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MONDRIAN'S "TRANSDANCE": TRANSPOSITION OF MUSIC AND DANCE MOVEMENTS INTO PAINTING

Abstract: Besides painting, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) was a devotee of the modern dances that appeared in the 1920s, such as the Foxtrot and the Charleston. Because of the rhythms of jazz he passionately danced to in the dance halls and in his studio, he became known as ‘The Dancing Madonna’. Paintings such as *Fox Trot A* (1930) and *Fox Trot B* (1929) could be interpreted as a kind of homage to dance – to the Foxtrot, and then, implicitly, to jazz music as well, which allows the observer to associatively imagine the possible transpositions of the basic elements of dance, and thus of jazz into a painting.

Keywords: Piet Mondrian, *Fox Trot A*, *Fox Trot B*, the Foxtrot, jazz music, rhythm and movement, colour and harmony.

The creator of neoplasticism in painting and one of the most influential artists of abstract painting, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), was a lover of the modern dances that appeared in the 1920s, such as the Foxtrot and the Charleston. Because of the rhythms of jazz he passionately danced to in the dance halls and in his studio, he became known as “The Dancing Madonna” at that time and was ‘ridiculed’ by other artists for the “seriousness with which he approached this favoured activity”.¹ Paintings such as *Fox Trot A* (1930) and *Fox Trot B*

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¹ Annette Chauncy, “Dancing with Mondrian”, *The International Journal of The Arts in*

(1929) could be interpreted as a kind of homage to the Foxtrot. Mondrian, in his own way, by the abstract combination of lines and (non)colours, created these paintings and they are in no way different from his other paintings of the '20s – '30s, except for their titles, because in this period the author mainly titled them simply *Compositions*, in the desire for the painting to allude to itself and avoid any associativity. However, with the aforementioned titles, the author consciously alluded to other art forms, firstly to dance – the Foxtrot – and then, implicitly, to the jazz music which accompanied this dance, and invited the observer to associatively imagine the possible transpositions of the basic elements of dance, and thus of jazz into painting.

What are the specifics of the Foxtrot and jazz that attracted the painter? Whether and to what extent did these elements correspond to the relation of black lines of different dimensions and the composition of primary colours and (non)colours present in the mentioned paintings? Did Mondrian see in the Foxtrot and jazz the presence of the 'dynamic equilibrium' that he wanted to achieve on his canvases?

In the literature it is often stated that Mondrian's first love was painting, and the second was dance and music. His essays: *Neo-Plasticism: its Realization in Music and Future Theatre* (1922), *Jazz and Neo-Plastic* (1927), *Neo-Plasticism: the General Principle of Plastic Equivalence* testify how he was thinking and searching for some possible correlation between the two, actually three arts. Beyond the fact that in these essays he wrote about the specifics of the main elements of all three artistic media, Mondrian also wrote about his personal philosophy of art, which was based on the deep conviction "that the purpose of all the arts was to mirror the harmony and equilibrium that underlay the chance appearance of nature".² This philosophical thought represents a reflection of the basic principles of Theosophy, which is not surprising, since the painter belonged to the Dutch Theosophical Society. In order to properly understand the poetics of Mondrian, followed by the analysis that will be presented, it is necessary to 'peek' behind the painting and make a brief overview of the author's socio-cultural development, that very much influenced the canvases to be exactly like this.

Society, 5/3 (2010), 179. Cf. original: Harry Cooper, "Foxtrot and Jazz-Band in Mondrian's Abstraction", in: James Leggio (Ed.), UK, Psychology Press, 2002, 170.

² Peter Vergo, *Music and Painting: Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts from the Romantics to John Cage*, New York, Phaidon Press, 2010, 315.

In her work *Theosophy and the Emergence of Modern Abstract Art* (2002), Kathleen Hall points out that “modern abstract art was the visible manifestation of the spiritual ideals professed through the teachings of Theosophy”,³ especially through the ideas of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), which she presented in her major work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). *The author claims that* “theosophy gave these artists a vista that [...] they were able to see beyond and into the natural world [...] that they stood in the doorway between two worlds, they were the messengers, and communicating this knowledge became the objective of their art”.⁴ Mondrian was especially under the influence of Dr. Mathieu Hubertus Josephus Schoenmaekers, a Dutch mathematician and theosophist, who explained his ideas about ‘the Positive Mystics’ in two books: *Het geloof van den nieuwen mensch* (*The Faith of the New Man*, 1900), *Het nieuwe Wereldbeeld* (*The New Image of the World*, 1915), and *Beginselen der beeldende wiskunde* (*Principles of Plastic Mathematics*, 1916).⁵ He formulated the plastic and philosophical principles of the De Stijl movement, which proclaimed that the main requirement was “the penetration of the absolute through the relativity of natural facts by discovering their underlying structure”.⁶ In Schoenmaekers’ own words:

We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions that can be controlled by reason, so as to be able to recover them later in natural realities, thus penetrating nature by means of plastic vision. Truth is: to reduce the relativity of natural facts to the absolute, in order to recover the absolute in natural facts.⁷

To what extent Mondrian interpreted and adapted Schoenmaekers’s ideas can be read in the writing *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*,⁸ which the painter wrote in 1919 – here are several of the painter’s key standpoints:

³ Kathleen Hall, “Theosophy and the Emergence of Modern Abstract Art”, *Quest*, May/June, 2002. <http://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/1446> (accessed October 24, 2012).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Italo Tomassoni, *Mondrian*, London – New York, The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970, 31.

⁶ *Idem.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* (1919), <http://homepages.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art319/319Read/319Mondrian.pdf>

- Modern man – although a unity of body, mind, and soul – exhibits a changed consciousness: every expression of his life has today a different aspect, that is, an aspect more positively abstract.⁹
- The picture can be a pure reflection of life in its deepest essence.¹⁰
- The existence of anything is defined for us aesthetically by relations of equivalence.¹¹
- If we focus our attention on the balanced relation, we shall be able to see unity in natural things. However, there it appears under a veil.¹²
- We find that in nature all relations are dominated by a single primordial relation, which is defined by the opposition of two extremes.¹³
- If we conceive these two extremes as manifestations of interiority and exteriority, we will find that in the new plasticism the tie, uniting mind and life is not broken; thus, far from considering it a negation of truly living life we shall see a reconciliation of the matter-mind dualism.¹⁴

Thus, Mondrian's primary idea was to allocate the exact order from real materialistic chaos by controlling reason and using the deductive method. Through the neoplasticistic expression in the painting he wanted to express the true relationship between matter and spirit, life and art, having one goal in mind – to create objective, super-individual art, or art which should become a social model.

In the *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti* (2011) Misko Šuvaković explains that “Mondrian's concept of neoplasticism is based on the metaphysical deductive theory of painting as an absolute art and geometric order of the real world”, and he goes on to say that geometric abstraction as a special direction in abstract art “has evolved, starting from the establishment of an analogy between visual geometric patterns and musical structures [...] and elaborated in the works of the pioneers of abstract painting”,¹⁵ including Mondrian. The painter came to mathematical reality as the basic structure of the universe by exploring reality, the material world, seeing it with the eye of a theoso-

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Misko Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti*, Beograd, Orion Art, 2011, 285–286.

phist. In other words, Paul Mondrian began to perceive reality geometrically as a space, with the idea that the material forms which are visible to us, in this 'our' reality, are based on an assumed universal uniformity of geometry of another reality, that is not visible to us. In this context, the interpretation of Pavel Aleksandrovich Florensky (1882–1937) – Russian Orthodox, theologian, priest, philosopher, mathematician, physicist – expressed in his book *Prostor i vreme u umetničkim delima* (*Space and time in works of art*, 2000) might be interesting:

In reality there is no space, or reality – thus, there are no things or environments [...]. In other words, the basic support methods of thinking are space, things and environment, whose task is to give us a diverse reality, which is in a state of movement, present as essentially composed of unchanged and equivalent material.¹⁶

One could recognise this very intention in the creativity of Mondrian.

Despite the fact that in his work, Florensky actually opposes the Euclidean regulation of space, he states the following as its characteristic features: homogeneity (equality, commonality), isotropy, continuity, coherence, infinity, and boundlessness.¹⁷ Thus, the key feature of this space, i.e. spatial geometric shapes, is that “by changing conditions they retain their internal relations [...] the increase or decrease of the figure does not distort its shape, even if it goes to infinity on one or the other side”.¹⁸ Although Florensky considers that “this homogeneity cannot be determined in the direct observation of reality, nor in art, which is based on this observation”, and that the “too easy acceptance of the Euclidean interpretation [...] testifies more to the gullibility of those who accept it, than of the actual structure of experience”,¹⁹ Mondrian just intentionally created homogeneity in the fine arts. The painter constructed the painted composition in a schematic way, analyzing reality as a geometrically complex picture.

Another significant aspect found in Florensky's interpretation is that these two deliberately used terms – *composition* and *structure*, do not have the same meaning. The construction is the thing that reality wants from the work, and the composition is the thing that the artist wants from his own work. “There

¹⁶ Pavel Florenski, *Prostor i vreme u umetničkim delima* (Анализ ѱросѱрансѱвенносѱи <и времени> в художественно-изобразительных ѱроизведениях, Москва, Мысль, 2000), transl. by Nada Uzelac, Beograd, JP Službeni glasnik, 2013, 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23–24.

is nothing in common between the construction and the composition”, Florensky wrote, “[...] because the construction characterises the reality by itself, its internal connections and relationships, the struggle and cooperation of its powers and energies, and the composition characterises the inner world of the artist, the structure of his inner life”.²⁰

Composition	≠	Construction
Expressive means;		The meaning – by the sheme, a plan;
The unity of the painting;		The unity of what is expressed;
The inner world of the artist, the structure of his inner life.		The reality by itself, its internal connections and relationships.

Example 1: A tabular presentation of P. A. Florensky’s terminological differentiation between composition and construction.

Specifically, the *composition* includes “consideration of the work from the point of expressive means and the plan of their unity, without seeking meaning”.²¹ The *composition* is the unity of the painting, and the unity of what is expressed by the *scheme* as a plan of artwork from the standpoint of its meaning – its *construction*.²² So, what we perceive on the canvas is *composition*, i.e. expressive means, and the meaning is not expressed directly by the painting, but in order for it to be expressed, the *composition* has to activate our mind and imagination, in which both these principles will eventually occur in harmonious relation – compositionally and constructively. Florensky explains the meaning of these two principles:

An artist says something about reality through his work, but in order to have the opportunity to say something about it, in itself it must carry some meaning, to illustrate something about itself. In this way, two words in the work, the word reality and the word artist, unite into a whole. But, although united, neither one nor the other loses their own nature. What reality speaks of itself through the work is the construction of the work; and what the artist says about reality is the

²⁰ Ibid., 99.

²¹ Ibid., 95.

²² Ibid., 96.

composition of the work. [...] *Construction of the work* – because the work is not subordinated to construction, but the reality which is presented in the work, the work is subordinated to composition. [...] The work as such is completely independent of the construction of reality, just as reality itself has nothing to do with the composition of the work. In other words, the construction is the manner in which the elements of reality itself, whether tangible or abstract, are in mutual respect; and the composition is the way in which the elements that paint the reality stand in mutual relation – [...] there is nothing in common between the construction and composition [...] because the construction characterises the reality by itself, its internal connections and relationships, the struggle and cooperation of its powers and energies, and the composition characterises the inner world of the artist, the structure of his inner life.²³

Accordingly, the main question is: How does Mondrian build *construction*, and by which means a *composition*? In other words, how does the artist depict an abstract space as geometric, separating it from the psycho-physiological and physical space of the Foxtrot dance/dancers and jazz music/musicians? Both paintings, *Fox Trot A* and *Fox Trot B* might represent how the dance steps and rhythms may have become integrated into the painter's art practice.

Fox Trot A

Mondrian realised the concept of art as a formative principle, and thus of form as formation, by having in mind

architecture as the expression of man's capacity for designing what could be achieved without recourse to subjective feeling, utilising the purely plastic logic which realises the universal rationale in the world of contingency. In this aesthetic system, painting will be the pure project, the *a priori* form which precedes experience: that is, the perfect plan, which [...] as architecture, will have to measure itself [...] against the world of experience.²⁴

In such a manner, Mondrian's geometry on the canvas was just a conception, a sketch of material reality. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) argued that “whatever lies in the realm of schematism is subject to arithmetical determination in nature and art”.²⁵ At this point it is nec-

²³ Ibid., 99.

²⁴ Italo Tomassoni, *Mondrian*, op. cit., 21.

²⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and transl. by Douglas

essary to recall Schelling's interpretation of architecture as frozen music. In his words: "Architecture necessarily proceeds in its construction according to arithmetic or, since it is music in *space*, geometric relationships".²⁶ In his constructions Mondrian eliminated the curve, which he saw as an ambiguous expression, and as a symbol of the subjective and changeable, and he used a straight line and right angle.

It has already been mentioned that Mondrian used the rules of Euclidean geometry, and if it is connected to arithmetic it leads us to the Pythagorean tradition and famous Quadrivium, which includes four scientific disciplines: geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. Plato (428/427 or 424/423–348/347 BC) believed that geometry and arithmetic are the essence of everything, and that they represent the purest philosophical language on the planet. However, the depth of the geometrical and musical base, and their symbolic importance are seen in the Pythagorean theory of numbers and basic mathematical principles. In other words, Pythagoras (c. 570–495 BC) explained in his *Harmony of the Spheres* the idea that harmony arises solely from between objects in the entire universe, and that the same would be implemented on the Earth, in Nature, and Man himself.

Pythagoras based the learning about geometry on three archetypal forms and the measuring of their relations: the triangle, circle and square. The numbers and the geometric forms are given symbolic meaning as well. Mondrian used only quadratic forms in his geometric abstraction. The square or tetrad, in the Pythagorean tradition, was considered the first geometric body and the number 4 was revered as the first-born number, the root of all things, the source of Nature and the most perfect number. Pythagoreans believed that Man's soul is made up of tetrads, i.e. four forces: that souls are the mind, sense, thought and science; that the tetrad connects all beings, elements, seasons and numbers; and that all tetrads on the planet are intellectual; it was also called harmony, as they have consistency in appearance; and most importantly, in the context of Mondrian's poetics – the tetrad was "the key of the guardian of Nature, because universal conformation does not exist without it".²⁷

Another interpretation of the tetrad or square can be found in theosophical literature – in a sort of lexicon of theosophical symbols, i.e. in Helena

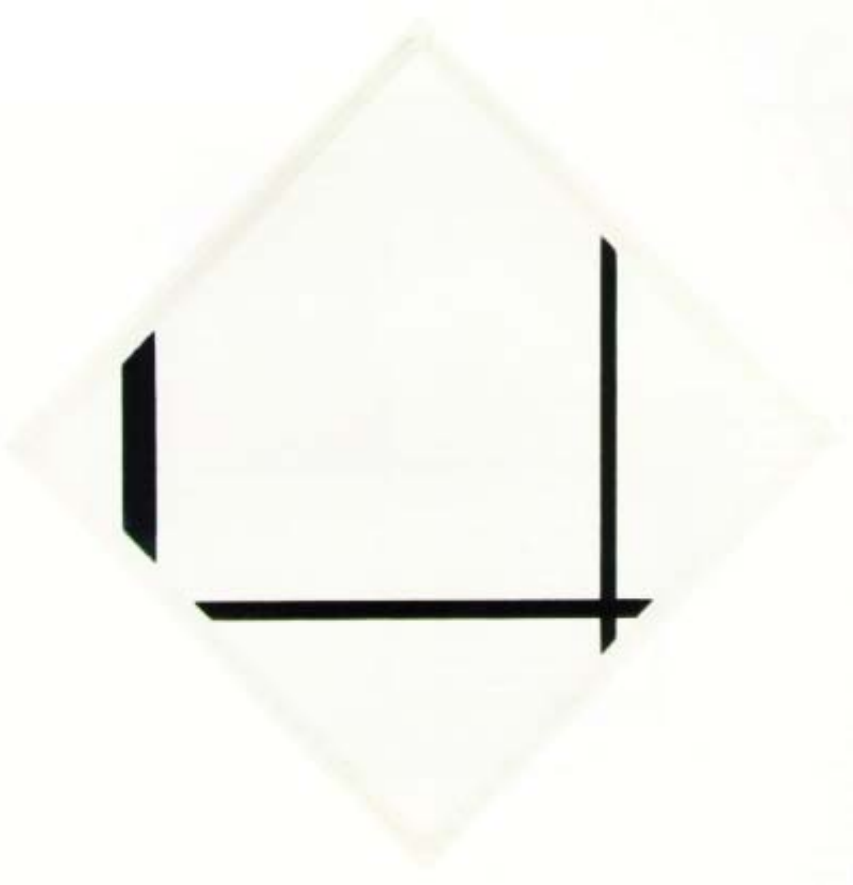
W. Stott, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 165.

²⁶ Idem

²⁷ Dr Irena Sjekloca Miler, *Pitagorin kod: Materija Numerica*, Beograd, Akia M. Princ, 2012, 309.

Petrovna Blavatsky's book *Keys to the Mystery Language: And Theosophical Symbols Showcase*, where the author also referred to Pythagorean tradition. As it is explained there, that specific "Pythagorean tetrad or square" is the "potentiality of Matter and the dual Duad, i.e. Tetractys or Quaternary" and consists of:

Two males ||, Logos-Word and Anthrōpos-Man, plus their syzygies, i.e.
Two females = Zōē-Life and Ekklēsia-Assembly.²⁸



Example 2: Piet Mondrian, *Fox Trot A – Lozenge Composition with Three Black Lines* (1929)

Oil on canvas, 78.2 x 78.3 cm, Yale University Art Gallery
(<http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/40159>)

²⁸ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Keys to the Mystery Language: And Theosophical Symbols Showcase*, ed. by Aglaya Annenkova, Philaletheians, 2017, 19.

H. P. Blavatsky referred to the Pythagorean understanding of this symbol as sacred, and went on to explain that “it is the perfect square, and none of the boundary lines exceeds the other in length, by a single point. It is the emblem of moral justice and divine equity geometrically expressed. All the powers and great symphonies of a physical and spiritual nature lie inscribed within a perfect square”.²⁹

The painter positioned this ‘perfect square’ of *Fox Trot A* on one of its points. A huge white central space dominates the composition, thus the three black lines trigger the eye of the observer and manoeuvre it to keep track of their relationship, and to contemplate the construction of this diamond configuration of the canvas. Although it may be said that this composition is minimal in its visual expressive means, its construction is fraught with both psychological and physical energy. In making this composition, the author provokes us to move out of the frame and search for another intersection of lines. Thus, the whole composition should be perceived as active, albeit reduced to its material substance, rather than redundant. It contains the essence of a universal principle based on antithesis: calm, but awareness and activity, balance but also tension; and all that, and not by accident, symbolised with only two (non) colours. Now, thinking about the Foxtrot dance, in which the couple (man and woman) hold each other’s arms, maintaining a well-balanced ‘square frame’, and then, in one moment, push each other (but keep holding on with one hand), making a distinctive movement that brings about distance, tension, and finally, emotional satisfaction in the moment when the couple connects and ‘makes a frame’ again. As Annette Chauncy explained, this idea contained in the Foxtrot choreography is “echoed in Mondrian’s writings where he ruminates that it is the ‘empty space between’ the couple which creates the relationship”.³⁰ In relation to all this, it is possible to ‘read’ this idea as the *construction* of this specific *composition*: the three black lines, although not fully connected, embrace each other outside the canvas; the liaison that exists within the image structure produces an ‘open’, but also a ‘closed’ space that prospectively might be likened to the couple’s closed dancing frame, as well as the ‘open’ stance. However, it could also be perceived as a visual representation of a Foxtrot corner step.³¹ Each set of strides are

²⁹ Idem.

³⁰ Annette Chauncy, “Dancing with Mondrian”, op. cit., 171.

³¹ For an example of the Foxtrot performed in the 1920s see “1920s foxtrot” 11 March 2007 on *You Tube* www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyOWM651ITA Retrieved 26/1/10. For

mutually cancelled or offset by swinging into an opposing direction where the female, who was initially moving backwards, rotates and steps forward and the male partner proceeds in reverse. This dynamic role reversal where the female and male change their travelling direction through negotiation of the small heel turn creates a contraposition within the dance. Mondrian states that the “contraposition of lines and planes [...] plastically manifests repose”.³² Accordingly, shall we think that maybe Mondrian – following the theosophical tradition – gave a special meaning to lines – horizontal brush strokes meant what was feminine, and vertical ones meant what was masculine – symbology that transferred from naturalism to abstractionism for a long work period.³³

It is noteworthy how Italo Tomassoni pointed out that Mondrian’s neo-plasticism used a two-dimensional surface geometry: a system in which there is no perspective, and time is frozen into a permanent present, and that on the other hand he studied the phenomenon of rhythm on the canvas. However, Aristotle (384–322 BC) explained that “not only do we measure the movement by means of time, but we also determine time according to the movement, because one causes the other”. Hence, perhaps Mondrian wanted to leave out the third dimension on his flat canvases, but he directly incorporated the fourth, that is time, striving to realise the rhythm of his paintings! Friedrich Schelling pointed out this possible connection long ago: “The necessary form of music is *succession*, for time is the universal form of informing the infinite into the finite, by meter and *rhythm*’, which is ‘one of the most wonderful mysteries of nature and art, for it is immediately or directly inspired by nature’.³⁴ For him “rhythm is the first dimension of music, for it determines or qualifies music for reflection and self-awareness”, and “in order

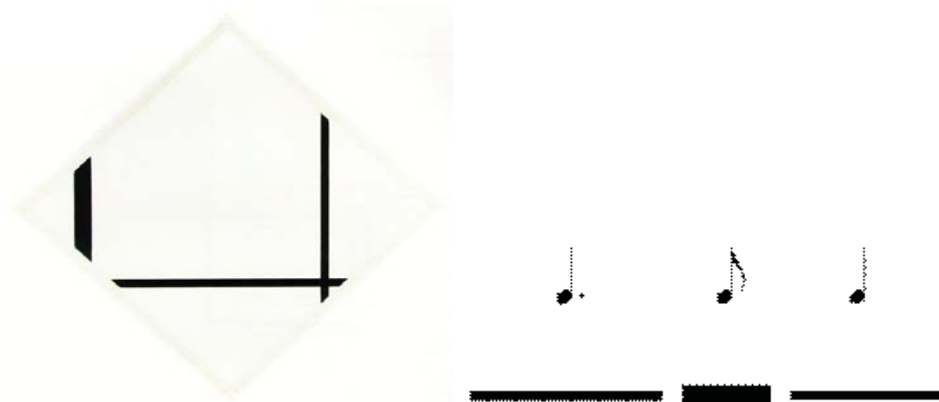
a more contemporary version of the Foxtrot see the “Luca Foxtrot Performance” 24 July 2006 on *You Tube* www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gQEik74U7k Retrieved 26/1/10. For an example of the Foxtrot corner step see “How to Do a Foxtrot Sway Step | Ballroom Dance” Published on 24 September 2013 on *You Tube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBvPTt0VqmA>.

³² Piet Mondrian, *Mondrian: Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: An essay in Trialogue Form (1919–1920)*, ed. by Martin James, transl. by E. M. Beekman, George Braziller Inc, 1995, 23.

³³ Jorge Alexander Barriga, *Piet Mondrian, Plastic vision and esthetic emotion*, Bunssei University of Art, Departamento de Artes Plasticas, Doctorando en arte, Recibido 3/12/11; aceptado 7/12/11, Número 8/dic, 2011), 115.

³⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, op. cit., 109–110.

to comprehend rhythm most purely we must separate everything else in music that is stimulating or exciting".³⁵ Thus, as it is important in the context of Mondrian's poetics, Schelling states that the analysis of rhythmic components is approached in the same manner as required by Mondrian when it comes to the basic construction of nature, i.e. the arts. Mondrian's dancing interest coincided with his fascination with jazz which endorsed his ideas concerning the tempo of music. What Mondrian later realised, was that the 'suddenness and interruption' that he enjoyed of American jazz, was called 'syncopation', one of the important factors of jazz music. Within jazz, rhythm became the dominant criteria for this style of music and can be found in the prevailing elements of swing (variations in momentum), syncopation (the displacement of sound) and improvisation (the creative adaptation of a piece of music). These elements which create dynamism can be observed in Mondrian's paintings and are also reflected in the dance forms which he adored. In this regard, if we reconstruct the lines in the image we shall see a punctuated rhythm:



Example 3: Rhythmical transposition of Piet Mondrian's painting *Fox Trot A*

Writing rhythmic components free of pitch, is the same as drawing a scheme or geometric drawing, the skeleton of music/dance free of material subjective appearances. Schelling confirms this with the following sentence: "one of the universal categories of painting – *drawing* (not *chiaroscuro* or *colouring*), is mentioned as the real form [...] that is, drawing is the rhythm of

³⁵ Ibid., 112.

painting”.³⁶ The drawing as rhythm are the black lines on Mondrian’s canvases. With the rhythms of lines – achieved by different lengths and thickness, Mondrian realises the metaphors of movement, and therefore time, filling the painting with a content that is not expressed descriptively but metaphorically! Mondrian writes that “the artistic expression of true reality is reached by dynamic movements in balance”.³⁷

Florensky explains that music, as the most abstract art, has limitless freedom in the organisation of space, which is why the listener also has the most freedom to perceive it and conceive it in many ways, which absolutely do not coincide with the initial idea of the composer. The pioneers of abstract painting tended to attribute this abstract quality of music to image. And actually, lines themselves are equally abstract as any sound, but still, to some extent, they evoke in our minds some pictures, we associatively recognise the objects from the outside world, i.e. dance and music figures. Mondrian gave us an objective construction but he liberated our subjective imaginative composition!

Fox Trot B

This famous painting by Mondrian, *Fox Trot B*, as well as *Fox Trot A*, may be associated with diverse dance themes, which could include the physical space of the room, as well as the dance motion and the partner’s stance. However, this painting has a different composition. Here, the painter has incorporated colours. By using purely pictorial means of expression – form and colour, i.e. the straight line and flat primary colours – red, blue, yellow and non-colours – white, gray and black, Mondrian realised the idea of pure painting. Non-colours have the value of space, and the value of the matter, and the primary task is to create harmony on the basis of the contrast, the opposition and asymmetry.

A connection could therefore be made between Mondrian’s understanding of colour and his interest in jazz music, i.e. its harmonic structure. Mondrian said: “The more purely we perceive harmony the more purely we will plastically express the relationships of colour and sound”.³⁸ Basic jazz har-

³⁶ Ibid., 127–128.

³⁷ Лазар Трифуновић [Lazar Trifunović], *Сликарски њравци XX века [Slikarski pravci XX века]*, Приштина, Јединство, 1982, 63.

³⁸ Piet Mondrian, “Dialogue on the New Plastic (1919)”, in: *The New Art – The New Life...*, op. cit., 79.

monies revolve around dominant, subdominant and tonic relationships, and there is an aspect of improvisation within the harmonic structure. However, as it was mentioned before, rhythm is another jazz music feature that was intriguing for the painter. The artist perceived rhythm as "something that is more about proportion and equilibrium, than about regularity or symmetry", and that it "can be expressed through lines and blocks of colour", and that its function is "to prevent static expression through dynamic action" created "by the tension of the forms".³⁹ As already mentioned, the Foxtrot, as well as jazz music, is based upon a rhythmic structure which consists of 4/4 timing. Mondrian frequently chose to utilise a square format for his pictures, where the rhythm of lines and planes of colour are contained within a frame of four equilateral sides.

Mondrian assigned the three primary colours red, blue and yellow to sound, whereas he equated gray, white and black to non-tones, which he determined as "noise".⁴⁰ However, these white non-tone squares demand attention in Mondrian's painting, and they are effectual in the same measure as the 'open' space created by the couples, while dancing along the walls inside a hall, leaving an 'open' central space. Or, one can compare its composition to the specific movements of the dancers, precisely to the Foxtrot box step.

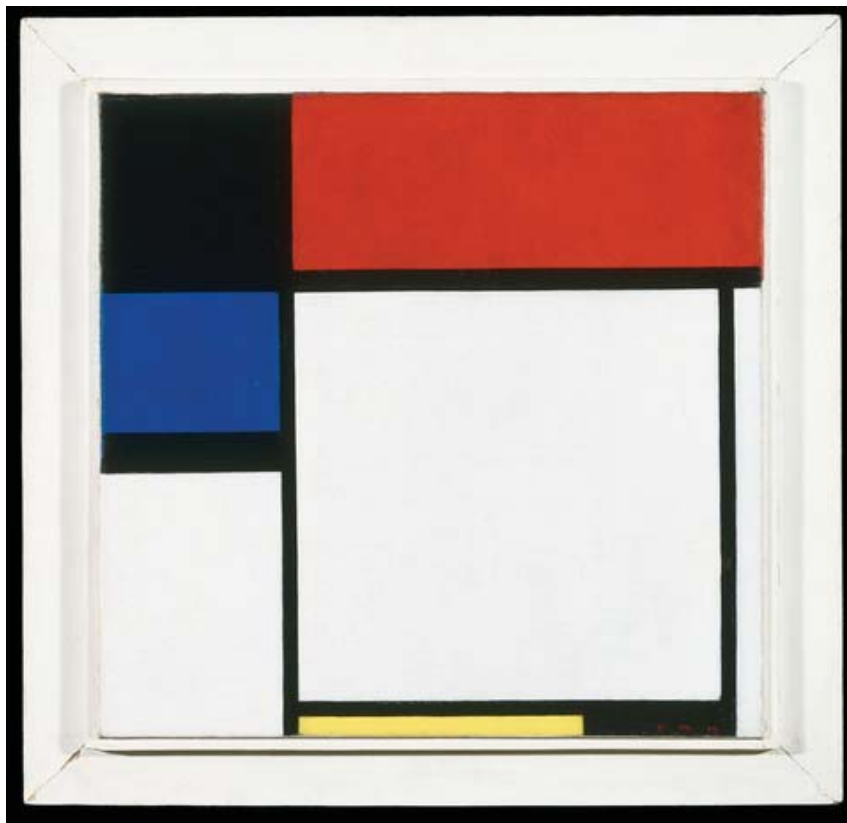
There we could realise the fact that the Hegelian concept of speculative universalism also had an influence on Mondrian's poetics.⁴¹ In the first volume of his *Aesthetics*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1777–1831) explained that the elements which define the external beauty of the abstract form are regularity, symmetry, legality and harmony, and as an example in the context of harmony he mentions the colours – blue, yellow and red, whose primary differences already exist in the essence of the colour. The author sees the beauty of their harmony in avoiding their showy differences and contradictions, which, as such, should be smoothed out so that he, in very different ways, shows their composition as they require each other because the colour is not one-sided but is essentially a whole. At the same time, the author mentions the music, explaining that the tonic, mediant and

³⁹ Annette Chauncy, "Dancing with Mondrian", op. cit., 173.

⁴⁰ Piet Mondrian, "The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' Bruiteurs (1921)", in: *The New Art–The New Life: Collected writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. by Harry Holtzman and Martin James, Da Capo Press, 1987, 150.

⁴¹ H. H. Arnason, *Istorija moderne umetnosti: slikarstvo, skulptura, arhitektura, fotografija*, Beograd, Orion Art, 2008, 357; Italo Tomassoni, *Mondrian*, op. cit., 23.

dominant are essential tonal differences that, united into a whole, match with their differences.⁴²



Example 4: Piet Mondrian, *Fox Trot B, with Red, Black, Blue and Yellow* (1929)
Oil on canvas, 45.4 x 45.4 cm, Yale University Art Gallery
(<http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/43964>)

Movement as the unifying element of painting, music and dance

For Schelling “music is nothing else but the perceived rhythm and harmony of the visible universe itself, [...] in rhythm and harmony music portrays the form of the movements of the cosmic bodies, the *pure form* as such, liberated

⁴² Георг Вилхелм Фридрих Хегел, *Естетика I*, (*Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*), transl. by Властимир Ђаковић, Београд, Култура, 1952, 153–158.

from the object or from matter".⁴³ According to Mondrian, one of the defining features of the new music was the polar opposition between melody and harmony, melody characterised as "descriptive" and "emotional", harmony as "orderly" and "objective". He explained that what he earlier called "constructive plastic" was "veiled by descriptive melody". Thus, Mondrian believed that the "demolition of melody" should be done, which he recognised, to some extent, in jazz music.⁴⁴

This conflict, between spontaneity and the desire to remain within the limits of the known, lies at the heart of jazz music. This duality gives the essential character of jazz, but jazz is just as much an intellectual, as an emotional art. This is again in accordance with Mondrian's idea in which composition, in the new plasticism, is dualistic. Through the exact reconstruction of cosmic relations it is a direct expression of the universal; by its rhythm, by the material reality of its plastic form, it expresses the artist's individual subjectivity.

Pavel Florensky draws attention to the fact that a common classification of art is made on the basis of the materials of a certain art and the means that it uses. However, the author believes that "art is the activity of the objective [...] and the objective of any art is the overcoming of sensory obviousness, the naturalistic crust of randomness and the showing of what is constant and unchanging, which is of general importance and value in reality".⁴⁵ In other words, the artist should transform reality, that is, to redefine spaciousness in the artistic and in his own way. Florensky explicitly states that "*movement shapes the space*".⁴⁶ It is interesting that we always imagine the movement as a line, a direction. From this it follows that spatial organisation by movement actually is spatial organisation by unit. And that is exactly what Mondrian was doing – his observations and experiences of popular culture (social dancing and jazz music) were replicated through plasticity in the form and structure of his art work. However, in which manner can the movement be transferred into the painting? Paul Klee imprinted in his canvases the dimension of time, and thus rhythm and movement, deeply inspired by music. He resolved the issue of movement, among other things, by drawing arrows along the drawn figures on the canvas and almost directing the view of the observ-

⁴³ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁴ Peter Vergo, *Music and Painting...*, op. cit., 315.

⁴⁵ Pavel Florenski, *Prostor i vreme...*, op. cit., 59–60.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 49.

ers, by which he caused visual movement and thus required a certain amount of time. So, on Mondrian's, and other abstract canvases, one of the key things is the organisation of the elements and their order, which Florensky considers to be essentially determined by the compositional and constructive principle and he concludes that if it is not there, there will be no *movement*.

In the context of the Foxtrot and jazz music, all this would mean that in analysing these two phenomena Mondrian excluded all subjective elements of both, that is to say – every strictly personal movement of the dancers, and every very personal improvisation of the musician. He analysed the four basic elements of jazz: melody, rhythm, harmony and instrumentation. If “jazz is a summary name for the musical styles that characterise the attempt at creative improvisation on a given topic over the basics of the complex and constant current rhythm and European harmony, with the overlapping of different styles in jazz”,⁴⁷ then, it could be said that the painter searches for the truth in dance, and in music, more precisely, the main elements – the basic steps in dance and the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic skeleton in music. He found the objectiveness of these elements in the fact that they remain unchangeable, regardless of all the added, subjective elements. Finally, one can assume all possible correlations and *transpositions* among all the three Foxtrots – the Foxtrot as a dance, as a painting and as music, bearing in mind the essential element which connects them all, i.e. movement.

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⁴⁷ Јадран Ерчић, *Књија о џезу*, Београд, Радио-телевизија Србије, 2007, 11.

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Summary

The syntagm, *Mondrian's "transdance"* is a term with which the author wanted to symbolically indicate the main research interest presented in this paper, that is, the examination of how the basic stance, steps and movements in the Foxtrot and, implicitly, the main elements of jazz, i.e. melody, rhythm, harmony, are transposed into the particular visual compositions – *Fox Trot A* (1930) and *Fox Trot B* (1929). All of these particular art forms (dance, painting, and music), though very different in the aesthetic and poetical respect, are nevertheless connected with one essential element – movement, as a measure of both time and space. In this consideration of painting as a temporal, and not only a spatial object, the visual art discourse is influenced by the vocabulary of the art of music and of dance. Thus, this paper should be understood as

the author's intimate observation of time-space transpositions (at the wider level), as well as the author's discussion about the latent (interdisciplinary) 'dialogue' which the painter, Piet Mondrian, aka "The Dancing Madonna", conducted with dance and music (in the strictest sense). This premise is explored from several aspects, but none of them deviates from the main methodological course, determined by the "interdisciplinary model of musicological competence" (Veselinović-Hofman).