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Broadway Boogie Woogie: Collapsing Dialectics and the Condition of Modernity

Piet Mondrian was a revolution in modern art. His paintings not only took abstraction to a new material and spiritual level, but also pushed painting "towards the true vision of reality," to use Mondrian's autobiography title. Indeed, Mondrian had many philosophical musings on his paintings, as well as many descriptions of the utopian society he wanted to exemplify through them, giving us a detailed picture of his progression through painting styles. Mondrian's career guided him to many locations and through many different schools of thought, mostly importantly helping form *De Stijl* and defining Neo-Plasticism in Paris. He eventually arrived in New York City at the outbreak of WWII. There, he would walk the street-light illuminated grid-iron, watching taxis slip by as jazz clubs roared into the night. It was to be in America where he would create both *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and his unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie* before succumbing to pneumonia at the age of 71. By then, Mondrian had effectively changed the world of not only painting, but all of modern art. Indeed, Mondrian's primary mission was to transform the world through his paintings. He wanted to "offer to the future a pure image of beauty that will transform our surroundings as well as our life into equilibrium between nature and non-nature."[1] As his paintings are a reflection of this desire, we must understand his mission to understand his painting and vice versa. His mature paintings of the 1920s, the *Compositions* of black lines and colored planes, have been thoroughly treated by art critics such as Yve Alain Bois and even Mondrian himself, with arguments illuminating the relationship between the dialectic of plane and line and Mondrian's mission. However, what does remain unclear is the role of Mondrian's two final paintings, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie,* in his narrative. The visual leap between his slightly earlier *New York* series and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is immense, saying nothing of the much greater leap from his *Compositions.* A simple question emerges: what led to this change in his style, and how can we understand it within the scope of his earlier paintings and ideas? Although Mondrian is a clearly abstract painter, a simplistic, representational reading of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* shows it as a map of New York City, with yellow taxi cabs and the gridiron of the city. We can easily interpret the painting as a sort of Impressionistic painting

[1] Mondrian, Piet. "Neo-Plasticism." In *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian,* ed. Harry Holtzmann (G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 1923.

of the city he loved. But if we are to understand Mondrian as a man possessed with a mission, as his writings and critics seem to suggest, then we must look for more in *Broadway* to understand the relationship between the visual change and a possible theoretical development. Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is a lateral shift from his utopian mission. Mondrian collapses the opposition between line and plane into a relationship based on similarity, allowing for expression of individuality within the framework via modules. This creates a new order of open form that provides a gateway to a slightly different utopia. Mondrian culminates his thoughts on jazz/boogie-woogie, architecture, the Hegelian dialectic, and the Neo-Plastic in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, returning to his beginnings and revolutionizing his art in a majestic finale.

To understand the ideas that *Broadway Boogie Woogie* conveys, let us take a closer look at the construction and composition of the painting. Note that we will focus on *Broadway* and not *Victory*, as *Broadway* stands as a finished representation of Mondrian's final style. A few key compositional elements are striking: the shimmering of the colored squares as consequence of adjacent colors, the verticality that emerges from the disturbance of the gridiron pattern, and the dual nature of line and plane. At 50in x 50in, *Broadway* is one of Mondrian's largest paintings, finished in 1943. The oil on canvas shines in one of four colors: grey, red, blue, and yellow, organized on top of the white canvas in a grid style, albeit with broken lines. Vertical and horizontal lines of yellow are broken up by seemingly random tiny squares of blue, red, and grey, to the point where one could even argue that, although yellow does predominate, the lines shouldn't be seen as yellow but rather as lines of various colored squares.[2] The alternation of the colored squares produces a vibrant effect, in that the squares seem to shimmer and dance as a color comes more into focus. This sparkling effect is due to the fact that each square's adjacent square is a different color, a constructive relationship with not only the adjacent squares, but all the squares around; the painting as a whole. The square colors are certainly not determined by an algorithm, but seem to have some kind of predominant order. In these orders there seems to be little variation, and thus the pattern appears repetitive throughout the painting. This is not a mindless replication, however, but something more nuanced. We see multiple squares with

[2] Mondrian himself noted that the painting was "too yellow," so it is possible that the lines were supposed to simply be polycolored rather than founded on yellow.

varying dimensions, some oddly rectangular (see top middle yellow-red-grey, all of differing sizes). Mondrian's skill rejects the suggestion of human error, so these variations can be viewed as intentional, creating striking moments of divergence from the otherwise relatively rigid patterns. The same can be said for the spread of the colored planes, especially the colored planes within planes. These planes seem to display a balance in color distribution while still being strewn around the painting seemingly haphazardly, again enhancing this vibrant, dynamic effect. Although the eye lingers on each plane as an individual unit when examining closer, given the variegated patterns one wants to absorb, no plane immediately strikes out, creating an *all-over* effect that sparkles with vibrant color.

Although there is a dynamic pattern in the square colors within the lines, certain vertical patterns in between the lines do show up. In the bottom middle, in the pattern of five horizontal lines, we see vertical sequences of squares of the same color that break up the horizontal line. Notice that this pattern mostly holds for each of the five horizontal lines, but are not perfectly matched up vertically. This creates the illusion of verticality to these horizontal lines, despite not connecting formally through a linear shape. There are some other examples of this phenomenon throughout the painting. Only such vertical patterns are created, as there are no truly illusionary horizontal lines. This, coupled with the overall vertical direction of the lines, makes verticality the main movement of the piece. Note that this is in contrast to the typical horizontality in Mondrian's earlier Neo-Plastic works. Indeed, many of the colored planes that interrupt the lines are also vertically orientated, drifting upwards in the stream of the work.

The colored planes play another curious role in the painting. They seem to interrupt the progression of lines, but vary between being on top of the lines and behind the lines; for example, the pair of yellow planes with smaller grey planes inside them, placed in the top left corner. The upper, horizontally orientated plane seems to lie underneath the lines, caged in on its sides by the blinking squares, while the bottom, vertically orientated plane seems to cut over the lines, a consequence of the yellow being part of both plane and line. This creates the odd effect of uncertainty over whether the line is dominating the plane or the plane the line. This conundrum is further enhanced by the behavior of some of the other planes. The middle

grey/yellow plane seems to both be one and two planes at the same time, due to the grey line cutting the plane in halves. Or, does the line actually belong to the lower grey plane? The positioning of the red/grey plane to the right of the grey/yellow plane is even more unclear, as the bottom grey line seems to not be a part of either the plane or the line. In some other areas, white planes determined by lines are further split by colored planes, making the white planes appear as thin white lines. This is present throughout the painting, but most notably at the top right corner. This line-plane duality is not so much of a mistake as a feature, a meshing of the plane and line duality into one. We even have a few instances of planes containing other planes within them, such as the blue-red-yellow plane in the top right. The blue plane seems to lie below the red, and the yellow on top of the red, but the blue could also be seen as being divided in two by the red-yellow plane. All of this confusion and duality challenges the notion of an established depth in the painting, with layers appearing and disappearing as the eye moves around the painting. Yet, there does exist another form of plane throughout the painting: the non-colored white planes bounded by the lines. But even as these are prevalent and stand on their own, especially in the middle of the painting, they are interrupted by the other planes andlines. Let us return to the red/grey plane and see how the plane cuts directly into the white plane, creating a white line to the left and a smaller white rectangle to the right. Are we supposed to see the white line and rectangle as part of an interrupted white plane, or do these forms now stand on their own as a new line and a new plane? It seems as if lines are not subservient to the planes, and are not only a mechanism to border planes. And although there are large swaths of white planes in the middle, the fact that the piece's edge peters off seems to imply this pattern extends beyond the canvas. So the middle exists, but perhaps is not the only "middle" of the proposed plane, as the hypothetical extension of the painting may have similar features.

Ultimately, we see the forms of lines and planes behaving in curious ways. The lines are split into many colored planes, creating a shimmering effect within the broken gridiron. A seeming verticality is outlined by the blinking squares and the orientation of the small planes. The planes are both on top of and below, both a part of and distinct from, the line. Planes are cut by, and become, lines. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is

certainly breaking from Mondrian's visual style while still drawing upon the same compositional vocabulary of right angles, primary colors, lines, and planes.

To now understand what was at stake when Mondrian revolutionized the visual in *Broadway*, we must build an understanding of his previous compositions and his mission. We start by defining the tenants of Neo-Plasticism on a theoretical basis, as his mature notions of Neo-Plasticism were his main artistic and theoretical contributions. Mondrian's own writings can be seen as the main primary source, as he wrote extensively on his mission throughout his whole life. We will also consider the writings of art historian Yves Alain Bois, who has extensively treated Mondrian's mature Neo-Plastic artwork. Bois writes,

> The principle of neo-plasticism is a dialectic roughly reminiscent of Hegel, which Mondrian also calls the "general principle of plastic equivalence." It is an apparent dualism meant to dissolve all particularity, all center, all hierarchy; any harmony that is not double, not consitutted by an "equivalent opposition"… Whatever is not "determined by its contrary" is "vague," "individual," "tragic."... Mondrian dreams of a perfectly equilibrated future society where every element will be "determined."[3]

Bois integrates Mondrian's quotes from various writings, namely *Neo-Plasticism in Painting* (1917) and *The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence* (1920), to describe Mondrian's vision. Mondrian deeply believed in utopian society, "perfectly equilibrated" and "determined," a "mature humanity" that completely expresses a certain "unity" and "exact order." To him, society functions best as a whole, an all-over system of humans where "the particular no longer matters."[4] He believes that order and society are derived from opposition in relationship, borrowing the Hegelian idea of the dialectic. He wants "pure equilibrium…a duality resolved through the equivalence of opposites" to be established, allowing the "dualism" to end the individual life and create a total utopia. He reached for this supreme mission, a spiritual and idealist image of what the world

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[3] Yve-Alain Bois. *Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995. 315
[4] Mondrian, Piet. "The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence." In *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian,* ed. Harry Holtzmann (G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 1920. 134-147

around him could become. He sought "to express this world plastically in a precisely determinate way"[5] with painting as the chosen medium. Accordingly, Bois writes, "Mondrian considers each of his neo-plastic canvases as the theoretical and microcosmic model of a macrocosm yet to come."[6] Merely evoking emotion through a representational painting was not enough; he wanted to create through painting, making his art a project of a utopian future. This utopia is again Hegelian in nature, but instead of an end of history, Mondrian wanted to bring "art to its end – in an art that expresses our mature humanity and is therefore a plastic expression of the equilibrated relationship."[7]In this end, "art no longer needs to exist" as "all human activity becomes art," in an overcoming of the natural state of the world.[8] In short, Mondrian's mission was to exemplify through his painted canvases a perfectly determined, equilibrated society, deindividualized through harmony of opposing relationships.

Let us now examine how he attempted to pursue these lofty goals within his physical art. Although Mondrian produced a fair number of works prior to his series of Compositions that he is most known for, we are focusing on how he realized the Neo-Plastic ideals within his paintings. Mondrian's art expressed his theoretical ideas by setting up numerous relationships of opposition to produce harmonious equilibrium, specifically through his flat line-plane composition, usage of color and non-color, disturbance of a modular plane, removal of the center, and the extension of his canvases. We will not examine a sole painting from this period extensively, as it is not the focus of this piece Instead, we will rely on Bois as a foundation. All of Mondrian's compositions utilize basic vocabulary of the line and plane, forgoing all other notions of curve in favor of the rigid right angle. In his own words, this choice creates "unity interiorized through the plastic expression of the straight line in vertical and the horizontal position…and through a multiplicity of rectangular planes or rectangular prisms."[9] Bois further explicates this by saying that "the vertical and the

[5] Mondrian, Piet. General Principle.
[6] Bois, 315
[7] Mondrian, Piet. "Neo-Plasticism" In *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian,* ed. Harry Holtzmann (G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 1923. 175-177
[8] Bois, 330
[9] Mondrian, General Principle

horizontal…reduces to the primordial and absolute,"[10] denying representation in favor of complete dissolution to the abstract. The opposition between the vertical and horizontal, the line and the plane, comes from the "point of absolute equilibrium" where "horizontal plus vertical" meet.[11] A battleground between one line and the other determines the plane, creating an equilibrated space through opposition of the dimensions. Of course, the flatness of the canvas further "expresses pure relationship" in a Greenburgian fashion.[12] Onto the choice of primary colors alongside black lines, Bois points out that "the entire opposition of color stems from opposition between light and dark" and that "non-color…[allows painting to] no longer be conceived as vague and atmospheric…but rather determined space."[13] Non-color, very simply put, is the black and white. With lines inhabiting this non-color and the planes inhabiting primary colors,, Mondrian further sets up opposition between the line and plane. Yet, within the opposition, the "lines harmonize the adjacent color planes…through color gradation."[14] This can be seen as analogous to the idea of an opposing relationship creating a beautiful unity with subdued individuality, as each color shines only in relation to another. He continues to weave this net of relationships by setting up a semi-grid within his paintings. Bois states that "without the regulating crutch of a modular grid the planes might regain their individuality and leap forward,"[15] arguing for the existence of a grid-like pattern to simulate an *all-over* effect. Yet, Mondrian is cautious to create completely determined paintings, stepping away from his earlier creations. He posited that too firm a grid "diminishes the visual impact of the linear network as a surveying of the surface."[16] Mondrian thus introduces disturbed grid patterns to enhance the impact of the harmony between the planes and lines, adding complexity to the relationship without compromising the mission. The elements of his paintings, the composition, vocabulary, color, style, usage of line-plane, and others all allow his paintings to become a microcosm of the utopian world he strives towards.

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[10] Bois, 334
[11] Bois, 338
[12] Mondrian, General Princple
[13] Bois, 319-320
[14] Bois, 325
[15] Bois, 325
[16] Bois, 324

With these features in mind, we turn to the question at hand. Given Mondrian's theoretical goals and their manifestation in his Neo-Plastic paintings, how can we reconcile the visual shift of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, both theoretically and artistically? While *Broadway Boogie Woogie* does away with the opposition between plane and line, greatly subdues the deterministic order, and brings more attention to individual units within the painting, Mondrian's trademark utopian mission and dialectic remain steadfast, transformed into a dialectic of destruction instead of construction, and including more room for individualism within the resultant harmony. Let us draw upon our previous conclusions regarding the composition and themes found in *Broadway*. We start with the collapse of the plane and line into one. Mature Neo-Plastic Mondrian heavily extols the opposition between the lines that determines the planes, as they are the basis of his compositional designs. Yet in *Broadway*, the relationship between the line and plane is no longer opposing. Lines become planes become lines, lines intersect to create planes that intersect to create lines. We can understand this shift as not a rejection of Hegelian dialectic; rather, it is the other side of the coin. Harry Cooper states "there is nothing anti-Hegelian about the collapse of oppositions…Mondrian imagined the end of art as a return to an "original unity" that appeared "in time as a duality"…the goal of evolution was the eventual and gradual cure of all opposition."[17] By collapsing the opposition towards a similarity, Mondrian actually moves closer towards his vision of unity. This is a rather nebulous concept, as it is not a meshing of the two in the form of a melting pot. It is the salad bowl, where the line and plane rest on top of each other, with the eye seeing them as a whole while still being separated from one another. While in opposition, harmony is achieved through relationship, the new collapse allows for a freer form, a harmony determined by a non-rigid "new order." Thus, we can accept this change as still part of Mondrian's vision, albeit in a different form. Each unit of line and plane becomes a part of the greater composition, not bound to each other through defining each other but bound to the canvas as a whole entity.

It seems reckless to abandon the opposition relationship without good reason, but the reason manifests itself in the way the modules behave in this new relationship. Within this collapse, a constructive

[17] Cooper, Harry. "Mondrian, Hegel, Boogie." October 84 (1998): 139

relationship between the modules emerges out of the death of the determined grid. The modules we speak of are the colored planes that dot the lines, in addition to some of the colored planes spread throughout the painting. We have seen the modules and their repetition in early Mondrian works, prior to his mature Neo-Plastic phase. There, they were single units in extremely tight grid patterns, and their only role was as a unit to form the overwhelming presence of the grid. Here, their spread is less ordered, and differ greatly from each other in both color and dimension. We have shown how they shimmer as a whole yet remain single units. This development could only occur when strict order removes itself from the painting, which occurs due to the collapse of the opposition between line and plane. Since these squares can float freely within the mass of the painting, they can interact with each other in a liberated manner, situating in new, perfectorders, to allow their neighbors and themselves to harmonize brightly. Repetition is no longer destructive of effect, but rather a device to further potential harmonies, to allow more units within the composition to speak to each other. The various colored planes of different sizes and compositions act in the same manner, as they can now invade the previously dominant white planes. Although they are still firmly founded upon the underlying horizontal/vertical grid pattern, they can express themselves in more nuanced ways within this framework, intersecting with lines, overlapping or containing other planes, and creating bridges between line and plane. This equilibrium is more dynamic, more composed. The grid now has a liveliness generated by the individuality of the modules, impossible in any of Mondrian's previous Neo-Plastic compositions.

Mondrian's collapse of opposition to similarity and expression of individual modules within a less deterministic grid reflects his philosophical journey, namely, his thoughts on Jazz and New York. Mondrian loved listening to jazz and fervently dancing to boogie-woogie while wandering the gridiron of New York City. The name *Broadway Boogie Woogie* invokes both of these loves. It is easy to see how the "rapid, syncopated rhythms and irregular rhythmic flickers of color"[18] could reflect the energy of boogie-woogie, and how the yellow grid represents a map of New York'sgridiron. The invocation, however, is more structurally and theoretically based than representation (surely Mondrian would not return to representation). In boogie,

[18] Brown, David. Noise orders: Jazz, improvisation, and architecture. U of Minnesota Press, 2006. 3

there exists "a competition of likeness…sharing one repeated rhythmic motif…[with] the two hands remaining distinct despite their similarities."[19] This is the very model of collapsed dualism within *Broadway*, where similarities create a unity. Mondrian himself wrote extensively on music in *Jazz and Neo-Plastic* (1927). Such lines as "Jazz and Neo-Plasticism are destructive-constructive. They do not destroy the actual content of form: They only deepen form and annihilate it in favor of a new order" and "Jazz above all creates the bar's open rhythm. It annihilates. Everything that opens has an annihilating action"[20] easily hint at Mondrian's desire to destroy. Jazz destroys by opening up form, creating space for solos and individual expression , but still remains largely grounded within the repetition of the rhythm. This open form that Mondrian wants is not entirely found in earlier Neo-Plastic works that are defined by opposition and are highly deterministic. What we see in *Broadway*, however, is the realization of the open form. The destruction of the plane-line opposition allows him to introduce the colored modules, allowing them to move freely. This is the solo, an individual painting temporally. The grid in the painting still pervades, grounding the open modules within a unified framework, relating them to each other. This is the rhythm, which subsumes and unifies all. Note that the grid of *Broadway* is vertically focused; in music, the vertical is associated with rhythm. This association is far from coincidence; Mondrian has finally realized his dream of open form introduced in relating jazz and Neo-Plasticism, aptly referencing jazz in the title of *Broadway Boogie Woogie.*

Similarily, Mondrian's thoughts on metropolis are largely analogous. He writes, "in the metropolis, unconsciously and in answer to the needs of the new age, there has been a liberation from form leading to the open rhythm that pervades the great city."[21] Mondrian was less optimistic about architecture than music, and did not treat it with the same idealism. Perhaps in the poorly organized Paris Mondrian did not see inspiration for his grid works, but within the gridiron of New York Mondrian could see the liveliness of the city bound by structure. An individual would be a living part of the unity of the city, able to see far horizontal and vertical distances into the mass of the city. Yet, he would remain individual. Mondrian states that "man no

[19] Cooper, 136
[20] Mondrian, Piet. "Jazz and Neo-Plastic." In The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed. Harry Holtzmann (G. K. Hall & Co., 1986), 1927. Jazz and Neo-Plastic, 217-222
[21] Mondrian, Jazz and Neo-Plastic

longer lives in a private world and for himself alone but within the world….he creates his own environment."[22] Though subsumed by the rhythm of the city, man still stands as a unit, much like how the modules stand as units within *Brodway*. Perhaps not as strong of a connection, as indicated by the scrapping of the *Broadway* title in his next *Victory Boogie Woogie*. Nonetheless, both the metropolis and jazz music clearly had great influence on Mondrian's ideas, and remain within the framework of the mission that Mondrian pursued.

Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* can be understood as a different approach to his utopian project, using similarity instead of opposition to build his line-plane Hegelian dialectic, allowing him to introduce modules that generate an individual liveliness in the painting while still being bound to the gridded canvas. Inspired by the possibilities of jazz and New York, Mondrian alters his utopian mission, weaving in more individualistic expression to the harmony of the colors and composition of the painting. This is not a sudden move; his New York series anticipated the collapse, moving forward his project. Perhaps it was the lack of realization of his project that pushed Mondrian to shift his mission and paint *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Perhaps he extolled the individual within the unity in order to speak directly to the modern man, the New Yorker who danced in jazz clubs and felt the closest to Mondrian's harmony. But Mondrian was also a man who "painted to find things out," so perhaps *Broadway* simply marked new territory for Mondrian, a new theoretical groundwork to explore. "Paintings come first and the theory comes from the painting," he said after painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. We will never know what drove Mondrian to revolutionize his work. His journey came to an end after *Victory Boogie Woogie* in 1943, from pneumonia. Yet his influence on the world of modern painting will forever be felt, and his utopian dream may one day be fulfilled.

[22] Mondrian, Jazz and Neo-Plastic

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