaviour and deviance, and so forth. Broude and Garrard (2005: 10, 22) respond critically to the patriarchal bias in Freudian theory, where the female psyche and sexuality are defined in terms of a masculine model which posits masculinity as the default gender of the human race, with the resultant classification of all females as psychologically crippled from birth by definition. Such an approach to the contextualisation of art production and art is detrimental to a sympathetic or even neutral conception as well as reception thereof. For instance, according to Freud’s notion of the ‘pleasure principle’, art is, above all else, an infantile response to the *id*’s need for omnipotent power. In this way art, like religion, is according to Freud the outcome of the unconscious desire for infantile satisfaction (Kuspit 1993: 105). The artist, blindly driven by his *id*, and immaturely unable to face ‘reality’, creates artworks in a neurotic, mal-adaptive response to the demands of the ‘reality principle’ and society. (Noticeably, Freud posits an uncritical notion of ‘reality’, which forms the basis of his pathologisation of any construct which falls outside his definition of reality).

In Kuspit’s earlier writings on Modernist abstraction he is in agreement with Freud’s relegation of art, religion and neurosis to the realm of psychic malfunction. In his essay *a Freudian note on abstract art*, Kuspit (1993: 113) notes “the religion of art which purity [abstraction] implies puts art in the perilous, unrealistic position of religion in general” and elsewhere (1993: 119): the “cul-de-sac communication ... of unintelligible abstract art is ... an incommunicado condition ... [its] refusal to represent the world of shared reality ... is at bottom defensive regression to a primitive world”. In this light, early abstract art is understood and described as a ‘psychic compromise’, “a matter of psychotic self-deception and failure of reality testing”, a pathological, marginal phenomenon, a perverse ritual of gratification, a pseudo-pleasurable plaything, a species of symptom formation (Kuspit 1993: 144, 314, 325, 309, 331) or, at best, a harmless illusion, “not particularly relevant in the larger scheme of things, however relevant for this or that ‘obsessional’ individual” (Kuspit 2000c: 97).

Kuspit himself eventually comes to critique Freud’s assumptions and approach and adopts what is referred to here as a post-Freudian model. Kuspit points out how Freud is amusingly defensive toward/ envious of the artist. Freud (in Kuspit 2005: 100) describes the ‘general enmity’ that exists between artists and those of a scientific persuasion, and also equates scientific work with men’s work, whereas art is women’s work. Nonetheless, or perhaps by virtue of the artist’s seductive and deceptive virtuosity, he (the feminised man, or artist), possesses a “master key to open with ease all female hearts” and has won, “through his fantasy [his art] ... honour, power, and the love of women” (Freud in Kuspit 2000c: 100, 105). Freud’s alienation from and resultant hostility toward the female, and, accordingly, toward art, is revealed – hostility that at the same time clearly articulates a longing for integration with this demonised ‘other’.

Happily, Freudian theorist Harry Trosman (in Kuspit 1993: 332) observes, psychoanalysis has moved beyond Freud in its understanding of the psyche as well as of art. What this entails is not the rejection of Freud's construct of the psyche in its entirety, but a more equanimous application thereof in the analysis of art and the understanding of the psychic drive of the artist. Kuspit maintains Freud's three-tiered structure of the psyche, consisting of *id*, ego and super-ego, as well as the notion of art as sublimation, but reacts against what he regards as Freud's inability to move beyond the *id*-inclination in the artist, or the artist's seemingly convulsive, infantile reactionism. A more balanced and sensible view of art-making includes for Kuspit the workings of the ego (adult/conscious) aspects of the artist's psyche in the production process. This is not to completely discard the role of the *id* in the artist's psyche, still present in the artist's striving for "perfection in form ... preserving some aspect of infantile narcissism in the work, which is an ideal extension of his or her self" (Trosman in Kuspit 1993: 336). This interpretation moves away from the purely psycho-sexual interpretation of art and its denigration as infantile regression. Now the artist can be seen to contribute constructively to society and to the cultural sphere. She or he, no longer a "glorified neurotic in rabid pursuit of instinctual gratification", in effect produces, by harnessing both subconscious and conscious forces, "a socially meaningful symbol" as opposed to an "asocial hallucination" (Kuspit 2000c: 104, 103). This adapted notion of sublimation is key to Kuspit's contextualisation of Mondrian's abstract art as the aesthetic transfiguration of suffering (Kuspit 1993: 31). In the act of sublimation, the artist channels potentially antisocial behaviour into more acceptable modes of expression. The point for Kuspit is that the notion of sublimation becomes more valuable when the artist is seen to sublimate also in part from a heroic attempt at self-integration. In this way art can be seen as "a relatively social means of withdrawing" (Kuspit 1993: 120), or conscious and constructive dissent from the status quo – its deconstruction for the sake of its 'better' reconstruction. This reading emphasises the agency, as opposed to the subconscious drive, of the artist. The artwork is no longer dismissed and marginalised as a substitute, but can be interpreted as an act of reformation and transformation (of aspects within the artist's psyche as well as within the cultural sphere), in the process "creating a new space for civilized discourse" (Kuspit 1993: 323).

Kuspit also takes notions on the *super-ego* into consideration when contextualising the production of art as sublimation. The super-ego encapsulates the conscience and addresses ethical considerations beyond the sphere of the ego/individual. This argument, of the role of not only the *id* but also the ego and super-ego in the production of art, is salient in an analysis of Mondrian's abstract compositions, as the latter were expressly positioned (by Mondrian) to address collective social destiny. For instance Mondrian (in Holtzman & James, 1986: 17) specifically posits abstract art as of value to *man* (emphasis added). In like vein, Kaplan (in Kuspit 1993: 336) notes the way in which the transpersonal aspect of the super-ego can serve to liberate the individual from the "tyrannies of personal history". Thus interpreting the ego and super-ego motivation behind art production, in conjunction with Freud's original conception art as the sublimation of 'basal' drives (as represented by the *id*), it is possible to interpret Mondrian's abstract compositions as manifestations of psychic defense – "signs (not unlike scars) of suffering" (Kuspit 1993: 31), as consciously addressing threatening external conditions, and lastly, as self-transcending attempts at reforming humanity at large.

Beyond this psychoanalytic reading of Mondrian's abstract art as a 'shield' against the rigours of modern life, and ultimately as psychologically and socially redemptive, an approach adopted by Kuspit, this essay attempts to assess this reading as well as Mondrian's abstraction from a feminist perspective.

The feminist ‘other’: harmony or hegemony?

Thus far it has been possible to relate Mondrian’s development of abstraction to his sense of alienation from a post-war world in turmoil, or the horrors of the outer ‘other’. Yet this essay seeks to address Mondrian’s struggle with an inner ‘other’ (which can upon analysis of his writings be identified with the feminine), from a feminist perspective. This reading of Mondrian’s ‘framing’ of the feminine is facilitated by feminist Luce Irigaray’s deconstruction of the male/female binary as a patriarchal strategy to ‘cancel’ or ‘neutralise’ the feminine.

It is possible to detect the psychological and social problematisation of the feminine in Mondrian’s art and writings and the subsequent demonisation of the feminine, albeit a demonisation that is polite and indirect when compared to the sentiments of his contemporary Modernists, the Futurists. An early Futurist manifesto reads: “We intend to exalt aggressive action ... militarism, patriotism ... and scorn for women ... We ... will fight ... feminism ... [and] cowardice ... Art, in fact can be nothing but violence” (Marinetti 1973: 21-23). Nor is Mondrian’s stance as openly vitriolic as Nietzsche’s (1997: 101), for whom woman is welcome not even in the kitchen. Yet, whilst Mondrian’s construct of universal harmony is ostensibly predicated on the notion of ‘balanced’ opposites, his writings show a bias toward the male, and qualities which the artist associates with the masculine, namely rationality, objectivity, universality, truth, sacredness, sublimity and transcendence (Kruger 2006: 187). Conversely, the feminine is equated with the material, the polluted, the subjective, the profane, the flawed, the individual and the particular, with nature (Mondrian 1986b: 369). In this Mondrian shows himself to be typically Modernist, as, according to Broude & Garrard (2005: 16), Modernist abstraction’s agenda was consonant with “art’s withdrawal from the traditional arena of struggle with female nature and its safe removal to a ‘higher’ plane”. In this way Mondrian’s relegation of the feminine to the ‘flawed’ and evolutionary redundant natural sphere can be read as an indication of the privileging of the male in his *oeuvre*.

Mondrian is equally insistent on the importance of rationalism and objectivity in his progressive utopia (Kruger 2006: 174). Broude and Garrard address the gendering of Impressionism (whereby it was originally regarded as masculine and scientific, and hence superior, and later as too material, and hence feminine and inferior), but their observations on the ‘gendering of style’ in early twentieth century abstraction are equally applicable to Mondrian. They state (Broude and Garrard 2005: 15-16) of the early twentieth century Modernists:

Turning away from the material world of nature and denigrating positivist science, they claimed for themselves the presumably superior (masculine) position of conceptual creativity, generated in the mind, as contrasted with the passive and mechanical (feminine) recording of mere sensory impressions.

In his writings, Mondrian consistently invokes the dualist principle as a metaphysical/material construct (which can be linked to his reaction to the ‘outer other’ addressed above) and as a male/female binary. For instance, in a 1920 letter to van Doesburg, Mondrian (in Holtzman & James 1986: 132) ponders: “[I]t seems to me that the only way to deepen word and meaning is by the juxtaposition of opposites ... man - woman ... boy - girl ... etc. ... but does every[thing] have an opposite?”, and in an article written in the same year, Mondrian (1986c: 143) states: “[T]he New Plastic in the ... arts is exteriorized by a ... duality of opposition: *active and passive, interior and exterior, masculine and feminine, mind and matter*; which are one in the universal” (artist’s own emphasis). The pairing of male/female attributes is not new, and Mondrian was greatly influenced by the analysis of this construct by H.P. Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society.⁹ Blavatsky, in *Isis unveiled* (1877), traces the notion of the universe consisting of opposites, or the archetypal male/female duality, back to Phoenician as well as ancient Greek thought (Blavatsky 1893: 61, xxvi).

Having assimilated Blavatsky's dualist construct Mondrian (1970: 38) states: "In nature, we perceive that all relationship is governed by one relationship above all others: that of extreme opposites. [Neoplastic art] expresses this basic relationship [as] the perpendicular ... [as] manifestations of the inward and the outward ... the matter mind duality". It is around this duality that Mondrian's presentiments about the feminine, despite his invocation of the ideal of balance, emerge. A Derridian deconstruction of Mondrian's texts underscores the order in which these opposites are mentioned: man/woman, boy/girl, active/passive, interior/exterior, masculine/feminine. In this implied hierarchy of significance, the first term is characteristically regarded as central and essential, the second as marginal and supplemental (Minor 1994: 165). In Mondrian's writings such binary opposites are multifarious – universal/individual (Mondrian 1986a: 41-42), sacred/profane, eternal/temporal, culture/nature – and function as manifestations of one and the same duality.

Mondrian's invocation of the male/female binary raises two problematic notions: firstly, Mondrian means to assert its 'harmonised' and 'balanced' character. Such a conception of 'balance' is expressly rejected by Irigaray as a patriarchal ruse, a cover for its actual oppressive 'cancellation' or 'neutralisation' of the feminine (Irigaray 1996: 41). The second problematic assumption around the dualistic construct (symbolised in



Figure 4
Piet Mondrian. *Amaryllis*. 1910. Watercolor over pen. 49.2 x 31.5 cm. Private collection (<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian19.html>).

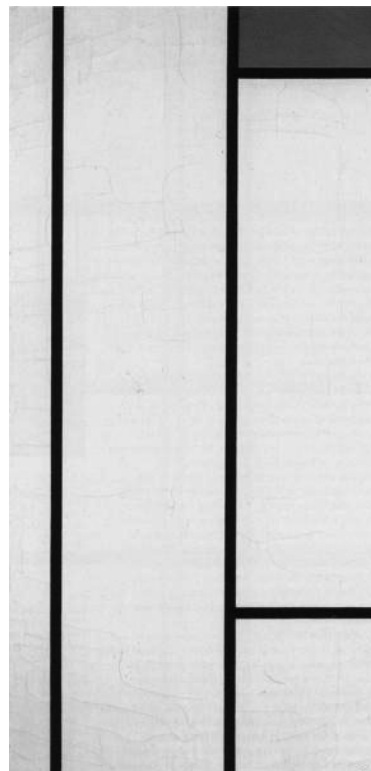


Figure 5
Piet Mondrian. *Vertical Composition with Blue and White*. 1936. Oil on canvas. 121 x 59 cm. Kunstsammlung Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany (<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian58.html>).

Mondrian's painting by the perpendicular), is Mondrian's assertion that the duality represented by the male/female binary is after all 'one in the universal'¹⁰ This relates to

Irigaray's (1996: 99) objection to the superficially harmonising aspect of the duality as, beneath the surface, it is conceived as 'singular' and as 'universal', constituting the re-assertion (tacitly denied) of the patriarchal phallic spectre. Thus it might be argued that neither the 'dualism' nor the 'universal' in Mondrian's work and thought conflate with the artist's stated search for a 'balanced relation'.

Reading two paintings by Mondrian, namely *Amaryllis* (1910) and *Vertical Composition with Blue and White* (1936) (see figures 4 and 5) from this (Irigarayan) perspective, the 'universal' construct positioned superficially by Mondrian as 'duality' is here more overtly phallic than in works such as *Composition with red, yellow and blue* (1928) and *Composition 2* (1922) (see figures 1 and 3 above). The vertical, conflated by Mondrian with the 'ethereal' and the masculine (read phallic), is here non-negotiably affirmed.

In her interpretation of the 'equalisation' of the feminine and the masculine as the reinstatement of a covert patriarchal hegemony, Irigaray does not mean to dispute that the female can indeed be differentiated from the male, and she in fact labours to emphasise that "across the whole world there are, there are only, men and women ... The natural is at least two ... speculation about the ... universal forgets that nature is not *one*... this *one* does not exist" (1996: 47, 35). The point is that, whilst there are indisputably men and women, to claim an abstract 'equality' is to submit to a patriarchal ruse. For Irigaray (1996: 27) "claiming [as a woman] to be equal to a man is a serious ethical mistake". The reason for this is that the female 'equality' in question is still measured against a male paradigm. An inversion of this statement shows its incongruity more clearly: it is not widely professed that men should strive to become 'equal' to women. For Irigaray, the claim to universality amounts to male colonisation of the human psyche. The notion of universality is tantamount to "confusing the [male] part for the whole ... [creating] a factitious double totality" based upon "pseudo-absolutes" (Irigaray 1996: 36). Similarly she notes that "the spirit Hegel speaks of turns out to be less absolute than he thought" (Irigaray 1996: 55). This universalising colonisation is perpetrated in the light of masculine failure to accept its limits (*ibid*). When Mondrian (1986b: 369) invokes Voltaire to the effect that: "'Man perfects himself as he departs from nature'", his meaning is clear. What the artist is longing for is not so much the balancing of the male and female elements, as the masculinisation, and hence diffusion of, the feminine. Of primary importance for Mondrian is the imperative to internalise, or purify, the female, precisely because "the male does not become obscured by uniting with the *purified* female, but only by uniting with the outward [impure] female" (Mondrian 1986a: 67). It is thus possible to see that the primary objective of Mondrian's increased abstraction (the limitation/elimination of the natural/female) is *not* balance, but an attempted cancellation of the otherness of the female.

Relating the mirage of equality behind the 'balanced' dual construct to her work on language, Irigaray (1996: 61) notes how, in a patriarchal construction of semantics and grammar (where 'all' language is 'male' language),¹¹ there is instead of a particularised, individualised 'other', "only an other me". This appropriative territorialism of language is denoted as a 'phallic field' by feminist writer Shannon Winnubst. One might compare Mondrian's grid-like compositions to a colonising 'phallic field'. Firstly, Winnubst (online 1999: 14) argues that dyadic logics (i.e. dualism masquerading as constituted of the feminine *and* the masculine), simply entail the re-inscription of the phallic field, characterised by its "gridlike performance of singular positions and demarcated – active and passive – roles". It is the same phallic field described by Foucault (in Winnubst online 1999: 15) as being "almost everywhere". Similarly, Mondrian conceived of his compositions as representative of a potentially infinite spatial continuum (Kruger 2006: 134-135), understood to be 'universal'. In this, Mondrian's grids can be seen to embed the notion of the 'absolute or 'universal' as masculine. The grid, deceptively integrative, is in effect (like

language) “a phallic structure that allows strict definition, clear demarcation, precise territorial markers” (Winnubst 1999: 25). It might be noted that in Mondrian’s abstract compositions the lines form an inviolable border between the planes, unwavering and assertive. Their forbidding gravitas reminds of Freud’s view (in Kuspit 1993: 318) that “[i]t is simply a fact that the truth cannot be tolerant”. The way in which Mondrian describes his Neoplastic style, his univocal insistence on a precise application thereof, and Neoplasticism’s stated ‘universal’ import can therefore be seen to fall within the mode of phallic re-inscription. Mondrian (1970: 54-55, 49) declares:

Abstract-real painting ... possesses an exact mathematical means of expression ... first, reducing naturalistic colour to primary colour; second, reducing colour to plane; third, delimiting colour – so that it appears as a unity of rectangular planes ... the universal is plastically expressed as the absolute – in line by straightness, in colour by planarity and purity, [in] relationship by equilibrium ... the aim of art is to express the absolute, this is the content (artist’s emphasis).

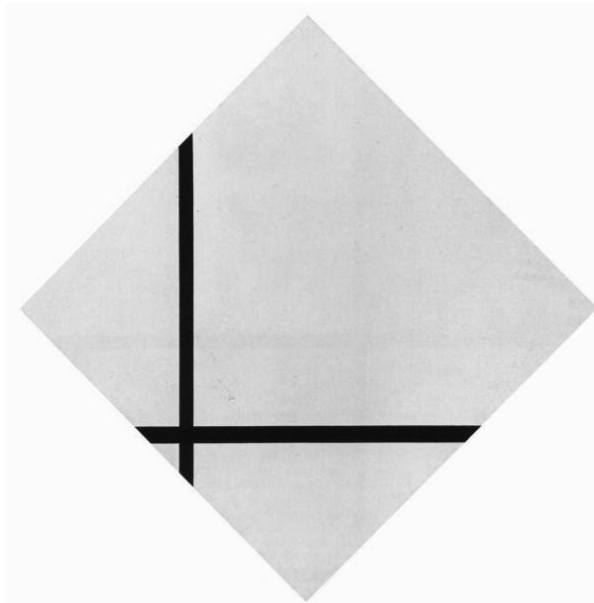


Figure 6
Piet Mondrian. *Composition with two lines*. 1931.
Oil on canvas. Diagonal 114 cm. Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands (<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/mondrian/mondrian54.html>).

Mondrian emphasises the need to *reduce* and *delimit* in order to create what ‘appears as a unity’, all in the name of the absolute.

The phenomenon of ‘other’ which, on closer inspection, is in reality the ‘same’, can furthermore be demonstrated visually by rotating Mondrian’s compositions at ninety degrees. This also holds true in Mondrian’s so-called ‘lozenge’ compositions (see figure 6). The lozenge compositions were adopted by Mondrian not in order to introduce the diagonal, but in order to *emphasise* the vertical and horizontal aspects, (Kruger 2006: 137), as well as the grid’s potential to exceed the boundaries of the canvas and infiltrate the implied spatial continuum, thereby appropriating it, or, *becoming* it (the continuum). Here, the perpendicular angle, conflated with the subject (in this case the artist), is less about the balancing of opposites than about marking the centre.

Irigaray reacts to the centralising aspect of phallogocentric praxis by disabusing herself of duality altogether. As demonstrated in figure 6, nothing changes when ‘substituting’ the masculine with the ‘feminine’, regardless of whether this ‘feminine’ is an actual entity or merely

a neutralised mirage. Refusing to engage in the Lacanian imperative to either 'be' or to 'have' the phallus (Winnubst 1999: 28), which is comparable with the Hegelian master/slave relationship, Irigaray (1996: 20) notes "it is not a matter of changing this or that within a horizon already defined ... It is a question of changing the horizon itself". Hence, Irigaray places the feminine *outside* or *beyond* the boundaries of the grid or phallic field. The feminine, not appearing 'here', is placed in an indeterminate 'elsewhere'. Winnubst (1999: 26) notes how Irigaray "articulates this 'elsewhere'" in terms of the erotics of the feminine morphology, "where woman's pleasure outstrips the classic phallogocentric representation of sexuality: her pleasure is 'everywhere.' In being 'everywhere' ... it is nowhere': it cannot be located; it has no place".

In Irigaray's synopsis, an alternative to the dualism which turns out to be a cancellation of the feminine lies in the recognition of the *embodied* differences between the masculine and the feminine, as opposed to an abstract, transcendent undifferentiated absolute. In this way the feminine and the masculine each recognise their own limitation as part of a construct, and, in the process recognise each other. Such a recognition would nullify the deadlocked appropriating dualism constituted by the 'grid'. Irigaray (1996: 105) states: "I recognize you signifies that you are, that you exist, that you become. With this recognition, I mark you, I mark myself with incompleteness ... Neither you nor I are the whole nor the same".

Conclusion

This essay has implemented a psychoanalytic as well as a feminist interpretation of Mondrian's abstract compositions, informed by Mondrian's writing on the nature and importance of Neoplastic theory and praxis. The question as to whether Mondrian's abstraction constitutes a redemptive and heroic act of sublimation and self-integration, or whether his professed formulation of a harmonious male/female duality constitutes, instead, patriarchal appropriation, has formed the basis of the present inquiry. In post-Freudian terms, as explicated by Kuspit, Mondrian's mature work can be read as the outcome of psychic maneuvers to integrate threatening aspects of the 'other'. Against the background of the traumatic commencement of the twentieth century, the psychological violation of a World War as well as the more insidious modern sense of alienation, such a reading seems tenable. Mondrian's abstract works can be contextualised as the creation of a safe space, or even of an 'other' world. Positivism and materialism (along with bourgeois banality), having been implicated in the disaster of war and the seeming disintegration of social coherence, become the enemy. Reactively, Mondrian insists that abstraction is the only possible option.

The use of Freudian constructs (notions around the *id*, ego and super-ego as it relates to the process of sublimation) were utilised by Kuspit in this regard (the psychoanalytic reading of Mondrian's art) but not uncritically. Kuspit (1993: 303, 325) 'revises' Freudian analysis, which hence becomes less 'abusive' than traditional applied psychoanalytical interpretation, where art "in the face of the psychoanalytic stare ... turns into a symptom", disregarding what for Kuspit constitutes art's (conscious) civilising intentions. For Kuspit the artwork ameliorates, on a personal level, the artist's potentially overwhelming anxiety, becomes "an obscure but telling sign" (Kuspit 1993: 163) of her/his particular sense of alienation. On a wider level the artwork mediates between the artist's personal desires, (subconscious as well as conscious, and as relates to the conscience) and the social construct of what it means to be 'civil'.

Exactly what such 'civilisation' entails is, nonetheless, open to critique, especially to feminist critique. From a feminist point of view, Mondrian's art, far from being psychologically and socially integrative and 'civilising', constitutes auto-referential phallogocentrism as mandated by the hegemony of the seemingly inescapable 'phallic field'. In the feminist reading of

Mondrian's art and writing attempted here, as informed by third wave feminist deconstruction of the notion of the 'feminine as other', and by the work of feminist Luce Irigaray in particular, an effort was made to correlate Mondrian's compositions (and statements) to a masculinist refusal to acknowledge the *materially* constitutive role of the feminine, intra-psychically as well as socio-culturally. The theoretical construct of the male/female binary recast by Mondrian as the 'balanced' perpendicular, was dismantled, in order to show the 'ground' of Mondrian's so-called universality to be skewed toward, or rather to consist of nothing other than, the masculine.

Taking Mondrian's compositions to be embodiments of the phallic field of patriarchal discourse, it can be argued that Mondrian's art and writing are misconstrued when interpreted as redemptive or integrative. Alternatively it might be *conceded* that the artist was indeed locked in a noble struggle to rise above the threat posed by the 'other', specifically the 'feminine as other', but that he (the artist) can be seen to have failed in this regard. Such efforts, from an Irigarayan point of view, were doomed to failure, as the artist was unable to conceive of a construct outside the phallic field of totalisation. Arguably even the effort of 'heroic battle' falls well within the boundaries of phallic endeavor. In conclusion, the interpretation of Mondrian's abstract art as an edifying sign of internal (male) struggle, which, for Kuspit, is not isolated from the evolution of the broader cultural discourse of what it might 'mean' to be human, is rejected. In an ominous tone the *dénouement* of Mondrian's (1986a: 68) explication of the new abstraction reads: "Because harmony in ... nature ... is very relative, *man is compelled to bring it to a constant and determinate expression* – in one way or another" (artist's emphasis). Irigaray's deft disentanglement from the master/slave imperative turns the male compulsion Mondrian speaks of and seeks to execute into self-absorbed infiltration of an 'other' no longer there.

Notes

1. The term sublimation is used here to describe the process of re-directing the energy of primitive instincts toward "a more elevated (intellectual, artistic, ethical, religious) quest" (Mautner 2000: 547).
2. The *id* is described by Freud as the infantile unconscious who's unreasonable and potentially dangerous demands are regulated by the *ego*. The *ego* is responsible for conscious behaviour, and as such represents the adult elements in the human psyche. The *ego* is, in turn, regulated by the super-*ego*, or conscience (Treffry 1998: 766, 495).
3. Third wave feminism can, succinctly, be described as a development of feminism (more or less from the late nineteen-eighties on) which is "always intensely concerned with the ethics of the *other*" (emphasis added), and a refusal to conceive of gender in terms of dualistic oppositionality (Shildrick 2004: 69-70). Here the 'other' does not relate to the notion of the '*female* as other', but refers to social and cultural diversity overlooked by feminist theory of the nineteen sixties and seventies (the so-called 'second wave' of feminism). The latter is characterised by a materialist analysis of the socio-economic conditions underlying female exclusion and a drive toward political activism
- (Howie & Tauchert 2004: 38) spurred on by the 'essentialisation' of women as a singular, un-differentiated group. Such essentialisation has subsequently come to be viewed as a generalisation predicated on the experience of white, privileged women (Stone 2004: 87). In this essay Irigaray's attempts at dismantling what she regards as the divisive/neutralising tendency latent in the dualistic male/female construct, pertains.
4. Power (online 2007) states that self-integration is sometimes attained "through the exclusion of important parts of the self" but that this can be seen to lead to certain personality disorders and even psychosis. Preferable to this is the constructive integration of disparate parts of the 'self-concept'. Kuspit, in regarding Mondrian's art as redemptive, might be seen to imply the latter 'positive' form of self-integration.
5. DiGiovanna's work in the field of philosophy in art and aesthetics focuses on the themes of self-creation and the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.
6. Here, the inner 'other' as feminine is recast as nature, in which Mondrian sees duplicity, decay and stagnation. The exteriorisation ('projection') nevertheless reflects an internal conflict.

7. Mondrian (1918b: 29) describes the 'concrete universal' nature of the abstract painting as follows: "*De nieuwe beelding is abstract-reëel, omdat zij staat tusschen het absoluut-abstracte en het natuurlijk, concreet-reëele. Zij is niet zöo abstract als de gedachte-abstractie en zij is niet zöo werkelijk als de tastbare realiteit*".
8. Worringer's theory on abstraction (based on the psychic imperative to create images which do not directly reflect the material environment), can also be related to Freud's notion of the 'death instinct'. The death instinct is described as the "force behind the principle of constancy" (Kuspit 1993: 167), that is, the effort to establish a tensionless state of being relating to inorganic existence, or death. At the same time "the fantasy of [death] also acknowledges that we experience ourselves as half dead and half alive, in effect hovering on the border between the two states. This is the quintessential experience of modern life. Art also struggles with it" (Kuspit 1993: 172).
9. Mondrian's conception of harmony as the balancing of all opposites has its roots in theosophical doctrine. Mondrian joined the Dutch chapter of the Society in 1909. Mondrian did not make light of his theosophical leanings, stating (in Blotkamp 1986: 103-104) that he "got everything from the Secret Doctrine [of Blavatsky]," and further that "[i]t is Neoplasticism that is purely a theosophical art".
10. For an explication of how Mondrian's dualism as a manifestation of monism see Kruger (2006: 148-153).
11. For a clarification of Irigaray's fieldwork on language and how the female subject is subsumed in spoken encounters (at least in Romantic languages), see her chapter *She forgotten between use and exchange* (in Irigaray 1996).

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