

Piet Mondrian's Intuitive Neo-Plastic Art and Zen Notion of Mu-shin

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Abstract

Reviewing scholarly materials pertinent to prominent Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), one faces perplex interpretations of his essays based on Western thought such as Hegelism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Theosophy. This research strives to shed a novel light on Mondrian's esoteric essays in respect to the pivotal notion of "pure intuition" in Neo-Plastic art from antirational standpoint of Zen Buddhism. To this end, the concepts of "inferior intellect" and "pure intuition", discussed in Mondrian's essays, are confronted with an antirational approach of Zen in disclosure of truth. Moreover this paper chronologically depicts the kinships between the pivotal Zen concept of *mu-shin* (no-mind) and Mondrian's notion of pure intuition as a universal vision which is further exemplified through three Neo-Plastic artworks representing three phases of Mondrian's artistic career. The results of this paper illuminate Mondrian's quasi-philosophical essays within the role of "pure intuition" through the ideology of Zen Buddhism.

Keywords: Piet Mondrian, pure intuition, Zen, no-mind, *mu-shin*, *wu-shin*

Spirituality: A Significant Movement in European Early Modernism

In the process developing representational (figurative) art to pure abstract art in the 20th century, scholars envisage various factors. Among the most seminal influences are two spiritual movements—Theosophy and Anthroposophy—formed under the main tenets of late 19th and early 20th European occultism. These spiritual creeds totally revolutionized the prolonged religious world-view of artists into a secularized spiritual vision. Indeed, through the decline of the religious-oriented doctrines, the transcendental teachings of Theosophy and Anthroposophy, proposed and developed by seminal figures like Madame Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), Rudolf Steiner

(1861-1925), and George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949), became the best substitution for the old concept of religion among modern artists in the 20th century (Barasch, 1998; King, 1998, p. 22). Thus, with the emergence of Abstract art, the artists gave priority to “spirituality” over “religion”. Both art historians Sixten Ringbom and Robert Welsh clearly stated the robust tendency of artists toward spiritualism. To this end, Robert Rosenblum called modern artists “spiritual seekers” and “mystics” in the beginning of the 20th century (Kokkinen, 2013, pp. 14-15).

The occult tradition, when considered as the main foundation of theory of Abstract art, is aimed at revealing the enigmatic beauty and truth in nature and cosmos without any dependence on rational and intellectual means (Barasch, 1998, pp. 299-300). It is noteworthy that the mystical insight of occult was steadily replaced with the doctrine of Theosophy founded in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky. As a matter of fact, two key published books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) were highly influential texts which inspired 20th century artists. In short, the main mission of Theosophy was the attainment of “universal brotherhood of humanity” as an efficient solution in terminating the prolonged tension between science and religion stemmed from Darwin’s theory of evolution (Kramer, 2013, p. 2). In contrast to Darwin’s theory, Theosophy sought the evolution of spirituality in Man from the physical to divine based on cosmic worldview.

Ideologically speaking, Theosophical teachings were in direct contrast with positivist insights in which the latter sought truth through empirical and intellectual means while the former endorsed the metaphysical and intuitive approach toward the realization of so-called mystical truth. According to the premises of Theosophy, all things should be perceived as spirit. Rudolf Steiner further delineates the spiritual essence of Theosophy as follows: “Everything that is matter is in fact spirit, it is the external appearance of the spirit” (Barasch, 1998, p. 301). Hence Theosophy is aimed towards unification of matter and spirit in the attainment of mystical and hidden truth. Indeed, Theosophy chiefly sought to reveal the so-called enigmatic truth in nature and cosmos on the basis of “antirational” and “antiscientific” way of investigation (Barasch, 1998, pp. 299-300).

It was during the emergence of Theosophy as a spiritual movement when prominent Abstract painters like Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian were deeply influenced by its teachings¹ concerning the revelation of mystical truth through abstraction of form (corporeality) in painting. In fact, Theosophy equipped these artists (including Mondrian) to metaphysical vision based on the “ancient wisdom” and cosmic rules of existence (Hall, 2002). Among these four artists, Piet Mondrian was influenced by the teachings of Theosophy when he joined the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909. For Mondrian, Theosophy—in contrast to the old Calvinist² tradition of his father—was the most appropriate ideological scheme for the fulfillment of his avant-garde artistic theories (Seuphor, 1956). Thus, it was through acquaintance with Theosophy that Mondrian formulated his Neo-Plastic art to the ultimate level of abstraction.

Mondrian's Intuitive Approach towards Neo-Plastic Art

Considering the profound impact of Theosophy on Abstract painters, it is not surprising to encounter Mondrian's concept of "pure intuition" in his essays. On this account, he spells out his Neo-Plastic³ art as a result of pure intuition which is the product of "deepened emotions" and "conscious or heightened intellect" (Mondrian, 1926b, p. 204). Holtzman, an intimate friend of Mondrian, clearly states this matter as follows: "The paintings [Mondrian's paintings] are the result of "pure intuition," of direct experience through the means of expression—for which there can be no substitute..." (1986, p. 1). Indeed, Mondrian holds that beauty and the universal⁴ are expressed through the use of pure intuition which is the synthesis of the ultimate degree of intellect and emotions. However Mondrian achieves this state of consciousness through cultivation of self-awareness by purification of all subjective/individual/particular feelings and intellect. Mondrian envisages this heightened degree of awareness as "conscious intuition" which is emancipated from subjective vision:

Intuition, the strongest quality in art, preserved the truly plastic over the centuries. In our time, modern man's *conscious* intuition frees this plastic from every impurity. Our present thought is still full of imperfection. Impurities accumulated over the centuries dull the clarity of our vision. We must *recover our clear vision and renew our conception* (Mondrian, 1924, p. 191).

In spite of the aforementioned crucial role of pure intuition in the construction of Neo-Plastic art, there is a noticeable lack in elucidation of this concept in Western thought. Indeed, much of the attention of scholars is paid in affiliation to Mondrian's ideological scheme (pertinent to dual system of oppositions, concept of evolution, and so on) with interlinked sets of Western philosophies such as Hegelism, Theosophy, and Neo-Platonism (Seuphor, 1956, p. 48; Holtzman, 1986, p. 3; Reynolds, 1995, pp. 164-166; Cooper, 1998, p. 121; Golding, 2000, pp. 4-5; Simon, 2013, p. 522). However the concept of pure intuition in Mondrian's essays has not been examined through Eastern philosophies, including Zen.

Zen Buddhism⁵, a non-dualistic school of thought, refrains from all intellectual means for realization of truth and beauty. Indeed, for Zen everything is defined within the "mind" which is empty from all logic and concepts. D.T. Suzuki briefly delineates Zen as follows: "Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logic and analysis (...) Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis; nor has it any set doctrines which are imposed on its followers for acceptance" (Suzuki, 1991, p. 38). This short statement leads us to the central notion of *mu-shin/wu-shin*⁶ (no-mind) in Zen which characterizes an empty mind emancipated from all logic and rationality. The term *mu* in Japanese means no and *shin* is equal to the mind. This mind, in parallel with the pure intuition of Mondrian, is composed of emotions (heart) and intellect (mind) that is a non-self in unity with the universe. So the total concept of *mu-shin* means "no-mind" in English. *Mu-shin*⁷, as we will see, is reflected in Mondrian's intuitive mind and intuitive method of creation of Neo-plastic art.

The goal of this paper is to firstly investigate notions of inferior/lower intellect and pure intuition in Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art within the intuitive vision of Zen Buddhism. To this end, the pitfalls of the so-called unconscious and vague intellect in attainment of pure truth and beauty in Neo-Plastic art will be examined through Zen ideology. Secondly, the notion of pure intuition and its component (i.e. heightened intellect and emotions) are analyzed through the pivotal Zen notion of mu-shin which is further exemplified through Mondrian's three selected Neo-Plastic artworks corresponding to the three distinct phases of his art. This chronological enquiry of Mondrian's essays in parallel with his paintings best demonstrates the close relationship between his writings and his work in relation with the Zen notion of mu-shin in all three phases of his artistic career.

The Role of "Pure Intuition" in Neo-Plastic Art

Undeniably the product of all lifelong efforts of Mondrian toward purification and simplification of form in his paintings are reflected in his essays. Indeed Neo-Plastic art was formulated via many years of experimentation on plastic elements. In this process, he used his intuition in determining the right place for plastic elements (perpendicular lines, primary colors and non-colors) than employment of any mathematical or intellectual calculation (Henning, 1968, p. 244; Schiff, 1995). To this end, Mondrian benefited from intuition more than anything else in the achievement of his artistic goals. Figure 1 shows one of Mondrian's early Neo-Plastic works painted in 1921 during the De Stijl years⁸. This work, which is executed in Paris, manifests his intuitive endeavor toward the amendment of previous shortcomings pertinent to the symmetrical division of the composition and unwanted optical effect in earlier diamond painting executed between 1918 and 1919. To this end, he has achieved the equilibrium between line, color, and non-colors through asymmetric arrangements of color planes. In general, his intuitive and experimental effort in this work is mainly on the relation between line and plane. The uneven distribution of color planes and their unequal sizes within the composition are essential techniques used by him toward the accomplishment of equilibrium and unity in the composition.

Early in his essays, Mondrian holds that the evolution of representational art into Neo-Plastic art chiefly depends on advancement of "inferior intellect" and subjective emotions into universal intuition. This advocacy for antirational method in abstraction of form in his early writings evolved from his contemplation of pure intuition being a "wellspring of all the arts" (Mondrian, 1917, p. 30). Furthermore, in 1920 almost in parallel with the creation of *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* (Figure 1), the components of pure intuition that unites the state of thinking (intellect) and feelings (emotions) is explicated as follows:

The new man combines feeling and intellect in unity. When he thinks, he feels; when he feels, he thinks. Both are in him, despite him, automatically alive (...) The emotion of beauty constantly vibrates throughout his being: thus he achieves abstract plastic expression of his whole being" (Mondrian, 1920, p.142).

At this point, we assert that this pure intuition, composed of united and universal state of the intellect and emotions, is a perfect depiction of Zen's concept of mu-shin (no-mind). In fact, within the non-dualistic lens of mu-shin, there is no boundary between thought and action. This non-dual approach of no-mind that is deeply rooted in Zen is manifested in Mondrian's language through the terminology of unity and equilibrium between two elements of intellect and emotions. However, it should be noted that in both Zen's mu-shin and Mondrian's pure intuition, the intellect is not negated but embraced as a universal and heightened intellect. Watts (2011) stated this simultaneous presence of thinking and acting in mu-shin beyond the logics restricted by dualistic vision:

Thus Zen is also a liberation from the dualism of thought and action, for it thinks as it acts—with the same quality of abandon, commitment, or faith. The attitude of wu-shin is by no means an anti-intellectualist exclusion of thinking (p. 157).

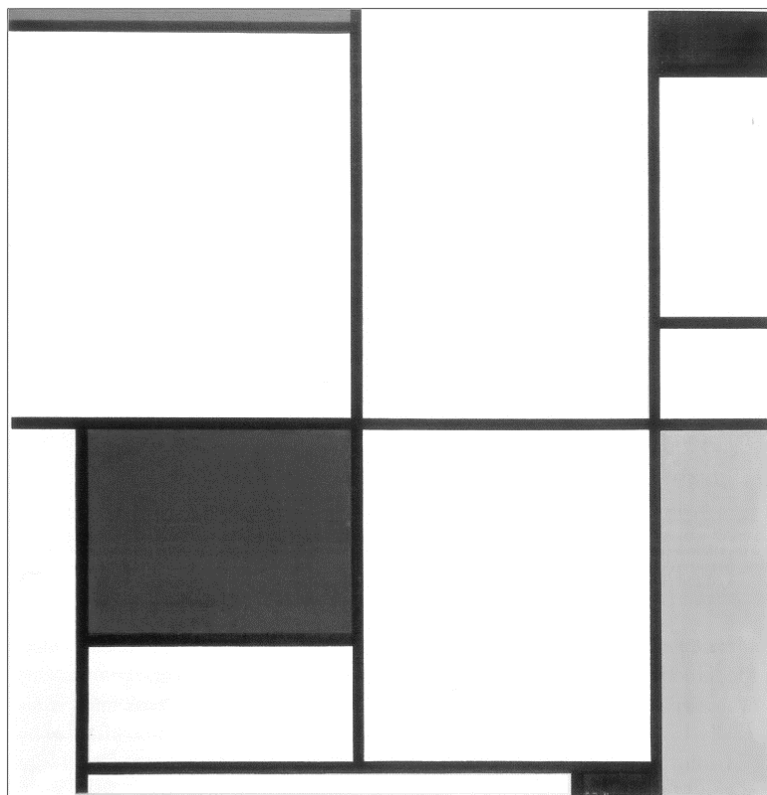


Figure 1. *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1921, Oil on canvas, 103 x 100 cm, The Hague, Haags Gemeente museum (from Blotkamp, 1994, p. 180).

Unconscious Intellect as a Hindrance in the Achievement of “Pure Intuition” and Truth

Following the delineation of pure intuition in Mondrian’s Neo-Plastic art, the concept of “inferior/lower/vague/unconscious intellect” is further illuminated through the antirational world-view of Zen Buddhism. In Mondrian’s vision, the “inferior intellect” deters the true depiction of truth in Neo-Plastic art since it is subjective, individual, impure, and unconscious. Meanwhile, this lower intellect is associated with personal ego and the logical mind of the artist that has not reached the level of consciousness. That is to say that the artist’s intuition which has attained the level of consciousness is totally independent from his inferior intellect in the production of Neo-Plastic art. Quite early in his writings, Mondrian has clearly shown his pejorative attitude toward this lower intellect by stating that the “intellect confuses intuition” (Mondrian, 1923, p. 189). A year later he further stated his opposite attitude towards the inferior intellect as an obstacle in the attainment of pure or conscious intuition as follows: “...Conscious intuition requires no supervision by the inferior intellect: it is capable of regulating itself” (Mondrian, 1924, p. 191). To put it differently, his artistic approach in the destruction of corporeality in his painting is affiliated with a universal state of intuition of the artist which is superior to the cognitive mind or, in Mondrian’s terminology, the inferior intellect.

Indeed, as long as the intellect dominates over intuition, art remains in the past (figurative/representational) as the former is associated with forms, ideas, concepts, and so on. In short, the vague and unconscious intellect falsifies the disclosure of pure truth in Neo-Plastic art. In 1931 Mondrian clearly pointed to this matter when he stated that the “intellect often distorts the truth, so that pure intuition, by which humanity evolves, is realized only after centuries” (1931, p. 249). This statement clearly certifies the need for annihilation of oppression of this inferior intellect for true experience of pure intuition which Mondrian himself utilized when slicing the canvas (plane) using plastic materials (lines and color) into a balanced composition.

Pure Intuition: From Figurative to Neo-Plastic art

Mondrian ponders all subjective and particular forms of intellect and emotions as vague elements in the fulfillment of the state of pure intuition. This fact accredits the intuitive essence of Neo-Plastic art which is perceived without the involvement of a calculative mind in contrast to the figurate (representational) art which depends on the inferior intellect and individual emotions. Hence the revelation of “pure plastic expression” (in Mondrian’s vocabulary) as a universal art can only be achieved through a conscious and clear intuition. This matter is stated by Mondrian as follows:

In a more or less primitive period, as soon as intellect intervenes and veils intuition and man begins to calculate, to compare his work with nature—as soon as one tries to follow natural appearance—pure plastic expression is weakened (1931, p. 250).

In 1931, concurrent with the above statement, Mondrian pictorially created a painting in the ultimate level of simplicity which was mainly an analytical experimentation on the line element in the second phase of his artistic career (post-De Stijl years). Figure 2 shows this level of abstraction through a work which is only composed of two fundamental opposing horizontal and vertical lines intersected close to the edges of the composition. Indeed, Mondrian's intuitive experimentation is depicted here through the removal of all colors and use of two perpendicular lines which show a sense of expansiveness and infinity towards the outer borders of the canvas (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 211). Indeed, Mondrian painted this ultimate level of simplicity through several stages of trial and error and by use of his pure intuition than any logical calculative method. This intuitive approach is clear in the number of sketches on paper which he has executed for his lozenge shape paintings⁹.

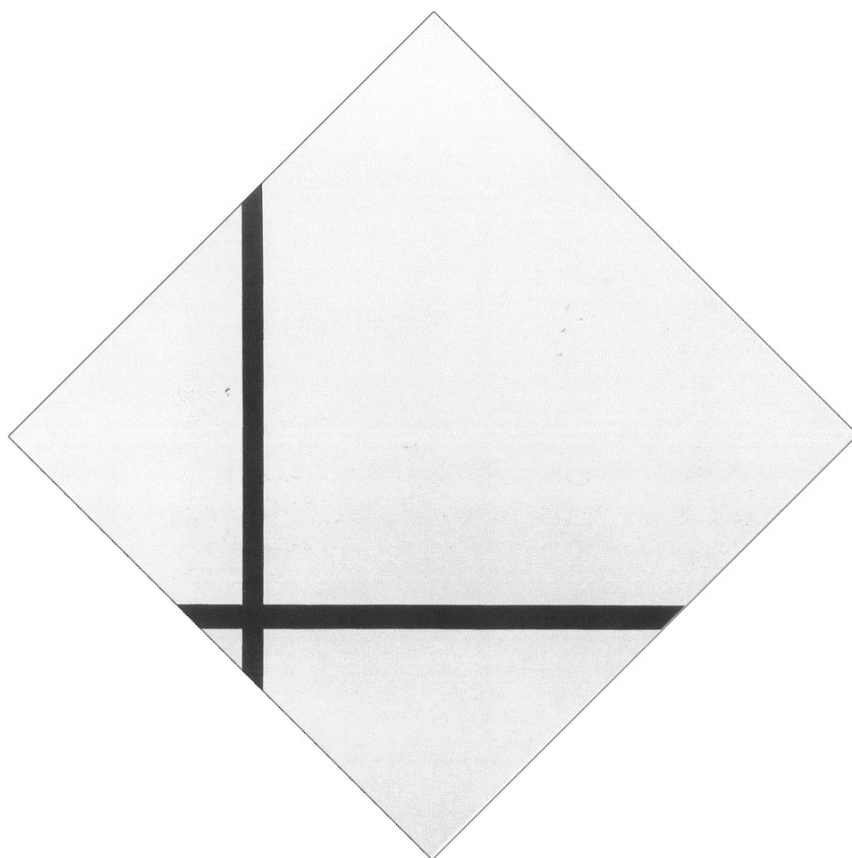


Figure 2. *Composition with Two Lines*, 1931, Oil on canvas, Diagonal 114, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (from Blotkamp, 1994, p. 210).

Indeed, Mondrian's reluctant attitude toward the appropriation of naturalistic forms should be traced back to his non-subjective and intuitive approach toward his new art. In reality pure abstract art is the offspring of pure intuition. He explicitly states that "pure intuition becomes conscious through long culture and creates pure abstract art,

which arises neither from intellect nor from vague intuitive feeling” (1929, p. 224). Similarly he stated elsewhere that “thinking that tends exclusively toward *truth* remains in the domain of pure reason and is not art” (1920, p. 143). Thus, his notion of intellect is specified within a type of logic that is beyond the sensual channels of the brain in a psychic mode of thinking.

At this point, firstly we argue that Mondrian’s reference to the inferior intellect is similar to the Zen premises regarding the pitfalls of intellect in the attainment of self-consciousness and the state of *satori* or enlightenment. Koren (2008) describes Zen’s antirational method in realization of truth as being “direct, intuitive insight into transcendental truth beyond all intellectual conception” (p. 76). Indeed, in Zen, the intellect is a deterrent element in grasping the state of *nirvana*. In short, nirvana in Zen terminology refers to the state of complete cessation of sufferings as the way towards enlightenment. On this account Suzuki states that:

... the Zen intellect is buffeted, confused and forced to such absurd exaggerations of its own nature that the individual is finally led to admit the helplessness of rationality in solving the dilemma of life (which, in Zen, would be the impossibility of reaching Nirvana through logic) and to look for some sort of nonrational aid. That aid is found in the intuition (Detweiler, 1962, p. 430).

Hence, the intellect veils the pure manifestation of hidden and mystical truth because logical survey cannot investigate the depth of reality. Instead it is through the power of intuition that one is able to discover “fundamental reality”. Adorable (1971) expresses this point as follows:

...Being inexpressible and inconceivable, this reality can only be apprehended by intuition directly, completely, and instantly. Intellectual analysis can only divide and describe and scratch the surface but cannot apprehend the fundamental reality (...). Since the knowledge of the reality is knowledge that is non-knowledge, it follows that it cannot be apprehended through the use of the intellect. The aim therefore of Zen is to throw off all the external paraphernalia which the intellect has woven around the soul and to see directly into the innermost nature of our being (p. 42).

Indeed, what Zen seeks to attain as “fundamental reality” is similar to what Mondrian aimed at actualizing the absolute and universal through pure intuition. As we see, this “knowledge that is non-knowledge” is delineated within Zen’s central notion of *mu-shin* (no-mind) in which the mind is apart from all concepts, thoughts, ideas, and duality of object-subject. In Mondrian’s insight only the cultivated man is able to accomplish this state of awareness in which feeling and thinking are in unity: “Mature man will be able to live by intuition: all “thinking-and-feeling-inform” will dissolve into the unity of deepened emotion and intellect (Mondrian, 1927, p. 221). In fact, this esoteric and hidden truth is what Zen seeks to grasp beyond the limitations of the

logical mind. Moore (1995) envisages this as the “ultimate truth” which is defined through pivotal concept of emptiness (*sunyata*):

The "ultimate truth" that Zen practitioners seek, therefore, is not intellectual but experiential or direct. Hence, the intellectual rendering of this "ultimate truth," "emptiness" (*sunyata*), is negative, specifying only that it is devoid of perceptual dis- criminations and intellectual distinctions (p. 708).

Here we assert that this “ultimate truth” in Zen which is spelled out in concepts such as *sunyata* is exactly what Mondrian demands for in his art’s achievement of the absolute and the universal by means of pure intuition. Therefore, the esoteric truth aimed at Neo-Plastic art (as reflection of Theosophical thought) is of the same value with the unexplainable essence of truth in Zen as elucidated by scholars such as Nishida within the central notion of “mu”. Pertinent to this matter Nishida holds that reality should be perceived through self-consciousness or “Nothing” which is apart from cognitive mind. At this point we argue that this “Nothing” or “non-self” in Zen is equivalent with Mondrian’s universal self (Being) in unity with nature. To put it differently reality in Neo-Plastic art is rendered through the pure intuition of a united “Being” who is in equilibrium between all Hegelian¹⁰ binary oppositions whereas reality in Zen is comprehended through the Nishidian nihilistic concept of “Nothing” or “non-being”. It is noteworthy that in spite of the apparent terminological gap between the perceiver of truth in two sides of the spectrum, both “Being” and “Nothing” realize truth through the antirational channels of mind¹¹ which is pure intuition. It is this “Nothing” that is pictorially exhibited in Figure 2 through the minimum use of painterly elements. Indeed, in this work, the “inexpressible and inconceivable” essence of Zen’s ultimate truth (*sunyata*/emptiness) is painted through the ultimate level of abstraction and infinite lines which extend beyond the borders of the canvas to outer infinite space.

Mu-shin (No-mind) and Mondrian’s Intuitive Neo-Plastic Art

Following depictions of corresponding similar notions between the intuitive essence of Neo-Plastic art by Mondrian and the Japanese anti-rational approach of Zen toward disclosure of ultimate truth, we will further illuminate this kinship through mu-shin. For Mondrian the intuition that reaches the level of consciousness is basically the combination of emotion and intellect. Indeed, the new man (i.e. cultivated and conscious) is in unity with his emotion and intellect: “when he thinks, he feels; when he feels, he thinks” (Mondrian, 1920, p.142). Thus we assert that the whole conception of pure intuition proposed by Mondrian is on the basis of the evolution of the human mind from an inferior mind (intellect) to a heightened and transcended mind which is a prerequisite in realization of truth in Neo-Plastic art. On another spectrum, the pure and intuitive mind is essential in Zen. D.T. Suzuki clarified this matter: “Zen is not a philosophy, not a network of ideas, not the unfolding of a concept. As is stated by the Zen masters, it is directly or immediately pointing to the mind” (as cited in Rasco, 1991, p. 278). At this point we argue that pure intuition as the origin of Neo-Plastic art is what Zen considers the central notion of mu-shin.

Mu-shin is similar to an infant's mind that has not been bounded with concepts and ideas. Indeed, in a state of mu-shin, the mind is emancipated from worldly desires and it is at an ultimate level of concentration and absorption in a task (Juniper, 2011, p. 162). In addition, mu-shin, in line with Zen's non-dual vision, is achieved through unity between body and mind. D.T. Suzuki further explicates this matter:

Mere technical knowledge of an art is not enough to make a man really its master, he ought to have delved deeply into the inner spirit of it. This spirit is grasped only when his mind is in *complete harmony with the principle of life* [emphasized added] itself, that is, when he attains to a certain state of mind known as *mu-shin*, "no-mind". In Buddhist phraseology, it means going beyond the dualism of all forms of life and death, good and evil, being and non-being. This is where all arts merge into Zen (as cited in Pilgrim, 1993, p. 56).

Similarly Mondrian envisions the annihilation of form in Neo-Plastic art in association with "unity of man and nature" that is the unchangeable law of life such as: "...the New Plastic could not return to naturalistic or form expression, for it grew out of these. It is bound to the fixed law of art, which as I said, is the *unity of man and nature*" (1919, p. 79). His insight on this integration of man and nature parallels with the principles of life that Suzuki states within the Zen doctrine of mu-shin: "The mind of no-mind is in complete harmony with the principle of life itself" (as cited in Keenan, 1989, p. 287).

Within an aesthetical scope, the representative quality of figurative art which follows the forms in nature by means of the logical mind (inferior intellect) is an impure state of Neo-plastic art that abolishes all corporeality and forms through the employment of pure intuition which is affiliated with what Mondrian referred to as "pure logic":

Naturalistic beauty is now purified and returns to its origin: "pure intuition." Created beauty is no longer vague and imitative, but conscious and creative. It is sometimes at variance with cerebral logic but always in accord with pure logic (Mondrian, 1926a, pp. 199-200).

Indeed, what Mondrian expresses through the terminology of "naturalistic beauty" is indeed bounded with the logical mind (inferior intellect) and it is representative of forms and corporeality in nature. Therefore, "pure logic", similar to mu-shin, is the only way to accomplish the ultimate level of beauty and truth in Neo-Plastic art. Pertinent to this matter, Mondrian holds that the inferior mind or what he called "primitive intelligence" is futile in the attainment of new art which is "superior art"¹². It is through the heightened level of intellect or what he referred to as "cultivated intelligence" that new art is born:

It should be noted that only primitive intelligence obstructs pure plastic expression: cultivated intelligence produces a superior art. The fine content of the culture of art is to have realized in the work the complete union of intuition and intellect (Mondrian, 1931, p. 250).

At this point, we argue that what Mondrian considers as conscious or heightened intellect—in contrast to the lower/inferior intellect—clearly reflects a mind which is in complete unity with the body and this body itself is in equilibrium with nature. In fact, he moves in parallel with the reinterpretation of the system of oppositions (mainly borrowed from Hegel) within a non-dualistic world-view which is expressed within the terminology of “purified duality¹³” or “equivalent duality” in his essays. That is to say that his proposal of the unification of oppositions is similar to the ideology of Japanese scholar Nishida Kitaro which echoes the kinships between Hegelian and Zen dialectics. In short, Nishida ponders *mu-shin* from the same value as the Hegelian Absolute which is pure truth and beauty in Neo-Plastic art (Kim, 1955, p. 23). To put it differently Mondrian parallels with Hegelian philosophy in terms of looking at Zen’s “Nothing” (which is of the same essence as the Hegelian Absolute¹⁴) in that, both find their common roots on the basis of unity between oppositions.

Conscious Intuition and the Universal Neo-Plastic Art of Mondrian

For Mondrian, the universal expression¹⁵ of beauty in Neo-Plastic art is achieved through the practice of enhanced intuition which is composed of the mind (intellect) and feeling (emotion) at the same time: “But intuition that has become conscious has great strength: it uses mind as well as feeling” (Mondrian, 1930, p. 235). In general, Mondrian believed that the art of the past¹⁶ were bounded by the subject matter and natural instincts of man in contrary to the new art (true art) which establishes its foundation upon pure intuition. On this account, Mondrian delineates to the crucial role of objective vision that is emancipated from all “subjective feelings” as a cultivated vision toward abolition of form in abstract art as follows:

Complete knowledge of form can be gained through purely objective vision, that is, vision unmixed with subjective feeling. Thus the new culture, whose mentality holds deepened emotion in equivalent relationship with consciousness (or intellect), can discern form, deepen form, abolish form (Mondrian, 1927, p. 219).

Mondrian here explicitly shows the pitfalls of inferior intellect and its component “subjective feeling” in the annihilation of form in Neo-Plastic art. In another words, an observer of Neo-Plastic art should firstly purify his individual (personal) feelings and intellect into a universal vision (i.e. deepened and egoless emotion and intellect) in order to be able to find the logic behind the destruction of corporeality in this new art. This “individual” in Mondrian’s terminology is similar to the self or “ego” in Zen terminology which strives towards emancipation from all worldly concerns, symbols, and concepts. Pertinent to this matter Mondrian stood against what he called the “lower intellect” and “natural instinct” that is bounded with ego of the artist:

The new art protests against such debasements, which originate in individualism, the lower intellect, and natural instinct. (By individualism we mean the state of the individual who is limited and dominated by his own "ego.") (Mondrian, 1924, p. 191).

Moreover, Mondrian, at the end of his artistic career, clearly stated his pejorative attitude towards the subjective and individual feelings for expression of his abstract Neo-Plastic art as follows: “Abstract Art is not the expression of man's predominantly subjective vision. It is the expression of man's objective vision realized by intuition” (Mondrian, ca. 1938-44, p. 371). It is during the third and last phase of his artistic life that the rhythm between colors and lines reaches the ultimate level of dynamism in New York. One of the early examples is *New York* (1941-42) (Figure 3) which echoes Mondrian's intuitive approach toward the manifestation of dynamic rhythm in this work that is a reflection of the vivid pulse New York City and syncopated rhythm of jazz music. This goal is attained through use of various thicknesses for lines and multiplicity of grids. In general the whole composition suggests a sense of depth and vivid rhythm between lines and planes. Indeed, there is a dynamic equilibrium in this work as a result of multiple crossings of lines, tiny color planes, and relationships between the smaller to larger color planes. Moreover, there is a perpetual effect of pulling (expansion) and pushing (contraction) between the plastic elements in this work (Blotkamp, 1994, p. 232) which is achieved through Mondrian's intuitive artistic experimentation.

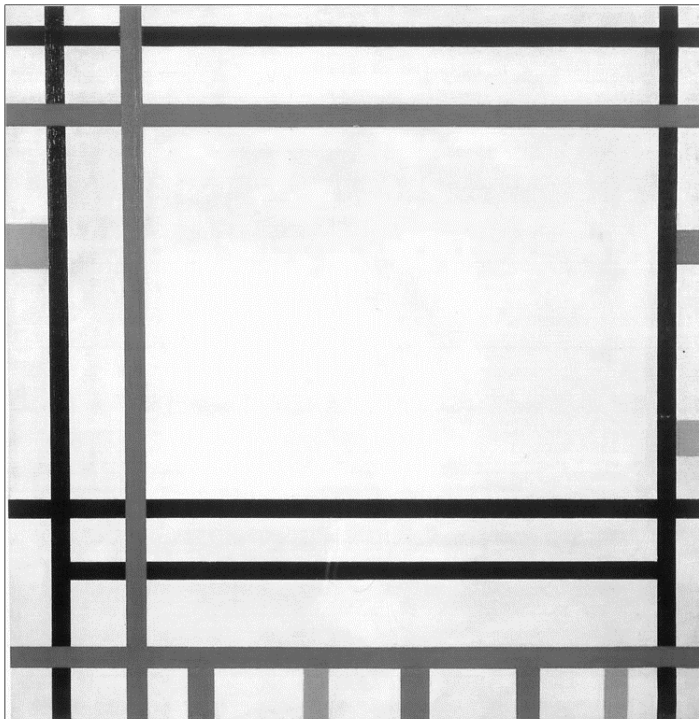


Figure 3. *New York*, 1941-1942, oil on canvas, 95.5 x 92. Private collection (from Blotkamp, 1994, p. 234).

The “natural instinct” and “lower intellect” proposed by Mondrian are expressed within the Zen concept of “ego” which Hashi (2016) affiliates with mu-shin in the

context of concepts such as “oneness”, “mu-self” or “muga”: a mind which is fully freed from ego and individuality.

Our full body and mind are completely in the oneness dimension, fulfilled by positive energy, but without any fixation of egoism. This circumstance is called the “*mu-shin*” by Zen Buddhism, the mind which is never fixated to any subjectivist position (Hashi, 2016, p. 110).

Hashi further explicates that the notion of mu-shin as a mind is attached to a united self and is freed from personal ego for it is through the unity of the body and mind that profound self-consciousness is achieved. This evolution of unconscious ego to conscious “egoless” self is exactly what Mondrian strived to accomplish as a requirement in the creation and perception of his Neo-Plastic art. Hashi (2016) states, “it is necessary to summarize that the “mu-shin”, the unlimited self-consciousness in an egoless open mind, is based on a dynamic self-negation and self-reconstruction in our daily life...” (p. 110). Hence, we arrive to a kinship between the central premises of Zen in abandoning the self (ego) and annihilation of subjective vision in old art (figurative art) towards the birth of Neo-Plastic art. However this denial of self is followed by construction of a new self—or in Zen language, nonself,—which is indeed the united self in harmony with principles of life.

Conclusion

Neo-Plastic art is founded on the union of the universal intellect and emotions of the artist which is called pure intuition. Mondrian, in parallel with the antirational mind of Zen, employs pure intuition as an egoless, objective, and universal artistic method for the annihilation of forms and subjective vision in his art. Aesthetically speaking, Mondrian’s lifelong experimental endeavor in his arrangements of perpendicular lines and primary colors and non-colors within his compositions, was executed through the constant practice of his intuition in fulfillment of pure relationships and equilibrium between all these opposing elements. Hence, this equilibrium is attained differently through a particular focus on the elements of line, color, and plane in each three distinct phases of his artistic career. Furthermore, regardless of the noticeable shift from a somewhat fixed to a more dynamic equilibrium between plastic elements (line, color, non-color) from early Neo-Plastic work in 1920s (Figure 1) to his latest work in 1940s (Figure 3), Mondrian vigorously used pure intuition in all phases of his work in the attainment of equilibrium and unity. To this end, Mondrian urged for a total shift from the inferior mind that is directed by individual, ego-based emotions and intellect to a superior state of “conscious intuition” that is capable of seeing the metaphysical and esoteric truth in Neo-Plastic art through the inner universal eye.

Philosophically speaking, we found the same voice between what Mondrian sought in universal self within the terminology of unity and equilibrium of dual oppositions¹⁷ (object/subject, individual/universal, etc.) and Zen’s non-dual vision which is considered as non-self (i.e. detached from personal ego) in unity with nature. As we assert, Neo-Plastic art should be portrayed within Zen’s non-dual intuitive lens in justification of the abolition of form which is expressed as a “purified duality” in

Mondrian's moderated dual vision which stems from Theosophy and Hegelian thought. To this end, Mondrian proposed his art as products of a dynamic state of relationships, balance, and harmony between perpendicular lines and primary colors in a flat plane through the aid of pure intuition. Therefore we argue that the notion of pure intuition is a common tool in the achievement of ultimate level of truth and beauty in Neo-Plastic art and Zen Buddhism.

Ultimately, as we discussed, Mondrian's intuitive mind in the formulation of Neo-Plastic art is akin to Zen's creed of mu-shin. In this process, the heightened intellect, which is portrayed as an essential structure of pure intuition, is empty of all individual emotions and subjective thoughts of the beholder. That is to say, Mondrian's universal, cultivated, and conscious mind is precisely reflected in mu-shin. Moreover, we realized in both cases that this universal mind or mu-shin belongs to an egoless self who is in complete unity with nature and the principles of life. In short, we are dealing with a similar united self which perceives beauty within a non-dual worldview excluded from all logical aspects of the mind. Nevertheless, this integrated self in Zen is defined through concepts such as emptiness and nothingness while Mondrian presents this united self-nature¹⁸ within Hegel's holistic lens. Aesthetically speaking, Mondrian adopted "no-mind" in the destruction of painterly elements and subjectivity in his Neo-Plastic art to dig into the underlying layers of esoteric beauty in his art.

Endnotes

¹Nevertheless, Seuphor (1956) and Simon (2013) hold that Mondrian was also impacted through "quasi Mystical" essence of Neo-Platonism which echoes spiritual anti-materialistic vision.

²Bratt (2013), in a recent enquiry, correlates Mondrian's radical thoughts toward the embracement of esoteric vision in his Neo-Plastic art with the ideology of Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuiper which later led Mondrian to join the Theosophical society in 1909. However, it was Theosophy which perfected Mondrian's previous immature vision toward the attainment of esoteric truth.

³The term "plastic" stems from the German word *beelding* which means "forming" or "bringing to form" (Edwards & Wood, 2004, p. 255; Dennis, 1970, p. 298). In fact, the origins of "Neo-Plastic" is the Dutch word "nieuwebeelding" which was translated by Mondrian into French as *le neo-plasticisme* that roughly translates to terms such as "Neo-Plasticism", "new Plastic" or "neo-Plastic" in English (Edwards & Wood, 2004, p. 255; van Haften, 2003, p. 230; Riley, 1996, p. 751; Seuphor, 1956, p. 134).

⁴Within the aesthetical scope, the term "universal" refers to the proportion and balance between plastic elements which allows for the absolute to reveal itself (Kruger, 2007, pp. 267-268). However, "universal" also points out to "new art" manifested in his world-view which is the plastic expression of fundamental elements of painting (form,

line and color) whereas “individual” (particular) echoes “old art” that is chiefly based on the prolonged tradition of representational painting (Holtzman, 1986, pp. 7-8).

⁵Ch’an, or Zen, is basically the direct perception of the world without involvement of any mental effort and intellect. Indeed Zen, due to its non-dualistic world-view, is seen through everything apart from binary conceptions (being/non-being, good/evil, etc.). To this end, a Zen monk frees his mind from all worldly (mundane) desires and attachments in perception of this world (reality) beyond preconceived concepts in the mind. Indeed, Zen desires to teach us that we are a part of this whole universe. Thus, any separation from outer environment (nature in Mondrian’s terminology) is “illusion” and wrong conception. This aim, unification with whole universe, is attained through forgetfulness of “self” or “ego” in Freudian vocabulary. Indeed, it is through this non-dual, egoless self which one accomplishes the state of *satori* (enlightenment) as the ultimate goal of Zen (Juniper, 2011, pp. 20-21).

⁶It is noteworthy that this Japanese term is presented in two formats in published articles and books. In some cases it is a two-syllable term, *mu-shin* or *wu-shin* and sometimes it is used as a joined term *mushin* or *wushin*.

⁷From this point onward and for consistency, the term *mu-shin* is used for this paper.

⁸Scholars have divided Mondrian’s Neo-Plastic artworks into three periods as follows: De Stijl years (1917-1924), post-De Stijl years (1924-1938), and London and New York years (1938-1944). This categorization is mainly based on historical events such as the foundation and influence of the De Stijl art movement spanning from 1917 to 1924, Mondrian’s detachment from De Stijl group after 1924, and finally Mondrian’s move to London and New York in 1938 and 1940 respectively.

⁹These sketches are shown by Carmean in 1979 in his book entitled: “Mondrian: The Diamond Composition” (pp. 38-43).

¹⁰According to Edwards and Wood (2004) Mondrian became familiar with Hegelian philosophy between 1914 and 1919 when he had to stay in Holland due to World War I. Indeed, his concept of oppositions that each part is defined by its opposition (object/subject, individual/universal, matter/spirit, etc.) reverts back to Hegelian philosophy.

¹¹The explanation of Nishidian philosophy pertinent to Zen is out of the scope of this paper. For further information please refer to Kim, H. T. (1955). The logic of the illogical: Zen and Hegel. *Philosophy East and West*. 5(1): 19-29.

¹²It is noteworthy that Mondrian, in parallel with his utopian thought, has used the term “superior art” in reference to the new art which is abstract and in contrary to figurative or representational art. Within a particular scope, this “superior art” implicitly points to “Neo-plastic” art.

¹³This concept of purification of duality comes back to Mondrian's central notion of equilibrium and unity between oppositions (individual/universal, matter/spirit, object/subject, etc.). This unity which seeks the integration of body and mind as well as man and nature is one of the philosophical points in Neo-plastic art. For further information, refer to Mondrian's essay entitled "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Dialogue" (1919-1920, p. 96).

¹⁴However, this notion of "Absolute" roots in the Theosophical teachings of Blavatsky which refers to "Truth" and "Deity". In fact, this "Absolute" depicts the universal of universals and "sourceless source of all life" that is expressed within terms like the "ALL" or the "ONE". In another words, this "Absolute" is the origin of all principles of life in the whole universe that is ultimate reality (Universal Theosophy: The Absolute).

¹⁵Universal expression is against the individual expression in figurative art. Indeed, Neo-Plastic art cannot be expressed via personal feelings and intellect or what Mondrian refers to as "tragic" in art. This matter is illuminated by the painter as follows: "This freeing is of the greatest importance for art, whose mission is to transcend individual expression and to show—as far as possible—the universal expression of life, which is above the tragic" (Mondrian, 1930, p. 227).

¹⁶"Old art" in Mondrian's essays refers to figurative or representational art which contrasts Neo-Plastic art and is expressed within the terminology of "new art".

¹⁷Aesthetically speaking vertical and horizontal lines, primary colors, and plane.

¹⁸The term self-nature here refers to the united state of body and mind which itself is in equilibrium with the outer world (nature).

Figures

Figure 1. Blotkamp, C. (1994). *Mondrian: The art of destruction*. New York: Abrams.

Figure 2. Blotkamp, C. (1994). *Mondrian: The art of destruction*. New York: Abrams.

Figure 3. Blotkamp, C. (1994). *Mondrian: The art of destruction*. New York: Abrams.

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