MONDRIAN'S

BOOGIE WOOGIE

BEAT

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Honors Thesis in Art History

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[1] Erich Uffelman and Drew Davenport. Inside joke.

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Introduction

My interest in Piet Mondrian stems from my sophomore year in high school, when in my Academic Decathlon class I encountered Mondrian's *Composition with Red and White* while studying the art section. I was bewildered by such a simple-looking painting. I wondered how that painting could count as art. Surely art must be about technical skill and ability to depict something the eye sees. Nonetheless, it had piqued my interest in art and I would go on to learn more about Mondrian in Advanced Placement Art History courses. By my senior year in high school, I had developed such an appreciation for Mondrian's work that I chose it as the subject for my admissions essay to Washington and Lee. I even attempted Mondrian-style painting while in high school, copying his *Composition with Red and White* but inverting all the colors; thus, red became green, blue became orange, yellow became violet, white became black, and vice versa. This experience taught me the difficulty of Mondrian's process, as well as the precision required to achieve the impeccability of his paintings.

I attended every Mondrian exhibit I could. When *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings* came to the Dallas Museum of Art, I was there. Ironically, I refer to that exhibit frequently throughout my thesis. Mondrian's theories about simplicity, purity, and the tranquility of the right angle appealed to me, as I tried to keep life organized and simple. I saw *Broadway Boogie Woogie* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with little idea that it would become a bedrock of my thesis five years later.

So when the time arrived to select a subject for my thesis, I could think of no artist more applicable to my interest in art history than Mondrian. Furthermore, I had just returned from the Science in Art program abroad in the Netherlands where I had not only

seen more of Mondrian's paintings in the region, but developed an interest in scientific examination and analysis of paintings. For my thesis topic, I wanted to somehow connect Mondrian and scientific analysis. I discovered a book that contains the only significant published analysis work on Mondrian's paintings, Cooper and Spronk's *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*, named after the exhibit I had seen in Dallas five years ago. The book, authored by a Mondrian historian and technical examination specialist, contains technical analysis of fifteen paintings completed by Mondrian in Paris or London, then altered in New York. After looking at the titles *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, I decided to explore the influence of jazz on Mondrian's life.

This led me to my angle on Mondrian. Most art historians attribute Mondrian's stylistic changes in New York to New York: skyscrapers, people, lights, advertisements, and jazz. They also compartmentalize Mondrian's New York work from the rest of his career, labeling *Broadway Boogie Woogie* the masterpiece of Mondrian's New York period. I argue not only for a jazz interpretation of Mondrian's final paintings, but their significance as the most important paintings in Mondrian's abstract oeuvre, a continuum of subtle adjustments over nearly 30 years. Using formalism and style, biographical study, light psychoanalysis, and scientific analysis, I connect Mondrian's paintings in New York to musical elements that he valued and a deeper philosophical interpretation of his theories and goals.

In my first chapter, "*De Stijl:* Mondrian's foundation," I lay out Mondrian's fundamental principles about art and his involvement in *De Stijl* and Neo-Plasticism. In the second chapter I discuss New York in the 1930s, when Mondrian arrived. I also analyze some of the transatlantic paintings and refer to the scientific analysis of Cooper

and Spronk for confirmation of Mondrian's alterations to the paintings in New York. In the third chapter, I present Mondrian's affinity for music and particularly jazz and its parallels to Neo-Plastic art. I also analyze selected New York paintings and connect them to the jazz Mondrian experienced in New York. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I assert the importance of Mondrian's final paintings to his career and original artistic intents going back to *De Stijl*.

I could have never imagined doing this kind of analysis of Mondrian's paintings after encountering *Composition with Red and White* seven years ago. Never could what I originally visualized as merely a tic-tac-toe board carry such a deeper meaning.

Chapter One

De Stijl: Mondrian's foundation

Piet Mondrian's deeply philosophical approach to art lay rooted within a uniquely Dutch cultural and artistic phenomenon known as *De Stijl.* Both a revolutionary and evolutionary approach, *De Stijl* altered the fundamental conception of artistic expression.[1] A young artist of the Dutch avant-garde, Theo van Doesburg formally founded *De Stijl* in 1917 as a periodical, a forum of expression for modern Dutch artists such as Bart van der Leck and Mondrian, both of whom contributed significantly in the publication's infancy.[2] Though it began in the Netherlands, its influence spread around Europe, a society that was recovering from World War I and searching for calm, reason, and tranquility. *De Stijl* provided antidotal placidity in an atmosphere of chaos.

Van Doesburg established the principles of *De Stijl* in the first issue: artists should enlighten the art-viewing public as art critics had not. They should create art that emphasizes the visual and they should engage the public in the beauty of this visually-intensive art.[3] By reducing art to fundamentally visual components such as line and color, they rejected contextual and interpretive approaches to art in favor of a more formalist perspective, a deconstruction of art to fundamental plastic components.

Mondrian's involvement in *De Stijl* began after he had formally trained as a painter. He was in his mid-40s when he first contacted Theo van Doesburg in 1915, and the relationship blossomed into collaboration on *De Stijl.*[4] Mondrian's approach to art,

[1] H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 54.
[2] Carel Blotkamp, "Theo van Doesburg." *De Stijl: The Formative Years* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 18.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Els Hoek, "Piet Mondrian." *De Stijl: The Formative Years* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982), 49.

progressing toward abstraction, fit naturally with the aims of *De Stijl*. He had rejected Futurism as too fixated on human emotion and sensation and thus clearly at odds with abstraction.[5] While he acknowledged Cubism as a step in the right direction and produced some proto-Cubist paintings, he still repudiated its natural aestheticism.[6] He "became aware that Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction towards its ultimate goal: the expression of pure reality."[7] *De Stijl* followed Cubism in a natural progression towards abstraction.[8] This "pure reality" that Mondrian criticized Cubism for lacking he expressed in the first issue of *De Stijl*:

> The truly modern artist *consciously* perceives the abstractness of the emotion of beauty: he *consciously* recognizes aesthetic emotion as cosmic, universal. This conscious recognition results in an abstract plastic—limits him to the purely universal…The new plastic cannot be cloaked in what is characteristic of the particular, natural form and color, but must be expressed by the abstraction of form and color—by means of straight line and determinate primary color.[9]

Mondrian breaks down painting to the simplest and most fundamental components—abstraction, form, color, and line. Abstraction is what makes art beautiful, spiritual, and universal. His emphasis on *consciously* shows the process is not haphazard or random, but a distinct method. The artist deliberately creates universal beauty though those plastically formal components, achieving progression towards universality through the

[5] Hoek, 44.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Jaffé, 43. Jaffé quotes an essay by Mondrian.
[8] Robert P. Welsh, "De Stijl: A Reintroduction," in *De Stijl 1917-1931: Visions of Utopia,* ed. Mildred Friedman (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982), 17.
[9] Piet Mondrian, "The New Plastic in Painting (1917)." *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian.* Edited by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: Hall, 1986), 28. The italics are Mondrian's.

transition from natural to plastic in art. This process attains the highly desirable "pure reality," as opposed to natural reality.

The artists working in the *De Stijl* method, formulated by Mondrian and propagated by Van Doesburg, brought a new dimension to the concept of art. It was to be a significant stage of human evolution as well as artistic evolution.[10] While the modern era of art was moving towards abstraction, Mondrian considered *De Stijl* a sign of human progress: "let us not forget that we are at a turning point of civilization, at the end of everything old; the separation between the two is absolute and definite."[11] The concept of the "absolute" dominated Mondrian's approach to art, and emerged as a stylistic theme in many of his paintings. *De Stijl* represented a complete departure from figural representation in painting. In his expression of *De Stijl* as an evolutionary stage, Van Doesburg referred to art (from Giotto to Picasso) as an evolving means of relating humanity to universal life.[12] *De Stijl* moved art and humanity closer to abstraction and concurrently toward universality.

A key ingredient of *De Stijl* was the elimination of nature, subject matter and individuality. The painter creates with only the plastic components: pure line, color, plane, and form, leaving no room for individualized expression.[13] Acknowledging however that the complete removal of subjectivity from art could never be accomplished, Mondrian nonetheless postulated: "one can become less and less subjective until subjective no longer predominates in one's work."[14] Combined, these plastic components and theories made *De Stijl* commensurate with a prevailing notion

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[10] Jaffé, 62.
[11] Ibid, 63. Jaffé quotes from a *De Stijl* article by Mondrian.
[12] Ibid, 64.
[13] Ibid, 11.
[14] Ibid, 43. Jaffé quotes an essay by Mondrian.

popularized by the Impressionists: *l'art pour l'art.*[15] Van Doesburg strongly supported this concept: "Art is an aim in itself…The place that art should take in our society is: to supply aesthetic needs."[16] Van Doesburg's support of "art for art's sake" indicates a desire to see art evolve into complete abstraction, devoid of natural connotation. The art itself should represent pure aesthetic beauty unimpeded by naturalism and independent of the artist's personality. This follows *De Stijl*'s elimination of individualism from art in favor of the whole. *De Stijl* subordinated individualistic tendencies in art to the holistic, collective, and universal.[17] Mondrian supported this ideal: "art, as a form of egotism has already been demolished gradually."[18] Mondrian and *De Stijl* asserted that egotism and individualism in art degrades the spiritual quest for reality and universality. The spiritual quest would reflect the targeted aesthetic beauty. Like naturalism, individualism taints purity.

The purity sought by *De Stijl* applied to color. The *De Stijl* founders addressed color from an abstract perspective, asserting that color must be pure rather than natural.[19] The *De Stijl*-based reduction of volume to rectangular planes paralleled the reduction of color from natural to primary. According to Mondrian, "color brought determinacy."[20] Thus, *De Stijl* would permit only the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue, and only within the confines of rectangular planes.[21] Of the *De Stijl* founders, Mondrian adhered most closely to use of primary colors, while Van Doesburg and Van der Leck were more

[15] Ibid, 98.
[16] Ibid. Jaffé quotes from an article by Van Doesburg
[17] Ibid, 71.
[18] Ibid. Jaffé quotes from a *De Stijl* article by Mondrian.
[19] Hoek, 53.
[20] Ibid. Hoek quotes Mondrian's 1918 article "Neo-plasticism in painting."
[21] Ibid.

open to secondary colors and mixed colors.[22] Since primary colors represent the absolute purity of the color wheel, the universal scope of color resides within the three primary colors. According to Mondrian, these colors should remain pure and untainted, free of undesirable tonal mixing with gray.[23] He connects the function of tone in painting to the function of tone in music: "tone is, in connection with painting: breaking of color. In music, tone is: breaking of sound."[24] By "breaking color" in a painting, tone pollutes the purity of that color by altering its appearance. Tone represented for Mondrian a divergence, something that contributed to the rhythmic beat of music. Music would influence Mondrian throughout his life; it often interlaced with his approaches to art.

De Stijl had several non-artistic roots, which combined into a multi-faceted approach to art. The German philosopher Hegel lay the foundation for a spiritual component embodied in Van Doesburg's formulation of *De Stijl*.[25] Hegel referred to plastic expression as a means of spiritual liberation and the removal of meaning as a step in the process of achieving "speculative universalism."[26] Dr. Mathieu Schoenmaekers' Neo-Platonic philosophy about plasticity and mathematics was also heavily influential for the development of *De Stijl* and particularly Mondrian.[27] Schoenmaekers focused on the concept of positive mysticism, and connected it to plastic mathematics:

> Plastic mathematics means: continuously to become aware of the creator's passion for manifestation, in order to contemplate his creation with equal circumspection…We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions which can be controlled by reason, in order to recover these same constructions later in 'given' natural reality, thus penetrating nature by means of plastic vision.[28]

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 54.
[24] Ibid., 54. Hoek quotes a letter from Mondrian to Anthony Kok dated 3 May 1917.
[25] Jaffé, 54.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 56.

Schoenmaekers relates plasticity to creation. *De Stijl* seeks to transform from a natural to plastic means of expression to achieve the purest form of reality, one that is governed by mathematics and science. The positive mysticism advocated by Schoenmaekers differentiated between nature and reality, in that while nature changes, reality perseveres.[29] It is this non-changing reality that positive mysticism attempts to grasp by penetrating nature.[30] Nature is a visually superficial barricade to reality, one that the *De Stijl* artist aimed to remove through creating plastic art. Plastic art, categorized by Mondrian as Neo-Plasticism, began with a rectangular plane unified by form and color.[31] This construction reduces nature to "mere plastic expression of definite relations."[32] Both Mondrian and Schoenmaekers lived in Laren. Mondrian was also a member of the Dutch Theosophical Society, which exposed him to idealized methodologies of human life untainted by real-world issues.[33] This experience programmed Mondrian to function idealistically and theoretically, convincing him that his approach to art was not only feasible but the universal solution. Upstaged by lofty and idealistic ambitions, pragmatism would never enter Mondrian's spectrum of thought. These philosophical origins contributed to Mondrian's utopian conceptions achieved through plastic expression.[34] The cultural and religious roots of *De Stijl* supplemented the philosophical origins.

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 57.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. Jaffé quotes a *De Stijl* article by Mondrian.
[33] Ibid., 61.
[34] Ibid.

The art of *De Stijl* can also be seen in the context of Dutch culture. Dutch culture traditionally valued precision, neatness, and cleanliness, characteristics that often describe *De Stijl* art.[35] While the surface purity of *De Stijl* paintings connects them directly to spiritual cleanliness, thus identifying them as beautiful based on Dutch cultural standards, it should also be noted that this prevalent mentality arises from the Calvinist religious tradition. Elements of *De Stijl* paralleled the iconoclast movement of the sixteenth century.[36] The Dutch public initially viewed *De Stijl* as a direct "manifestation" of iconoclasm; the removal of subject matter and references to nature seemed to be similar to the religiously motivated destruction of icons in churches.[37] The universalistic perspective equates the two movements in that both search for reality: Calvinists seek God, *De Stijl* seeks truth.[38] Both beliefs are spiritual, which means for *De Stijl*, without naturalism, subject matter, or individuality.

According to Mondrian, the contrasting complexity and simplicity of line played a key role in the formulation of *De Stijl* and its search for spiritually pure reality. Mondrian differentiated between line as horizontal and vertical.[39] Mondrian defined the "ray" as the plastic manifestation of a vertical line, while line was reserved for the horizontal. Line and ray constitute fundamental elements of geometry, and thus are related to *De Stijl* and Schoenmaekers' conception of plastic mathematics. Schoenmaekers' analysis of line and ray approximates Mondrian's:

> Movement in line is continuation, movement in ray is rising…The line receives its essence from the ray, it is passive…the ray gives, it brings the line into existence, it is active…The line is horizontal in essence, the ray is

[35] Ibid., 83-84.
[36] Ibid., 84.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 84-85.
[39] Jaffé, 59.

> vertical in essence…The relation between line and ray is relation between the external and the internal. It is plastic relationship.[40]

Schoenmakers offers a distinct delineation between ray and line. More importantly, he focuses on the "essence" of each rather than the natural appearance. The essence contributes to *De Stijl*'s spiritual quest for universality and reality. In this case, essence and spiritual carry similar meanings by eschewing literal interpretation.

Some of these *De Stijl* principles apply to Mondrian's *Composition in Lines* (Fig. 1), which is generally regarded as Mondrian's first *De Stijl* painting. Using a rounded composition on a square canvas, Mondrian paints short and thick horizontal and vertical line segments, evoking a sense of disparate staccato indicated by the brevity and range of the line segments. Each segment forges a small contribution to the whole, the universal. The segments are related, as they sprawl across the amorphously swollen and rounded universe. Mondrian created each bar as a component to the universe of the painting, and each painting as a component to the universe of art. For now, Mondrian has chosen not to address color, maintaining the monochromatic and dualistic relationships afforded by black and white. There is no focal point. The viewer's attention shifts rhythmically from black to white, vertical to horizontal, segment to intersection, intersection to intersection, intersection to segment. In analyzing *Composition in Lines*, Meyer Schapiro asserted the existence of a "statistical order" within the layout of horizontal and vertical "bars."[41] A distinct irony exists in the carefully constructed and strategically placed line segments, as can be seen in the following experiment: A computer-generated simulation of this painting by Michael Noll (Fig. 2) put Mondrian's painting in perspective. Noll created the computer generation to compare its effect on amateur viewers with that of the original

[40] Ibid. Jaffé quotes an excerpt from Schoenmaekers' *Plastic Mathematics*.

[41] Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 249.

Composition in Lines.[42] In a survey, Noll asked viewers to identify which image they considered Mondrian's and which one they considered the computer's, as well as which one they preferred and whether or not they found abstract art appealing.[43] A majority of those surveyed preferred the computer version, as well as a majority of those who liked abstract art.[44] Those same respondents found the computer version more organized, creative, and visually pleasing.[45] This survey attests to Mondrian's success in achieving some of *De Stijl's* aims in eliminating individualism, since a majority of those surveyed thought that his painting was the computer version. For the most part, the viewers could not even distinguish which version was created by a person, thus the human component of artistic creation was totally eliminated. Mondrian would have applauded the results of Noll's experiment as reflective of *De Stijl's* effort to purge art of individualistic and personalized creative expression.

Though they agreed on the fundamental concepts of *De Stijl*, Mondrian and Van Doesburg differed sharply in personality and character. The impulsive, quick, and strident Van Doesburg contrasted sharply with the slow, deliberate, and patient Mondrian.[46] Volatile, Van Doesburg conversed, discussed, and argued with everyone from Fauves and Cubists to like-minded Neo-Plasticists, whereas Mondrian retained a deep-thinking conscience and reticence.[47] Mondrian was the purist, Van Doesburg the propagator. Though he conformed to the main principles of *De Stijl*, Van Doesburg was more flexible and open to other perspectives.[48] Nonetheless, the two men complemented

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[42] Ibid., 252.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Frank Elgar, *Mondrian* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1970), 90-91.
[47] Elgar, 90-91.
[48] Jaffé, 147.

each other to advance the ideology of De Stijl. Mondrian clearly expressed his deliberate and methodical nature through his *De Stijl* paintings, and later developed his style through a more personalized Neo-Plasticism.

There is one further aspect of *De Stijl* that pertains strongly to Mondrian's work in New York. The concept of the metropolis, the large, urban, dynamic, and populated city, greatly appealed to the followers of *De Stijl* and particularly Mondrian, who expressed the abstract viability of the metropolis:

> The truly modern artist regards the metropolis as an embodiment of abstract life; it is closer to him than nature, it will give him an emotion of beauty. For in the metropolis, nature has already been straightened out and regulated by the human spirit. The proportions and rhythms of planes and lines, will mean more to him that [sic] the capriciousness of nature. In the metropolis, beauty expresses itself more mathematically; therefore it is the place, from where the future mathematically artistic temperament must develop, the place whence the new style must come forth.[49]

Mondrian explains how of the urban city conforms to *De Stijl* principles. He worked mainly in big cities through his life: Amsterdam, Paris, London, and New York. Yet it was New York that most profoundly influenced his style of painting after the *De Stijl* years; the energetic confluence of lights, skyscrapers, jazz, cars, and people caused a renovation of composition.[50] These elements would form the basis of the urban rhythm that appealed to Mondrian. His *De Stijl*-based attraction to the urban landscape seems fitting given its contrast with everything natural. Yet it would be that jazzy, musical element of the New York stimuli that would influence him most profoundly. *De Stijl*'s revolutionary conception of abstract art formed the fundamental basis for Mondrian's style. Mondrian's art would reflect the influence of *De Stijl* for the rest of his career. He was unflappably loyal to his principles. His arrival in New York would bring the concept

[49] Ibid., 72-73. Jaffé quotes a *De Stijl* article written by Mondrian.
[50] Ibid., 73.

of the metropolis to the forefront, and result in a new interpretation of plastic expression wherein the urban landscape itself eliminated the subject matter of nature.

Before Mondrian's arrival in 1940, New York had become a vibrant city of people, lights, music, art, and overall visual stimulation. It was a city booming with people. The 1940 Census reports New York's population of nearly 7.5 million (twice the size of number-two Chicago's 3.4 million).[51] The number of skyscrapers built during the 1930s, helped establish New York as a bona fide urban metropolis. The Empire State Building (1931) was the world's tallest building until 1973.[52] Other tall and impressive architectural masterpieces included the 50-story Art Deco Irving Trust Company tower (1931), and the Art Moderne Starrett-Lehigh Building (1932).[53] Rockefeller Center developed during this period, as did the RKO and RCA buildings and Radio City Music Hall.[54] Mondrian, who praised the urban landscape as a modern manifestation of everything artificial and synthetic, must have been attracted to the pure verticality of the skyscrapers and the strong lines of other buildings that graced the New York skyline upon his arrival. The New York skyscrapers must have validated his deliberate use of vertical lines in his paintings.

New York provided not only vertical stimulation for Mondrian, but horizontal-line stimulation as well, with its avenues, roadways, bridges, and subways. In 1933 the Grand Central Parkway, a major thoroughfare for cars, connected Kew Gardens and Nassau County.[55] In addition, the Eighth Avenue subway opened (1932), as well as the

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[51] "Population of the 100 largest urban places: 1940." U.S. Bureau of Census. Available online <http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0027/tab17.txt> 28 January 2006.
[52] Jeffrey A. Kroessler, *New York Year by Year: A Chronology of the Great Metropolis* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 216.
[53] Ibid, 216-218.
[54] Ibid., 219-221.
[55] Kroessler, 221.

Chapter Two

Mondrian's transatlantic paintings and the New York setting

Before Mondrian's arrival in 1940, New York had become a vibrant city of people, lights, music, art, and overall visual stimulation. It was a city booming with people. The 1940 Census reports New York's population of nearly 7.5 million (twice the size of number-two Chicago's 3.4 million).[51] The number of skyscrapers built during the 1930s, helped establish New York as a bona fide urban metropolis. The Empire State Building (1931) was the world's tallest building until 1973.[52] Other tall and impressive architectural masterpieces included the 50-story Art Deco Irving Trust Company tower (1931), and the Art Moderne Starrett-Lehigh Building (1932).[53] Rockefeller Center developed during this period, as did the RKO and RCA buildings and Radio City Music Hall.[54] Mondrian, who praised the urban landscape as a modern manifestation of everything artificial and synthetic, must have been attracted to the pure verticality of the skyscrapers and the strong lines of other buildings that graced the New York skyline upon his arrival. The New York skyscrapers must have validated his deliberate use of vertical lines in his paintings.

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[52] Jeffrey A. Kroessler, *New York Year by Year: A Chronology of the Great Metropolis* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 216.
[53] Ibid, 216-218.
[54] Ibid., 219-221.
[55] Kroessler, 221.

Bronx-Whitestone (1939), Marine Parkway (1937), Henry Hudson (1936), and Triborough Bridges (1936).[56] The city's subterranean transportation expanded with the construction of the Queens Midtown and Lincoln Tunnels.[57] All these arteries of transportation were like a horizontal grid imposed by man in the natural landscape to move from one plane to another, and the grid must have registered deeply on Mondrian. Paris and London had similar urban landscapes, of course, but the newness and avant-garde nature of New York must have created a rhythmic and energetic atmosphere that was instrumental to Mondrian's experience there.

Perhaps the greatest "horizontal" architectural feat in the years leading up to Mondrian's 1940 arrival was the completion of the George Washington Bridge. At a cost of $59 million, the George Washington Bridge was praised by Le Corbusier as "the most beautiful bridge in the world. Made of cables and steel beams, it gleams in the sky like a reversed arch. It is blessed…it is painted an aluminum color and, between water and sky, you see nothing but the bent cord supported by two steel towers."[58] Le Corbusier's glowing tribute to the George Washington Bridge could easily have emanated from Mondrian, who was always ready to exalt anything that enhanced the urban landscape. He very likely found the bridge a unique monument to human artifice, and the interplay between the steel beams and cables both aesthetically and abstractly beautiful. The continuous passage of hundreds of cars over this bridge enlivened the structure with movement while injecting it with a sense of rhythm. The horizontal and vertical geometry of the graceful suspension bridge, with its roadway intersected by upright beams, was a powerful witness to what Mondrian often sought to capture in his art: the

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[56] Ibid., 219-235.
[57] Ibid., 228-232.
[58] Ibid., 217. Kroessler quotes Le Corbusier.

transcendent harmony and primacy of the 90-degree angle, rhythmically connected and related to other lines and colors.

By the late 1930s New York's basic structural lines mirrored the vertical and horizontal elements of a Mondrian composition. Tall skyscrapers connected the Manhattan skyline. Crisscrossing roads and streets, subway lines, bridges, sidewalks, and tunnels were like compositional measures of music, holding the city together with a sense of structural organization. They were the structural answer to Mondrian's black lines on a canvas that intersect each other only perpendicularly, accentuated by seemingly random blocks of primary color. Before Mondrian's arrival, New York was already the architectural embodiment of his artistic mission.

New York experienced a cultural boom in the 1930s not entirely unlike its construction boom. The repeal of Prohibition in 1933 led to renewed alcohol service in bars and clubs. A number of such establishments profited from Prohibition's end. These included the Paradise Restaurant, Trommer's Brewery, Rubsam & Horrmann, Stork Club, and Ruppert's brewery, all of which excelled with Prohibition's end.[59] The success of the New York music scene grew hand in hand with the success of the nightclubs.

Music took a solid foothold in New York during this period. George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* went through 124 performances after opening at the Alvin Theater in 1935.[60] Jazz particularly thrived in clubs around the city, including Minton's Playhouse, the birthplace of bebop and host to renowned musicians like saxophonist Henry Minton and Thelonius Monk.[61] "Digging New York," Charlie Parker came of age by playing in the Jay McShann Orchestra, and Louis Armstrong moved to New York with his wife,

[59] Ibid., 220. The previous sentence comes from the same source.
[60] Ibid., 224-225.
[61] Ibid., 234-239.

Lucille in 1943.[62] Benny Goodman and Count Basie performed in the first jazz program at Carnegie Hall in 1938.[63]

It was a particular genre of jazz that would attract Mondrian, however. It was boogie woogie that he loved and that he would use in the titles of his final two paintings. It too developed significantly during this time as well. An improvisational style of music played only by the piano, boogie woogie would profoundly influence Mondrian's approach to art. It unofficially began in Chicago in 1928, when Clarence "Pinetop" Smith played "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie."[64] This was the first time the word "boogie" had been used in a musical title.[65] The boogie beat comes from piano and bass, the piano playing in "'eight to the bar'" meter.[66] "A left hand like God" is needed to maintain the persevering rhythm, while the right hand explores the melody in the higher sections of the piano.[67] The rhythm and beat of boogie woogie often mimicked the sound like of a locomotive, with the piano player aiming to create clattering noises and whistles, to imitate the intense excitement brought by an approaching train.[68] Boogie woogie was an offshoot of more mainstream jazz, and a short-lived fad, but it had a lasting impact.

It took nearly ten years for boogie woogie to gain attention among music listeners, and it did only when it appeared in New York. In 1938, Meade "Lux" Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson played in the "Spirituals to Swing" concert in New York's Carnegie Hall.[69] This successful concert propelled boogie woogie to the forefront of the

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[62] Ibid., 238-247.
[63] Ibid, 233.
[64] Roy Carr, *A Century of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 35.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

New York music scene and brought other jazz musicians into the boogie woogie ranks.[70] Boogie Woogie music was also known for its colorfully bizarre, if not downright awful, titles.[71] "Fry Me A Cookie With A Can Of Lard," and "Scrub Me Mama With A Boogie Beat" exemplify a music style whose titles were as catching and primitive as the locomotive-like rhythm.[72] This is the music that emanated from New York jazz clubs when Mondrian arrived in 1940.[73]

New York developed artistically in the 1930s, and nourished a vibrant community of talented artists, many of whom had fled to America to escape the rise of the Nazis and the outbreak of the war. The Whitney Museum of Art, a collection of American contemporary art rejected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, opened in 1931.[74] The Museum of Modern Art went through several New York locations before settling on a 53rd Street property donated by the Rockefellers in 1939.[75]

Under German occupation by 1940, Paris could no longer serve as the free world's art capital. Artists began fleeing Europe in 1933 and most who could, had crossed the Atlantic by 1942.[76] In addition to Mondrian, André Breton, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, André Masson, Yves Tanguy, Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall, and Jacques Lipchitz helped to bring the heart of the European art world to New York.[77] Of the major early twentieth-century artists, only Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky stayed in Paris

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 37.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Mondrian's influence in jazz will be explored in chapter three.
[74] Kroessler, 217.
[75] Ibid., 237.
[76] Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1945: Strategies of Being* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 20.
[77] Ibid.

throughout the war.[78] The exodus of artists from Paris showed the impact of war on all facets of society. Under Nazi occupation, artistic freedom suffered. In 1940 Mondrian expressed his contempt for both the Nazis and Soviets:

> The evil of Nazi and Soviet oppressive tendencies—long obvious to the whole world—is now a terrible 'fact.' Reality has manifested this evil, writers and thinkers have shown it in all its depth and have considered its consequences. Although at present the destruction of these actual oppressive powers is most important, all that can help to unveil the evil of all oppression is useful to present and future. Evil must be seen and well understood unless it is to continue in another form after the war.[79]

Mondrian's opposition to Nazi (and Soviet) totalitarianism was clear. His opposition stemmed partly from an artist's perspective, which assessed those oppressive powers stifling the enlightenment of society released by plastic art. With no refuge of cultural freedom remaining in Europe, these artists looked to New York as the most promising city in which to contrive a viable artistic community, and so, they decided to convene there as World War II grew imminent.

Mondrian himself did not go directly to New York from Paris. Encouraged by his friend Ben Nicholson, Mondrian moved from Paris to London. This was in 1938, in the face of Hitler's advance through Europe.[80] Mondrian never really established a firm foothold in London, since he lived there less than two years. He had earlier met Harry Holtzman, a young and wealthy American artist. Filled with admiration for Mondrian, Holtzman had long encouraged him to move to New York, offering to subsidize all costs needed for the move.[81] Mondrian finally accepted Holtzman's offer when a Luftwaffe

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Piet Mondrian, "Art Shows the Evil of Nazi and Soviet Oppressive Tendencies." *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian.* Edited by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: Hall, 1986), 320.
[80] Frank Elgar, *Mondrian* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 174-175.
[81] Ibid., 175-177.

bomb destroyed the house next to his London home. On September 20, 1940, Mondrian departed London for New York.[82] A world class metropolis, New York awaited his arrival.

The shift of the Western world and center to New York introduced America to the concept of the "avant-garde." This was a French military term for a small group of soldiers sent ahead of the main forces to spearhead a mission. The concept came to be applied to modern artists, whose forward vision distinguished them from the rest of society in their search for truth through the power of art to interpret the present and seize the future.[83] Avant-garde modern art, by definition, therefore, will always evoke a strongly negative reaction from general society, because it is so new. The movement believes in its ability to convey truth regardless of the situational conventions. The confluence of the modern painters who moved from Paris to New York created a avant-garde atmosphere that was favorable for Mondrian's ideas.

After initially living in an apartment on First Avenue, Mondrian moved to a studio on East 89th Street, that was nestled among several art galleries.[84] Largely through his friendship with Harry Holtzman he made connections with the city's artists. He became acquainted with Charmion von Wiegand, who had been profoundly influenced by Mondrian's work.[85] Von Wiegand, a writer and art critic as well as an artist, would write much about Mondrian and his art.[86] Mondrian also met fellow artists Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, and André Breton. He held two one-man exhibitions in New

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[82] Ibid., 176-177.
[83] Fineberg, 17.
[84] Elgar, 178.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*. Exhibition Catalogue (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 12.

York, the only two during his lifetime. Both were at the Valentine Gallery, one in 1942 and the other in 1943.[87] Mondrian included some paintings in the exhibit that he had completed in London or Paris and then modified again after moving to New York. These paintings are now part of a larger collection of eighteen works known as the transatlantic paintings.

Mondrian's transatlantic paintings embody the many facets of the artist's personality, reflecting Mondrian's state-of-mind of the particular place and time of each painting.[88] They are a fundamental attempt to address being radically displaced by crossing an ocean, while at the same time an attempt to interpret expressively the New York atmosphere.[89] They represent transition and change with simultaneous acknowledgement of and tribute to past accomplishments.

Compiled into an exhibit in 2001 by Harry Cooper, an art historian specializing in Mondrian, and Ron Spronk, a specialist in technical examination of paintings, the exhibition provided insight into how Mondrian altered many of his paintings after moving to New York.[90] Although he altered them and considered them "finished," Mondrian struggled arduously with the concept that a painting is ever really "finished."[91] His struggle is evident in his assignment of two dates he inscribed on each of the transatlantic paintings. There is nothing concrete about the two dates that Mondrian inscribed on each of the paintings.[92] They vary from being dates when Mondrian began them in Europe to the years when he stopped working on them in Europe, to the various

[87] Elgar, 195-196.
[88] Ibid., 45.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Cooper and Spronk, 2.
[91] Ibid., 53.
[92] Ibid., 28.

points of completion in New York.[93] The inscribed dates simply provide time periods that help categorize the paintings as "transatlantic." Four of those eighteen paintings have been selected for review here as a representative sample of Mondrian's larger stylistic adjustments following his move to New York: *Composition with Red Yellow, and Blue; No. 7; Trafalgar Square*; and *Place de la Concorde*. These four were selected because of the depth of the scientific analysis available (thus leading to profound insights into Mondrian's methods) as well as for the variety of their titles.

Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue (1935-1942) offers a vertically-oriented canvas and compositional structure (Fig. 3). Two strong and yet relatively thin black lines span the entire length of the painting, one near the middle of the composition and the other near the left edge. Horizontal black line segments extend from the right edge to the right vertical line and truncate the painting. Mixed black and red, small and thick line segments run from the left edge to the left vertical line. There are two planes of color encased by black lines: a yellow horizontal rectangle appears along the upper right corner, and a smaller vertical blue rectangle rests in the lower left corner, nestled between the left vertical line and the lowest horizontal thick line segment.

Mondrian began this painting in Paris. He actually started working on it before 1935, as proven by a 1934 photo of the painting in its infancy (Fig. 4).[94]

Mondrian altered this painting significantly even while still in Paris (Fig. 5). He moved the left vertical line slightly farther to the left, thickened the thick black line segments on the left while moving the top one farther up and the lower one farther

[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 117.

down.[95] Later, in New York, Mondrian altered neither the thickness nor position of the existing black line, nor did he add any more black lines.[96] Ultraviolet fluorescence reveals that in New York, he did change the top left bar from black to red, and he added a second red bar farther down, while lowering the lowest black bar again (Fig. 6).[97] X-radiography suggests the possibility that Mondrian at one point had painted thicker black lines between the two vertical lines on the painting (Fig. 7).[98] The X-radiograph also shows how Mondrian was open to a change of mind in mid-painting, carefully scraping away a layer of paint in order to change the color. When he moved the black bars on the left up or down, he scraped them off and filled the space with white or red. He also constructed planes of white and color with a thick buildup of paint, while keeping his black lines thin.[99] Mondrian's most significant alterations to this painting in New York consist of the added red bars on the left and a blue plane in the lower left corner. The "unprotected" bar of color is a new element that Mondrian develops in New York and includes in a number of the transatlantic paintings. The bar of color, unexpected and innovative, also visually relays the rhythm of a jazzy New York.

Though not as exaggeratedly vertical as *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, Mondrian's *No.* 7 (1937-1942) still presents an overall vertical orientation (Fig. 8). As in nearly all his compositions in this style, Mondrian creates a canvas with a white background that is crisscrossed by three horizontal lines and five vertical lines running the painting's width and length respectively. The work includes somewhat distracting

[95] Ibid., 118. This painting was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936 in its Fig. 4 state.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 120.

shorter, more punctuated horizontal lines and bars that stretch from various edges, and from vertical lines to other vertical lines. Two short and thick red bars run from the right edge to the farthest right vertical line. Between these two bars and farther left is a black bar of similar length and thickness that borders an enclosed vertically-oriented blue plane. There are two short line segments: one towards the bottom that runs between two vertical lines, and that also borders the small blue plane; the other helping to divide a plane of red into six sections of red. Mondrian uses no yellow in this work.

Mondrian's approach to this painting differs from *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*. He exhibited *No. 7* as part of his one-man show at the Valentine Gallery in 1942.[100] *No. 7* is categorized as one of Mondrian's "rhythm" compositions, known for their well-spaced vertical lines that run the entire canvas, and that are intersected by horizontals of various lengths.[101] Ultraviolet fluorescence reveals that Mondrian likely thickened many of the black lines while working in New York (Fig. 9).[102] He also seems to have scraped away sections of the red plane in the top left corner, so as to widen the black lines that traverse the plane.[103] This procedure resembles the widening of city roadways, something Mondrian might have witnessed while in New York. In *No. 7* Mondrian also shifted lines without widening them, as is evident in the slight upward move of the horizontal line along the bottom of the red plane. This is suggested by an X-radiograph of the painting (Fig. 10).[104] The arrows indicate various points on the canvas where a line formerly existed. Mondrian also tweaked the blue plane towards the lower right corner, enlarging the plane by shifting the black bar above it slightly higher, and

[100] Ibid., 165.
[101] Ibid., 40.
[102] Ibid. 165.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 167.

thus creating more colored surface (see Figs. 11 and 12).[105] It is also likely that Mondrian added the two red bars to the painting only after coming to New York.

The most visually stimulating of Mondrian's transatlantic paintings is *Trafalgar Square* (1939-1942). It offers a playground for the observing eye (Fig. 13). Five vertical black lines, three positioned to the left and two positioned to the right, run the length of the canvas. Four horizontal black lines spaced equally apart almost straddle the center of the painting and run its entire width. This fundamental structure creates many small and slim rectangles within these intersections. Mondrian heightens the effect with several short, staccato-like bars, both black and colored, that connect various lines to each other and to the edge of the canvas. This occurs mostly along the bottom and right side. The planes of color vary in size and are mostly yellow. Most of them lie and along the left side of the painting, but a larger red plane lies more toward the middle. It runs parallel to smaller and thinner planes of yellow and blue that rest respectively on the left and right edges. In this work Mondrian includes a feature rarely seen in his transatlantic paintings: he encloses a small blue area only on three of its sides (using the bottom edge and two black lines), leaving the right side unbounded. For all the colorful interplay at the bottom and sides of the image, the large area at the middle and top looks relatively uneventful.

Mondrian undoubtedly began *Trafalgar Square* in London. He was working in London in 1939 and titled the painting after the London landmark. Categorized as a format between "composition" and "rhythm," based on the fact that all vertical lines and most horizontal lines run edge to edge on the canvas, *Trafalgar Square* is one of two transatlantic paintings that bear a geographical title, the other being *Place de la*

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[105] Ibid., 171.

Concorde.[106] An X-radiograph reveals that Mondrian widened the third and fourth lowest horizontal lines, as well as the far right vertical lines (Fig. 14).[107] He widened the farthest right vertical line only after completing the blue plane on the right, evidenced by traces of blue paint found under the line's layer of black paint.[108] Though not based on technical examination, Charmion von Wiegand's journal entries note that Mondrian added the red plane on the left while in New York.[109] The X-radiograph indicates that Mondrian tweaked this painting significantly, particularly the colored and black bars. In addition to widening the vertical and horizontal lines, he shifted most of the lines and bars in the painting, altering the sizes of the color planes.[110] The origination of this painting in London means that Mondrian's transatlantic paintings can be divided into two groups: those he began in London and those he started in Paris.[111] Besides *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, the *Place de La Concorde* also has Parisian roots.

Somewhat similar in layout to *Trafalgar Square*, *Place de La Concorde* (1938-1943) is composed of five vertical black lines: two towards the left and three towards the right. They span the length of the canvas (Fig. 15). These lines intersect three horizontal lines that also run the length of the canvas. Four adjacent planes of yellow, varying widely in width but not length, fill the middle top section of the painting. Thin consecutive vertical bars of blue, red, yellow, and black, connect the bottom edge to a horizontal line segment that crowns the middle three vertical lines. Short and thick bars of red, black, and blue run from the right side of the painting to the farthest right vertical

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[106] Ibid., 35.
[107] Ibid., 237.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 238-241.
[111] Ibid., 32.

line. The highest blue bar connects the right edge to the third vertical line from the right. Two horizontal and thick red bars connect the second and third vertical lines from the right.

The 1938 date on this painting, along with the Parisian landmark title, lead to the conclusion that Mondrian began it in Paris. A photomicrograph indicates that Mondrian originally inscribed "39" instead of "38" when dating the painting, but that he later went back and corrected his mistake (Fig. 16).[112] Ultraviolet fluorescence shows that in the four planes of yellow at the top, Mondrian used two different compounds of cadmium yellow, to build up his paint. This correlates with a slight difference in pigments used in Europe and America (Fig. 17).[113] Mondrian widened all five vertical lines, extending the two on the left farther to the left and expanding the three on the right in both directions. The X-radiograph reveals that Mondrian, true to his revision-intensive process, scraped away earlier layers of paint to change colors. By doing this Mondrian maintained a topographical balance on the surface of his painting by keeping the entire composition on the same level (Fig. 18).[114] Evidence of significant reworking in the bottom-center section is also evident in both the X-radiograph and stereomicroscope. Mondrian must have painstakingly played with the line and color placement in New York before settling for what is seen today.[115] When removing earlier paint layers, Mondrian protected the integrity of his black lines by leaving a microscopic ridge of "breathing room" adjacent to the lines, visible in the X-radiograph.[116] Finally, there is the possibility that Mondrian originally painted an enclosed red plane along the middle right side where only a short

[112] Ibid., 222.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., 226.
[115] Ibid., 230.
[116] Ibid., 227.

red bar now remains. Such a possibility arises from traces of red paint found in the surrounding white area around the red bar (Fig. 19).[117] *Place de la Concorde*, like the other transatlantic paintings, points to the fact that Mondrian made important modifications after he arrived in New York.

Reviewing the transatlantic paintings gathered together from the museum exhibit leads to important insight into Mondrian's stylistic adjustments once he arrived in New York. For the most part, he thickened his black lines and moved them farther to the edge of the canvas, therefore creating more empty space in the middle sections of his paintings. He thickened his lines only slightly and shifted them only a few millimeters in any direction. He introduced a new element that included both line *and* color: the unenclosed bar of color, typically running from the edge of the canvas to the first line it encounters. For the most part these color bars are red or blue. Something about his experience of New York must have inspired him to do this, as it marks a sharp departure from the more rigid and regulated approach of his European years.

The areas of heavy reworking in the transatlantic paintings, indicated by X-radiographs, demonstrate Mondrian's reluctance to leave a painting as is. A good example is the bottom section of *Place de la Concorde* (Fig. 18), where the area is so dark and convoluted, and where Mondrian changed his mind several times, exchanging lines for color planes and different colored bars before settling for the current layout. New York's influence in this regard rose from the new, strange, and wonderful visual stimulation and new cultural growth it offered Mondrian, who had moved to a foreign country for the second time in two years, this time crossing the great Atlantic. Jazz, boogie-woogie, nightclubs, skyscrapers, bridges, cars, buses, subways, roadways, and

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[117] Ibid., 228.

people living in a macroscopic rectangle all had their influence. Mondrian had long praised the urban landscape for its technical antithesis to natural form and its role in the progress to universal purity. New York provided him with a tangible realization and confirmation of what his vision and work represented.

Of course there is the possibility that Mondrian significantly altered all of his paintings, not merely the transatlantics. The scientific data compiled by Cooper and Spronk does not provides exact dates for Mondrian's widening of lines or insertion of colored bars. However, Mondrian's inscription of second dates in his transatlantic paintings distinguishes them from others. It is as if he wanted to acknowledge that he experienced something so profound in New York and needed to reflect it in paintings that he had already "completed" in either London or Paris, but that he now "revisited" in the New World.

A comparison of *Composition with Lines* and *Place de la Concorde* reveals a development of rhythm evident in the latter. Not only has Mondrian integrated color into his work in *Place de la Concorde*, but a formerly taboo element: the direct juxtaposition of color and white, embodied in the bars of color was added in New York. This represents a new relationship: color vs. white. The newfound relationship gives the rhythm of *Place de la Concorde* more sophistication, as Mondrian adds to the available pool of relationships. The color versus white becomes the most rhythmically dynamic addition to Mondrian's work up until that point. Though all the stimuli offered by New York played some role, I believe that the jazz contributes the most to this innovative technique.

Mondrian's relationship with Harry Holtzman and Charmion von Wiegand allow a small glimpse into his daily affairs in New York. His New York paintings: *New York City I, New York City II, New York City III, Victory Boogie Woogie, and Broadway Boogie Woogie*, represent a relatively drastic yet controlled departure from the strict discipline that had regulated his painting for so long. In retrospect, the New York paintings prove the transatlantic works to be merely transitional to the final round of paintings that completes his evolution as an artist. Though transitional, the transatlantic paintings were likely a necessary step along his way that eased his oeuvre into the New York series.

Chapter Three

Mondrian tunes into New York

Piet Mondrian's sojourn in New York would mark the end of his life, the end of his growth as an artist, and the end of his westward migration. Pulsating with cars, lights, avenues, signs, skyscrapers, and jazz, this great American city quenched his Neo-Plastic thirst for the ideal urban environment. Removed from war-torn Europe and safely nestled in a free-spirited America, Mondrian passed his final years in New York with joy and a zest for living that brought fresh refinement to his painting style. The urban landscape provided a visual wonderland that helped season his personality and approach to art, unleashing an energetic rhythm in his paintings. While not many in number, the New York paintings represent the last harvest of Mondrian's fruitful career.

It was World War II that forced Mondrian to leave Europe for good. His journey to the New World was made easy because of his relationship with patron and friend Harry Holtzman. A member of the Art Students League, Holtzman had come to appreciate Mondrian's work after visiting his Paris studio in 1934.[118] On October 3, 1940, at the age of 68 and after nearly two weeks at sea, Mondrian arrived in New York.[119] Holtzman, who met Mondrian upon his arrival, took him on a vacation, found a place for him to live, and paid for his living expenses.[120] The financial and personal support provided by Holtzman enabled Mondrian to establish himself in New York as an artist and urban dweller. Without having to worry about money, Mondrian was free to direct

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[118] Harry Cooper and Ron Spronk, *Mondrian: The Transatlantic Paintings*. Exhibition Catalogue (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 14.
[119] John Milner, *Mondrian* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 203.
[120] Ibid.

all his energies to his work and bring his art to the next level of his self-appointed ambitions.

Mondrian immersed himself in the stimulating environment that was New York. He mingled and consulted with artists a fraction of his age. He joined circles such as the American Abstract Artists.[121] He attracted his own company of followers that included Burgoyne Diller, Fritz Glarner, and Charmion von Wiegand.[122] These connections encouraged him to believe that his ideas were marketable in America, and comforted him as a recent immigrant. His provocative approach to painting resonated within the avant-garde cliques of New York. In addition to making new acquaintances, Mondrian rekindled his friendship with kindred spirits from Paris who had also fled to New York.[123] Though he was aged, Mondrian showed no signs of retiring. He continued to work at art just he always had.

Music appealed to Mondrian throughout his career. In his *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction,* Carel Blotkamp explores Mondrian's relationship with music. Despite Mondrian's limited education in musical appreciation, he found it easy to draw inspiration from music, particularly jazz, as an art form.[124] His interest in music began with the work of Jacob van Domselaer, a Dutch composer and friend that Mondrian had met in 1912.[125] After consulting with composer and music critic Paul Sanders, Mondrian turned to pieces by amateur Dutch composer Frits can Hengelaar.[126] It was at this time that Mondrian developed Neo-Plasticism as a philosophy, and he sought to apply its

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[121] Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 225.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Blotkamp, 158.
[125] Ibid., 159.
[126] Ibid.

principles to music as well as painting. This he did by connecting musical notes to horizontal and vertical lines, key elements of plastic ideology.[127] Inherent in this connection is rhythm, the catalyst of these relationships, manifested in the sequential movement from musical note to note, and vertical line to horizontal line. Mondrian's strong belief in plasticism transcended its role in visual art, and became a multidisciplinary method that dominated his outlook on all of life.

Mondrian was turned off by naturalism in music as much as naturalism in painting. He worked zealously to promote abstraction in the evolution of music. He advocated the elimination of melody, since it was too reflective of nature.[128] In diminishing the compositions of Debussy, Mondrian rebuked the popular melodist for his "style in the manner of nature."[129] Mondrian drew a connection between nature and melody based on the imitative quality of melody. Melody mimics what exists naturally, proving itself dispensable. Mondrian felt it should be replaced by harmony: the rhythmic assemblage of equivalent, but non-repeating musical elements.[130] Though there seems to be little difference between harmony and melody, Mondrian likely preferred the former for its emphasis on artificial (unnatural) strings of chords. Harmony relies upon no melodic organization, instead it promoted the simple grouping of chords played in sequence. It is thus a more fundamentally simple and universal component of music, and therefore favored by Mondrian. In the 1920s Mondrian found validation of his quest for abstract music in jazz. He admired its progression towards fundamental and universal

[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.

purity.[131] Interestingly enough, he considered jazz to be more universal than classical music and yet, it would seem that no musical form could be more universal than a full orchestra, made up of every type of instrument from each of the major sections: string, woodwind, brass, and percussion. What Mondrian likely meant was that a jazz band was a welcome reduction of instruments to those essential for a rhythm-catalyzed harmony, and thus a welcome move toward abstraction and ideal sound. Boogie woogie takes this concept even further, reducing the harmonic production of rhythm to one instrument, the piano. With a variety of pitches, the piano allowed for both rhythm and harmony.

In his personal essays, Mondrian went so far as to connect his ideal conception of music to Neo-Plastic painting. Relating the interplay of opposing "tones" and "non-tones" to primary colors and non-colors, as audio and video counterparts, he further justified the musical validity of Neo-Plastic expression.[132] Since non-tones were like a painting's background, and pure tones were like primary colors, Mondrian believed a composer could use Neo-Plastic method to evoke the same response from a listener that Mondrian evoked from a viewer of his paintings.[133] The reflection of Neo-Plasticism that Mondrian saw in music was significant enough for him to develop a philosophy of musical expression all to itself. He pondered jazz's Neo-Plastic connections to life in a journal entry: "This passage from art to life is seen most clearly in jazz and in Neo-Plasticism. True, both remain in the auditory and visual sphere, but this sphere is now so closely bound up with life as to be concrete for us."[134] There was an increasing likelihood that Neo-Plasticism dominated all facets of Mondrian's life. While jazz was

[131] Ibid., 160.
[132] Ibid., 163.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Piet Mondrian, "Jazz and Neo-Plastic (1927)." *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Edited by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: Hall, 1986), 219.

not the absolute solution to Neo-Plastic ideals, it was certainly the most progressive solution in Mondrian's mind. It remains both surprising and ironic that Mondrian related jazz so intimately to his painting, given the contrast between the energetic and sometimes improvisational nature of jazz and the statically rhythmic and sometimes predictable nature of his paintings.

Mondrian's formal introduction to jazz came after World War I. Writing about his Neo-Plastic vision, he exalted the elimination of form he saw in jazz as similar to the abandonment of form he sought in his paintings:

> Jazz—being free of musical conventions—now realizes an almost *pure rhythm*, thanks to its greater intensity of sound and to its oppositions. Its rhythm already gives the illusion of being "open," unhampered by form. But on the other hand Neo-Plasticism realizes the principles of Neo-Plastic painting in the totality of our constructed environment, it is the beginning of a new more universal order *realized in life.*[135]

Here Mondrian alludes to the fundamental elements of his idealistic vision for art: purity, rhythm, oppositions, elimination of form, universal order. Jazz wove all of these elements into a cohesive Neo-Plastic approximation of the transcendent *universal*, which Mondrian considered the sovereign goal of all true art. Just as Mondrian felt that at his unique time and place in history, Neo-Plastic painting was leading the way visually to union with the universal, so too he felt that jazz was leading the way acoustically.

In addition to its value for an idealistic philosophy of art, jazz appealed to Mondrian for its entertainment value. He frequently listened to recorded jazz at his Paris studio in the 1920s and 1930s.[136] In New York he often went to jazz clubs with Harry Holtzman.[137] Though deeply committed to his ideology and mission as a painter, and

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[135] Ibid., 218. The italics are Mondrian's.
[136] Blotkamp, 159-165.
[137] Milner, 220.

thus prone to sacrifice life's lighter side for the "universal" cause, Mondrian still found time to enjoy music and dance. He was an avid fan of the latest ballroom dance steps and took lessons to master the tango and foxtrot.[138] His attraction to jazz existed on a number of levels.

Just as he saw his painting techniques reflected in jazz, so too he tried to have jazz reflected in his paintings, particularly while living in New York. It was there that Mondrian maximized his exposure to jazz and especially to boogie woogie. Before this, he had access to jazz only through records and other secondhand means. In New York he could hear it first hand. While boogie woogie was a generally popular trend during Mondrian's time in New York, his attraction to it derived from its abstract physiognomy, which he believed embodied the pure universal in its harmony and rhythmic chords. Calling it "enormous, enormous," he saw boogie-woogie as "homogeneous with my intentions."[139] This homogeneity, including the harmony of rhythmic chords, embodies the abstract universal afforded jazz, and thus summarizes Mondrian's attraction.

With jazz and the lively New York urban landscape as a backdrop, Mondrian managed to finish three new paintings: *Boogie Woogie*, *New York City I,* and *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. He worked significantly on a few others, but they remained unfinished at his death: *New York City II*, *New York City III*, and *Victory Boogie Woogie*. Quantity gave way to quality in his final years, as Mondrian was not as much concerned with finishing paintings as he was with applying Neo-Plasticism to the dynamic New York environment around him.[140] To do this, Mondrian sought to integrate Neo-Plasticism

[138] Ibid., 164.
[139] Harry Cooper, "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie," *October* 84 (Spring 1998) : 118-142.
[140] Ibid.

with jazz and thus give his final paintings "more boogie woogie."[141] He added primary-colored tape to his repertoire of tools, using it diligently in the production of his New York paintings.[142] The tape united color and line into a cohesive whole, a Neo-Plastic ideal, and possibly encouraged Mondrian to add the bars of color in the revision of his transatlantic paintings.[143] As a frail septuagenarian creating canvasses that required precise orientation of lines and angles, Mondrian very likely appreciated the help provided by straight-line tape. His use of tape figured most prominently in the *New York City* series, particularly in *New York City II* and *New York City III*.

The *New York City* paintings are more independent experiments than a series. Two of the three paintings are "unfinished." Mondrian reduced his elements to line, weakened the presence of black, and tested out the newly added tool of colored tape. Though he labeled them as if a series, Mondrian's focus was on revision rather than completion during this period, saying "It is not important to make many pictures but that I have the picture right."[144] Without pressure to finish paintings or seek commissions, Mondrian was free to work at will and address the new challenges as Neo-Plastic art evolved.

Mondrian completed *New York City* I, the most refined of the *New York City* series, without colored tape in 1942 (Fig. 20). A large, slightly vertical-oriented canvas, *New York City I* offers a wonderland of primary colors and straight lines, all of near-equal width, and spanning entire canvas. Yellow lines dominate and give the painting a sense of brightness and light: eight oriented vertically, and seven horizontally. Five of the eight

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[141] Ibid. [quote only]
[142] Kermit Champa, *Mondrian Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 128.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Cooper, "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie."

vertical yellow lines lie close together on the right third of the painting, while the other three are spread apart, one near the middle and two together near the left edge. The horizontal yellow lines lie more or less evenly apart up and down the painting, with the bottom three lines lying closer together than the rest.

The dominance of yellow lines causes the muted red and blue lines to command less attention. There are only four red lines, two vertical and two horizontal. Their combined placement favors the right side and top of the painting. One horizontal red line lies at the top edge and the other crosses just below the middle. One vertical red line lies toward the right edge, but is buffered from the edge by a vertical yellow line. The other vertical red line is left of the center. The blue lines are also four in number, three horizontal and one vertical. The three horizontal blue lines are fairly evenly spaced, one towards the top edge, one across the middle, and one towards the bottom edge. The lone vertical blue line lies towards the left, but buffered on both sides by yellow lines.

This exciting visual interplay of horizontal and vertical lines of red, yellow, and blue, marks a distinct departure of technique in the context of Mondrian's oeuvre. He eliminates black, giving the painting a lighter, brighter, look. He reduces composition to merely horizontal and vertical lines of continuous primary color on a white background, making the plastic expression simpler and more fluid, free of constraining black lines and blocks that might obstruct the passage of line. I believe that this process of unification and simplification represents a step in the progression towards a more fundamental and universal purity. I also believe that Mondrian's elimination of black, a reducible "universe" composed of all colors, represents another major New York innovation,

adding to the increase of rhythm in painting through more relationships. As line, primary color can now relate not only to other primary colors, but to white as well.

Mondrian's introduction of colored lines, rather than black, raises a whole new issue into Neo-Plastic expression: which color should overlap at an intersection of different-colored lines? There are 132 total line intersections in the painting: 56 yellow on yellow, four red on red, and three blue on blue. There are 30 yellow and red intersections; red overlaps four times, and yellow 26. There are 31 blue and yellow intersections; blue overlaps once and, yellow 30 times. Finally, there are eight red and blue intersections; red always overlaps. These numbers prove the dominance given to yellow in the painting, which is followed by red, and then by a well-hidden and diminished blue. Yellow serves a melodic function, establishing the general framework around which the other colors add the rhythm and harmony.

Rhythm is inherent in these intersections. The volatility of the intersections is caused by the weaving pattern formed by lines intersecting with their counterparts of different colors. The movement of the lines from intersection to intersection is rhythm, culminating with the unpredictable intersection of each color. Mondrian has completely departed from the disparate monochromatic line segments of *Composition with Lines* and developed a quite sophisticated rhythm of colorful lines transgressing a canvas. The musical features of jazz, most notably its rhythm, plays a major role in this continuing development.

New York City I reflects a number of the city's visual features. The painting could be interpreted as a subway plan, a street map, yellow taxicabs populating the streets, scaffolding on skyscrapers under construction, or as jazz and boogie woogie. In the latter

case, the different colors could represent different pianos playing different boogie beats that come together to form a unified jazz composition. The piano playing yellow would provide the main harmony, accompanied by supporting pianos "playing" red and blue. The "off" intersections featuring overlaps of less prominent colors (e.g., red or blue over yellow), could represent syncopation, the emphasis on the offbeat that Mondrian so admired in jazz, and particularly, boogie-woogie. Finally, the primary-colored lines of could reflect the "tone" of music, played against the "non-tone" background of white. In effect, *New York City I* embodies jazz as it does life in the big city.

The signature piece from Mondrian's New York period, as well as his last finished painting, was *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (Fig. 21). It maximizes visual complexity within the scope allowed by Mondrian's restricted style. A very large and square canvas, the painting's composition is a network of lines pieced together from yellow, red, and blue, with blocks of red, blue, yellow, and gray placed rather sparingly around the canvas. The lines are no longer of one continuous or solid color, but a mosaic—alternating, staccato-like squares—of yellow, red, blue, and gray rectangles. Eight of these mosaic lines span the canvas horizontally, and five vertically. Shorter horizontal and vertical mosaic segments run between the main lines, at several locations throughout the painting. There is nothing repetitive or predictable about this painting. The small mosaic blocks of red, gray, and blue, while joined with yellow on every line, fail to repeat or form any recognizable pattern. In addition to the mosaic lines, there are unbounded blocks of color and gray between some of the lines. These blocks vary in size, proportion, and color. Some of them are one solid color, while others have a small block of one color embedded in a large block of another color.

This is Mondrian's performance. He brings the dominant "yellow" piano from *New York City I* into *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, directing it to play the primary harmony with supporting accents and rhythm provided by the supplementary "blue," "red," and even "gray," pianos. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is as random and incoherent as possible within Mondrian's standards. He retains the straight line and perpendicular intersections throughout, but takes widespread liberties with his rhythmically intermingling colors. He positions the color blocks in a seemingly random fashion, sometimes to bind lines together, and other times to border or overlap them. The only feature shared by all color blocks is that they touch at least one of the yellow mosaic lines or segments. Despite the rhythmic excitement of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, Mondrian maintains his undying loyalty to fundamental Neo-Plastic principles by not straying from vertical and horizontal lines or primary colors.

Despite the similarities between the two paintings, Mondrian takes the rhythm of *New York City I* one step further in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Imagine *New York City I* as the mere composition for a jazz piece. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* would then be the actual performance. In short, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* has even more rhythm. Each mosaic line is like a musical chord, complete with individual tones that, while not repeating, contribute equally to the overall sound. The piece moves rhythmically from one line to the next, just as a boogie woogie creation moves rhythmically from one section to another. The randomly positioned blocks of color are the syncopation, improvisation, or possible accompaniment of other instruments. The white background and gray blocks are the background beat of the bass playing the sublimated "non-tone," behind the piano's forward "tone." *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is assuredly skyscrapers,

lights, streets, subways, people, cars, and energy. But it is also jazz and boogie woogie, a visual expression of what Mondrian experienced in New York. While this last painting is a tribute to New York, Mondrian meant it also as a tribute to the plastic nature of boogie woogie. Though he pushed and polished his style even further in *Victory Boogie Woogie* (Fig. 22), that work stood unfinished due to Mondrian's death in 1944.

Broadway Boogie Woogie is New York. This painting is boogie woogie and jazz. But most importantly it is Mondrian. It is the summation of what he principally lived and worked for—becoming one with universal purity through abstract plastic expression. Juxtaposed with Mondrian's *Composition with Lines, Broadway Boogie Woogie* caps 25 years of loyalty to principle, while yielding to allowable innovation. There is continuity in the use of horizontal and vertical, and in the use of primary colors, but there is discontinuity in the handling of line and color on the canvas. The two paintings serve as bookends to the distinguished career of one of the luminaries of modern art. However flawed some might find the strained idealism in Neo-Plastic art, Mondrian's talents and efforts served his world in the never-ending struggle to validate human existence through art. His innovation created in New York is the developed and colorful rhythm inspired by his experience of boogie woogie, moving his art ever closer in the quest for universal purity.

Chapter Four

Boogie Woogie: Music to Mondrian's Eyes

Piet Mondrian's few years in New York changed his life and then ended it. The visual stimulation offered by the Mecca of cosmopolitan life in the New World gave him and his art a new birth which paradoxically prefaced his death. His creative years in New York are therefore essential to summing up his life and full evolution of art. Works such as the *New York City* series, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, provide a unique visual record of Mondrian's final artistic metamorphosis under the aegis of the New York melting pot and the stimulating freedom of jazz, the urban atmosphere, and New York. These paintings constitute a rigorous conclusion to Mondrian's oeuvre, standing as a tribute to a lifelong innovator who, even as a septuagenarian, never relinquished his spiritual quest for universal purity.

In *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, Mondrian unites both visual components of authentic plastic expression, with its audio counterparts. These two paintings are as much, and perhaps more, about jazz, as about New York and Neo-Plasticism. Both works transform jazz into a deceptively simply flat canvass that abstracts the concept of rhythm. In jazz, rhythm serves as a steady "timekeeper," moving the piece along and safeguarding the element of seamless progression.[145] Rhythm dominates *Broadway*. The mosaic squares of red, blue, and gray, pulsate rhythmically along the yellow lines, conveying to the eye a sense of perpetual motion and constant movement. As a piece of jazz dwells on no one single note, so *Broadway* dwells on no one visual element. There is no focal point to the composition. The eye is left to wander

[145] Terry Vosbein, interview with author, written notes, Lexington, Virginia, 6 March 2006.

freely along the syncopated chords that dance across the canvas, albeit within the confines of Mondrian's insistent perpendicularity.

If rhythmic beat dominates *Broadway*, it engulfs *Victory*. In *Broadway* it is set to method, while in *Victory* it runs rampant. Rhythm is conveyed not only in the regulated alternation of tiny bits of colored tape, but also in the change of colors and sizes of the various modular shapes that span the entire painting. In comparison to *Victory, Broadway* offers less rhythmically induced excitement. While *Victory* clearly takes liberties with Mondrian principles, it still adheres to the fundamentals of Neo-Plasticism as stipulated by Mondrian: red, yellow, blue, white, and some gray, organized by using only modular shapes and perpendicular lines. Just as rhythm regulates a piece of jazz, in time, so does it regulate the elements of paint on canvas. The five colors continuously yield to one another in free-form fashion. Listening to boogie woogie music while viewing *Broadway* and *Victory* can enhance their jazz-like rhythmic expression. As the mainline beat progresses and moves the music along, the eye may tend to dart from one visual element to the next in the absence of a focal point. If the many paintings completed by Mondrian during his 71 years are viewed as an oeuvre of rhythmic development, then *Victory* and *Boogie* represent a worthy *coda con brio*.

Elements of rhythm gleaned from exposure to New York culture are manifest in Mondrian's work as far back as the transatlantic paintings. The unbounded bars of color he then inserted into his paintings imply the kind of rhythmic feelings elicited by jazz. No transatlantic painting illustrates this more clearly than *Place de la Concorde*. The succession of color bars, with black along the bottom and right sides, suggest a row of piano keys. Just as piano keys change pitch across the keyboard, so do Mondrian's color

bars change hue across the bottom row of *Place de la Concorde*. Gone are the more organized and stiff compartments of color in the earlier Neo-Plastic, and in their place we find elements of rhythm set to color. In jazz, each instrument has its own timbre, or tone quality.[146] For example, though superficially parallel in timbre, trumpet and saxophone, in fact produce essentially different tone qualities that accent any given pitch in their own peculiar way.[147] This example from sound can be adapted to color, as in the case of red and burgundy. While both colors are basically red, burgundy reflects a supporting darkness that shades the red in a unique manner. Mondrian's alternation of red, blue, and yellow, in his paintings is further indication that he was probably struck by the varied timbre of jazz instruments playing together.

Mondrian's general attraction to jazz is well established, connecting as it accomplished for him different methods of plastic expression. But the specific affinity for boogie woogie, however, is not all that transparent. Boogie woogie was short-lived in much the same way of some modern art fads, which diminished quickly.[148] Boogie woogie never rose to dominate the American jazz scene. Mondrian could certainly have found available to his liking any of a variety of jazz styles being played in New York, which during Mondrian's time there had become the jazz capital of the world.[149] For some reason, though, it was boogie woogie that caught his ear. Perhaps it was the center-stage piano soloist blending the opposing roles for the left and right hands. This playful competition calls to mind the philosophical paradox of "coincidence of opposites," a paradox Mondrian worked by since his original *De Stijl* work. Earlier in his *De Stijl*

[146] Terry Vosbein, interview with author, written notes, Lexington, Virginia, 6 March 2006.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

days, for example, Mondrian worked deliberately to capture the coincidentally-opposing relationship of the vertical and horizontal, respectively symbolic of male and female, and two aspects of reality joined as one. The perpendicular intersection of two lines was for Mondrian the epitomical visual expression of relationship: two as one, and one as two. The coincidentally-opposing relationship of the left hand and right hand in boogie woogie must have played some role in its appeal to Mondrian.

Mondrian's fascination with the boogie beat likely went hand in hand with an admiration for the piano. In any jazz group, the piano almost always plays the rhythm section.[150] The assignment of rhythm to the piano, together with its instrumentality for sounding both chords and harmony, gave it special appeal to Mondrian's ears. For him the piano also had an artificial quality that gave it Neo-Plastic credentials and validated its worth as antithetical to nature. Pressing a "key," which is essentially a button, produced a single, pitched sound—mechanically, unnaturally, *Neo-Plastically*.

Mondrian preferred harmony to melody, put off as he was by the latter's connection to naturalism. This can be somewhat confusing. Harmony is the simultaneity of notes, whereas melody is the succession of notes.[151] Even though Mondrian admired jazz because it diverged from the more naturalistic classical style, jazz too contained some degree of the naturalistic element of melody. Every music piece contains melody of some kind, yet not all music contains harmony. Harmony leads to the formation of chords, combinations of usually three or four alternate notes played together.[152] In the do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do scale, for example, a chord might consist of do-mi-sol played in unison. All chords are harmonic, but not all harmony can be construed as chords. The

[150] Interview with Terry Vosbein.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

element of simultaneity is key to Mondrian's fondness for harmony. When observing *Broadway* or *Victory* as a whole, the rhythmic elements appear simultaneously. The mosaic squares of varying color in *Broadway*, or the constant fluctuation of taped color bits in *Victory,* combine to form an overarching harmony. The long lines, along which the colors are arranged, form an underlying beat that accompanies the alternation of colors, while at the same time adding to the harmony. Every visual component in these paintings contributes to rhythm, yet the paintings as a whole convey harmony.

The origins of boogie woogie, even of the name, are considerably obscure and subjective, which is neither uncommon nor peculiar for specific styles of jazz.[153] "Boogie" is a slang word for dancing or partying to music. "Woogie" has no known meaning. It seems to be an intensively-rhymed wordplay off "Boogie," a fun modifier of the former. Thus, "boogie woogie," strongly suggests dancing and good times, even though no specific dance was created to accompany it. Mondrian easily made the connection, given his passion for dancing. Boogie woogie was not the only music available in New York for dancing, but was a natural fit for Mondrian. When he said he wanted to give his paintings "more boogie woogie," he probably meant "more of a sense of fun," reflective of his active social life in New York.[154]

Though dancing added fun to his professionally formal life, Mondrian brought his Neo-Plastic tenets to this recreational activity he so enjoyed. Much like his preference of plastic and synthetic over natural, his preference of jazz over classical, and his preference of harmony over melody, Mondrian found ballroom dancing superior to dance produced

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[153] Ibid.
[154] Cooper, "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie." [boogie woogie quote only]

for theatrical performance.[155] He held that ballroom dancing represented the modern outlook on life. It was an expression of the future, he argued, while theatrical dancing was inherently traditional, and in that sense naturalistic and stale in performance.[156] This is a provocative argument. After all, ballroom dancing is also rehearsed and programmed for performance before an audience. Yet it includes an element of spontaneity that competes with the familiar. It was for Mondrian a matter of true rhythm that separated the two. He saw more authentic rhythm in ballroom dancing than in stage show productions. The couple glides all around a modular dance floor in pure rhythm, constantly entertaining the audience with fresh and surprising spins and swings. This concept of dance all but cries out *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.

Mondrian's preference for ballroom dancing is analogous to his fondness of jazz and its expression of plasticism, the modern, the future. It sounded more synthetic and technological, more spontaneous and unpredictable. On the other hand, classical music rejected by Mondrian was very contrived and prepackaged, striving to hit perfect notes, imitating familiar sounds, even those of the human voice, all of which is disappointingly naturalistic. But what Mondrian appreciated most about jazz is its rhythm. Jazz makes rhythm and harmony take center stage in a way that the classical style cannot.

There are two main differences between jazz and classical music. In jazz, the input of the individual is stronger than in classical.[157] A piece of jazz allows the listener to identify various instruments more easily due to the phonic and tonal differences in sound of each instrument. Secondly, technical perfection is paramount in classical

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[155] Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 165.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Interview with Terry Vosbein.

music.[158] Musicians are trained with cramped exactness through traditional exercises in scales and tempo.[159] Jazz performers, on the other hand, are free to pursue an overall mood or emotion, diminishing the importance of practiced accuracy fixing every single note.

This holistic sentiment is key to interpreting Mondrian's preference for jazz. While acknowledging the role of each individual note, sound, and instrument in a piece of jazz, the emphasis on the whole, on the overall sentiment conveyed by the music, is a direct link to Mondrian's quest for the universal. Each bit of instrumental tone exists as a single graphic on sheet music, and as an isolated vibration of art. But rhythm and harmony weave the singular bits into a coherent whole that transcends and transforms them all.

Both *Broadway* and *Victory* embody this kind of boogie woogie energy. In *Broadway* the colored mosaic squares act to compose their respective lines, which in turn act to compose a network of intersecting lines, which in turn act to hold together a white background embracing modular shapes of blue, red, yellow, and gray, which in turn act to create the feeling of *Broadway as Universe*. Similarly in *Victory*, the individual bits of tape act to compose lines, that, in turn, connect perpendicularly and combine with the background and other modular shapes convey the feeling of *Victory as Universe*.

Mondrian's choice of titles, particularly *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, further supports the legitimacy of a musical, rhythmic interpretation. The importance of boogie woogie would be paramount to a painting that includes the jazz style in its title. Mondrian must have felt so strongly about boogie woogie, that he

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[158] Ibid. The succeeding sentence comes from the same source.
[159] Ibid. The succeeding sentence comes from the same source.

spotlighted it in the titles of his final two paintings. Even going back to his earlier, nondescript titles, Mondrian used *Composition* rather than *Untitled* or *Painting.* Since *Composition* can also refer to sheet music, Mondrian might have subtly reflected rhythm and music in his paintings as far back as 1917 in *Composition with Lines*. His initial exposure to jazz in the 1920s might have strengthened his loyalty to using *Composition* in his titles, which he would do up until his move to New York.

Though Mondrian the artist worked within the larger evolution of art as a whole, he sincerely believed in the innovativeness of his work and saw himself as the ultimate avant-garde. His art would rhythmically push all art and humankind to the fundamentally utopian perfection of universal purity. Perhaps this universal purity would mean the end of art's relevance to humankind and its necessity.[160] Mondrian's undying commitment to universal purity was enacted entirely in large urban cities: Amsterdam, Paris, London, and New York. These metropolises insulated Mondrian, protecting him from the counterproductive naturalism lurking outside the city. Though his paintings satisfied this structured Neo-Plastic ideology, they can hardly be construed as universal in a *partout* and *pour tout le monde* sense. Mondrian's style was highly tangential to the larger development of modern art. He attracted very little formal artistic following. Mondrian's conception of the universal was unique to him.

Mondrian's idealistic mission for himself in art's long evolution continued to dominate his work even in New York. Immersion with the hustle and bustle of the metropolitan cosmos indeed loosened his standards to some degree. Innovative yet conforming, *Broadway* and *Victory* above all else represent the city's boogie woogie beat.

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[160] *Piet Mondrian: Mr. Boogie Woogie Man*, videocassette, directed by Janice Sutherland (Chicago: BBC/RM Arts, 1995).

He felt that it was a mixture of red, yellow, and blue, and thus no longer pure enough to suit the essential Neo-Plastic quest, except perhaps in support of cameo appearances of gray. The gradual removal of black from his palette left Mondrian with red, yellow, blue, white, line, and space, as his tools. In *Victory* he even begins to diminish the use of space by pushing the lines, segments, and rectangles together. Perhaps space would have been the next casualty of Mondrian's quest for the universal. Though it was his final work, *Victory* leaves more questions than answers. Would Mondrian eventually eliminate space from painting? Would Mondrian ever achieve the universal purity he so desired? Or would he have eventually given up and liberated himself from the strict confines of Neo-Plasticism and launched into wild, Kandinsky-style expression? His death on February 1, 1944, meant that he would posthumously rely upon the rhythm he lived to move art toward the universal, leaving us to contemplate: *ars longa, vita brevis.*

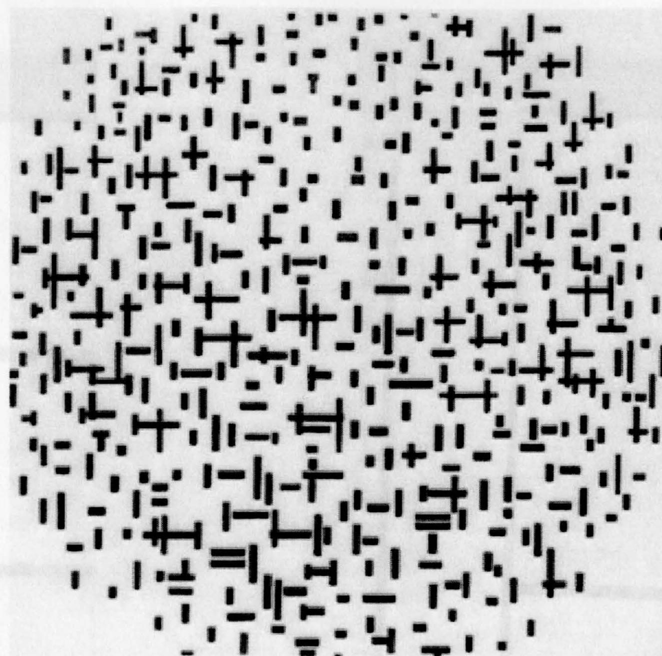

Fig. 1[161]

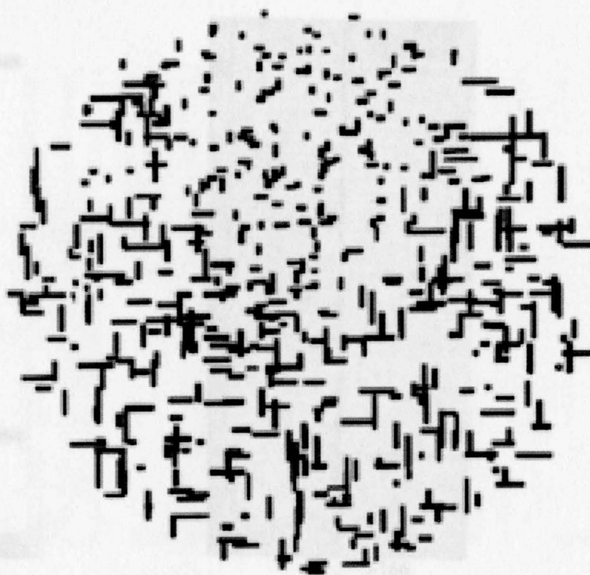

Fig. 2[162]

[161] Piet Mondrian. *Composition with Lines*, 1917. Image obtained online at <http://www.fiu.edu/~andiaa/cg2/mon_09.jpg> 16 December 2005.
[167] A. Michael Noll. *Computer Composition with Lines*, 1964. Image obtained online at < http://dam.org/noll/images/noll_mondrian.gif> 16 December 2005.

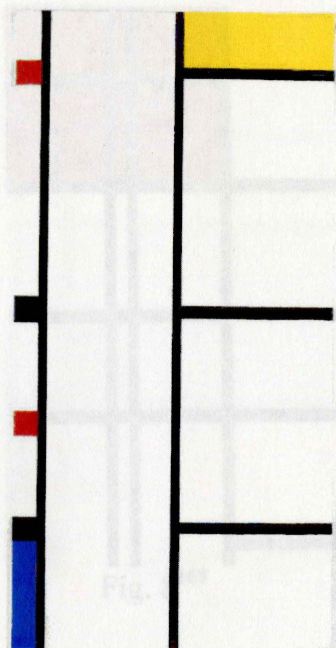

Fig. 3[163]

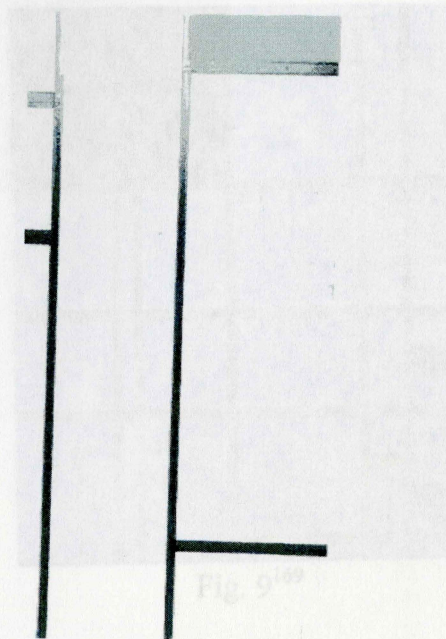

Fig. 4[164]

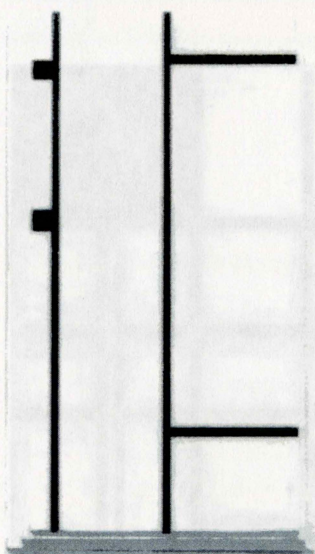

Fig. 5[165]

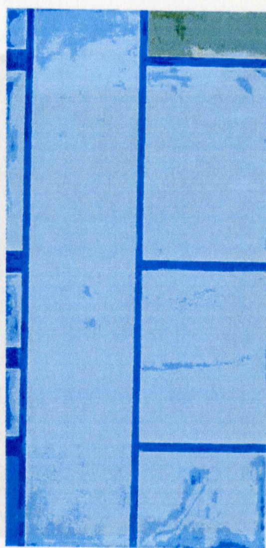

Fig. 6[166]

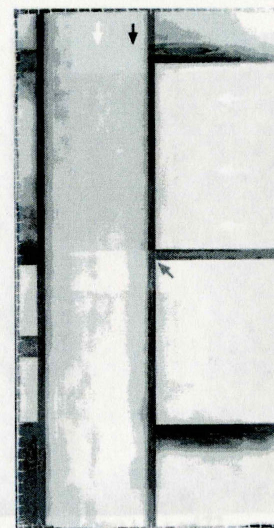

Fig. 7[167]

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[163] Cooper and Spronk, 115. *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, by Piet Mondrian. Scanned from text.

[164] Cooper and Spronk, 117. Photograph of Fig. 1, unfinished. Scanned from text.

[165] Cooper and Spronk, 117. Photograph of Fig. 1 on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1936. Scanned from text.

[166] Cooper and Spronk, 119. Ultraviolet Fluorescence of Fig. 1. Scanned from text.

[167] Cooper and Spronk, 119. X-radiograph of Fig. 1. Scanned from text.

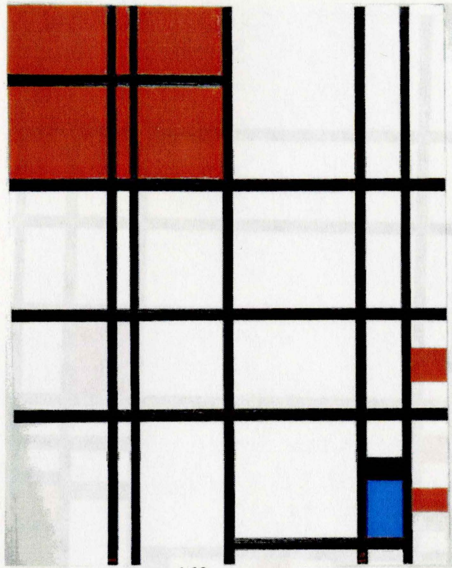
Fig. 8[168]

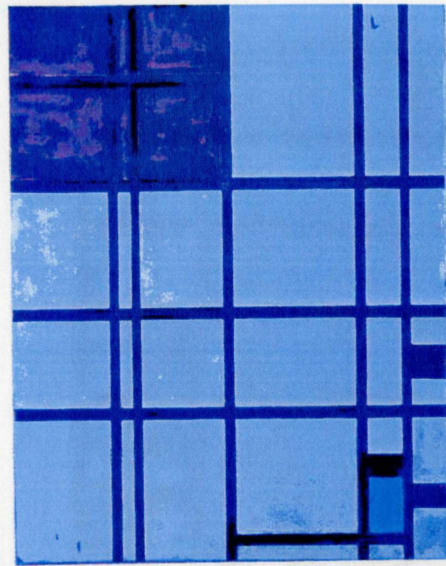
Fig. 9[169]

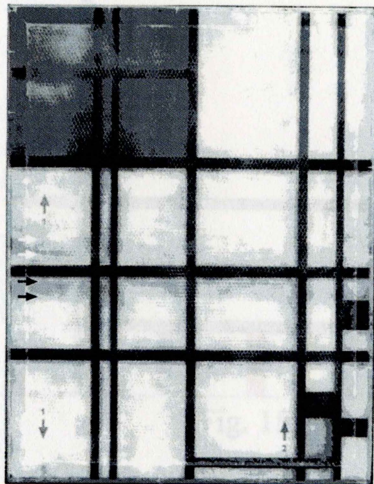
Fig. 10[170]

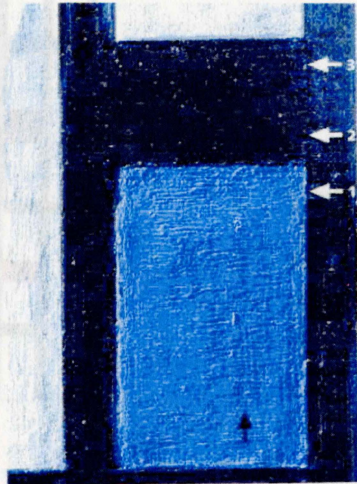
Fig. 11[171]

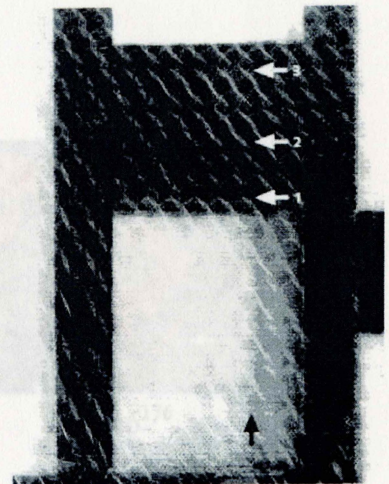
Fig. 12[172]

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[168] Cooper and Spronk, 163. *No.7,* by Piet Mondrian. Scanned from text.
[169] Cooper and Spronk, 164. Ultraviolet fluorescence of Fig. 6. Scanned from text.
[170] Cooper and Spronk, 166. X-radiograph of Fig. 6. Scanned from text.
[171] Cooper and Spronk, 170. Raking light detail of Fig. 6. Scanned from text.
[172] Cooper and Spronk, 170. X-radiograph detail of Fig. 6. Scanned from text.

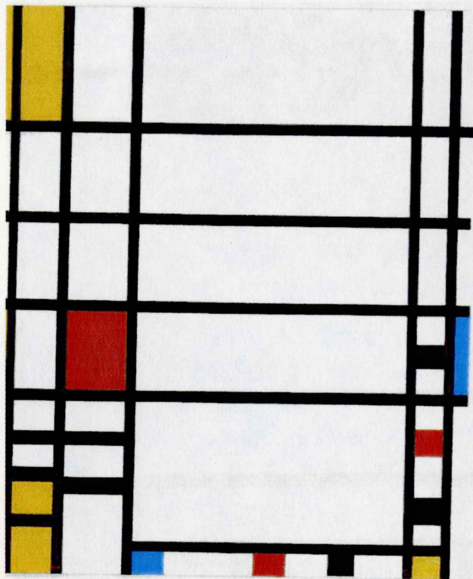

Fig. 13[173]

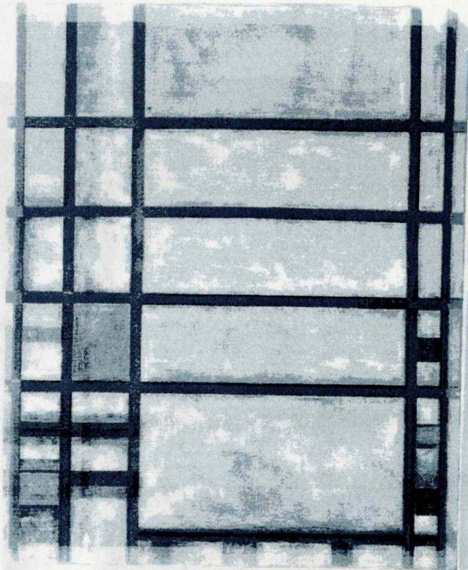

Fig. 14[174]

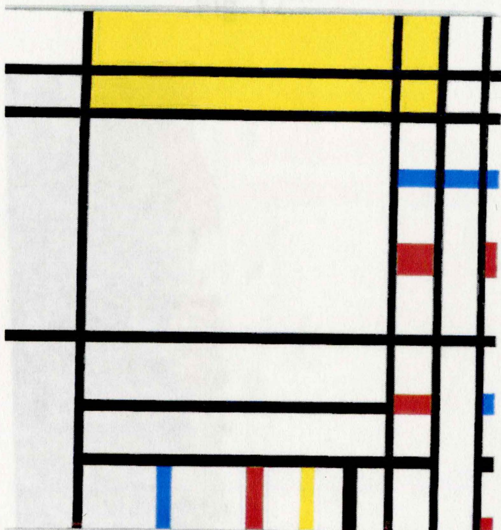

Fig. 15[175]

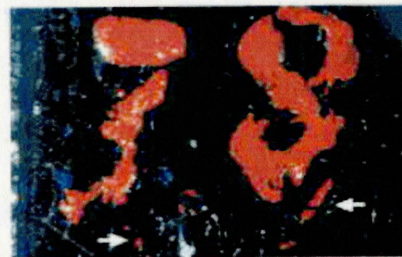

Fig. 16[176]

[173] Cooper and Spronk, 233. *Trafalgar Square,* by Piet Mondrian. Scanned from text.
[174] Cooper and Spronk, 236. X-radiograph of Fig. 11. Scanned from text.
[175] Cooper and Spronk, 221. *Place de la Concorde,* by Piet Mondrian. Scanned from text.
[176] Cooper and Spronk, 222. Photomicrograph detail of Fig. 13. Scanned from text.

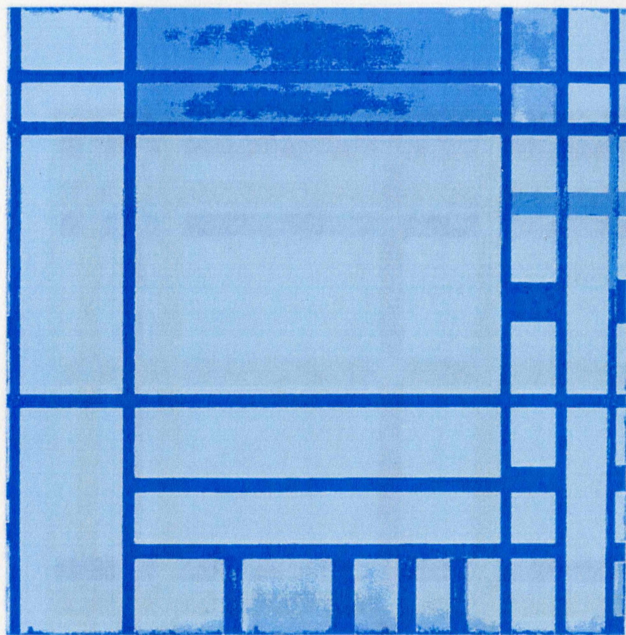

Fig. 17[177]

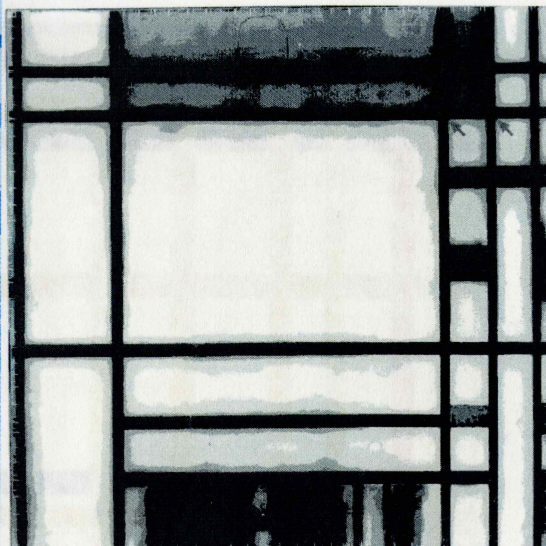

Fig. 18[178]

Fig. 19[179]

[177] Cooper and Spronk, 224. Ultraviolet fluorescence of Fig. 13. Scanned from text.
[178] Cooper and Spronk, 226. X-radiograph of Fig. 13. Scanned from text.
[179] Cooper and Spronk, 228. Photomicrograph detail of Fig. 13. Scanned from text.

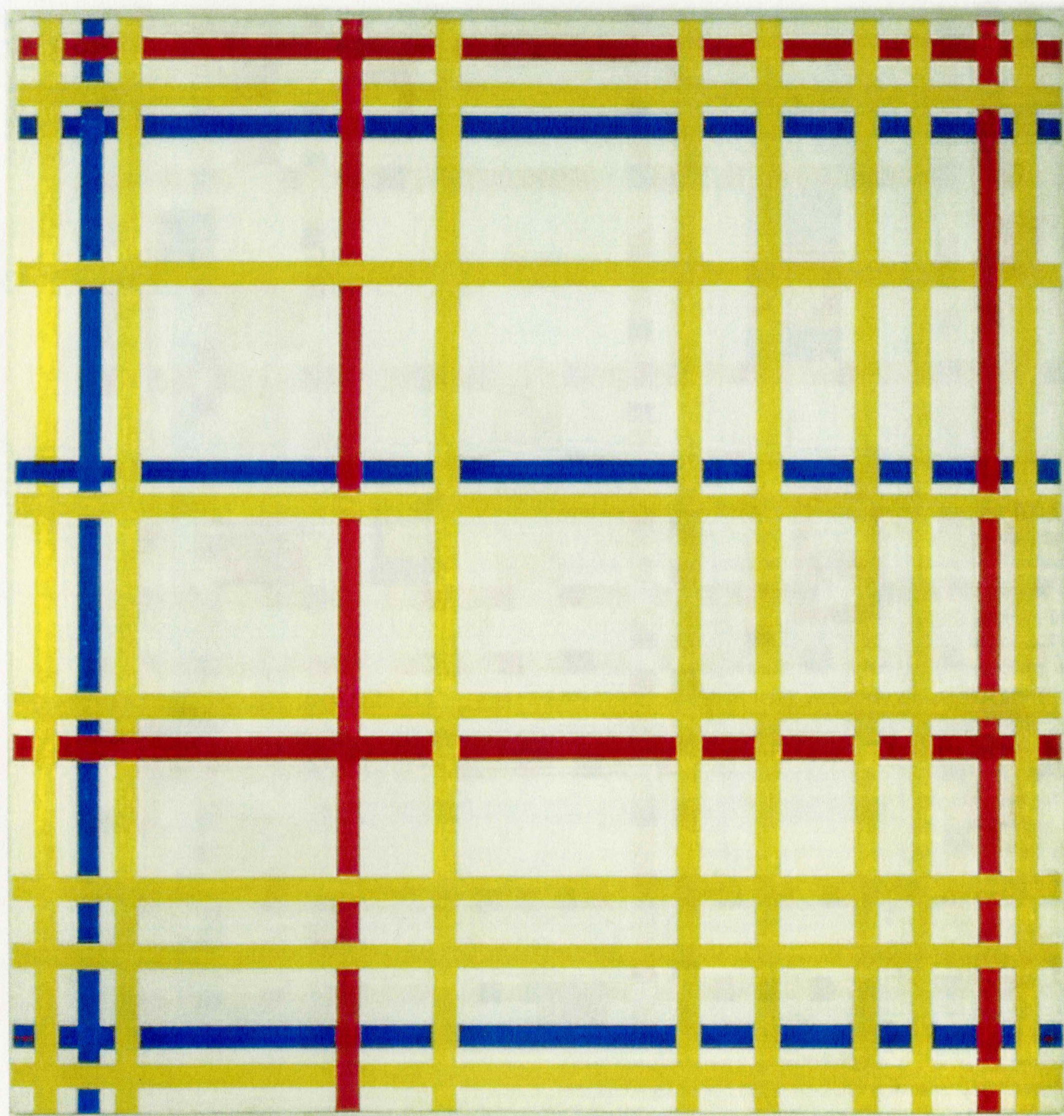

Fig. 20[180]

[180] Piet Mondrian. *New York City I.* 1941-42. Image obtained online from <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/mondrian/mondrian_nyc.jpg.html> 22 February 2006.

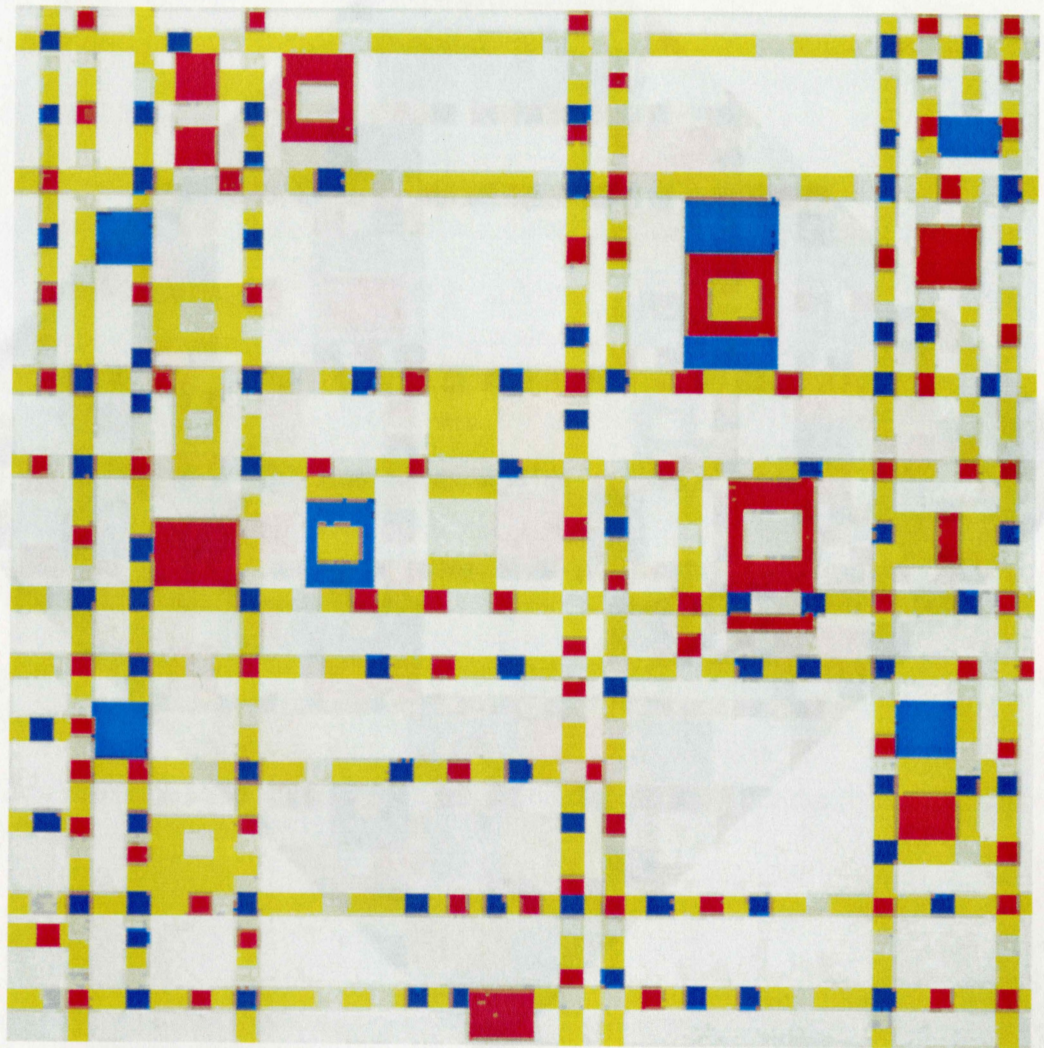

Fig. 21[181]

[181] Piet Mondrian. *Broadway Boogie Woogie.* 1942-43. Image obtained online from <http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2002/> 22 February 2006.

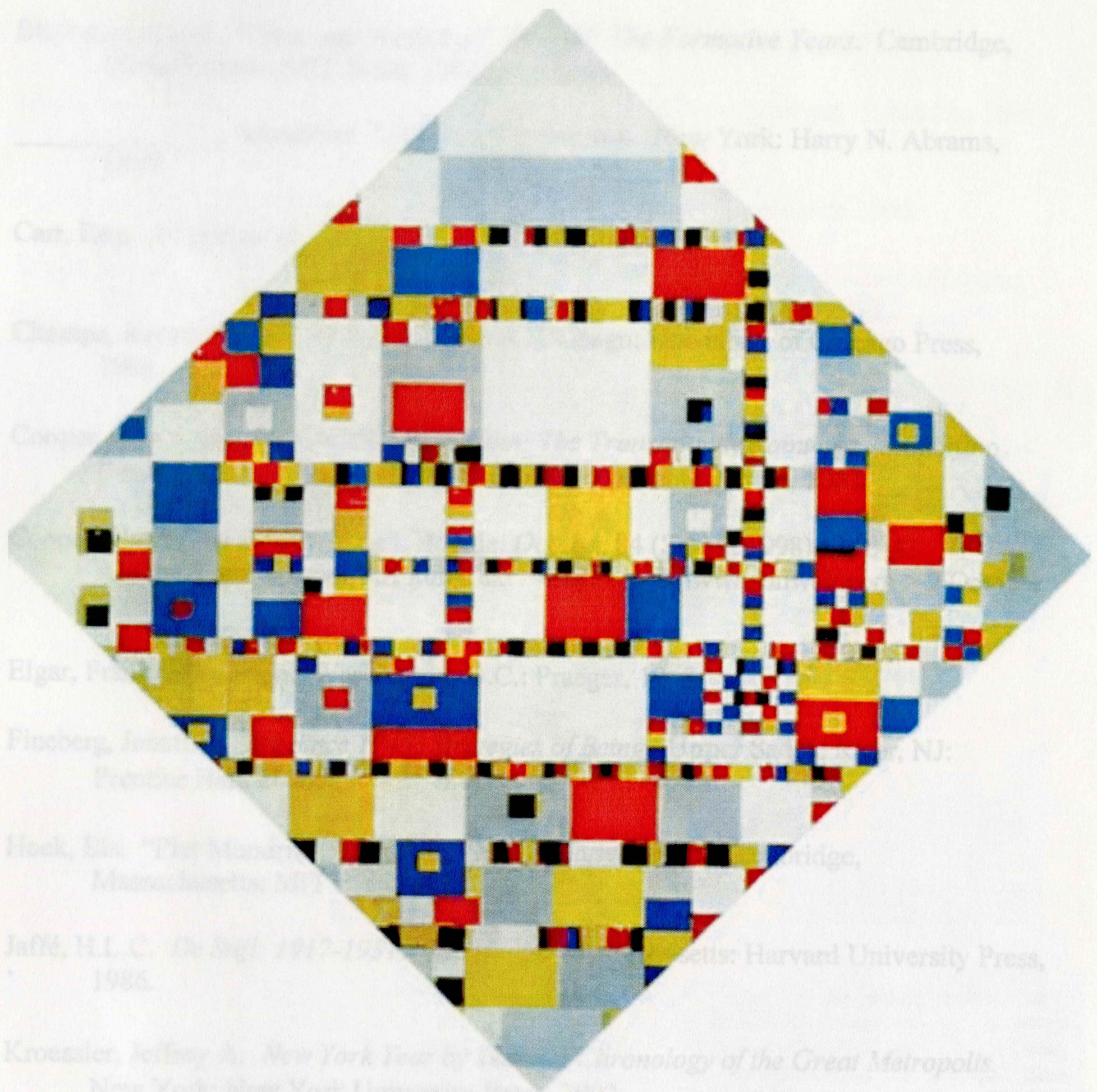

Fig. 22[182]

[182] Piet Mondrian. *Victory Boogie Woogie*. 1943-44. Image obtained online from <http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/decker/decker11-4-1.asp> 22 February 2006.

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