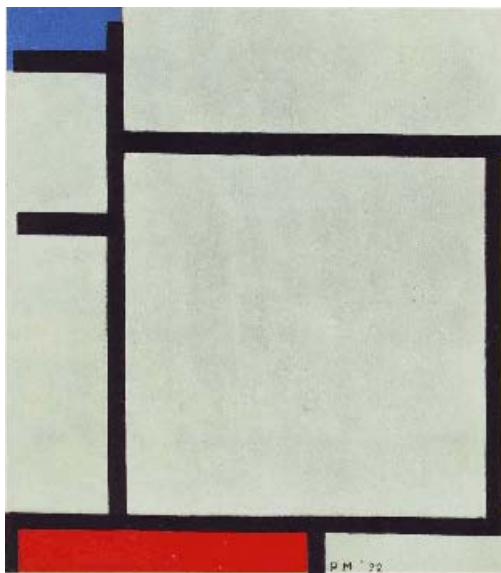


**TORE NORDENSTAM**

**EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING  
IN THE HISTORY OF ART**



**1978**

**INTERNET EDITION 2007**

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## **NOTE ON THE INTERNET EDITION**

A long time ago, Professor Joe Margolis and an anonymous reader commented in some detail upon my manuscript from 1977. They suggested a good number of substantive and linguistic amendments. I am very grateful indeed to both of them for their encouragement and constructive criticism. For various reasons, I have not been able to do what they wanted me to do. When preparing this internet version of *Explanation and Understanding in the History of Art*, I have followed their advice on the minor details, but the bulk of the text is virtually identical with the version which was published in 1978 in the report series from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bergen.

It might be added that Mondrian's art-theoretical writings are now available in the volume *The New Art – The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, edited and translated by Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (Thames and Hudson, London 1987).

Bergen, February 2007

Tore Nordenstam

## **PREFACE**

Questions of explanation and understanding are central in the history of art, as in other human sciences. In the following essay I shall try to shed some light on the nature of the explanation and understanding of works of art by reflecting upon the oeuvre of Piet Mondrian and some of the literature on those works. The confrontation of philosophy with art and art history will, I hope, be of mutual benefit.

Much philosophy of science is devoted to technical issues with little interest for others than specialized philosophers. But it would be undesirable (I think) to write on art and art history in such a way that communication with practicing art historians is barred. Consequently I have tried to avoid unnecessary technicalities, without, however, attempting to trivialize the enterprise by abstaining from presenting aspects of the philosophical platform on which I stand when the context demands it. That platform is to a large extent derived from the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

I should like to add that philosophy for me is what I think art was for Mondrian: a way of searching. It is a way of searching the questions as well as the answers. The results – in both fields — consist of that which is said and of that which is not said. Progress consists not so much in building stones which can be put at their place in the history which we are. Rather, it is a question of hitting the nail on the head.

Throughout I have benefitted from discussions with my Bergen colleagues in the departments of philosophy and art history. Above all, I am grateful for the generous assistance I have got from Gunnar Danbolt in the department of art history and Kjell S. Johannessen in the department of philosophy. Their influence pervades the following essay.

Bergen, Summer 1977.

T.N.

# 1. THE MEANING OF MONDRIAN

It would seem to be a feature of contemporary art that the transformations it exhibits are more extensive in character than the changes which the philosophical art-historians concerned themselves.

(Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, § 60)

# 1. THE MEANING OF MONDRIAN

## 1.1. Some problematic rectangles

Consider the painting called *Composition with red, yellow and blue* which can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm :

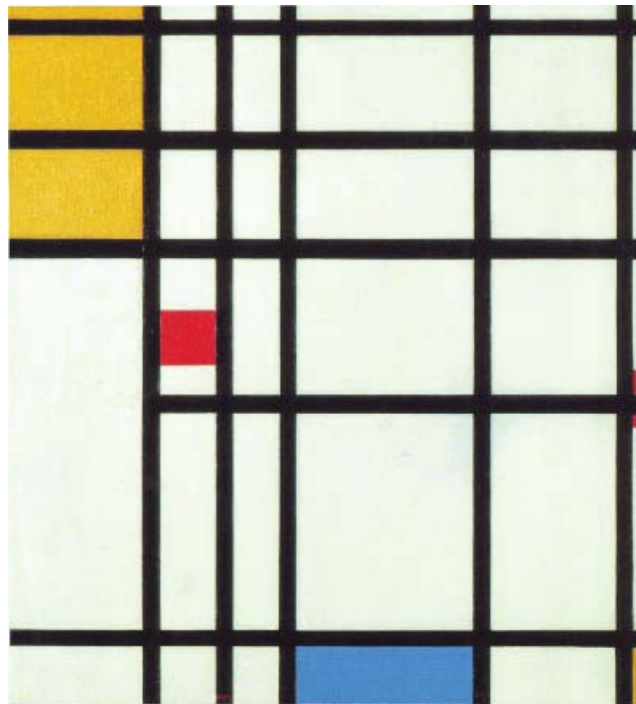


Fig. 1  
Piet Mondrian, *Composition with red, yellow and blue*, 1936-43  
Oil on canvas. 59 x 54 cm  
Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm

The picture is signed with the initials “PM” and dated “36/ 43”. The initials stand for the Dutchman Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan, who after 1912 referred to himself as Piet Mondrian.

The colour reproduction gives some idea of what the canvas looks like : most of it is in white, there are five horizontal and five vertical black stripes which intersect at a number of points; there is a yellow area in the upper corner to the left, or three yellow rectangles, if you like; and similarly a yellow rectangle in the lower corner to the right; there are two or three red rectangles, depending on how you count; and one blue patch. The letters “PM” and the numbers “36/43” are painted with the red colour against two of the black stripes. The letters are small even in the original, which measures 59 x 54 centimeters.

When one sees reproductions of this painting, one might think that the surface of the picture is blank, enamel-like, but that is not so. The white areas are painted with rather thin paint, the brush strokes are clearly visible if one looks closely at the picture, whereas the black stripes are hard, thick and shining. The coloured areas are also more painterly than the reproduction might lead one to believe. (There is a larger reproduction in Galerie Beyeler's catalogue from 1964-65, which gives a better idea of what the original looks like.)<sup>1</sup>

The reproduction conveys the same sort of liveliness as the original painting : when one looks at the picture, it comes alive, greyish round spots seem to emerge at the intersections of the black stripes in a manner which might remind one of the jerky movements of some of the neon advertisements in the centers of our cities.

It is a highly ambiguous picture, which might be interpreted in many different ways. The general conventions of oil painting and museum display help us a little bit on the way. The general conventions include such rules as the following: that we should look at the surface of the picture from a certain distance, not too close, not too far away; that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Piet Mondrian*, éditions Galerie Beyeler, Basel s.d. The *Composition with red, yellow and blue* is reproduced as no. 55 in that catalogue.

back of the picture is irrelevant and that the picture should be viewed when hanging in a certain position on a wall; that we should look for some kind of pattern in the picture; that we should observe the interplay of forms and colours; and similar things. None of these conventions are self-evident. It is easy to imagine a culture where pictures painted on surfaces are expected to be handled in other ways, for instance as objects to be viewed from all angles. But we are accustomed to pictures hanging in fixed positions on the walls of homes, galleries and museums. Some elementary experience with pictures helps us that far. But how should we go on to interpret the composition by Mondrian ? We are used nowadays to pictures of several kinds. Some pictures are used to represent aspects of the visual world for various purposes, as illustrations or as parts of building instructions, for instance; some have a purely decorative function; some are objects of meditation, icons; and so on. How should we approach this particular picture by Mondrian ? What does it mean ?

The problem of meaning does not become less pressing when we consider the fact that virtually all Mondrian's serious works of art from around 1920 up to his death in 1944 are more or less similar to the *Composition with red, yellow and blue* from 1936/43. (Disregarding some conventional pictures done for financial reasons.) Consider for instance the following two samples (Fig. 2 - 3).<sup>2</sup>

The similarities between the three pictures are striking: the same black and white structure with inserted rectangles in red, blue and yellow. Figure 2 and figure 3 contain only two colours in addition to black and white, and the black grid is not so tight as in figure 1. The same greyish spots as in figure 1 appear in figure 2 but not in figure 3; the appearance of the spots seems to depend on the number of black stripes, so that a picture with too few black stripes cannot give rise to this optical effect.

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<sup>2</sup> Reproductions of those paintings can be found e.g. in S. Deicher, *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944. Structures in Space*, Benedikt Taschen Verlag, Cologne 1995. Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, Harry N. Abrams, New York s. d., contains a good number of colour reproductions. *L'opera completa di Mondrian*, edited by M. G. Ottolenghi, Rizzoli Editore, Milan 1974, is not really what it says ("complete"), but it is a good catalogue, again with many large colour reproductions.



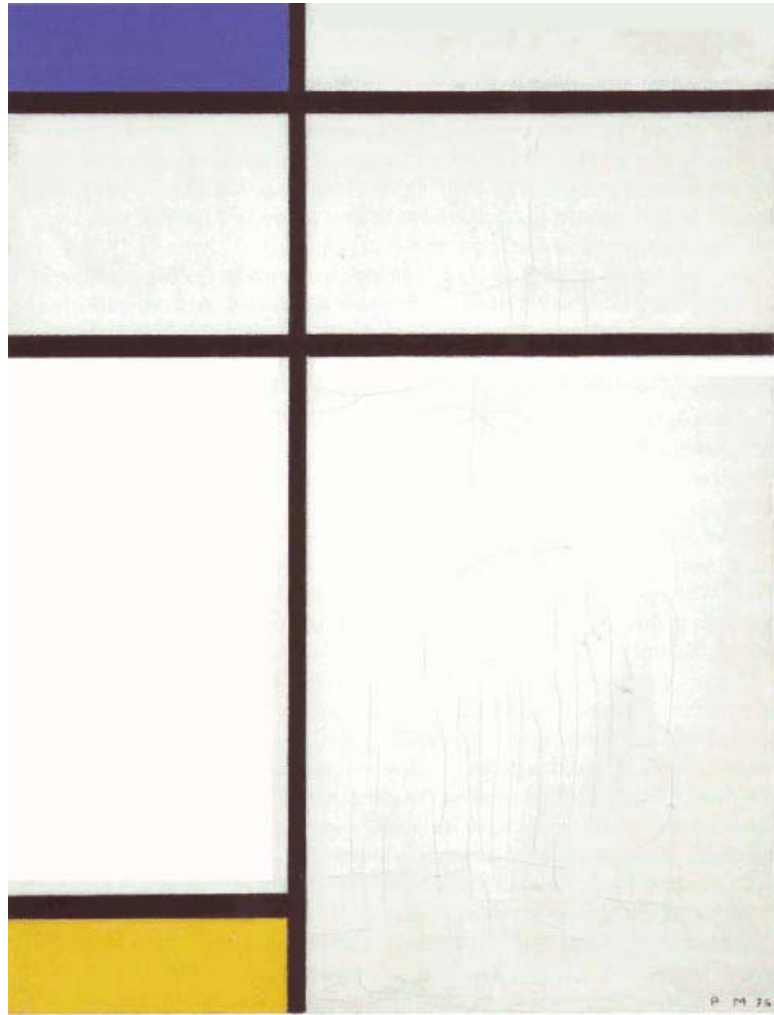


Fig.2

*Composition III with blue, yellow and white, 1936*

Oil on canvas, 43.5 x 33.5 cm

Kunstmuseum, Basel

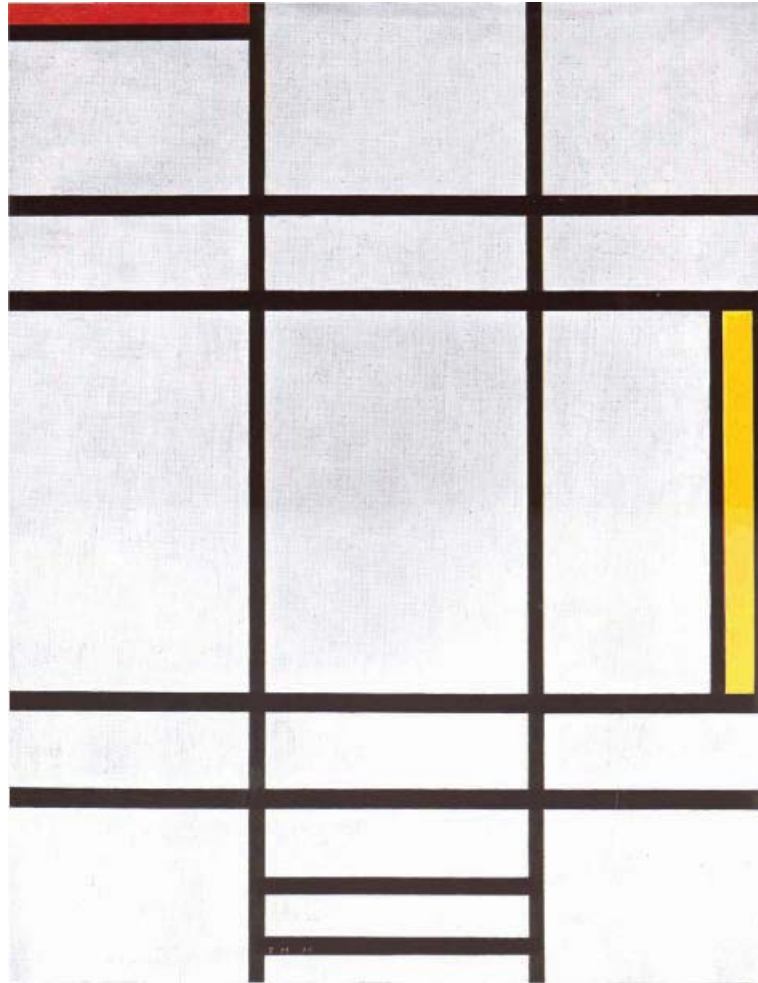


Fig. 3

*Composition with yellow and red*, 1938

Oil on canvas, 80 x 62 cm

County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

The rest of Mondrian's oeuvre from about 1920 to 1942 consists of variations on the same themes. The colours are always the red, blue and yellow nuances exemplified in pictures 1 - 3, with some slight variations, in addition to white areas and black bands. The black lines in the three pictures we have considered now all reach to the edges of the pictures, but often this is not so. Consider e.g. the picture on the front page of this essay, the *Composition* from 1922, where three of the black stripes stop a bit before the edge. The black bands are thicker in this picture, one may also note. Sometimes a picture uses only one colour in addition to black and white, sometimes two, sometimes three, but never more than three. And there are no monochroms in Mondrian's oeuvre. Sometimes the coloured rectangles are more dominating than in the paintings we have considered so far where the black and white pattern is the dominating feature (Fig. 4).

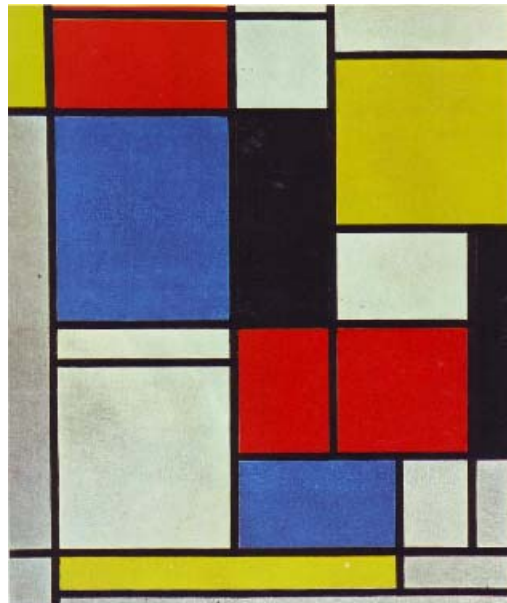


Fig. 4

*Picture II (Tableau II)*, 1921-25

Oil on canvas, 75 x 65 cm

Max Bill collection, Zurich

Sometimes Mondrian uses a diamond format instead of the usual rectangular one, as in the following example:



Fig. 5

*Composition No. 1: Lozenge with four lines, 1930*

Oil on canvas, diagonal 95 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Against the background of the other pictures, the picture above might be described as depicting five rectangles, with most of the rectangles outside the picture surface. Other descriptions are possible. One can e.g. describe it as consisting of four triangles, four black surfaces, and a more complex area in the middle.

Only the pictures from the last three years of Mondrian's life (1942-44) break this pattern which characterizes the paintings from the twenties and the thirties; e.g. the following two paintings where the black bands have been replaced with coloured stripes (Fig.6 - 7).

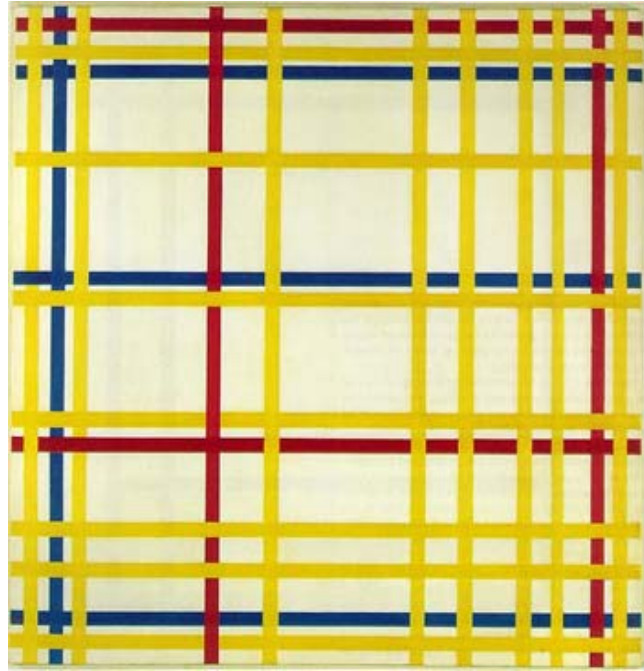


Fig. 6

*New York City*, 1942

Oil on canvas, 120 x 144 cm

Harry Holtzmann collection, New York

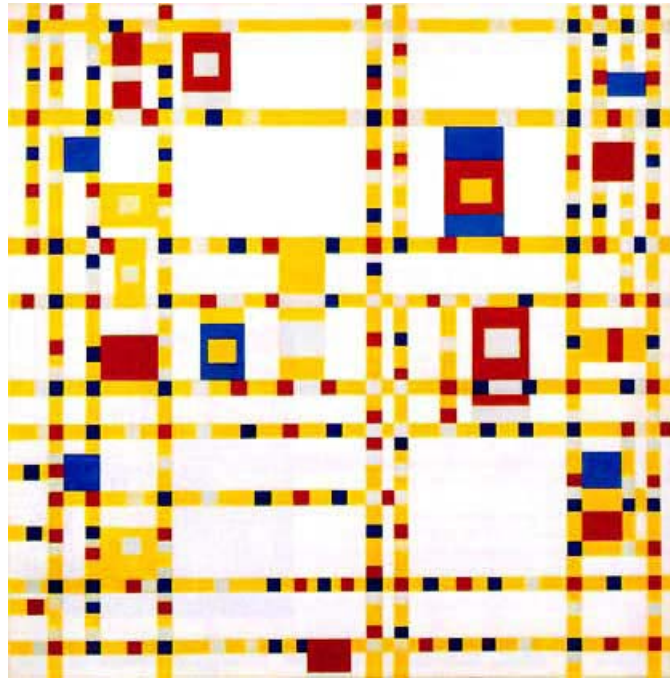


Fig. 7

*Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, 1942-43

Oil on canvas, 127 x 127 cm

Museum of Modern Art, New York

*Broadway Boogie-Woogie* is unusual also in that it is square-shaped. Generally, Mondrian preferred rectangles to squares (the diamond canvasses apart). The size of the last pictures is also considerable bigger than the foregoing works. Mondrian's last work, the unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, is about the same size as the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (126 x 126 cm, diamond format).

In the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, one may again note that some of the bands do not reach the edge of the canvas; unfortunately this cannot be seen from the reproduction I have used here which is somewhat amputated around the edges.<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious then that the first picture we considered, the *Composition with red, yellow and blue* (Fig. 1) is no unique painting. On the contrary, it belongs to a long series of works in which the same formal means are used. Now why does anybody choose to paint pictures like these? What are they intended to communicate and do they succeed in doing so? Is it possible to explain the details of the formal language that is used in the pictures? Why, for instance, do some of the bands stop short just before the edge of the canvas? Why are there only the three colours blue, red and yellow, in addition to black and white (or greyish)? Why is there no green in these paintings, for instance? Why are there no monochromatic paintings? Why are there only horizontal and vertical lines and no diagonal lines? Or curves? Why are there no recognizable objects depicted in these paintings (apart from rectangles)? Are the pictures intended to represent anything at all and, if so, what? Who can decide on such matters?

The questions multiply.

## 1.2. The painter's intentions

In *Art and Illusion* E.H.Gombrich suggests that art is fundamentally representational. Classical art attempts to represent the outer world, our visual surroundings, as truly as possible. Similarly, he suggests, much of twentieth-century art tries to find adequate visual expressions for the inner world, the world of the mind, the sphere of feelings and dreams.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion is, then, that we should look at the development of modern art

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<sup>3</sup> This is not uncommon in the books and catalogues I have seen. The reproduction in Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York s.d., p. 157, is better in this respect.

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton University Press, paperback edition, 1969, ch. XI, "From Representation to Expression", pp. 367-368.

as a trial and error process, where the aim is to improve on the existing schemata for rendering the inner world in visual form. What a picture represents cannot be determined by looking at the picture in isolation. Rather, it gets its meaning by the ways in which it continues and breaks the tradition which is a necessary condition for its production. Which feelings a particular work of art expresses can only be decided by relating it to the artist's other works and to earlier works by other artists. The expression of feeling is a question of style.

Applying these ideas to Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (Fig. 7 above), Gombrich suggests that this painting expresses "gay abandon"; the picture explains to Gombrich, who professes to know nothing about that kind of music, what a boogie-woogie is.<sup>5</sup> Against the background of more "severe" works like Fig. 1 - 5, Gombrich's suggestion might seem rather plausible. Perhaps Mondrian felt more relaxed in New York than he had done before; perhaps he became a less severe man as he grew older, and perhaps his paintings reflect this emotional development.

But if we turn to Mondrian's own writings on art, and he wrote extensively on his own art, we get another picture. The *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* was painted in 1942-43, in the middle of the war, by one of the many refugees from Europe. Mondrian might have had no particular reason to feel gay abandon in that situation, or to try to represent such feelings in his art, but his belief in art remained unshaken: "Even in this chaotic moment, we can near equilibrium through realisation of a true vision of reality. Modern life and culture helps us in this. Science and techniques are abolishing the oppression of time", he wrote in 1942. "Plastic art must move not only parallel with human progress but must advance ahead of it."<sup>6</sup> Mondrian discovered that "[w]here there is no history, reason becomes lucid madness," according to one commentator,<sup>7</sup> but his optimistic faith in the progress of mankind and the central role of art in that development did not falter.

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<sup>5</sup> Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 369.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted after I. Tomassoni, *Mondrian*, Hamlyn, London 1970, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> G. C. Argan, *Salvezza e caduta nell'arte moderna*, Milan 1963, quoted in Tomassoni, *op. cit.*, p. 47.



To realize “a true vision of reality” was indeed Mondrian’s aim, according to the self-image that he has given us in his art-theoretical writings. In his contributions to the Dutch journal *De Stijl* from 1917 onwards, he explained his intention of eliminating “the particular” from his art, emphasizing “the universal” by “a pure plastic expression of relationships”.<sup>8</sup> “In painting you must first try to see *composition, colour and line*, and not the representation *as representation*. You will finally come to feel the subjectmatter a hindrance.”<sup>9</sup> The subject-matter had never been important in itself, he explains in “A Dialogue on Neoplasticism”, also in *De Stijl*:

A: I admire your earlier work. Because it means so much to me, I would like to understand your present way of painting better. I see nothing in these rectangles. What are you aiming at ?

B: At nothing different than before. Both have the same intention but my latest work brings it out more clearly.

A: And what is that intention ?

B: The plastic expression of relationships through oppositions of colour and line.

A: But didn't your earlier work represent nature?

B: I expressed myself by means of nature. But if you observe the sequence of my work carefully, you will see that it progressively abandoned the naturalistic appearance of things and increasingly emphasizes the plastic expression of relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Mondrian had no intention to express his own particular feelings in his art; he aimed at finding apt visual expressions for the fundamental structure of the world, as he saw it. But that does not mean that his art has nothing to do with “feelings”, in some sense of that ambiguous word. In the next installment of the dialogue from which we quoted above, Mondrian lets A say: “I gather that abstract painting is not just intellectual, but is as much the product of *feeling*?” And B, the Neoplastic painter, answers: “Of both:

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<sup>8</sup> *De Stijl*, Vol. II, No. 4; English translation in Hans L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson, London 1970, p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

deeper feeling and deeper intellect. When feeling is deepened, in my eyes it is destroyed. That is why the deeper emotion of Neoplasticism is so little understood.”<sup>11</sup>

It seems, then, that Mondrian’s own interpretation of his art differs considerably from the interpretation suggested by Sir Ernst. It might of course be objected that the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* was painted some twentyfive years later than the publication of the statements we have quoted; but it is a fact that Mondrian’s theory of art remained stable from the *De Stijl* period to the end of his life. It would be easy to find apt supporting quotations to substantiate this claim. In view of Mondrian’s own writings, it does not seem plausible to regard his latest works as indicating a fundamental reorientation with regard to aesthetic aims. The fundamental issue which the two interpretations of Mondrian’s art raises has to do with the role that we should attach to the painter’s own comments on his paintings. Are we to concentrate on the works of art exclusively, disregarding the painter’s own comments, or should we let ourselves be guided in our way of looking at the works by the painter’s sayings?

At this juncture one should, I think, draw a demarcation line between two ways of approaching works of art. One way of approaching art is that of the critic whose task it is to aid us in the appreciation of works of art. The critic’s basic aim is to find rewarding interpretations, irrespective of the historical correctness of the interpretations. Another way of approaching art is that of the historian, whose basic task is to find historically correct interpretations of works of art and to explain the circumstances of their origin and the ways in which they have influenced later art.<sup>12</sup>

Gombrich’s comments on the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* might be very good considered as critical comments with the function of making the work of art come alive for us, making it meaningful for us. But if they are taken as art-historical sayings, they must fulfil other criteria which have to do with the historical plausibility of the suggested

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<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. Grigg’s lucid account of the confusion that the failure to distinguish clearly between art history and art criticism has brought about in the literature on the Constantinian friezes from Alois Riegl to D. E. Strong: “The Constantinian Friezes: Inferring Intentions from the Work of Art”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 10, 1970, pp. 3-10.

interpretation.<sup>13</sup> If we are interested in the meaning of the work rather than in its significance for us, then it seems necessary to focus on the painter's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs (to paraphrase a statement by Quentin Skinner).<sup>14</sup>

The relevant question is, then, not what boogie-woogie means to us or to E.H. Gombrich but what it meant to Mondrian. In one of the essays in *De Stijl* he explained that modern dances illustrate the tendency towards abstraction in modern life: "*In modern dance steps (boston, tango, etc.) the same tensing is seen: the curved line of the old dance (waltz, etc.) has yielded to the straight line, and each movement is immediately neutralized by a countermovement – signifying the search for equilibrium.*"<sup>15</sup> The choice of the boogie-woogie theme, it turns out, was governed by the same considerations as e.g. the choice of the tree theme or the pier and ocean theme – the theme was chosen because of its aptness for bringing out the features that Mondrian considered to be essential in modern life.

In art-historical writings, the border-line between critical and historical commentary is often crossed fairly unnoticed. But sometimes it is important to distinguish clearly between the two types of activities. It is common in the history of art to refer to intentions or aims in support of a suggested interpretation; some examples will be discussed in the following chapters. But references to intentions seem to play a different role in the critic's and in the historian's writings. For the critic they are one of many possible ways of illuminating works of art. For the art historian references to intentions seem to play a much more fundamental role. To try to shed some light on the role of references to intentions and aims in the explanation of works of art will be one of our tasks in the following.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. ch. 4 below.

<sup>14</sup> Q. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts", in D. Newton-De Molina, ed., *On Literary Intention*, Edinburgh at the University Press, 1976, pp. 200-201.

<sup>15</sup> "The Rationality of Neoplasticism", *De Stijl*, Vol. I, No. 5, quoted here from Jaffé, *De Stijl*, p. 64.

### 1.3. The transformations of art

In one of the quotations from *De Stijl* above, Mondrian invites us to observe the sequence of his work carefully, and then we will see how it “progressively abandoned the naturalistic appearance of things and increasingly emphasizes the plastic expression of relationships.” A glance through one of the catalogues where Mondrian’s works are ordered chronologically will support his suggestion, particularly if we concentrate on one theme. Consider e.g. his treatment of *the tree motif*.<sup>16</sup>

Mondrian began his career as a painter of landscapes and still lifes under the influence of the Dutch painter Breitner and the Barbizon school. The *Landscape near Amsterdam*, painted around 1902 when Mondrian was thirty years old, will serve as our first example (Fig. 8). The following two versions of a landscape at the river Gein show how Mondrian began to simplify the forms he found in nature (Fig. 9 – 10). The following charcoal drawing (Fig. 11) is reminiscent of the famous red and grey trees from about the same time (Fig. 12 and 13). The natural forms are still clearly visible in the *Trees in blossom* from 1912 (Fig. 14), but in the *Composition no. 3 (Trees)* from 1912-13 the last traces of naturalism are barely visible (Fig. 15). *Composition no. 3 (Trees)* was painted when Mondrian had settled in Paris, attracted by the Cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque, whose influence is undisputable in this work. And to end the more or less naturalistic stage of the tree sequence, I have chosen one more piece from the same time, taken from one of Mondrian’s sketch-books (Fig. 16). From here the road to Mondrian’s abstract painting is not very long (Fig. 17 – 18).

That the road to non-representational art passed through the representational, as Kruskopf puts it,<sup>17</sup> is amply born out by a consideration of Mondrian’s treatment of the tree motif. His other motifs – the church façades, the dunes, the pier and ocean studies – all end in the same kind of abstract pattern.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. F. Elgar, *Mondrian*, Thames and Hudson, London 1968; or M. Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian. Sa vie, son oeuvre*, Flammarion, Paris 1956 (also in English, German and Italian), pp. 371-374.

<sup>17</sup> E. Kruskopf, *Shaping the Invisible. A Study of the Genesis of Non-Representational Painting, 1908-1919*, Helsinki 1976, p. 172.



Fig. 8

*Landscape near Amsterdam, ca. 1902*

Oil on canvas, 29 x 48 cm

Collection Michel Seuphor, Paris

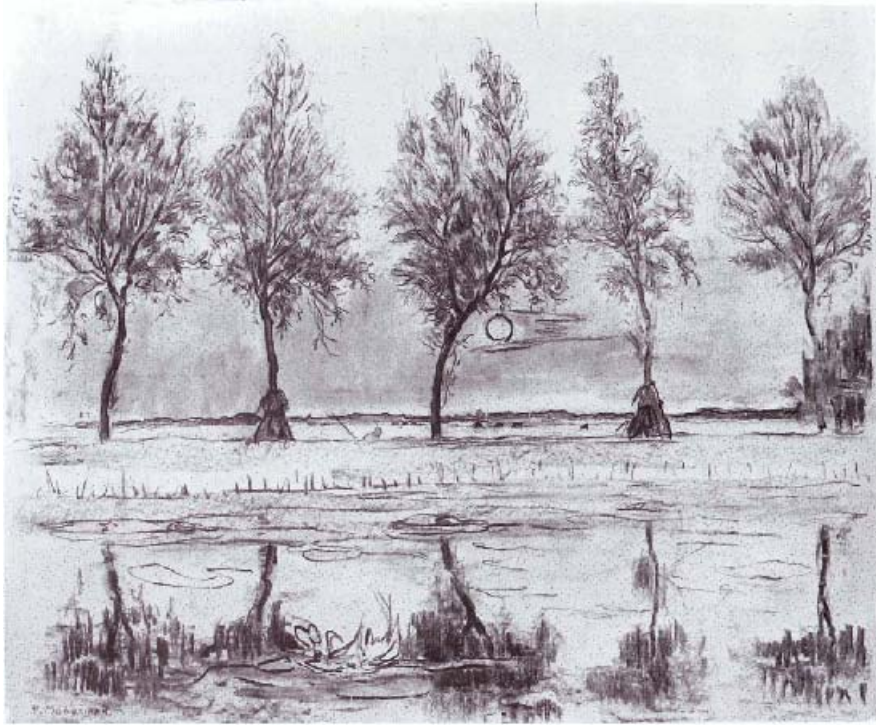


Fig. 9

*Trees on the banks of the Gein at moonrise, 1907-08*

Charcoal drawing on brownish paper, 63 x 75 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



Fig. 10

*Trees on the banks of the Gein, with rising moon, 1907-08*

Oil on canvas, 79 x 92.5 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



Fig. 11

*Tree*, 1910-11

Charcoal on brownish paper, 56.5 x 84.5 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



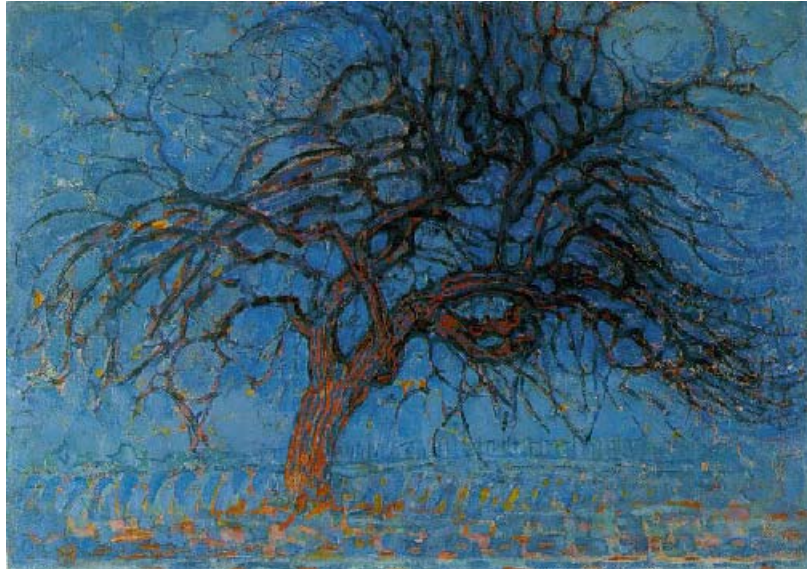


Fig. 12

*The red tree*, 1909-10.

Oil on canvas, 70 x 99 cm.

Gemeentemuseum., The Hague



Fig. 13

*The grey tree*, 1912

Oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



Fig. 14

*Trees in blossom*, 1912

Oil on canvas, 65 x 75 cm

The Judith Rothschild Foundation, New York



Fig. 15

*Composition no. 3 (Trees), 1912-13*

Oil on canvas, 95 x 80 cm

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum

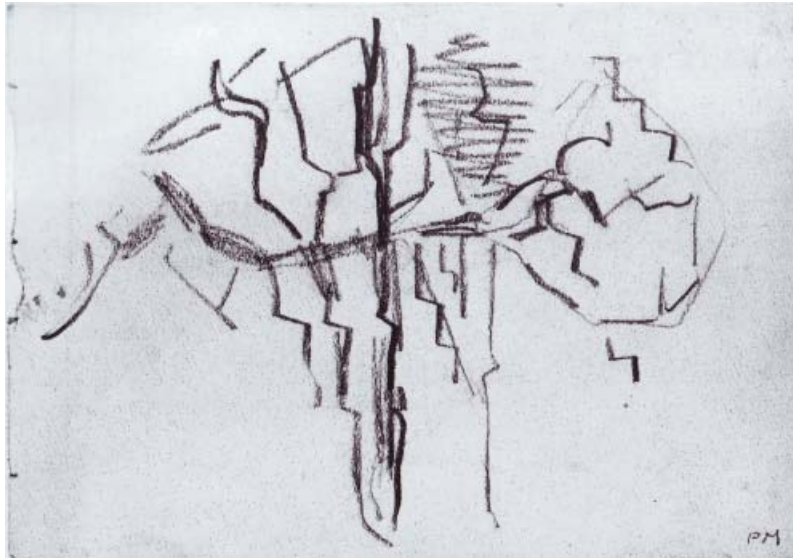


Fig. 16

*Trees*, 1913-14.

Sketch-book drawing, 12.4 x 16.8 cm.

Marlborough Fine Art, London.

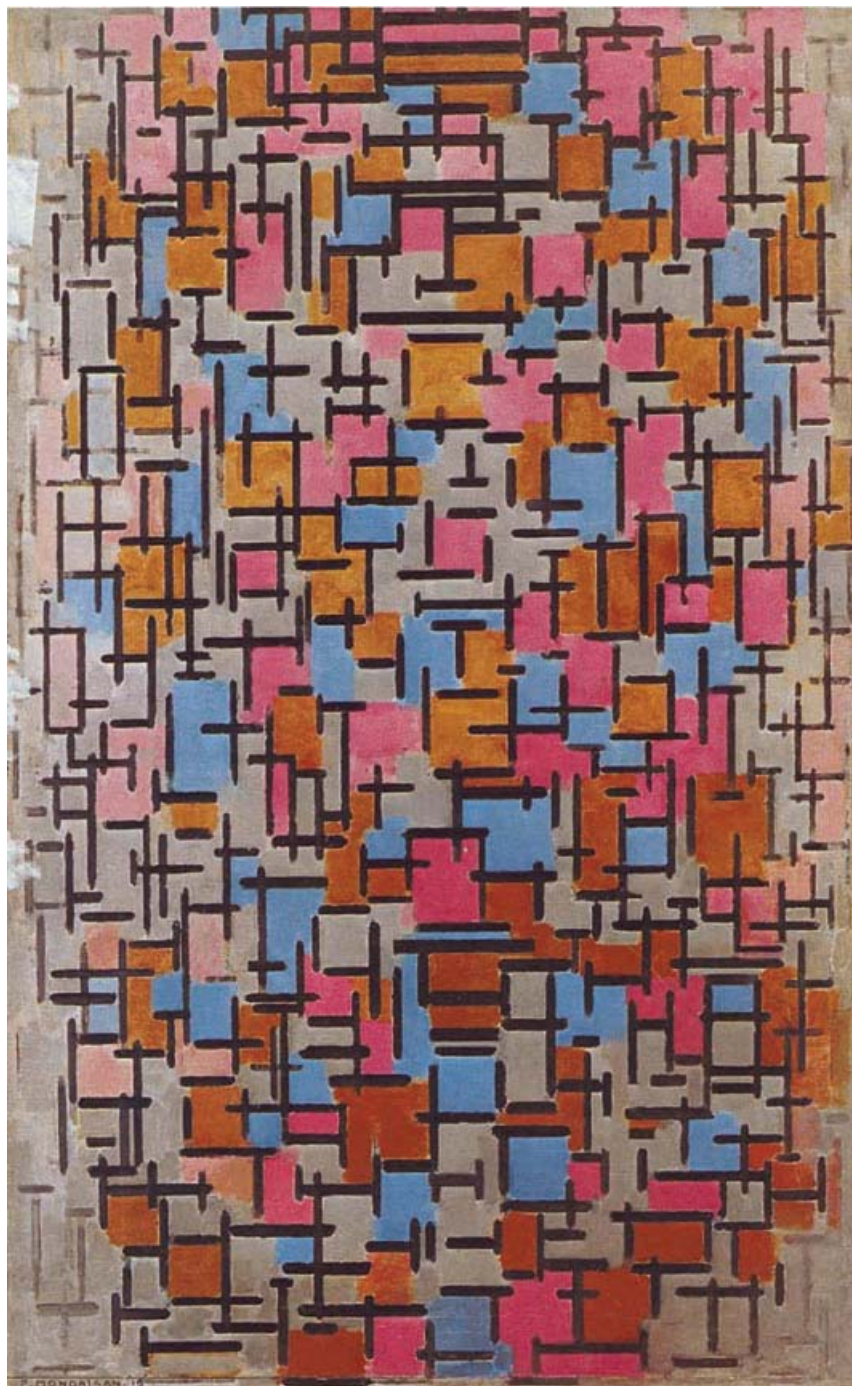


Fig. 17

*Composition*, 1916

Oil on canvas, 120 x 75 cm

The Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

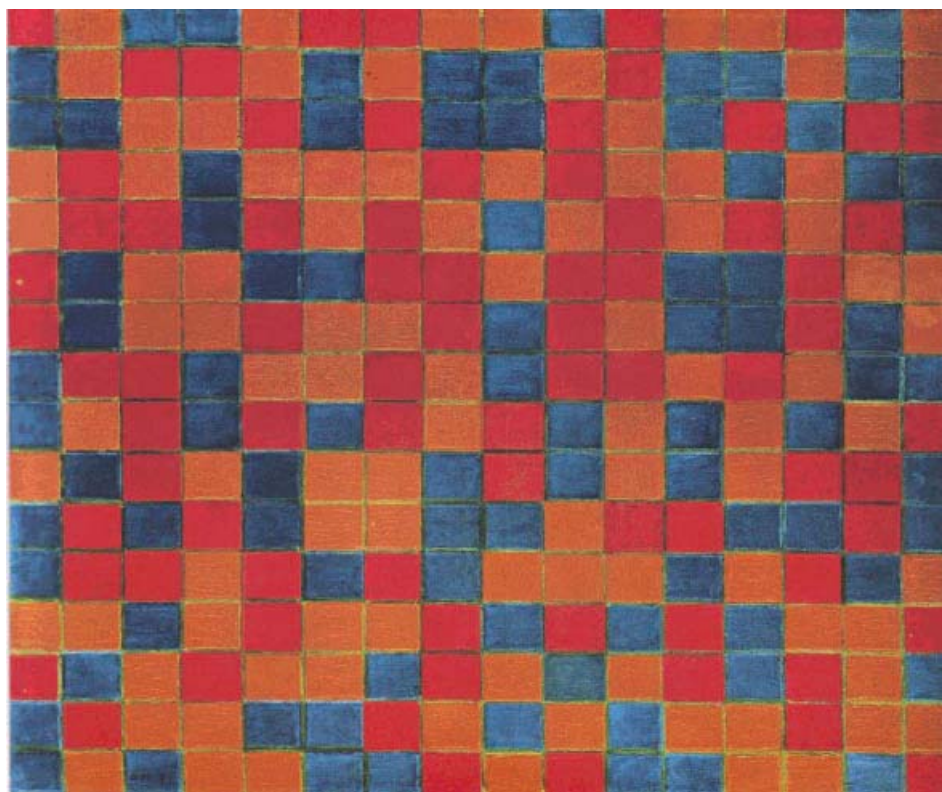


Fig. 18

*Composition: Checkerboard, Dark Colours*

Oil on canvas, 84 x 102 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

Gradually Mondrian arrived at the conclusion that the essential features of the motives can be brought out by very simple means: arrangements of horizontal and vertical strokes. The *Composition* from 1916 (Fig. 17) is one of the so-called plus-minus-works which stand halfway on the road from Cubism to the purely rectangular works. In 1916 - 17, Mondrian arrived at what might be described as the take-off stage of his abstract painting. The simplification of the motifs had been carried so far that the same basic structure began to emerge in the different motifs. Then it did not matter from which naturalistic motif one started; the problems that remained to solve were the pictorial ones of how to balance the forms against each other and how to balance colour against form. For some years Mondrian experimented with checkerboard patterns and various ways of distributing rectangles on the surface of the canvasses (see e.g. Fig. 18), until he settled for the solution illustrated by the pictures we considered in section 1.1.

Why is it clarifying to look at a sequence of works like the tree sequence from Fig. 8 to Fig. 18 and from then on the sequence from Fig. 1 to Fig. 7? Richard Wollheim has suggested that art is essentially historical and that the understanding of art therefore requires an historical placing of the works of art. One can look at the history of art as a series of transformations. "As a rough principle it might be laid down that those works of art which result from the application of the more radical transformational devices will require for their understanding a correspondingly greater awareness of the devices that went into their formation."<sup>18</sup> The principle is indeed applicable to Mondrian who is "one of those great creative artists of the twentieth century who transformed western painting in its structures and its objectives," as Frank Elgar puts it in his book on Mondrian.<sup>19</sup>

If art is transformational, then it becomes understandable that the explanation of art so often takes the form of pointing to sequences, analogies and parallels. But why is art historical and transformational? Is it just an empirical fact that the art with which we happen to be familiar is of this nature, or can one find more fundamental reasons for the fact that art is nourished by art more than by nature? In the background of Wollheim's

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<sup>18</sup> R. Wollheim, *Art and its Objects. An Introduction to Aesthetics*, Harper & Row, London 1968, §§ 60-61. The quotation is from p. 127.

<sup>19</sup> F. Elgar, *Mondrian*, Thames and Hudson, London 1968, p. 85.



proposal lies a Wittgenstein-inspired philosophy of meaning, which will be discussed below (in chapter III ). It is, in fact, one of the theses of the present work that both the intentionalist way of explaining works of art and the transformational way of doing so can be illuminated by a consideration of the conditions which are necessary for the production of meaning generally.

In order to demonstrate this, we shall first cast a glance at the current philosophical debate on the nature of explanation and understanding (ch. II), and then turn to a consideration of the conditions of action which are fundamental also for the production and understanding of works of art (ch.III). On the basis of the results of these investigations, we shall then return to the problem of the interpretation of Mondrian's oeuvre, with an emphasis on the role of the intentions and theoretical writings for the understanding of his works of art.

#### **1.4. Summary**

Piet Mondrian's mature works belong to those works of art which can hardly be considered to be self-explanatory. In this chapter we have indicated two ways of enhancing our understanding of the works: (1) by familiarizing ourselves with the painter's intentions: *the intentionalist way of explaining works of art*: (2) by construing sequences of works of art leading up to the works which present problems of understanding: *the transformational way of explaining works of art*.

We have also made a distinction between two ways of approaching works of art : the historian's approach and the art critic's approach. And we have suggested that the criteria governing good explanations and interpretations might differ in the two cases.

Finally, we have proposed that both ways of explaining works of art – the intentionalist way, and the transformational way – may be clarified by relating them to contemporary

philosophical analyses of explanation and understanding, particularly the theory of meaning production that can be derived from Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Having introduced our problem area, we can now begin to disentangle some of the issues involved.

## 2. PATTERNS OF EXPLANATION

Sage, was du willst, solange dich das nicht verhindert, zu sehen, wie es sich verhält. (Und wenn du das siehst, wirst du manches nicht sagen.)

Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them, there is a good deal that you will not say.)

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 79)

## 2.1. Explanations in the history of art : some examples

Explanation stands in the service of understanding. When there is something that we do not understand, we feel a need for an explanation. Different types of explanations will satisfy us in different situations depending upon what it is that we do not understand. We may fail to understand *what* a person is doing; we observe his bodily movements and do not understand what the meaning of it is. In such a case we will be satisfied with an explanation of what action he is performing. Or we may understand what kind of action a person performs but fail to see *why* he is doing it. If we are told what his aim or motive is, we understand the point of his doing what he is doing. Again we may fail to understand *how* a person manages to do what he is doing. In such a case an analysis of his procedures might be a satisfactory explanation for us. And we may be curious to know more about the conditions which make it *possible* for the person to do what he does, or the conditions which make it *impossible* for him to perform a certain kind of action.

Accordingly, one could distinguish between *what-explanations*, *why-explanations*, *how-explanations*, *how-possible - explanations*, and *why-not-possible- explanations*.<sup>20</sup>

Art-historical texts contain explanations of these different kinds in various combinations. The procedure which we called “the intentionalist way of explaining works of art” uses a kind of why-explanations; the procedure which we called “the transformational way of explaining works of art” uses how-explanations and how-possible- and why-not-possible-explanations.<sup>21</sup>

Before turning to the abstract discussions of patterns of explanation to be found in philosophical texts, it might be useful to collect some examples of passages from art-historical works which are intended to be explanatory in some sense of that term.

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<sup>20</sup> On explaining how, why and what, cf. William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood-Cliffs, N. J., 1964, ch. 2; and the same author’s paper “Explaining What in History”, in P. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, The Free Press, New York 1959, pp. 403-408.

<sup>21</sup> Section 1.4 above.

*Example 1.* Commenting on Mondrian's *Composition* from 1922, which is reproduced on the front page of this essay, Hans L.C. Jaffé first points out that Mondrian was fifty years old when he made it and that he had considerable financial problems which forced him to paint flowers in the manner of his naturalistic watercolours of the early 1900s. He continues:

But Mondrian was always careful to separate this breadwinning activity from what he called his "own work": continuing and perfecting neo-plasticism. In 1925, he abandoned this indirect form of aid and, despite poverty and privation, devoted himself exclusively to his own work. An outstanding example of this "own" work, dating from 1922, the year of his fiftieth birthday, is the painting reproduced here, which again marks a step forward from the preceding one. The equilibrium of the planes and colors is reduced still further to the basic elements; over against the three primary colors, which now form a perfect triad, stand the bright white as a non-color and the tautly drawn black lines. The equilibrium is now pre-eminently qualitative, that is, a balance of weights not of dimensions, an equilibrium that from the outset excludes any symmetry. Mondrian proceeded after 1922 along this road, the road of purification, of reducing the plastic means to the elements, always constructing each new masterpiece on the basis of the one before. Although there may seem to be little variation in his work, every painting surpasses its predecessor in purity and mastery.<sup>22</sup>

Besides indicating some of the circumstances under which the painting was produced, Jaffé draws attention to a number of features of the painting, explaining what it is. "Explanation" in this sense is synonymous with "interpretation". This is a common way of using the term "explanation" in writings on art and literature.

*Example 2.* In Sixten Ringbom's book on Kandinsky, *The Sounding Cosmos*, one finds the following commentary on one of Kandinsky's works:

*The Ariel Scene from Faust II* is painted on cardboard in a sketchy impasto technique. In front of the trees on the right stands a man in a robe turned towards the beholder. On the

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<sup>22</sup> Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 138.

left is a configuration which seems to represent reclining figure. In the centre is a white figure slightly turned to the left. The identity of the protagonists not quite clear. Maria Strakosch believes that the figure on the right is Ariel, the figure on the left an elf, and the central figure Faust. In the present author's opinion other interpretations are equally possible. The man in the long robe with its even button could be the magician Faust, who is seen turning his back against the sun; the white figure could then be Ariel. Or else the scene may in fact depict the very first lines of Goethe's Prologue where Faust is still reclining 'auf blumigen Rasen' on the left; he is being roused by an elf while Ariel, standing on the right, begins his monologue. Which of these explanations is the correct one is left to the beholder's judgment; the picture itself seems to be deliberately ambiguous.<sup>23</sup>

This is another illustration of an explanation in the sense of "interpretation". How easily the two words are interchanged is nicely illustrated by the following example (another quotation from Ringbom's book on Kandinsky):

*Example 3.*

If we are to accept Maria Strakosch's statement that *The Pointer* was inspired by Steiner, we must find another interpretation which tallies with the genealogy and the preparatory work. As it happens, such an explanation can indeed be found ...<sup>24</sup>

*Example 4.* In the *Composition* from 1922 (on the front page of this essay) and in many other works by Mondrian right up to the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* from 1942-43 (Fig. 7), some of the bands do not quite reach the edge of the canvas. Commenting on one of these paintings, the *Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue* from 1921 (Fig. 19), Hans L. C. Jaffé writes as follows:

A third characteristic of this picture, and again one that was to last well beyond the second half of 1921, is the fact that some lines break off shortly before reaching the edge

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<sup>23</sup> S. Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Acta Academiae Aboensis, Ser. A, Vol. 38, No. 2, Turku 1970, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

of the painting, whereas the color of the adjoining area carries through to the edge. This effect was also employed by others of the Stijl painters, and the explanation has been given that it represented an unwillingness to divide up the picture into a sort of trellis. In Mondrian's case, it seems to me rather a return, as so often with him, to earlier practices, this time to his late cubist compositions (page 115) and the 1919 lozenges (page 129), in which, especially in the bottom half of the canvas, the structure does not reach the edge, thereby giving the whole a hovering, immaterial quality.<sup>25</sup>

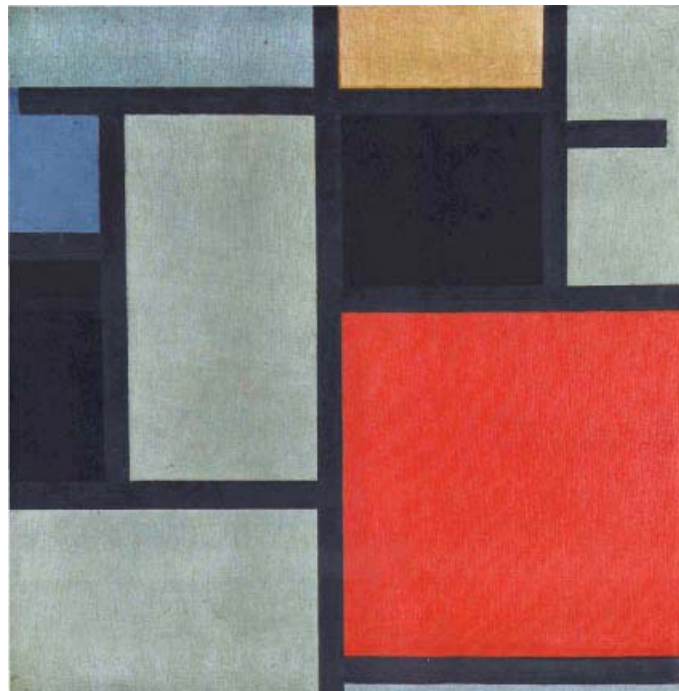


Fig. 19

Piet Mondrian

*Composition with red, yellow, and blue*, 1921

Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 cm

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert M. Rothschild,

Ossining, New York

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<sup>25</sup> Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 134.

This is obviously an attempt at a why-explanation. The question “Why do the lines not reach the edge of the painting ?” is answered first by stating the aim that Mondrian might have had in mind (“an unwillingness to divide up the picture into a sort of trellis”). This proposal is rejected, and another explanation in terms of pictorial intentions is suggested (“giving the whole a hovering, immaterial quality”). In the course of the commentary, reference is also made to parallels (“others of the Stijl painters”) and influences (Cubism). The passage attempts to explain the *point* of one of the features of the painting.



Fig. 20

Pablo Picasso

*Woman washing her feet,*

1946

Pencil, 51 x 38 cm

Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris



*Example 5.* In his book *Pictures as Arguments* (1976), H. Hess makes the following comment on Picasso's drawing *Woman Washing her Feet* (Fig.20):

Why, for instance, is the woman's left foot painted so big? An explanation might point out that "If the foot looks too large for classical concepts, the truth is that it carries a greater mass and therefore looks and feels and is bigger." The whole leg which goes with this foot expresses in its form the same knowledge. Picasso paints something more, not only the visible event, but the physical forces which this event contains. It is thus unavoidable that these additional factors of the event must distort the accepted forms.<sup>26</sup>

This is another why-explanation, an explanation of the point of the largeness of the foot in the picture. The explanation could be characterised as an attempt to elucidate the intention imbedded in the work.

*Example 6.* Explanations in terms of the painter's aims and intentions are very common in art-historical literature. The following illustration is taken from Maurice Basset's *Art of the Twentieth Century*:

According to Mondrian, the only way to make a painting autonomous is to treat it purely for what it is – as a vertical plane. Any suggestion of an illusory treatment of space – whether or not it is in perspective – must go. There is no question of our looking at the painting from various viewpoints. It must not offer any "views". It must be without focus ("afocal"). To achieve this, uniform components are distributed as evenly as possible over the picture surface. That is why at first, so long as he needed the support of an external theme, Mondrian chose subjects such as trees, scaffolding on the sides of buildings, or the sea billowing around a pier. These subjects were particularly suited to two-dimensional treatment, since they consisted of meshlike structures with repeating elements that could be conveyed with the minimum of geometric figures.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> H. Hess, *Pictures as Arguments*, Sussex University Press, 1975, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> M. Basset, *Art of the Twentieth Century*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1976, p. 65.

*Example 7.* In his dissertation *Shaping the Invisible* (1976), Erik Kruskopf tries to explain the rise of non-representational painting. Theoretical ideas similar to those of Kandinsky and Mondrian had been expressed in the beginning of the 19th century, but did not lead then to the development of a new form of art.<sup>28</sup> Why did that development come a century later? Kruskopf sums up his results in the following way:

This investigation has shown that the new language of form could not be created on the basis of theoretical speculation, but that it had to be developed from the starting point of a representational language of form that already existed, and that the separate elements of this earlier language of form were in many respects fully utilisable within the new system. The road to non-representational art consequently passed through the representational. A language of form for the reproduction of a non-visible world had to be based upon forms that existed in the visible world.

As this summary indicates, Kruskopf makes use of “the transformational way” of explaining the development of art (cf. section 1.3 above). Both how-possible explanations and why-notpossible-explanations are hinted at in the quotation.

*Example 8.* The preparatory works for Kandinsky’s *The Pointer* include what looks like a tree behind the central figure, the pointing person. The stem of the tree begins at the top of the figure’s head, as it were emerging from the head. What is the point of this ? Why did Kandinsky include this feature in the preparatory works ? Sixten Ringbom has suggested the following explanation. Kandinsky was influenced by Steiner at the time when he made those works. In a book by Steiner which Kandinsky is known to have studied carefully the following passage occurs:

Dadurch nimmt der Mensch an den „drei Welten“ (der physischen, seelischen und geistigen) teil. Er wurzelt durch physischen Körper, Ätherleib und Seelenleib in der physischen Welt, and blüht durch das Geistselbst, den Lebensgeist und

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<sup>28</sup> In a letter from 1924, the German painter Oskar Schlemmer quotes from Runge 1803: ”Die strenge Regularität sey grade bey den Kunstwerken, die recht aus der Imagination under der Mystik unsrer Seele entspringen, ohne äussernen Stoff oder Geschichte, am allernothwendigsten.“Quoted in G. Berefelt, „Romantisk tradition och nonfigurativt bildspråk“, in *Bild och verklighet*, Stockholm 1972, p. 14.

Geistesmenschen in die geistige Welt hinauf. Der *Stamm* aber, der nach der einen Seite wurzelt, nach der andern blüht, das ist die Seele selbst.<sup>29</sup>

Ringbom comments:

This passage in a book so carefully studied by Kandinsky serves to explain the artist's remarkable preoccupation with the stem of his first conceptions, and it may also account for his choice of this particular woodcut to his Steinerian pupil. We shall later on have repeated occasions to see Kandinsky's remarkable gift of finding concrete expressions for abstract relations and of visualizing purely verbal patterns.<sup>30</sup>

Influence arguments of this kind play an important role in art-historical explanations, and we shall have occasion to discuss such explanations later on (section 2.4 below).

Against the background of the examples, which serve as reminders of what the art-historical reality looks like, we can now turn to some patterns of explanation which have been particularly attended to in recent philosophy of science.

## **2.2. The deductive-nomological pattern**

It has been a widely held doctrine in recent analytic philosophy that all explanations in all scientific disciplines (the natural sciences as well as the sciences of man) have the same basic form. To explain an event means to show that it was to be expected in the light of the circumstances and preceding events. The doctrine is associated with the names of Karl Popper and Carl G. Hempel in particular. Popper has formulated the idea in the following way: "To give a causal explanation of an event means to deduce a statement

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<sup>29</sup> R. Steiner, *Theosophie: Einführung in übersinnliche Welterkenntnis und Menschenbestimmung*, 2nd ed., Leipzig 1908, p. 43; quoted in Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

which describes it, using as premises of the deduction one or more universal laws, together with certain singular statements, the initial conditions.”<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Hempel has suggested that the scientific explanation of an event consists of

- (1) a set of statements asserting the occurrence of certain events  $C_1, \dots, C_n$  at certain times and places,
- (2) a set of universal hypotheses, such that
  - (a) the statements of both groups are reasonable well confirmed by empirical evidence,
  - (b) from the two groups of statements the sentence asserting the occurrence of the event  $E$  can be logically deduced.<sup>32</sup>

The Hempel - Popper model is attractive in its simplicity; and for those who have qualms about the scientific respectability of the social sciences and the humanities, it might have the further advantage of reassuring us that those disciplines are, after all, scientific in their explanatory endeavours, in spite of appearances to the contrary. The examples which fit the deductive-nomological model best are those which are taken from natural sciences like astronomy, where particular events can be explained and predicted with reference to general laws. If for instance the historical disciplines at least implicitly make use of similar laws, then their scientific status would seem to be justified at least as far as the explanatory aspect is concerned.

A further asset of the deductive-nomological model is that it makes it clear why it is rational to expect certain events under certain circumstances. If the tie between the statements describing the initial conditions and the statements of general laws on the one hand and the sentence describing the event in question on the other hand is a deductive logical tie, then it is undeniably rational to expect the event given the initial conditions

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<sup>31</sup> K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London 1959, p. 59. The German version *Die Logik der Forschung* appeared in 1934.

<sup>32</sup> C. G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", in P. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, The nFree Press, New York 1959, p. 345. First published in *The Journal of Philosophy* in 1942.

and the laws. A valid deductive argument is precisely one where the conclusion cannot be denied if the premisses are true.

The Popper-Hempel model of explanation has aroused a considerable amount of discussion.<sup>33</sup> Out of the many objections which have been raised against it, the following one seems to me to be particularly important. The model identifies explanation with rational expectation. But this does not seem to be enough. If the barometer goes down considerably, it is rational to expect bad weather. But the point of an explanation is not merely to tell that something is to be expected; it is to tell why it is to be expected. To have reasons to expect something is not the same as understanding it. It seems, then, that the deductive-nomological model leaves out something that is essential to all explanations with reference to general laws. If this observation is correct, then the model cannot be a correct description of, for instance, explanations in meteorology and other natural sciences.<sup>34</sup>

To attempt to apply the model to art-historical writings does not seem very fruitful. It cannot be the function of art-historical explanations to predict the development of art with reference to general laws of some kind, or, what amounts to the same, to explain *ex post facto* why that which happened was bound to happen in the light of the circumstances and some general laws of art history or psychology or what not. As Karl-Otto Apel puts it: "Should we in fact believe that the efforts of philologists, historians and cultural anthropologists to methodically understand, i.e. interpret, the intentional objects of human goals and beliefs may, at least within the frame of teleological explanations, have only the function of answering the question why necessarily or probably, i.e.

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. the survey in W. Stegmüller, *Probleme und Resultate der Wissenschaftstheorie, I*, Springer Verlag, Berlin 1969. Stegmüller's standpoint is very close to that of Hempel.

<sup>34</sup> M. Friedmann, "explanation and Scientific Understanding", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXI, 1974, pp. 5-19. Cf. Stegmüller, *op.cit.*, p. 761, and K.-O. Apel, *Causal Explanation, Motivational Explanation, and Hermeneutical Understanding (Remarks on the Recent Stage of the Explanation-Understanding Controversy)*, mimeo., Autumn 1975, p. 23. A shorter version of this paper has been published with the same title in G. Ryle, ed., *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, Oriel Press, London 1977, pp. 161-176.

according to causal laws or at least statistical regularities, some actions were or even are to come about?”<sup>35</sup>

Even if we disregard the first three examples of the foregoing section, in which explanation is the same as an interpretation, it seems that the deductive-nomological model does not hit the nail on the head as far as our examples are concerned. The why-explanations of Examples 4 - 6 do not seem to stand in need of being supplemented with general laws in order to make them adequate as art-historical explanations. Attempts to explain the point of a feature in a work of art (like Picasso's painting the left foot so large, or Mondrian's letting some of the black stripes stop a bit before the edge of the painting) do not seem to require any references to general laws of any kind. Similarly, the explanation in Example 6 of why Mondrian selected certain motives in preference to others and why he gave up even the last traces of illusionism to be found in Cubist paintings does not seem to require any filling-in in order to be an adequate art-historical explanation. Given Mondrian's general aims and his historical situation, his choices seem understandable. Hempel's proposal that the explanations that are common in historical texts are incomplete – “explanation sketches” rather than “full-fledged explanations” – does not seem convincing.<sup>36</sup> An alternative account of the nature of scientific explanation would therefore be welcome.

A further reason why an alternative account would be welcome is the step-motherly treatment that Hempel and his fellows and followers give to such phenomena as meanings, aims, intentions, and actions. In the article from 1942, from which we quoted above, Hempel brushes the problem of meaning aside as being of no theoretical interest, considering understanding as a purely heuristic device in the service of scientific explanation.<sup>37</sup> This, I suggest, is to put the cart before the horse.

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<sup>35</sup> K.-O. Apel, *Causal Explanation ...*, mimeo., 1975, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> C. G. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History”, in P. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, p. 351.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 352-353.

Towards the end of the 1950s, a number of philosophers like Anscombe, Dray, Hampshire, Skjervheim and Winch began to articulate a critique of the current philosophical approaches to social phenomena like meaning, intention and action.<sup>38</sup> In the course of those critical activities, an alternative to the deductive-nomological model of explanation was proposed by William H. Dray.

### 2.3. The intentionalist pattern

When we want to explain a natural event, we can do so by seeing it as the effect of a combination of preceding events, which are the causes of the event. Similarly, when we want to explain a feature of a human work or an action, we can do so by seeing it as the result of certain reasons. Richard Wollheim notices in his lecture “On Drawing an Object” that the word “contour” is used both to refer to the lines in a drawing and to the edges of perceived objects, and comments “Contour is not in this context a homonym. There is a reason for this double usage, and the reason surely is this: that, though the contours in a drawing aren’t themselves edges, when we look at a drawing as a representation we see the contours as edges.”<sup>39</sup> Wollheim refers to this as an “explanation” of the ambiguity of the word. Similarly, Picasso’s drawing of the large foot and Mondrian’s letting the black stripes stop shortly before the edges of the paintings can be explained by indicating the reasons that the painters might have had for making their pictures in the ways they did. Explanations of this kind clarify *the point* of something: features of works, or actions, or games, or rules and institutions. “The game”, as Wittgenstein remarked, “has not only rules but also a point.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1957; W. H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1957; S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, Chatto and Windus, London 1959; H. Skjervheim, *Objectivism and the Study of Man*, Universitetsforlaget, oslo 1959, reprinted in *Inquiry* 1974; P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1958.

<sup>39</sup> R. Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind*, Allen Lane, London 1973, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> “Das Spiel, möchte man sagen, hat nicht nur Regeln, sondern auch einen Witz.“ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1953, § 564. Cf. §§ 62, 142, 545, 567, and pp. 179-180.

When we fail to understand the point of an historical actor's doings, we can illuminate them by trying to reconstruct the actor's calculation of which means he should use to reach the goal he had chosen in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself, as Dray has emphasized.<sup>41</sup> Explanations of this kind might be called "rational explanations" (Dray), since they make actions intelligible in the light of the actors' reasons, rationale, for performing their actions. Explanations of this type are reconstructions in the sense that often the means-end calculations are not made consciously by the actors themselves; they are made more or less intuitively.<sup>42</sup>

The phrase "the circumstances in which the actor found himself" may be interpreted in two ways. It may be taken to refer to the situation as the actor himself saw it, or it may be taken to refer to the situation as we, the scientific observers, see it. In a rational explanation, the actor's point of view is adopted. It is the actor's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs, which is relevant here, to use a formulation from Quentin Skinner once more (cf. section 1.2 *supra*).

According to the defenders of the deductive-nomological pattern of explanation, a rational explanation of the kind indicated here is at most a sketch of something that could be turned into a full-fledged scientific explanation if the presupposed general laws were formulated and confirmed by further research. In the intentionalist pattern, as I prefer to call the kind of explanation that Dray began to investigate, the general laws are replaced by action principles. A rational explanation aims at showing that the actor had good reasons for doing what he did. But, as Dray points out, if *y* is a good reason for *A* to do *x*, then *y* is also a good reason for doing *x* for all other actors who are similar to *A* in the relevant aspects and who find themselves in sufficiently similar situations. When one refers to *y* as a good reason for doing *x*, then one makes use of a universal principle of action of the type "When one is in a situation of type  $C_1 \dots C_n$ , then *x* is the right thing to do".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> W. H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History*, p. 122

<sup>42</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>43</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 132.



The phrase “the right thing to do” contains an ambiguity which is not clarified sufficiently in Dray’s own presentation of the intentionalist pattern of explanation. That x is the right thing to do might mean that the actor himself considered x to be the right thing to do, or it might mean that we, the observers, find it the right thing to do. Since Dray emphasizes that rational explanations adopt the actor’s point of view, one should expect that he would opt for the first of these interpretations of the phrase “the right thing to do”. But he maintains, in fact, that there is an element of appraisal in such explanations: “what we want to know when we ask to have the action explained is in what way it was appropriate.”<sup>44</sup>

Often, the actor’s and the spectator’s evaluation of the means that are suitable for reaching a given goal will coincide, but sometimes they will not do so. In view of this, it seems necessary to distinguish between two directions in which Dray’s model of action explanation can be interpreted, one adopting the actor’s point of view and one adopting the observer’s point of view. I shall refer to these interpretations as the descriptive and the normative interpretation.

The intentionalist pattern, interpreted in the descriptive direction, can be set out schematically as follows:

- (1) The person P had the aim A in the situation S.
- (2) P considered that M was a good (adequate, the best, the only) means for reaching A in S.

Therefore,

- (3) P used M in S.

The intentionalist pattern, interpreted in the normative direction, can be set out schematically as follows:

- (1) P had the aim A in S.

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<sup>44</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 124.

(2) M was a good (adequate, the best, the only) means for reaching A in S.

Therefore,

(3) P used M in S.

When Hempel tried to show that the intentionalist pattern is reducible to the deductive-nomological pattern, he chose the normative interpretation of Dray's version of the pattern. Hempel sums up Dray's model in the following way:

A was in a situation of type C.

In a situation of type C, X is the right thing to do.

Therefore, A did X.

But in order for this argument to be valid, it must be supplemented with another premiss, as Hempel points out. If the phrase "X was the right thing to do" is taken to mean "It was rational to do X", then A did X only on the assumption that he as a matter of fact acted rationally. Consequently, Hempel proposes the following reconstruction of the intentionalist pattern:

A was in a situation of type C.

A was a rational actor.

In a situation of type C, all rational actors do X.

Therefore, A did X.

Hempel maintains that the third premise – "In a situation of type C, all rational actors do X" – is a statement of an empirical law. And so we would be back at the deductive-nomological pattern.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> C. G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, The Free Press, New York 1965, pp. 469-471. "The Function of General Laws in History" (1942) is also reprinted in that volume.

But is it possible to interpret the third premise as an empirical generalization ? If the statement is empirical, it must be possible to falsify it. But it does not seem possible to falsify the statement “In a situation of type C, all rational actors do X” in the way in which empirical statements are falsified, viz. by instancing counter-examples. If A wants to go from Stockholm to Paris in the quickest way, and the quickest way of getting from Stockholm to Paris is to take the plane, and if A takes the train instead, we should have to say that he was irrational or that he had changed his mind, or find some other way of explaining his action. But we would not let such incidents count as counter-instances to the rationality principle that is expressed by the third premise in the argument above.<sup>46</sup> I conclude that Hempel’s attempt to reduce the intentionalist pattern to the deductive-nomological one is abortive. What is the logical status of the third premise, if it is not an empirical generalization ? We shall return to that question shortly in connection with another attempt to reduce the intentionalist pattern to the deductive-nomological model.

The normative version of Dray’s model does not seem directly relevant for the historical disciplines (*pace* Dray). In history we are concerned to explain the doings and works of people against the background of their own beliefs and norms etc. Whether we consider a certain pictorial device as an adequate means for reaching a certain aesthetic goal or not is not relevant if we want to understand why a certain painter chose that means. (Consider examples 4 - 6 above.) I conclude that it is the descriptive version of the model which is relevant for our present purposes.

Von Wright’s defense of the intentionalist pattern of explanation in his book *Explanation and Understanding* from 1971 may be characterized as a defense of the descriptive direction of interpretation of the intentionalist pattern. Von Wright begins with the

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Dray’s reply to Hempel’s objection: “Such statements as to what a rational agent would or would not do, it might be said, simply elucidate the notion of a rational action. They are expressions of the criteria we apply to an agent in calling him rational, rather than reports of our discoveries as to what people, already classified as rational, in fact do.” W. H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1964, p. 13.

following preliminary statement of the pattern, which he refers to as a “practical inference” or a “practical syllogism”:

A intends to bring about p.

A considers that he cannot bring about p unless he does a. Therefore A sets himself to do a.<sup>47</sup>

In order to take care of some ways in which A might fail to do a although he had intended to do a, the preliminary statement of the schema is eventually replaced with the following one:

From now on A intends to bring about p at time t.

From now on A considers that, unless he does a no later than at time t', he cannot bring about p at time t.

Therefore, no later than when he thinks time t' has arrived, A sets himself to do a, unless he forgets about the time or is prevented.<sup>48</sup>

In 1971, von Wright maintained that this schema “provides the sciences of man with something long missing from their methodology: an explanation model in its own right which is a definite alternative to the subsumption-theoretic covering law model”, *i.e.* what I have called the deductive-nomological pattern of explanation. “Broadly speaking” (he went on), “what the subsumption-theoretic model is to causal explanation and explanation in the natural sciences, the practical syllogism is to teleological explanation and explanation in history and the social sciences.”<sup>49</sup> Commenting on some of the criticism that his book has provoked, von Wright wrote some years later that he had tended to exaggerate the role of the practical syllogism – or intentionalist explanation, as he now prefers to call it – when writing *Explanation and Understanding*: “I did not see then, as I think I do now, the existence of other, different explanatory patterns –

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<sup>47</sup> G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, Cornell University Press 1971, p. 30.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

particularly for explaining actions in a social setting.”<sup>50</sup> The claim is now that the intentionalist pattern is “*pivotal* in the sense that the other explanatory mechanisms all seem to revolve round this schema as their core.”<sup>51</sup>

The claim that the intentionalist pattern hits upon something which is essential to explanations. in the human sciences seems immediately convincing e.g, in the light of the examples collected in the beginning of this chapter. Example 6, for instance, seems tailor-made to illustrate the intentionalist pattern in the preliminary version quoted at the top of the foregoing page. With little reformulation, it can be fitted into the schema:

Mondrian intended to bring about the autonomy of painting.

Mondrian considered that he could not bring about the autonomy of painting unless he dispensed with any suggestion of an illusory treatment of space etc.

Therefore Mondrian set himself to do so.

Example 4 and Example 5 can also be fitted into the schema without any obvious difficulties. Von Wright’s schema demands that the actor consider the means necessary to bring about the desired aim, which might seem to be a too stringent condition. In Dray’s version, the demand is the looser one that the actor should consider the chosen means to be adequate for reaching the aim. The difference between von Wright’s and Dray’s versions is, however, only apparent. For “what is necessary is usually not that just one definite action be performed, but that one out of several is chosen. The practical necessity is then a *disjunctive* action.”<sup>52</sup> With this proviso, von Wright’s schema would seem to clarify one type of explanation that is common also in the history of art. In order to cover the art-historical material, the basic schema will, however, have to be elaborated in various ways. The interplay between aims and means in creative activities will have to be considered, and the nature of the kind of intentions that are relevant in art-historical contexts will have to be clarified. To this we shall return in the last chapter of this essay.

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<sup>50</sup> G. H. von Wright, “Replies”, in J. Manninen and R. Tuomela, eds., *Essays on Explanation and Understanding. Studies in the Foundations of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Synthese Library, Vol. 72, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht 1976, p. 413. Cf. pp. 374, 394-395.

<sup>51</sup> von Wright, “Replies”, p. 413. Cf. p. 394.

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 396. Cf. p. 418.

It should also be clear by now that the intentionalist pattern cannot accommodate all the things that are referred to as “explanations” in art-historical contexts. Explanations in the sense of “interpretations”, like those in examples 1 - 3, fall outside the scope of this pattern, and so do the explanations hinted at in Example 7 (how-possible- and why-notpossible-explanations). The kind of explanation illustrated by Example 8, on the other hand, can be shown to rest on the intentionalist pattern, as I shall show in section 2.4 below.

Although the intentionalist pattern seems to fit at least one type of explanation to be found in the human sciences fairly well, and certainly much better than the deductive-nomological pattern seems to do, a number of critics have drawn attention to various theoretical difficulties which the intentionalist pattern gives rise to. We have already considered Hempel’s attempt to reduce Dray’s version of the intentionalist pattern (in one of its interpretations) to the deductive-nomological pattern. Raimo Tuomela has made a similar attempt to show that von Wright’s version of the intentionalist pattern should be reduced to the deductive-nomological pattern.

Tuomela starts from the more elaborate version of von Wright’s model quoted above:

- (P1) From now on A intends to bring about X at time t.
- (P2) From now on A considers that unless he does Y no later than at time t', he cannot bring about X at time t.
- (C) Therefore, no later than when he thinks time t' has arrived, A sets himself to do Y, unless he forgets about time or is prevented.

This pattern ought to be replaced with the following one, according to Tuomela:

- (P1) From now on A intends to bring about X at time t.
- (P2) From now on A considers that unless he does Y no later than at time t', he cannot bring about X at time t.

(P3) “Normal conditions” obtain between now and t'.

(L) For any agent A, intention X, action Y, and time t, if A from now on intends to realize X at t and considers the doing of Y no later than t' necessary for this, and if “normal conditions” obtain between now and t', then A will do Y not later than when he thinks the time t' has arrived.

(C) No later than he thinks time t' has arrived A does Y.<sup>53</sup>

Tuomela's third premise (P3) takes care of the cases which von Wright refers to in the conclusion: “unless he forgets about time or is prevented”, and a number of similar cases (e.g. that A had no other intention which he ranked higher than doing X). This is obviously an improvement upon the original version of the intentionalist pattern. The improvement which Tuomela considers to be most interesting is, however, the addition of premise L. L is not an empirical statement which can be refuted by citing counterinstances; any suggested counterinstances will be explained by showing that some of the normal conditions are not fulfilled. (Cf. the discussion of Hempel above.) The statement L is non-contingent and therefore “not very interesting from the point of view of the empirical explanation of action”, as Tuomela points out.<sup>54</sup>

The reason for the suggested improvement is, then, not the pragmatical one of improving on existing explanations in the human sciences or to aid practising human scientists in getting a better understanding of what they are doing when they explain. The reason is logical. Only if a lawlike premise like L is added to the intentionalist pattern will it be logically conclusive, according to some critics.

Now if a statement like L is not empirical, what is its logical status ? Dray looked upon the general principles presupposed in intentionalist explanations as statements which elucidate the notion of rational action. It would belong, then, to our concept of rational action that if an agent intends to reach a certain goal and if he considers that the only way

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<sup>53</sup> R. Tuomela, *Human Action and its Explanation*, Reports from the Institute of Philosophy, University of Helsinki, No. 2, 1974, pp. 18-23.

<sup>54</sup> Tuomela, *op. cit.*, p.23.

(etc.) of reaching that goal is by using a certain means, then he will use that means; otherwise he proves his irrationality.<sup>55</sup>

It does, however, seem misleading to emphasize the notion of rationality in the way that Dray did. An alternative account of why the intentionalist pattern is logically conclusive could point to the fact that our concepts of intention and action are such that if an agent really has an intention to do x, then he will do x unless he is prevented or changes his mind etc.<sup>56</sup> If, for instance, an agent professes to have a certain intention and yet fails to do what he says he intends to do when the appropriate occasion arises, then we would have to say that his intention was not sincere – it was an idle wish, for instance – unless we can find excusing circumstances which explain why he failed to carry out his intention. The answer to the question about the logical status of the statement L is, then, that it is an analytic truth: the truth of the statement depends upon the connections between the key concepts in it, the concept of intention and the concept of action. In Wittgenstein's terminology, it is a grammatical sentence.<sup>57</sup>

Tuomela and Apel do, however, not regard L as purely analytic. According to Apel, the statement L hovers somewhere between the analytical and the empirical; he talks of “a quasi-analytical universal quasi-law of rational action” and of “a contingent, non-universal regularity of behavior that can serve as a quasi-law concerning socio-cultural habits of action.”<sup>58</sup> He also suggests that we have to do here with “an ideal type of human ‘competence’ (to be compared with Chomsky's concept of ‘grammatical competence’).”<sup>59</sup> It is not easy to follow Apel here. It does not seem plausible to construe L as a competence statement in the sense of a statement about some skill that a person must have in order to be able to perform actions of a specified kind. Until clear

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. the quotation from Dray in note 46 above.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. the discussion of the so-called Logical Connection Argument in von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, pp. 107-118.

<sup>57</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, e.g. §§ 251 and 295.

<sup>58</sup> K.-O. Apel, “Causal Explanation, Motivational Explanation, and Hermeneutical Understanding. (Remarks on the Recent Stage of the Explanation-Understanding Controversy)”, in G. Ryle, ed., *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, Oriel Press, London 1977, p. 166.

<sup>59</sup> *Loc. cit.*



indications to the contrary have been produced, I shall continue to consider L analytically true.

Now if L is analytically true, then the intentionalist pattern can be regarded as logically binding; and from a non-logical point of view, it does not matter very much which of the versions of the intentionalist pattern we settle for. The binding force of the intentionalist pattern rests, then, if my argument is on the right track, on a conceptual tie, in contrast to the bindingness of the deductive-nomological pattern which rests on the deductive tie between the premisses and conclusion of explanatory arguments. If, for logical reasons, someone wants to maintain that also intentional explanatory arguments ought to be written out in the form of deductive arguments, I have no objection. "Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing how it is."<sup>60</sup>

The view that a statement like L is not purely analytic but somehow in-between the analytic and the empirical is one of the reasons why Apel considers that von Wright's claim that the intentionalist pattern is a definite alternative to the deductive-nomological pattern has been refuted by his critics:

For, if teleological explanation is to fulfill the function of a theoretical explanatory argument, then it must fulfill, it seems, at least the two following requirements of a subsumption-theoretic causal explanation: First, it must conceive of reasons as effective reasons, i.e. as causes; secondly, it must insert a quasi-law into the inference schema, be it a quasi-analytical universal quasi-law of rational action, be it a contingent, non-universal regularity of behaviour that can serve as a quasi-law concerning socio-cultural habits of action.<sup>61</sup>

I do not think that Apel draws the right conclusions here from the material at hand. By a "theoretical explanatory argument" he understands an explanation which answers the question why something was to be expected. But, as he himself points out, such why-

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<sup>60</sup> "Sage, was du willst, solange dich das nicht verhindert, zu sehen, wie es sich verhält." L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 79.

<sup>61</sup> Apel, "Causal Explanation ...", *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, p. 166.

questions are not the typical ones in the human sciences. In the human sciences, one typically tries to illuminate what something is, for instance what a person did by referring to his reasons for doing what he did. Such explanations are, as we have seen, common in the history of art, for instance. But according to Apel, such clarificatory efforts should not be called “explanations” at all, for they do not provide answers to the question why the action (etc.) was to be expected.<sup>62</sup> Attempts like that of von Wright to demonstrate that the human sciences have their own explanatory patterns which differ from those typically used in the natural sciences are (Apel suggests) an indication of a scientific bent of mind.<sup>63</sup> One tries to show that the human studies are scientific by trying to find an equivalent to the explanatory pattern considered to be characteristic of the natural sciences. But in the light of the way in which the term “explanation” is used in such a human science as the history of art (see again Examples 1 - 8 above), this observation does not seem to hit the mark. One could, with more justice, retort that Apel’s interpretation of “explanation” as “theoretical argument which answers the question ‘Why was x to be expected?’” reflects an undue influence from the philosophy of the natural sciences. If this observation contains a grain of truth, it does not seem necessary to elaborate on the other objection which Apel refers to in the quotation on the foregoing page (that the reasons must be conceived as effective reasons). The motive for suggesting this “improvement” on the intentionalist pattern is, again, not the pragmatical one of attempting to account in an adequate way for the explanations that human scientists actually produce (or ought to produce). The motives are rather of a metaphysical or ontological kind (related to the problems about the interaction of mind and body, for instance).

Contrary to Apel, I conclude, then, that the discussion has not shown that the intentionalist pattern of explanation does not have a crucial role in the human sciences. The various logical and metaphysical arguments adduced by the defenders of the deductive-nomological pattern do not affect the substantial point that intentionalist explanations are frequent and central in the writings of human scientists.

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<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>63</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.167ff.

## 2.4. Influence explanations

von Wright claims that the intentionalist pattern of explanation is “pivotal in the sense that the other explanatory mechanisms all seem to revolve round this schema as their core.”<sup>64</sup> To substantiate the claim, a good many case-studies and specialized investigations of different kinds of explanations in the various human sciences will be needed. In this section, we shall begin the work on those lines by considering one type of explanation which is common in the history of art and literature as well as in the history of ideas: influence explanations. Von Wright’s claim may be somewhat exaggerated; but as far as this particular type of explanation is concerned, it does seem to hold good.

When Mondrian exhibited some pictures in the 29th Salon des Indépendants in Paris in 1913, Guillaume Apollinaire made the following comment in a review published in the journal *Montjoie* on March 18, 1913:

The very abstract cubism of Mondrian – he is Dutch (cubism, as we know, has made its entrance into the Amsterdam museum; while here the young painters are jeered, there the works of Georges Braque, Picasso, etc., are exhibited with Rembrandts !), now Mondrian, offspring of cubism, does not imitate the cubists. He seems to have been particularly influenced by Picasso, but his personality remains entirely his own. His trees and his portrait of a woman allow a sensitive intellectualism. His cubism has taken a different path from the one that Braque and Picasso seems to be taking, with their interesting present explorations.<sup>65</sup>

Those are perceptive comments. “Sensitive intellectualism” is an apt summary of Mondrian’s character, as it is presented in his works.

Pointing out that Mondrian’s pictures round 1913 show influence from the Cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso contributes to explain why the pictures look the way they do. As Göran Hermerén puts it in his book on influence in art and literature:

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<sup>64</sup> G. H. von Wright, “Replies”, *Essays on Explanation and Understanding*, p. 413.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 114.

If the relation of explanation is defined as a relation between a statement describing a fact (event, action, process, regularity) and a statement answering the question: “Why is this object like this?” or “Why did this event (etc.) take place at the time and in the way it did?”, then it is obvious that influence statements provide us with explanations; they indicate *why* works of art have certain definite properties, and they provide us with causal explanations, since they indicate the cause or at least a cause of the fact that the works of art in question have these properties.<sup>66</sup>

But it should also be obvious that an influence explanation taken in isolation can never be a complete explanation of why a certain work of art has the properties it has. For we can always go on to ask, Why was the painter influenced in the way he was? Hans L.C. Jaffé cites the quotation from Apollinaire on Mondrian in the course of a commentary on Mondrian’s *Composition No. 6*, painted in 1914, and goes on to relate the Cubist influence to Mondrian’s aims:

He brought cubism, which he had first encountered in its analytical phase in 1911, consistently further, beyond its own boundaries. For the “abstraction” that Apollinaire stresses in speaking of Mondrian’s work is not merely an abstraction of the rhythmic pattern from the factual form linked to the thing-value of the object. This abstraction signifies above all, in the sense of Cézanne, an exposition of the structural laws that govern the forms of objects. It is an attempt to approach the objectivity of the precise language of a mathematical formula.<sup>67</sup>

As in his other comments on Mondrian’s paintings, Jaffé here paraphrases and summarizes the intentions of Mondrian. Similar statements can be found in Mondrian’s own published papers.

If we let the term “intention” or “aim” stand for the conscious, verbalized intentions and aims of the artist as well as for those of his aims and intentions which he did not consciously formulate for himself or for others, we can sum up the situation by saying that influences can be explained by relating them to aims and intentions. The logic of

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<sup>66</sup> G. Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature*, Princeton University Press 1975, pp. 122-123.

<sup>67</sup> Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 114.

influence explanations may then be clarified by setting them out as a variant on the intentionalist pattern:

The person P had the aim A.

P sought for means M for reaching A.

P came across X which he considered worth trying as a means for reaching A.

Therefore, P used X.

Hermerén is not unaware of the desirability to supplement influence explanations with reference to the artist's needs. Influence explanations can be "part of explanations", he writes in one place.<sup>68</sup> In another place he writes that the explanation of why someone was influenced can be supplemented with another explanation which refers to the dispositions of the artist: "he was open to new ideas", "if he was not open to new ideas, he might very well see a work without being influenced by it."<sup>69</sup> This is, however, rather vague. What does it mean to be open to new ideas? Mondrian was not open to new ideas indiscriminately. He had a general programme, to begin with in the form of an idea, an urge, a sense of direction, later on more precisely formulated in words and works, and therefore he needed certain things and not other things. If we want to understand the selections that Mondrian made from the welter of possible influences which surrounded him in Paris in 1911 - 1914, we must relate them to his aims – his formulated aims, as e.g. Jaffé does, or his unconscious aims and needs, as e.g. Peter Gay does in his chapter on Mondrian in *Art and Act*.<sup>70</sup>

The vagueness on this point in Hermerén's generally very lucid monograph does not seem to be accidental. The explanation (I suggest) is his attachment to the deductive-nomological pattern of explanation, which makes it hard for him to see the relevance of intentions for understanding actions and works and which generally seems to act as a

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<sup>68</sup> Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature*, p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp.124-125.

<sup>70</sup> Jaffé, *Mondrian, passim*; P. Gay, *Art and Act. On Causes in History –Manet, Gropius, Mondrian*, Harper & Row, New York 1976, pp. 175-226.

barrier against the writings of intentionalists like von Wright. Also he seems to conceive of intentions as conscious intentions, which naturally leads to the standpoint that consideration of intentions might not be relevant for influence explanations.<sup>71</sup>

It seems reasonable to suppose that when A is influenced by B, then normally there is some reason for this. The reasons should be sought in the direction of the aims and needs of A. Mondrian, for instance, was aware of certain needs. In a letter to the Dutch critic Israel Querido in the summer of 1909, he wrote: “For the present at least, I shall restrict my work to the customary world of the sense, since that is the world in which we still live. But nevertheless art can already provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm.” Art is “the path of ascension; away from matter.”<sup>72</sup> The letter indicates that he wanted to do something which he could not yet achieve as a painter. Therefore, he continued the search for more adequate means to reach the spiritual in art, and let himself be influenced by Theosophists and younger painters like Picasso who (he felt) could give him something of value. When Mondrian let himself be influenced by Picasso, he was clearly aware of what was going on. In a letter from Paris in 1914, he wrote: “I am not ashamed to speak of this influence, since it is far better to keep improving one’s art than to remain satisfied with one’s imperfections, and think oneself so original.” “I am sure I am completely different from Picasso, as people are generally saying.”<sup>73</sup>

Commenting on another source of influence, the painter Bart van der Leek, Mondrian wrote in 1932: “... van der Leek, who, though still figurative, painted in compact planes of pure colour. My more or less Cubist technique – in consequence still more or less

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<sup>71</sup> See e.g. p. 122 of *Influence in Art and Literature*, where the author talks of “a rather elementary and fundamental requirement of an explanation: the explanatory hypothesis can be a premise of a deductive or an inductive inference, where the conclusion is a statement describing that which is to be explained.” The contributions of von Wright are not referred to in Hermerén’s book. For indications that intentions are identified with awareness, see *Influence in Art and Literature*, pp. 96 and 100.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Gay, *Art and Act*, p. 175. The letter has been published in J. Joosten, ed., *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks. 1912-1914*, 1969.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Gay, *Art and Act*, p. 175. The letter, addressed to H. P. Bremmer, has been published in J. Joosten, ed., “Documentatie over Mondrian (1)”, *Museumsjournaal*, XIII, 4 (1968), p. 213.

picturesque – underwent the influence of his exact technique.”<sup>74</sup> The pattern is the same as in the previous case. Mondrian had certain artistic aims, and therefore certain needs; he felt that some of the means used by another painter could be useful for his own purposes, in spite of possible differences of ultimate aims. The influence becomes understandable when it is related to the aims and needs of the painter.

Michel Seuphor has expressed his surprise over the fact that Mondrian let himself be influenced by van der Leek:

I have never understood how Van der Leek could have had any influence whatever on Mondrian at that particular moment. Van der Leek's paintings are cold and superficial; their style suggests chromos. There is something pitilessly hard in the works of Van der Leek of this period. Mondrian was, on the contrary, all warmth and inwardness. He had long sought inwardness in his art. Extremely sensitive, he strove to reconcile opposites. His vision of the world was entirely spiritual. That of Van der Leek was rather anecdotic and trivial.<sup>75</sup>

But Seuphor does not deny that the influence from van der Leek actually has taken place. He quotes Mondrian's statement to that effect, and concludes: “So it was Van der Leek who influenced Mondrian to paint in flat surfaces, and to use rectangular planes of pure color.” Van der Leek's and Mondrian's pictures from around 1917 are indeed similar in some respects, as e.g. Fig. 21 –23 demonstrate, and there seems to be no reason to contest the statement that it was from van der Leek that Mondrian first learned to paint in flat surfaces and to use rectangular planes of pure color. It was van der Leek who introduced the use of primary colours into the *De Stijl* environment (cf. Fig. 21). Mondrian's self-imposed restriction to the primary colours did not begin until 1921. The influence, it may be added, went in both directions. For some years, the two painters kept learning from each other.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Mondrian in the final issue of *De Stijl*, 1932. Quoted here from P. Overy, *De Stijl*, studio vista/dutton pictureback, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., New York 1969, p. 72.

<sup>75</sup> M. Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian .Life and Work*, Abrams, New York 1956, pp. 129-130.

<sup>76</sup> F. Elgar, *Mondrian*, p. 82.

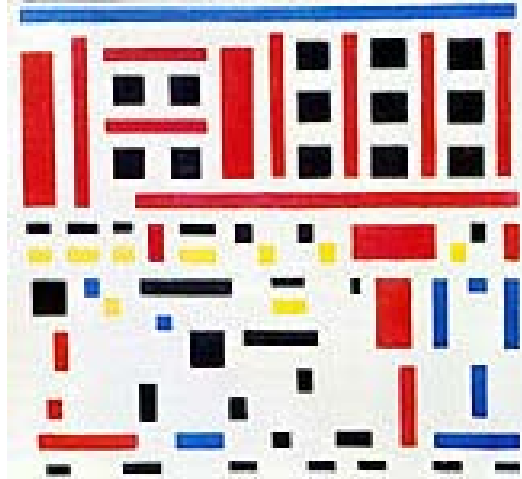


Fig. 21

Bart van der Leck, *Geometrical composition No. 2*, 1917.

Oil on canvas, 94 x 100 cm.

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

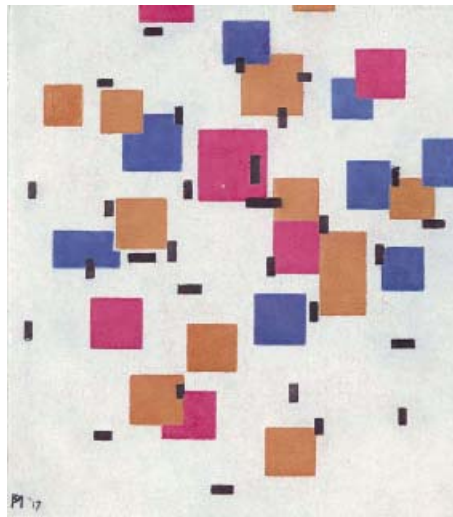


Fig. 22

Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Colour A*, 1917.

Oil on canvas, 50 x 44 cm.

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



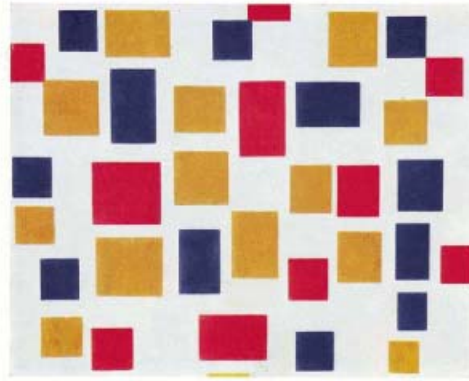


Fig. 23

Piet Mondrian, *Composition with colour planes*, ca. 1917

Gouache, 47 x 59.3 cm

Collection Mr. and Mrs. B. H. Friedman, New York

Influence explanations, like other explanations, stand in the service of understanding. It has been pointed out that influence studies may be worthwhile since they may illuminate the nature of creative processes and the nature of culture contact, and because they may illuminate the respects in which an artist is original, and because they may contribute to the reception histories of works of art.<sup>77</sup> The prime motive for paying attention to influences must, however, be that this may increase our understanding of the works themselves. Influence explanations, like other intentional explanations, should help us to understand *what* a work of art is and what it is not. To understand what a work of art is we have to familiarize ourselves with the pictorial and other intentions that the painter had and the needs that his aims gave rise to, as well as the resources which he had at hand.

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<sup>77</sup> Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature*, p. 321,

If my argument in this section is on the right track, then influence explanations are essentially incomplete. That this is so comes out also in Hermerén's treatment of influence arguments in the history of art and literature. According to Hermerén, "if a visual or literary work of art X influenced the creation of the work of art Y, and if Y was created by the artist or poet B, then B's contact with X was a necessary condition, and *a part of* a sufficient condition, for the creation of Y." The phrase which I have underlined is explained in the following way: that a is a part of a sufficient condition for b means that a is a sufficient condition for b in the presence or absence of c, where c can be replaced with names or descriptions of trivial or nontrivial standing conditions "like the existence of particular economic, political, or social structures at the time when a occurred or was performed."<sup>78</sup> I submit that the most important type of replacement of c is with descriptions of intentions (aims and needs). In other words, influence explanations always presuppose explanations of the intentional pattern. Aims and needs, in their turn, depend upon structures and practices of various kinds, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## 2.5. Summary

Philosophical discussions of explanations after World War II have been dominated by the deductive-nomological model, according to which explanations are answers to questions like "Why was x to be expected?" Such why-questions should be answered by citing appropriate general laws and by descriptions of the circumstances, according to the defenders of this model. Our objection to the model is that it does not fit the art-historical material very well.

A rival to the deductive-nomological pattern of explanation is the intentionalist pattern, according to which explanations are answers to questions like "What was the reason for doing x?" and "What is the reason for the occurrence of the feature F in the work W?" Explanations on those lines fit many but not all explanations in the history of art.

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<sup>78</sup> Hermerén, p.111.

It has been claimed that the intentionalist pattern is basic in the sense that other types of explanation in the human sciences revolve round this schema as their core. We have attempted to show that this claim can be substantiated at least as far as influence explanations are concerned. Influence explanations, we have argued, are essentially incomplete, and require to be filled in by reference to intentions (in a broad sense which includes both conscious and subconscious aims ). Generalizing from this case, one can venture the hypothesis that the intentionalist pattern will turn out to comprise a family of related models of explanation.

Although explanations in terms of intentions may be considered to be logically complete, it is obvious that one leaves out a great deal when one focusses on intentions and their results only. Intentions, actions, and works do not occur in a social vacuum. Attempts to shed light on various aspects of the social space surrounding intentions and works may also be referred to as explanatory activities (e.g. how-possible-explanations). In the next chapter we shall attempt to illuminate the intentionalist pattern further by investigating the social space in which intentions and works are situated.

### **3. THE CONDITIONS OF UNDERSTANDING**

It is true, we only see what we look for, but  
we only look for what we can see.

(Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*,  
p. 230.)

### 3.1. A pragmatic perspective

The intentionalist pattern seems to take care of at least one important type of explanation in the human sciences. Yet many philosophers have felt that the intentionalist pattern as presented e.g. by Dray and von Wright is unsatisfactory. The dissatisfaction may in some cases be explained by the critics' commitment to another pattern of explanation, which they tend to regard as *the* basic pattern of explanation. Their strategy will then be to try to show that intentionalist explanations may be reduced to the deductive-nomological pattern. More interesting from our point of view is the reaction of a philosopher like Karl-Otto Apel, who feels dissatisfied with the existing presentations of the intentionalist pattern without being committed to the view that deductive - nomological explanations play a crucial role in all sciences. When von Wright proposes that the intentionalist pattern of explanation plays the same key role in the human sciences as the deductive-nomological pattern does in the natural sciences, Apel suspects a hidden commitment to ideals which belong properly to the natural sciences but not to the hermeneutic disciplines (i.e. those human sciences in which understanding plays a central role). The ideal which belongs properly to the natural sciences but not to the hermeneutical disciplines is the production of theoretical explanations which constitute answers to questions of the type "Why was x to be expected?" The very attempt to find an explanatory pattern which is to the human sciences what the deductive-nomological pattern is to the natural sciences (according to the received view) "seems to involve the hidden motive of a scientific parallelism of theoretically explanatory arguments", according to Apel.<sup>79</sup>

The tacit assumption which is made both by von Wright and his critics is (Apel suggests) that all sciences are guided by the same leading question of research, viz. to answer questions of the "why to be expected"-type. As against this, Apel wishes to stress that "within the humanities we have an autonomous interest in understanding what kind of

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<sup>79</sup> K.-O. Apel, "Causal Explanation, Motivational Explanation, and Hermeneutical Understanding. (Remarks on the Recent Stage of the Explanation-Understanding Controversy)", in G. Ryle, ed., *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, Oriel Press, London 1977, p. 175. (A longer version of this paper exists in mimeographed form, dated Autumn 1975.)

human actions we are confronted with by understanding the reasons behind the actions.”<sup>80</sup> Such understanding cannot be regarded merely as a preliminary to the setting up of “why to be expected”-hypotheses (theoretical explanatory hypotheses). He suggests, therefore, that the division of the sciences into natural sciences and human sciences on the basis of two patterns of explanation should be replaced with a division of the sciences according to their leading interests of knowledge. Some sciences are guided by the interest in finding theoretical explanations (the natural sciences), some are guided by the interest in increasing understanding for its own sake (the hermeneutic sciences or the humanities). The social sciences are guided by a theoretical explanatory interest which is similar to that of the natural sciences, but the differences which exist between social science and natural science makes it necessary to regard the social sciences as a third type of science, according to Apel, who talks of “quasi-nomological social sciences corresponding to the interest in quasi-causal statistical relevance-explanations as a basis for social engineering.”<sup>81</sup>

The century-long philosophical controversy over explanation and understanding started with attempts to divide the sciences into two broad groups, the natural sciences and the human sciences (*die Geisteswissenschaften*). Explanation was held, then, to be to the natural sciences what understanding is to the human sciences. The second stage of the controversy is characterized by the doctrine that all sciences, natural as well as human, are explanatory in nature. Wilhelm Dilthey’s *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* belongs to the first stage of the controversy, Hempel’s paper “The Function of General Laws in History” may be regarded as typical of the second stage. The third stage (Apel suggests) is characterized by attempts to show that the natural sciences and the human sciences are all explanatory, but work with different patterns of explanation. Von Wright’s *Explanation and Understanding* can be selected as a representative of the third stage of the explanation-understanding controversy.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>81</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>82</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 161.

It can be objected to Apel that the interest in patterns of explanation need not be a symptom of a hidden commitment to the ideals of natural science, Whether this is so or not in the case of von Wright's *Explanation and Understanding* I do not know. But if the evidence upon which Apel bases his diagnosis is the linguistic one that von Wright talks of intentionalist "explanations", the reply must be that this is too meagre to attribute scientific tendencies to anybody. As we have seen above (section 2.1), it agrees with ordinary usage in the history of art to refer to various sorts of increasing our understanding of works of art as "explanations".

Apel's diagnosis of why the existing presentations of the intentionalist pattern are unsatisfactory does not seem to me to hit the mark, nor do I think that a consideration of leading interests of knowledge will help to remove the sources of dissatisfaction entirely. One reason, I want to suggest, why such a presentation of the intentionalist pattern as that of von Wright in *Explanation and Understanding* may be felt to be unsatisfactory is the way in which the logical relations between intentions and actions are focussed, while the social space in which intentions and actions are situated is left in the dark. If an action or a work of art, for instance, is explained with reference to a certain intention, we can go on to ask how it was possible for the agent to realize his intention in the way he did and how it came about that he had that particular intention. In order to answer such questions, we must illuminate other aspects of action situations than those which are thematised in *Explanation and Understanding*.

Explanation stands in the service of understanding. My proposal is that the nature of explanation may be further elucidated by considering the conditions under which understanding is possible. Since the necessary conditions for the possibility of understanding are basically the same as the necessary conditions for the possibility of actions in general, we shall start by a consideration of the conditions of action. We shall then go on to consider hermeneutical actions (understanding) as well as creative actions in the sphere of art in more detail. Because of the emphasis on the conditions of acting, our approach might be characterized as pragmatist; and in view of the traditional terminology, according to which necessary conditions for the possibility of something are

called transcendental conditions, the approach might well be called transcendental-pragmatic". Attempts like those of K.-O.Apel to develop a transcendental-pragmatic approach to the traditional problems of philosophy might then, perhaps, be regarded as the beginning of a fourth stage of the controversy over explanation and understanding.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.2. Actions, rules and precedents

"Give me an apple, please," I said to my daughter, and she gave me an apple. How is it possible that my uttering some words can have this result ? In order for her to be able to give me an apple upon hearing my request, she must have acquired a number of skills. She must have learned what giving is, what the word "me" stands for when it is used by a speaker, and what the word "apple" means. She must have learned to distinguish apples from other things, and she must have acquired the motor skills which are required for handing over a thing like an apple to somebody. The skills which are necessary for her to be able to give me an apple upon hearing my request are at once linguistic, cognitive, perceptual and practical. When she has learned to perceive, understand, and act in the indicated ways, she may be said to have acquired the concept 'apple'.

Generalizing from the example, we may say that in a full-fledged case of mastering a concept, the individual must have the following skills:

- (1) the ability to identify instances of the concept 'C' as instances of 'C';
- (2) the ability to use the expression "C" or some synonymous expression in meaningful ways ;
- (3) the ability to understand the expression "C" or some synonymous expression when it is used by other people ;
- (4) the ability to perform actions which are connected with instances of 'C'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. K.-O. Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie, I-II*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1973.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. L. Nørreklit, *Concepts. Their nature and Significance for Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Odense University Press 1973, p. 37.



In a full-fledged case of mastering a concept, we should also require that the individual is able to think about instances of the concept. He or she should be able to think of apples, for instance, or to make plans or to form the intention of eating an apple, and so on, if it is to be called a full-fledged case of mastering the concept 'apple'. We can add this to the list of conditions: in order to be said to master the concept 'C' fully, the individual must also have

(5) the ability to think (etc.) about instances of 'C'.

Finally, it belongs to our idea of what it means to master concept that the individual should have at least a rudimentary ability to explain the concept to others, for instance in the form of an ability to explain the meaning of the expression "C" which he uses for 'C' to those who are unacquainted with it.

In order to be said to perform an action of a certain kind, A, we should normally be required to have the concept of A. Since having a concept is a complex of several abilities, there will be no sharp boundaries between having and not having the concept. Conceptual skills may be more or less well developed. When my daughter is fifteen months old, she might be able to give me an apple in some situations, although she has not yet learned to say "apple" or any synonymous word. A chimpanzee might do the same. But the limitations of the mastery of the concept in such cases will come out in certain situations. If my baby daughter has learned to distinguish apples from bananas in the fruit bowl, she might get confused if pomegranates or oranges are added to the assortment of fruit in the house. It belongs to the full-fledged mastery of a concept that one has learned the relevant set of contrasts. When one has learned some of the relevant contrasts, one might be said to be on the way to mastering the concept. There is thus a floating border between the novice's having a concept and that of the expert.

There are restrictions on the normal use of words which we have to learn before we can be said to have acquired the concepts expressed by the words. We cannot be said to have

learned a concept before we have learned which things count as the same and which things count as different.<sup>85</sup> What counts as the same and what does not count as the same depends upon the circumstances. Within the limits given by nature, there is considerable scope for ordering the world in different ways, depending upon one's needs and interests. Within certain limits, what counts as the same is decided by conventions and rules, which have to be learned from experience.

We have arrived at the view that in order for a person to be said to have performed a certain action A, he will normally be required to have the corresponding concept 'A'. And to have a concept means to master a set of rules for doing things. That is why we should hesitate to say that a person who is totally ignorant of football made a score, or that a monkey produced a work of art. It would be more natural to describe such cases by saying that he happened to make what looked like a score, or that he made something which under other circumstances would have counted as a score (or a work of art) .

The next step in the argument will be to bring out what is involved in mastering a rule.<sup>86</sup> When we learn a rule, that occurs normally in a social situation. We learn the game of football, for instance, by acquainting ourselves with the rules which exist for that game. The best way of doing so is by taking part in the game. We are socialised into games and practices, and so it might seem that the connection between learning a rule and the experience of a certain social context is empirical. The study of the relations between actions and their social settings would then be the domain of empirical social scientists exclusively.

That this cannot be the whole story has been shown by Wittgenstein in the so-called private language argument. Philosophers have often entertained the idea that the world of the mind is essentially private in contrast to the external world which is publicly accessible. If that is correct (as Descartes assumed), then it should be possible to have

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<sup>85</sup> P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1958, p. 26ff.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Winch, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-33; and K. S. Johannessen, "Wittgensteins regelbegrep: En interpretativ skisse med hensyn på implikasjonene for filosofisk semantikk", *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift* 1973, pp. 59-75.

concepts which are on principle inaccessible to others. It should be possible to follow rules which are essentially private in the sense that it would be impossible for others to find out about them. But in such a case it would be impossible for the person who has the rule to decide if he is in fact following the rule or not in a particular case.

Suppose e.g. that I decide to refer to a certain bodily sensation as “E” and to write E in my diary on every day throughout the year on which I have that kind of sensation. How am I to decide if a sensation which I have on a particular day really is of the kind which should be called “E” ?

I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. – How? Can I point to the sensation ? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and the same time as I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. ... in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – But “I am impressing it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’.<sup>87</sup>

The argument shows that it is impossible to follow rules which are essentially private. And since all actions are governed by rules, it follows that acting is essentially public. There is a necessary link between the concept of action and the concept of social space, one could say. In Wittgenstein’s terminology, ways of acting are “practices” or, alternatively, “customs”, “uses”, “institutions”.<sup>88</sup>

A necessary condition for a person to be said to follow a rule is that it is possible to decide when the rule is broken. That we have grasped a rule “is exhibited in what we call

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<sup>87</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 258. Cf. § 202.

<sup>88</sup> *Op. cit.*, §§ 199, 202.

‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases.”<sup>89</sup> It is not necessary that we should be able to formulate the rule in so many words. A native speaker can normally decide whether a proposed sentence is grammatically correct or not, without being able to make the grammatical analysis required to bring out the rules which are followed or broken in the case, and similarly for other types of action. Our knowledge of concepts and rules is practical knowledge, knowing how to do things, in contrast to the expert’s theoretical knowledge, which is an explication in words of how to do things (knowing that).<sup>90</sup>

In the legal sphere, one can make a distinction between statute law, which rests on written rules, and case law, which rests on precedents. The sense of “rule” in which all acting is rule-governed should not be confused with rules in the sense of statutes. Here we are concerned with a more fundamental sense of “rule” in which all actions, including the practice of the law of precedents, is rule-governed. When we learn a rule in this sense, it is normally by way of examples and counter-examples. I show my daughter an apple, and tell her that it is an apple; I show her another apple, slightly bigger than the previous one, and tell her that it is also all apple; I show her an orange and tell her that it is not an apple but an orange; and so forth. The specimens I show her serve as “paradigms”, to use another term from Wittgenstein, which guide the future use of the term. To have learned the rules governing the term in question means to have learned which of the features of the paradigms are essential for the correct use of the term. Normally, there will be borderline areas where it is impossible to tell whether the term applies or not. Our concepts tend to be “open-textured”, as Friedrich Waismann puts it.<sup>91</sup>

We acquire our concepts by familiarizing ourselves with a set of paradigmatic specimens, learning to discriminate between correct and incorrect applications of the corresponding verbal expressions and at the same time learning to perceive and handle features of our

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<sup>89</sup> *Op. cit.*, § 201.

<sup>90</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1957, §§ 32, 45-48; G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Hutchinson’s University Library, London 1949, Ch. 2, “Knowing How and Knowing That”.

<sup>91</sup> F. Waismann, “Verifiability”, in A. Flew, ed., *Logic and Language*, First Series, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1952, p. 119ff. Cf. H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, pp. 120-132; and T. Nordenstam, *Sudanese Ethics*, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies / Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala 1968, Ch. 2, “The Deductive Ideal”.

surroundings in particular ways. There is thus an internal connection between learning a language, learning to see the world in a particular way and learning to handle the world in specific ways. Since we learn to do so on the basis of paradigmatic precedents, one can say (as Wittgenstein did) that “the limits of the empirical are ... ways of comparing and acting.”<sup>92</sup> The ability to make the appropriate comparisons is a necessary condition for all meaningful behaviour. That art is essentially historical and transformational, as Woolheim puts it, can be seen, then, to be a feature which it shares with all social phenomena. Being transformational is a feature of meaning in general, and not restricted to the meaning-bearing entities we call works of art.

In his presentation of the intentionalist pattern, von Wright emphasizes that intentionalist explanations are logically complete, since there is a conceptual tie between intentions and actions which is the basis of such explanations. “To say that such and such intentions and beliefs, assuming they do not change, will normally result in such and such behaviour is not to state an empirical generalization based on observations or experiments. It is to state a necessary truth to which anybody familiar with the concepts involved will agree off-hand.”<sup>93</sup> But beliefs and intentions are embedded in social situations.<sup>94</sup> We can always go on to ask how it comes about that the agent has the intentions and beliefs he has. Explanations of why an agent has certain intentions and beliefs can be regarded as second order explanations (it has been suggested) Such additional explanations can e.g. take the form of showing how the intentions and beliefs of an individual are related to some “very general system of belief”, a world-view which is prevalent in the culture to which the individual belongs.<sup>95</sup> On the basis of the foregoing considerations, one could say, more generally, that intentions and beliefs can be explained with reference to the practices and institutions under which the agent is acting.

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<sup>92</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1956, V, § 18: “Die Grenzen der Empirie sind nicht unverbürgte Annahmen, oder intuitiv als richtig erkannte; sondern Arten und Weisen des Vergleichens und des Handelns.” (The English translation contains a bad error (“empiricism“), which has been corrected here.)

<sup>93</sup> G. H. von Wright, “Determinism and the Study of Man”, in J. Manninen & R. Tuomela, eds., *Essays on Explanation and Understanding. Studies in the Foundations of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht 1976, p. 425.

<sup>94</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 337: “An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions.”

<sup>95</sup> R. Martin, “Explanation and Understanding in History”, in Manninen & Tuomela, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

Now if the relations between intentions and beliefs and actions on the one hand and social practices and institutions on the other hand are conceptual in the sense that there is a necessary relationship between intentions, beliefs and actions and practices and institutions, then it can be seen that the intentionalist pattern of explanation stands in need of being supplemented with other types of explanation, which are logically complete in the same sense as intentionalist explanations. Intentionalist explanations exploit the conceptual link between intentions and actions. Explanations of intentions in terms of background practices and institutions similarly exploit a conceptual link between intentions and practices.

The results which we have derived from a consideration of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning coincide largely with the position taken by von Wright in the paper "Determinism and the Study of Man", written some years later than *Explanation and Understanding*<sup>96</sup>. In this paper von Wright points out that a man's intentions are determined by his wants and duties as well as his abilities and opportunities. He proposes that the relations between these factors are conceptual, referring to "the very general conceptual patterns" he has outlined in his paper. The conclusion which I should like to draw from this is that the intentionalist pattern of explanation must be supplemented with another type of explanation which is not reducible to the intentionalist pattern and which must be regarded as logically binding in precisely the sense in which intentionalist explanations are binding, viz. explanations of intentions and beliefs in terms of the social background of existing practices and the agent's abilities and resources.

The conceptual links which must exist between the components in a situation in order for action to be possible may be summed up in the following way:<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See note 93 above.

<sup>97</sup> The diagram is a result of the cooperation between the art-historian Gunnar Danbolt, the philosopher Kjell S. Johannessen and myself in the 1970s. Variations on the theme can be found in several of our publications from that time. See e.g. K. S. Johannessen, "Art and Aesthetic Praxis", in L. Aagaard-Mogensen & G. Hermerén, eds., *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, Bokförlaget Doxa AB, Lund 1980, p. 97; and G. Danbolt, "Aesthetic Theory and Practice in Art History. A Study of the Codex Egberti", *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, p. 131.

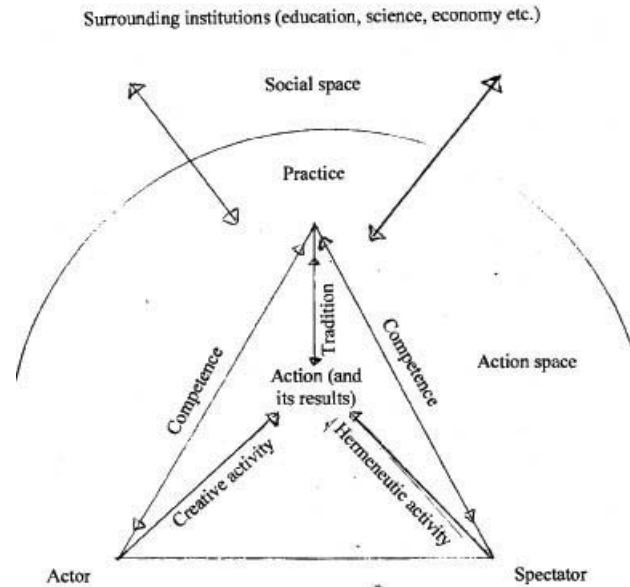


Fig. 24

The structure of action situations

The diagram brings out the logical skeleton of action situations, thereby indicating the necessary conditions for the possibility of action. The structure is invested with different values for each practice, which change over time. It is these contingent, empirical investments of the necessary structure that form the fields of investigation of the historian. In the present context, it is aesthetic practices which are in the center of interest. The kind of actions we are particularly interested in are the creative activities of the artists and the hermeneutic activities of the beholders. The kind of competence we are particularly interested in is the aesthetic competence required from artists and beholders. The institutions we are interested in are the aesthetically relevant institutions like aesthetic education, artistic training, the art market, museums, journals, and so on.

### 3.3. Aesthetic competence

To understand a mathematical proof we need the relevant mathematical competence. “Mathematical thoughts” cannot be attributed to those who are known to lack the relevant skills.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, “aesthetic thoughts” cannot be attributed to a person unless he is known to have acquired the relevant competence. The activities we refer to as the interpretation and understanding of art require a combination of different skills. Like other activities, the understanding of art demands perceptual, cognitive and motor skills of particular kinds, and those skills have to be learned through socialisation processes within the relevant practices. An aesthetic practice can, then, be characterised as a type of activity requiring a set of related skills, in particular a number of conceptual skills.

It is not our aim to give a systematic analysis of all the different skills which might be required in encounters with works of art in different fields. We shall try to illuminate the demands that works of art put on their public with the help of some examples and reminders. Our ambitions are more similar to those of Wittgenstein than to those of Habermas. “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose,” said Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, whereas Habermas has a vision of a group of “reconstructive sciences” in which linguistic and other competences would be systematically set out, perhaps on the quasi-mathematical lines indicated by Noam Chomsky.<sup>99</sup>

A basic condition for aesthetic appreciation is the ability to organize the impressions one gets when confronted with a work of art into meaningful patterns. To be able to hear a melody, for instance, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to have theoretical knowledge

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<sup>98</sup> R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, Methuen, London 1974, p. 187.

<sup>99</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 127; J. Habermas, “Was heisst Universalpragmatik?”, in K.-O. Apel, ed., *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1976. Cf. also my comments in “Aesthetic Competence”, in *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, 1980.



about harmony and counterpoint. Understanding requires the ability to discriminate, to concentrate and to organize what one hears or sees in certain ways.<sup>100</sup>

In order to be able to “understand” a piece of music in the sense of appreciating it aesthetically, one needs the capacity to organize what one hears into some pattern or other. This does not imply that one will appreciate the music every time one hears it. One may be tired and unconcentrated, for instance, or the performance may fall below the standards one expects to be fulfilled. The ability to pay attention to the relevant aspects of the work of art requires *comparisons*. It is only in contrast to other works of art that the peculiarities of the work at hand stand out. Our taste has to be cultured, as both Kant and Wittgenstein have emphasized.<sup>101</sup>

Another basic condition for aesthetic appreciation is the ability to concentrate on the important features of the work of art and to disregard irrelevant impressions. The irrelevant impressions may be physical, like the sound of an ambulance mixing with the pianissimo of the orchestra, or intellectual, e.g. irreverent associations which might temporarily destroy a work of art for us or irrelevant background knowledge which might lead our attention away from the aesthetically important features of the work. Learning to concentrate and discriminate in the indicated ways requires training, and the training will not be the same for every practice. On the contrary, it is characteristic of works of art that they tend to require different approaches according to style and genre etc. The term “aesthetic competence” stands for a family of more or less similar aggregates of skills.

Sometimes, familiarity with one aesthetic practice will be an asset when one comes to another practice. At other times, it will be a hindrance. The pioneers of non-representative art were exposed to the danger of being misrepresented as merely trying to produce decorative patterns, to take an example from the history of modern art. Therefore Kandinsky issued repeated warnings against the traps of ornamentation:

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, p. 170ff. Scruton illustrates the point by drawing attention to two different ways of listening to a passage from Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, adding that “depending on how one hears it, the remarkable ending will sound relaxed or tense” (p. 178).

<sup>101</sup> In the *Critique of Judgement* and the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1970), respectively.

If we begin at once to break the bonds that bind us to nature and to devote ourselves purely to combination of pure colour and independent form, we shall produce works of art which are mere geometric decoration, resembling something like a necktie or a carpet.<sup>102</sup>

The appropriate aesthetic competence did not exist yet in the public. It had to be built up, for instance by publishing theoretical literature on the new art like Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and the journal *De Stijl*, where Mondrian published a number of his art-theoretical papers.

That the interpretation of pictures always requires experience with a relevant practice may be shown even at the elementary level of everyday photographs and similar pictures which are self-evident to us who happen to live in an exceedingly picture-oriented culture. If you show a picture of a person to someone who lacks all experience with photographs and other pictures – some tribes in Africa are still so uninfected with Western culture that the experiment is practically possible – then he will be at a loss what to do with it. He will not be able to see a meaningful pattern in what you show him; he will e.g. not be able to see if the picture is upside down or not.<sup>103</sup>

All images are inherently ambiguous, and therefore picture communication presupposes shared experience. An infinite number of geometric constellations in three-dimensional space can result in exactly the same picture when represented on a flat surface, as the following diagram suggests:<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> W. Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911), 4th ed., Bern-Bümplitz 1952, p. 155. The English translation is quoted here from E. Kruskopf, *Shaping the Invisible*, Helsinki 1976, p. 42.

<sup>103</sup> Personal communication from a visitor to the Fur and Daju tribes in Western Sudan in the 1960s. Today the situation is probably quite different.

<sup>104</sup> The diagram is to be found in E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton University Press 1969, p.251.

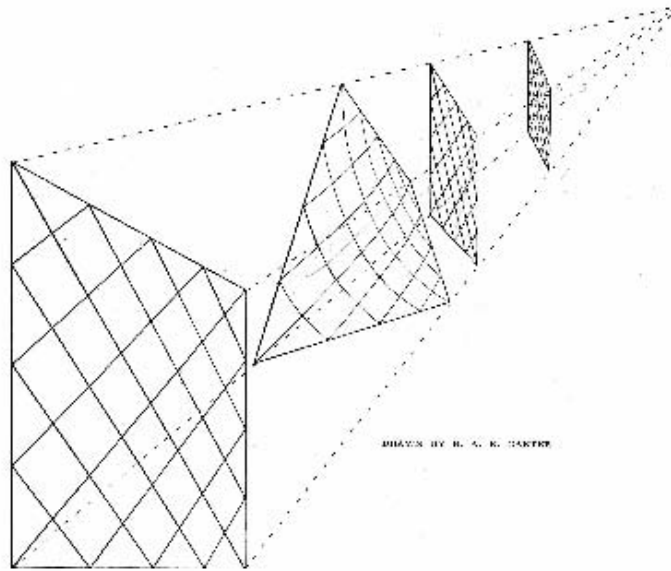


Fig. 25

A picture with a faulty perspective may, therefore, be interpreted as a correct picture of a possible world.<sup>105</sup> It is only against the background of the experience with our world and with our pictures that a given picture may be characterized as faulty.

The conditions which hold for the picture - object relation can be summed up in the following way:

- (1) A given picture can (logically) be a correct picture of an infinite number of objects.
- (3) A given picture cannot (logically) be a correct picture of whatever object you like.

The addition of the second statement is necessary both because of the natural limitations on possible pictures and because of the conventional limitations imposed on pictures in different aesthetic practices.

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<sup>105</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, p. 249.

The choice of a medium is conventional. When a medium for making pictures has been selected, further conventional choices will have to be made within the space of possibilities offered by nature. Black colour on red clay can for instance be used to make black figures against a red background, or red figures against a black background. In both cases, the convention might be added that the colour of the figures should not be taken to indicate the real colour of the persons portrayed. The figures on Greek amphoras are not intended to be taken as representations of Africans and Red Indians.

The natural limitations and the conventions may be characterized as transcendental conditions for picture communication. Without them picture communication would not be possible. If we want to understand a picture in at least approximately the way in which it was intended by the artist who made it, we have, therefore, to familiarize ourselves with the ways in which he utilised the space of possibilities opened up for him by nature and culture. We have to familiarize ourselves with the relevant aesthetic practice in order to get the required aesthetic competence.

What does it mean to familiarize oneself with an aesthetic practice? An activity is constituted as an activity of a particular kind by certain concepts. The activity of doubling in the game of bridge, for instance, would not be possible without the concept 'doubling (in bridge)'. And similarly for aesthetic activities, both those of the artists which may be referred to as creative or expressive activities, and the activities of the public which may be referred to as hermeneutic activities (understanding, appreciation). To appreciate a lithograph as a lithograph one must master the concept 'lithograph' more or less well, and this involves a combination of different skills: being able to recognize lithographs when one encounters them, being able to distinguish them from other types of pictures, being able to use the word "lithograph" or some synonymous expression in some other language in a meaningful way and to understand it when one reads or hears it, being able to handle lithographs in the appropriate ways (viz. as aesthetic objects), and being able to think about lithographs. To see a "passage" in a painting by Cézanne one would have to have a more or less full-fledged concept of passage. The man who commissions a work of art

must have the relevant concepts at his disposal, to take another example. When Archbishop Egbertus in Trier ordered the book of *perikopes* now referred to as the *Codex Egberti* to be illustrated with pictures of a certain kind, he must have had enough aesthetic training to make it clear to the artist monks what he demanded.<sup>106</sup> “We only see what we look for, but we only look for what we can see,” as Heinrich Wölfflin put it.<sup>107</sup>

Learning aesthetic concepts is more similar to the learning of our concepts of emotion than to the learning of techniques for producing things.<sup>108</sup> To learn the multiplication table is to learn a technique which is governed by a limited set of fixed rules which can be used to decide on the correctness of the results which we arrive at. Learning to apply concepts of emotion, by contrast, is a question of experience. One has to learn to make the correct judgements, which can be done under the guidance of the more experienced. “There are also rules” (Wittgenstein suggests), “but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculation rules.”<sup>109</sup> Understanding art is a question of judgement. Some of the concepts we use in connection with works of art have a primary use outside art and are then carried over to the aesthetic sphere (‘balance’, for instance). And some are learned primarily in connection with works of art (‘picturesque’, perhaps). But learning aesthetic concepts is always a question of acquiring new perceptual skills, learning to see in new ways. This is why neither emotional nor aesthetic concepts can be defined conclusively with the help of verbal formulas (e.g. of the traditional type “something can be properly called x if and only if the following conditions are fulfilled ... “).

One could argue that every major artist creates his own world, his own form of life.<sup>110</sup> To understand what is going on in his world we must get socialised into it in the same way as

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. G. Danbolt, “Aesthetic Theory and Practice in Art History. A Study of the Codex Egberti”, in L. Aagaard-Mogensen and G. Hermerén, eds., *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, Doxa, Lund 1980.

<sup>107</sup> H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, Dover Publications, New York 1950, p. 230.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. K. S. Johannessen’s contribution to *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*, entitled “Art and Aesthetic Praxis”.

<sup>109</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 227.

<sup>110</sup> “To the painter, to the poet, to all artists – and this is what distinguishes them from other men, especially from the scientists – each work becomes a new universe with its own laws.” Guillaume Apollinaire in the introduction to a catalogue of a Braque exhibition in Paris in 1908, quoted in E. Fry, *Cubism*, Thames and Hudson, London 1966, p. 49.

we get socialised into other forms of life, by training and learning, by being corrected, by getting experienced. What this involves has been well formulated by Kjell S. Johannessen, from whom the following quotation stems:

The *surroundings* will in general be more important than the individual aesthetic concepts. We would have to form a general picture of the place of art in the culture in question by investigating the conditions under which works of art are produced and received. We would have to describe the treatment of artists and the prestige of connoisseurship. We would have to try to determine the *function* of art in society by describing its relation to religion, economics and politics. We would have to determine the perceptual skills of the connoisseurs and the general public by describing their education and its relation to the economical basis and the technology of the society. Norms and values of different kinds as well as their particular interrelations in the prevailing world view would also have to be included in the description.<sup>111</sup>

We would have to do this not merely because we happen to be interested in say the relations between art and society. We would have to do so for conceptual reasons: because works of art are part of the conceptual fabric of actions, intentions, practices, skills and institutions.

Finally, an ambiguity in the phrase “familiarizing oneself with an aesthetic practice” remains to be cleared up. To familiarize oneself with an earlier aesthetic practice may be taken to mean the same as “trying to re-enact the aesthetic experiences which people had e.g. at the time when the works of art in question were produced.” Understanding is then taken to mean a kind of empathy or *Einfühlung*. This was the aim of the first generations of hermeneutically minded historians in the 19th century (for instance Ranke and Droysen). But, as Wilhelm Dilthey emphasized a hundred years ago, this is an impossible

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<sup>111</sup> K. S. Johannessen, “Art and Aesthetic Praxis”, in *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia*. Gunnar Danbolt’s work on the *Codex Egberti* draws the art-historical implications of this (cf. note 106 above). Cf. also M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford University Press 1972, paperback edition 1974), who approaches his material in a similar way without explicitly formulating the presupposed philosophical platform.

aim.<sup>112</sup> We cannot step outside our own horizon, to use a metaphor which has been current in hermeneutics since Dilthey, in other words it is impossible for us to forget our own practices and concepts when we approach earlier practices (or practices in other societies today). The aim of the historian who approaches earlier practices should not be the re-enactment of earlier experiences but the *reconstruction* of the conditions which made those experiences possible. The historian of art must not be identified with the contemporary observer or the connoisseur to the right in Fig. 24 above. Rather, his object of study is the totality indicated by the diagram. To illustrate this one could construct a diagram of the same kind, where the central position is taken by the aesthetic practice in question. In the art historian's practice, the field of study is the aesthetic practices of earlier times, approached not in the spirit of the critic but in the spirit of the reconstructive scientist.

### 3.4. The implicit beholder

About 1911 Mondrian painted a triptych which he gave the title *Evolution*. It is a monumental work. The central canvas measures 184 x 87 cm., the two other panels measure 178 x 84 cm. Even a reproduction might give some impression of the intensity that radiates from these pictures (Fig. 21).

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<sup>112</sup> See particularly Dilthey's last published work, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VII. Hempel's criticism of "the method of empathetic understanding" is an echo of Dilthey at al. C. G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History" (1942), in P. Gardiner, ed., *Theories of History*, The Free Press, New York 1959, pp. 334-356. See pp. 352-353 on empathetic understanding.



Fig. 26

Piet Mondrian, *Evolution*, ca. 1911.

Oil on canvas, three panels

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

The body of the figure to the left is painted in a luminous blue colour, the background is in violet, the two emblems behind the shoulder are red. The body of the middle figure has the violet colour which forms the background in the left hand picture, and the background in the lower part of the picture of the middle picture has the colour of the body of the left hand picture; the rest of the background is yellow, the emblems are whitish with a tinge of violet. In the right hand figure the blue is confined to the background of the yellow stars; the rest of the picture, both body and background, are held in tones of violet.



One commentator (Erik Kruskopf) characterizes this work as deviant from Mondrian's other production,<sup>113</sup> but there are in fact many other pictures which are similar to the *Evolution* in some ways, e.g. *The Red Mill*, which was painted at the same time (Fig. 27). *The Red Mill* communicates a feeling of serenity not unlike the feeling of *Evolution*. The colours are similar: the light blue background of the red mill is similar to the light blue in the background of the middle figure in the triptych, and the foreground is painted in shades of violet which are reminiscent of some of the shades of *Evolution*. Also the forms are similar. One can e.g. compare the forms of the upper part of the mill with the emblems in the left picture of *Evolution*, or the violet lines at the bottom of the pictures. Commenting on the connections between *The Red Mill* and *Evolution*, Jaffé points out that "[t]he mill looks almost human and that the figures in *Evolution* seem, like the mill, to have their bodies rooted in the ground."<sup>114</sup> It is also natural to see the *Evolution* in connection with other works of Mondrian's, e.g. *Devotion* from 1901 (Fig. 28) and the watercolour entitled *Passion Flower*, also from 1901 (or perhaps 1902–03). Both the subject, the treatment of colour and the formal language of the *Evolution* have connections with other parts of Mondrian's oeuvre, and the recurrence of some of the elements over a period of some ten years indicates that they have been of some importance to the painter.<sup>115</sup>

It is possible to appreciate a work like *Evolution* without any explanations at all, assuming only the kind of pictorial competence which can be expected of anyone who frequents museums and galleries. The *Evolution* and such related works as the *Church at Domburg* and *The Red Mill* "may appeal to a present-day audience chiefly for the optical

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<sup>113</sup> E. Kruskopf, *Shaping the Invisible. A Study of the Genesis of Non-Representational Painting 1908-1919*, Helsinki 1976, p. 110.

<sup>114</sup> H. L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 96.

<sup>115</sup> Herbert Henkels makes the same point in his paper "Mondriaan in zijn atelier"/"Mondrian in seinem Atelier"/"Mondrian in his study", in the exhibition catalogue *Mondrian. Zeichnungen. Aquarelle. New Yorker Bilder*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart 1980, pp. 219-285. The picture sequence on pp. 248-253 emphasizes the connections between Mondrian's portraits and self-portraits and *Evolution*. Fig. 29 below is a good illustration of the point.

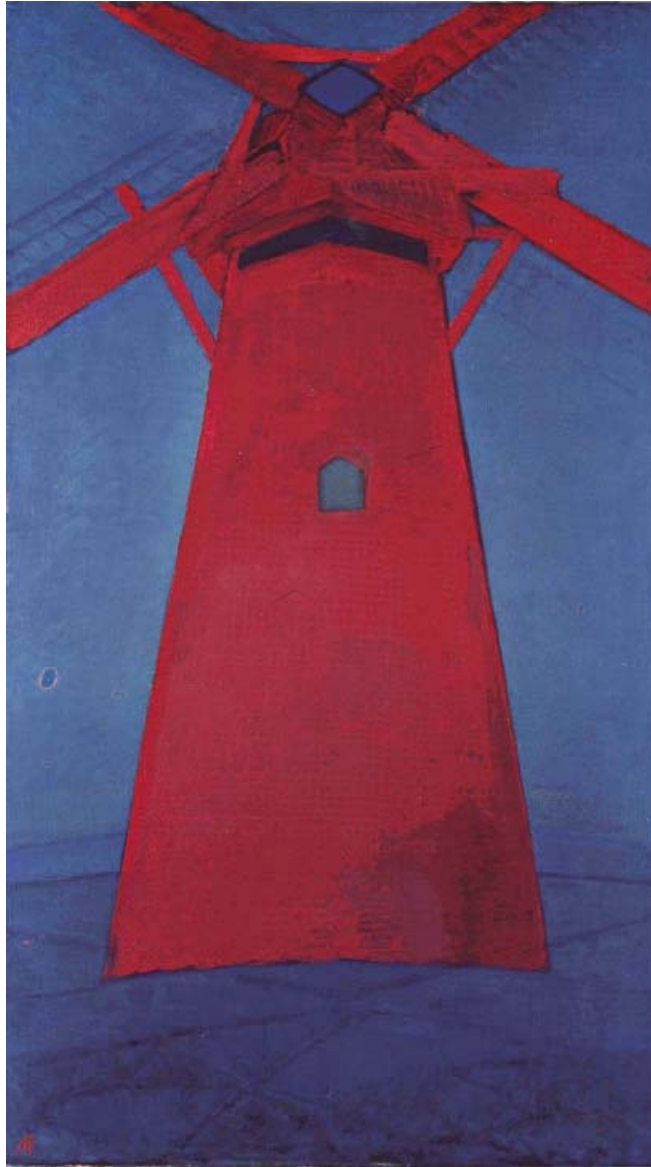


Fig. 27

Piet Mondrian, *The Red Mill*, 1910 - 11

Oil on canvas, 150 x 86 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague



Fig. 28

Piet Mondrian, *Devotion*, 1908

Oil on canvas, 94 x 61 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

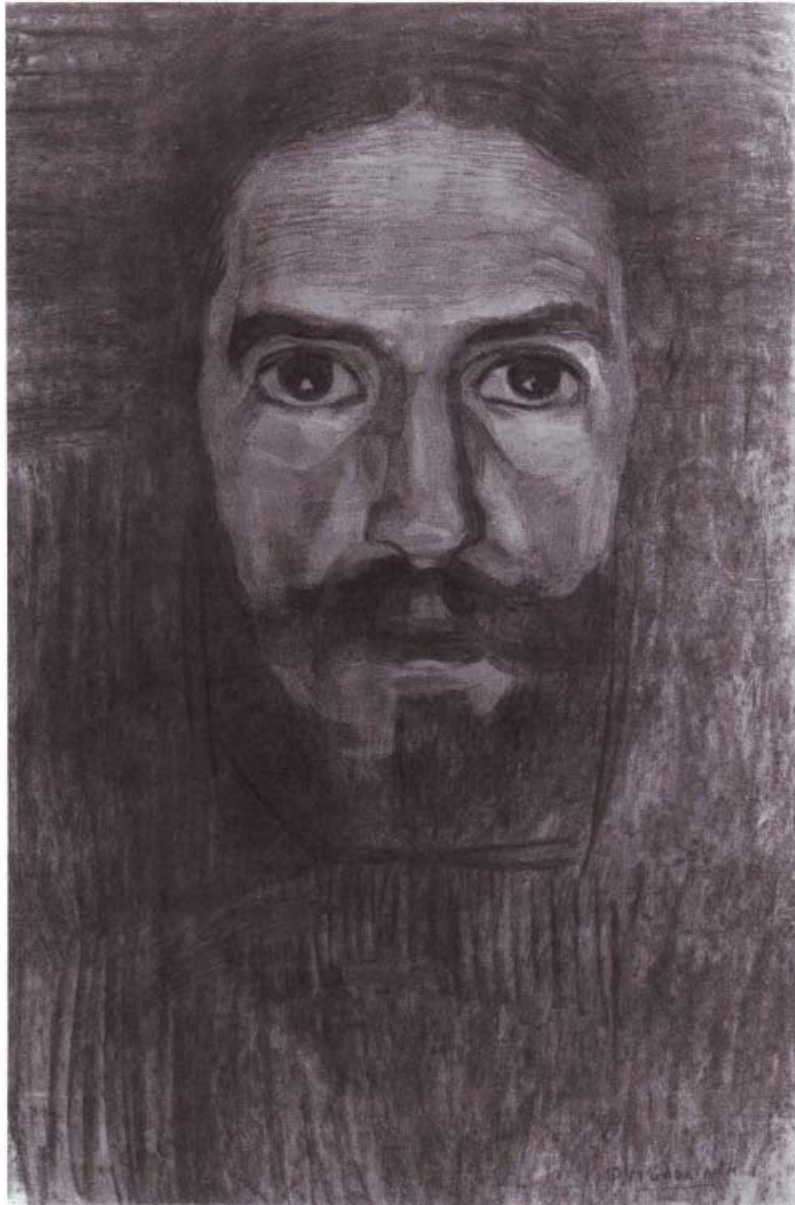


Fig. 29

Piet Mondrian, *Self-portrait*, 1908-09

Charcoal on cardboard, 79.5 x 53 cm

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

phenomena of intense color luminosity and irradiation which they contain and which so clearly anticipate contemporary artistic trends,” as R. P. Welsh puts it.<sup>116</sup> One can add that no explanations are needed to get fascinated by the strangeness of the paintings, the strong feeling of mystery that they convey. The symbols which convey no clear meaning tend to heighten the sense of mysteriousness, and the very unclarity as to what kind of evolution that the pictures are about also contributes to this effect. One way of approaching pictures like the *Evolution* triptych is to view them in the same way as one might listen to music, without any demands for definite meaning, as meditation objects which are enjoyable for their own sake.

It is possible that the painter intended the pictures to be approached in that way. But it is equally possible that the forms and colours were intended by the painter to convey more definite meanings. The yellow star is a figure which is loaded with symbolic significance in our culture. Did Mondrian have any particular meaning in mind when he painted the picture ? Would it be relevant to associate to the emblem that Jews have been forced to wear at some times in history ? If so, what is the function of the symbol within this particular work ? Why are the nipples and the navel of the left and the middle figures painted as small triangles, whereas they are represented as diamonds on the right hand figure ? Again, the triangles on the left figure point downwards, on the middle figure they point upwards. Should this be taken to indicate that the diamonds of the right figure are intended to represent a synthesis of the corresponding figures in the two other pictures ? In which order should we read the pictures ? Does the evolution go from left to middle to right, or perhaps from left to right to middle ? If we read the triptych from left to right and then to the middle picture, the middle figure will be seen to represent the highest stage of evolution. The oval emblems in the middle picture might then be associated with eggs, and again with creation myths of various kinds. Would that be relevant associations? Again, colours have sometimes been invested with symbolic values, as in Goethe's Theory of Colour and in the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and other

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<sup>116</sup> R. P. Welsh, “Mondrian and Theosophy”, in the catalogue *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944. Centennial Exhibition*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1971, p. 51.

anthroposophists and theosophists. Does the *Evolution* have any connections with such strands of thought ? Do the open and closed eyes carry symbolic meanings ? Are the three figures intended to be interpreted as three stages in the evolution of one person or should they rather be taken to symbolize (say) stages in the evolution of mankind ?

If we are interested in understanding the meaning that Mondrian intended the pictures to convey, it is obvious that we need further explanations. The explanations we need are such as will help us to build up the competence that Mondrian assumed in his public. The intended meaning of the pictures is the meaning which arises for the beholder who has acquired the assumed competence. Borrowing a term from literary theory, one might refer to a beholder with that kind of competence as *the implicit beholder*.<sup>117</sup>

I do not know of any commentary by Mondrian on the *Evolution*, but some biographical facts prove valuable at this juncture. It is known that Mondrian was interested in theosophy, a preoccupation which did not have the same sectarian connotations for the intellectual strata in the beginning of the 20th century as it has for most of us today. He joined the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909, not long before the painting of *The Red Mill* and the *Evolution*. Jaffé writes that in the *Evolution* “Mondrian’s theosophical vision of man and cosmos takes form,” without going into any details.<sup>118</sup> The question arises, then, exactly how have theosophical doctrines influenced *Evolution* and (say) *The Red Mill* ?

Kandinsky was one of those who shared Mondrian’s interest in theosophical writings. Sixten Ringbom concludes his analysis of the influence of theosophy on Kandinsky’s works by stating that the imagery he found in the theosophical writings he studied “could only provide a justification of the basis of abstraction, and not a model to be imitated.” The colour illustrations he found in works like *Man Visible and Invisible* and *Thought-Forms* by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater could only provide him with a starting-

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<sup>117</sup> W. Iser, *Der implizite Leser*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1972.

<sup>118</sup> Hans L. C. Jaffé, *Mondrian*, p. 96.

point. “We may say that for Kandinsky the higher levels of nature envisioned by the theosophists formed only a word-list, a repertory of crude paradigms out of which the artist developed the morphology and syntax of his own pictorial idiom.”<sup>119</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that the same applies to Mondrian. If so, it would be in vain to search for specific iconographic meanings of every element in *Evolution*. But to get a general idea of the kind of associations that the picture might have had for Mondrian and his competent contemporary public, which was more or less well acquainted with theosophical ideas, one will have to investigate the extent to which Mondrian was indebted to theosophy in some detail. Robert P. Welsh has made a beginning in his paper “Mondrian and Theosophy”.<sup>120</sup>

In 1909, the same year in which he joined the Dutch Theosophical Society, Mondrian commented upon his artistic aims in a letter to the art critic Querido:

For the present at least, I shall restrict my work to the customary world of the senses, since it is the world in which we still live. But nevertheless art already can provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm. /Art is/ the path of ascension; away from matter.<sup>121</sup>

This artistic programme was inspired by theosophical writings, for instance by a series of lectures given by the secretary of the Theosophical Society in 1908 and collected in a book which Mondrian owned and annotated. These *Dutch Lectures* (as Welsh calls the book) present the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, Madame Blavatsky and other leading theosophists.<sup>122</sup> Several of the main theosophical writings also appeared in Dutch translation, e.g. Besant's and Leadbeaters *Thought-Forms* which came out in Dutch in 1905. Mondrian is likely to have been acquainted with the book.) Now it turns out that evolution was a central concept in the teachings of Blavatsky and Steiner. Madame

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<sup>119</sup> S. Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, p. 206.

<sup>120</sup> In the Centennial Catalogue *Mondrian*, éditions Galerie Beyeler, pp. 35-51.

<sup>121</sup> Cited in J. Joosten, *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks, 1912-1914*. Here quoted from P. Gay, *Art and Act*, p. 203.

<sup>122</sup> Welsh, “Mondrian and Theosophy”, p. 39.

Blavatsky taught that evolution was the basic feature of the world, replacing the Christian concept of creation with the notion of evolution in an attempt to explain how the world functions. Darwin's mistake, according to Blavatsky, was to have substituted matter for spirit. The world is fundamentally spiritual:

Three spirits live and actuate man ... three worlds pour their beams upon him; but all three only as the image and echo of one and the same all-constructing and uniting principle of production. The first is the spirit of the elements (terrestrial body and vital force in its brute condition); the second, the spirit of the stars (sidereal or astral body – the soul); the third is the *Divine* spirit ...<sup>123</sup>

Reading Mondrian's triptych in the light of such quotations from Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (and there are more of it in Welsh's paper), one can interpret it as a progression from matter (the left picture) through soul (the right picture) to spirit (the central picture). The center figure may be considered as a representation of mankind's "third spirit, the divine," conceived as "one of the countless radiations proceeding directly from the Highest Cause – the Spiritual light of the world."<sup>124</sup>

It would be wrong (I presume) to try to read *Evolution* as a painstaking attempt to translate the details of e.g. Madame Blavatsky's doctrines into pictorial language. But the theosophical writings give some idea of the kind of setting that Mondrian seems to have assumed his painting to have. If theosophical ideas were widespread at the time, it seems that he could count on a rather specific aesthetic competence in his public. He must have assumed the beholder to know e.g. that the sixpointed star in the picture to the right of the *Evolution* triptych is the emblem of theosophy (to be found on the cards of membership of the Theosophical Society, for instance), and he seems to have assumed the competent beholder to know that "the respectively downward and upward pointing triangles basically indicate the opposing principles of matter and spirit which sometimes

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<sup>123</sup> Madame Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. I, New York 1877, p. 212. quoted in "Mondrian and Theosophy", pp. 45-46.

<sup>124</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, I, p. 212, quoted in "Mondrian and Theosophy", p. 46.



interpenetrate and achieve balance in the ‘sacred hexagram’” (to quote from Welsh again).<sup>125</sup>

I should not say that the intended meaning of *Evolution* has become quite clear to me through Welsh’s commentary. There are many puzzling features of the pictures which remain obscure, and which might be intended to remain obscure. But by relating the *Evolution* to theosophical writings, Welsh has managed to shed some light on the competence which the painter assumed his viewers to have.

A contemporary painter producing for the market cannot count on specific competences in the public, as the Renaissance entrepreneur could. But he can assume a public which is willing to acquire the competence which a new work requires. Mondrian’s rectangular compositions, which provided the starting-point for this essay, assume an implicit beholder with a competence which is somewhat different from that assumed by the *Evolution* triptych (although the differences are not so great as they might seem to start with). Mondrian assumed a beholder with a willingness to learn through theoretical writings on art and, above all, through working with the works of art, learning to see in the relevant ways by making the relevant comparisons. When “the Singer” objects (in the *Dialogue on Neoplasticism* in *De Stijl*, Vol. II, No. 5) that he has seen *De Stijl* but found it difficult to understand, the Neoplastic painter promptly replies:

I recommend repeated reading. But the ideas that *De Stijl* expounds can give you no more than a *conception* of Neoplasticism and its connection with life: Neoplasticism’s content must be *seen* in the *work itself*. To truly appreciate something new, one has to approach it with intuitive feeling, and one must look at it a great deal, and compare.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> “Mondrian and Theosophy”, p. 47. Mondrian kept his membership card in the Dutch Theosophical Society to his death; it is now preserved by Mr. Harry Holzman, New York (Welsh, *loc. cit.*). Welsh also suggests that the blue and yellow colours used by Mondrian in the *Evolution* triptych can be interpreted as suggesting “astral shells” or radiations of the figures (p. 45). Welsh’s proposal seems rather plausible in view of Mondrian’s later rejection of the “imitation of astral colours” (*De Stijl*, Vol. 1, 3, p. 30, note 3); cf. Welsh, *op. cit.*, p. 45, note 32. Astral shells, by the way, have entered art history also via Kandinsky, e.g. his *Moscow Lady* (*Dame in Moskau*) from 1912, reproduced in Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos*, ill. 26.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Jaffé, *De Stijl*, Thames and Hudson, London 1979, p. 121.

### 3.5. Summary

In this chapter we have tried to shed further light on the nature of explanation and understanding in the history of art through a consideration of the conditions which are necessary in order for understanding to be possible. The intentionalist pattern of explanation is based on the existence of conceptual links between intentions and actions. Through a consideration of the conditions of acting we have arrived at the result that there are a number of similar conceptual links which together make up the fabric of social life: the links that exist between intentions and beliefs, on the one hand, and practices, institutions, concepts and skills on the other hand. The basic reason for considering art in relation to society and for studying the abilities and resources at the disposal of artists and beholders is, therefore, not that one happens to be interested in such things. The basic reason is that it is necessary to do so in order to understand art, since art is conceptually linked to skills, concepts, practices and institutions of different kinds.

A distinction was made between re-enacting the aesthetic experiences which might have occurred within earlier aesthetic practices and reconstructing the conditions which made such experiences possible. The task of art history (it was suggested) is to reconstruct earlier aesthetic practices.

A part of the reconstruction of aesthetic practices consists of analysing the competence which works of art of different kinds are intended to demand from the beholders. What might be demanded of an implicit beholder was illustrated with a consideration of Piet Mondrian's triptych from 1911, the theosophically inspired *Evolution*.

## 4. INTENTION AND WORK

Die Absicht ist eingebettet in der Situation, den menschlichen Gepflogenheiten und Institutionen.

An intention is embedded in its situation, in human custom and institutions.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 337)

#### 4.1. The relevance of intentions

In the foregoing chapters we have often referred to the painter's intentions, and we have argued that explanations in terms of intentions play a crucial role in the history of art and other human sciences. It is indeed not difficult to find passages in art-historical writings which seem to give support to the position we have taken. Here are some samples from texts from which we have quoted in the foregoing chapters:

Mondrian was quite clear about his aim: that of breaking down the object, and attaining a completely non-representational mode of expression. Against this, he was not quite sure which way he should choose to find forms that in reality corresponded to what he wished to express by his painting. (E. Kruskopf on Mondrian.)<sup>127</sup>

... all the time, the aim in view seemed to be the same: the reduction of forms to horizontal and vertical lines to as great an extent as was practicable with the retention of a meaningful pictorial content. (Again Kruskopf on Mondrian.)<sup>128</sup>

The beholder, however, is intentionally left in the dark, unable to see the connexion between the actions, let alone their literary meaning. (Sixten Ringbom on Kandinsky's *Stormbell*.)<sup>129</sup>

When, during the Cubist adventure, anyone tried to ask questions of Picasso, his reply was: "Il est défendu de parler au pilote." The truth, of course, is that no artist, or very few artists, work in accordance with a theory and yet all their work conforms to an intention, and it is those intentions which the theorists can analyse with more or less success. (Hans Hess in *Pictures as Arguments*.)<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> E. Kruskopf, *Shaping the Invisible. A Study in the Genesis of Non-Representational Painting 1908-1919*, Helsinki 1976, pp. 117-118.

<sup>128</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>129</sup> S. Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Turku 1970, p. 72.

<sup>130</sup> H. Hess, *Pictures as Arguments*, Sussex University Press 1975, p. 36.

But it has also been forcefully argued that appeal to intentions can never be appropriate in this kind of context. In “The Intentional Fallacy” Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that it is never relevant to appeal to the author’s intention in the field of literary criticism. For either the poet succeeded in doing what he intended to do, and in that case we need not consult anything but the resulting poem; or else he did not succeed, and then we need not worry about the intentions since our interest is in the existing poem and not in a poem which might have been produced under other circumstances.<sup>131</sup> And if this is true of poems, it seems reasonable to assume that it is true of paintings and other works of art as well.

But here there are a number of confusions and unclarities which have to be cleared up. Some of the work which is needed has already been done in the foregoing chapters. The target of Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s joint critique is i.a. the kind of romantic aesthetics epitomized in the writings of Benedetto Croce. They reject the standpoint taken by Croce in his comments on the *Madonna* of Cimabue, for instance:

Historical interpretation labours ... to reintegrate in us the psychological conditions which have changed in the course of history. It ... enables us to see a work of art (a physical object) as its author saw it in the moment of production.<sup>132</sup>

With this kind of criticism we thoroughly agree. It cannot be the object of art history to try to re-enact the aesthetic experiences of earlier times (we argued). The aim of the history of art is rather to reconstruct the conditions which made those experiences possible. But this did not lead us to reject references to the painters’ intentions as irrelevant or illegitimate in the history of art. On the contrary, we have suggested that such appeals are an essential aspect of the reconstruction of earlier aesthetic practices.

The authors of “The Intentional Fallacy” assert, in a footnote which has provoked critical comments from other authors, that “the history of words *after* a poem is written may

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<sup>131</sup> W. K. Wimsatt & M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, *Sewanee Review*, Vol. LIV, Summer 1946, pp. 468-488; reprinted i.a. in D. Newton-De Molina, ed., *On Literary Intention*, Edinburgh 1976, pp. 1-13. The quotation is from p. 2 in that book.

<sup>132</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

contribute meanings which if relevant to the original pattern should not be ruled out by a scruple of intention.”<sup>133</sup> Here we might appeal.

to the distinction we made in the first chapter between the tasks of the critic and the tasks of the art historian. Later semantical developments may indeed increase our possibilities to find aesthetically satisfying interpretations of works of art, and there is no reason why the critic should abstain from appealing to such features in his attempts to make earlier works of art meaningful to us. But (we suggest) it would not be legitimate for the art historian to do so, unless his task happened to be to write the reception story of a work of art.<sup>134</sup>

The distinctions between the critic’s business and that of the historian and between the re-enactment and the reconstruction of aesthetic experiences seem to us to diminish the force of the attack on intentionalism to a considerable extent. The view that references to intentions are always irrelevant, it may also be noted, is clearly on the way out from literary theory, as the papers collected in Newton-De Molina’s anthology *On Literary Intention* clearly show. And art-historians do not seem to entertain any scruples of that kind. “The meaning of the work of the painters can be elucidated by their own statements,” says Hans Hess categorically.<sup>135</sup> In another recent contribution to aesthetics, the anthology *The Arts and Cognition* (1977), we find the following declaration:

Interactions among language, gesture, picture, dance, music, and so on appear both persistent and fruitful. An isolationist doctrine whereby each art disdains illumination through any other mode of symbolizing flies in the face both of actual practice and of the capacity for dialogue suggested by a cognitive model.<sup>136</sup>

But in order to decide in which respects “the isolationist doctrine” of the anti-intentionalists is tenable and in which respects it is not, the concept of intention and its

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<sup>133</sup> “The Intentional Fallacy”, *On Literary Intention*, p. 257, note 7. Critical comments from other authors: see e.g. A. Fowler, “Intention Floreat”, *On Literary Intention*, pp. 249-250.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. section 1.2 above.

<sup>135</sup> *Pictures as Arguments*, p. 134.

<sup>136</sup> D. Perkins & B. Leondar, *The Arts and Cognition*, Baltimore 1977, “Introduction”, p. 4.

relations to the other strands in the fabric of action situations will have to be elucidated in more detail. To do so is the task of this chapter.

By making some distinctions between different kinds of intentions we shall also introduce some of the qualifications which are necessary to make for the intentionalist pattern of explanation to do justice to the art-historical material. Finally, we shall briefly comment on the relations of intentionalist explanations to the “critical” explanations to be found in psychoanalytic writings, for instance.

#### **4.2. Intention and competence**

If you look at a man and say what he is doing, then you will usually say what the man himself already knows, “and again in most, though indeed in fewer, cases you will be reporting not merely what he is doing, but an intention of his – namely, to do that thing,” says Miss *Anscombe in Intention*. When we look at a man who is doing something, then the man’s intention of doing what he does is usually clear to us; for actions are normally taken to be intentional (and not done by mistake or negligence, for instance). And the same applies to the man’s intention in doing what he does.<sup>137</sup> If we observe a driver getting out of his car and changing a flat tyre, we know, under normal circumstances, that he is doing what he does intentionally – his intention of doing what he does is clear to us from the situation; and under normal circumstances we also know his intention in doing what he does, viz. to replace the flat tyre with an undamaged one in order to be able to continue his journey.

But how is it possible to see this from the situation? If I go to a foreign country, a good deal of the doings of the people in that society might be incomprehensible to me to start with. And if I observe a mechanic repairing the engine of my car, I can only describe what he is doing in the most general and imprecise terms. My lack of competence in the field of motor maintenance includes the lack of the concepts which are necessary to be

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<sup>137</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford 1957, pp. 8-9.

able to see and report correctly on what he is doing. When Miss Anscombe says that in most cases you will say what the man himself already knows, she has a certain kind of situation in mind, situations in which there is a high degree of shared competence.

In order to be able to do an action of a specified kind, we need a number of skills, including the mastery of the concept under which the action falls and familiarity with the relevant set of rules and precedents. If one refers to the set of relevant concepts, rules and precedents as the “practice” or “institution” under which the action is done, then one can say that saying what a man does requires familiarity with the relevant practice or institution.

The same applies to the actor: a man cannot be said to be doing an action of a certain kind unless he is familiar with the relevant practice. Familiarity with the relevant practice is a necessary condition for the possibility of having the practice-relevant intentions, in the case of the actor, and for inferring the practice-relevant intentions from the situation, in the case of the spectator.<sup>138</sup> If you take part in the game of bridge, for instance, there are a number of rules which you must abide to, including restrictions on the kinds of intentions you can have when playing the game. You cannot intend to beat your own partner in bridge. The necessity is a logical one; there is no scope for such an intention within the practice we call “bridge”. When one takes part in a rule-governed activity falling under a certain practice, it holds generally that one is thereby committed to having certain intentions and also committed not to have certain intentions. Those intentions to which a person who wants to take part in an activity of a certain kind is necessarily committed I shall call *institutional intentions*.

Institutional intentions may be contrasted with *private intentions*, those intentions which an individual might have irrespective of whether they are permissible within the practice in question or not. The apprentice who intends to beat his own partner in bridge has a

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<sup>138</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein’s example in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 337: “Soweit ich die Satzform im voraus beabsichtige, ist dies dadurch möglich, dass ich deutsch sprechen kann.“



private intention which happens to fall outside the social space defined by the concept of bridge.

To find out about institutional intentions one must familiarize oneself with the relevant practice, and nothing more. No information on the practitioner's wishes, plans and autobiography is relevant as far as institutional intentions are concerned, assuming that one knows the relevant practice. To find out what the private intentions are one must get information on the individual concerned. Autobiographical details might be relevant as far as private intentions are concerned.

Learning what kinds of intentions are appropriate and not within a certain practice is part of learning the practice. The common access to institutional intentions which familiarity with a given practice gives to the actor and the spectator is the explanation of how practices can come to foster mutual expectations: when an author or a painter produces a work of art, then he does so with the intention that the spectator should attribute to him the intention that he (the author, the painter) wanted the reader to look at the work of art in certain ways. (Similarly, if a speaker meant something by uttering x, then he must have intended x to have certain features and a certain audience to recognize that x has those features and, further, he must have intended the audience to recognize that he had the intention to produce a certain response in the audience.) If, for instance, Piet Mondrian intended to communicate C by painting the sixpointed stars in the right hand panel of *Evolution* (Fig. 26), then he must have intended the observer to attribute that intention to him, and in order for this to be possible he must have given the stars certain features which he could count on to be recognized by the observer as intended to communicate C. He could not have counted on an arbitrarily selected observer to be able to do so; he must have presupposed a certain kind of public with a certain competence. We have referred to this kind of public as the implicit beholder.

But have we not conceded too much to the anti-intentionalists when drawing the distinction between institutional and private intentions in this way, asserting that autobiographical details are relevant to private but not to institutional intentions ? I think

not, provided that the following qualification is made. An original artist like Mondrian might be regarded as setting up his own aesthetic practice, which will by the nature of the case be more or less similar to other aesthetic practices but nevertheless a phenomenon *sui generis*. In order to acquire the competence required of the implicit beholder it might be a good idea to get information on the artist and his circumstances. This may, in fact, be the only practicable way of getting access to the social space to which the works of art one is interested in belong. The rationale for informing oneself about the life of (say) Piet Mondrian is, then, that this might help to illuminate the practice under which the work of art was intended to be seen. A 19<sup>th</sup> century painter producing a battle scene on canvas could rely on stable expectations in his public; there existed a common frame of reference for painter and public which made it unnecessary for the beholder to get any further information on the intentions of the painter. The case is different when a painter steps outside the traditional genres and sets up a new pictorial practice. In order to identify the new practice, information on the painter's circumstances and his own statements of intention may be invaluable.<sup>139</sup>

Modern art is a world of experiments and attempts to set up new aesthetic practices. Even if one sticks to the masterpieces, in which the intentions of the artists have been clearly and successfully embodied in the works, there is, therefore, a good reason for sometimes considering the artist's verbalized intentions and personal circumstances. This may be the only way of identifying the practice in question.

### **4.3. The blueprint model**

There is a traditional view according to which an action consists of an intention which occurs in the mind and behaviour which occurs in the world. And according to the traditional view, the occurrence of the intention in the mind comes before the occurrence of the behaviour in the outer world, and is sometimes considered to be the cause of the

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<sup>139</sup> "In modern art one can very simply state that the content of the picture is the artist's intention; it is the painter's life, his will and his ego which forms the content of the picture." (Hans Hess, *Pictures as Arguments*, p. 54.) Somewhat exaggerated but not untrue.

behaviour (in some sense of the word “cause”, for instance a Humean sense compatible with the requirements of the deductive-nomological pattern of explanation).<sup>140</sup>

Against the background of this traditional view, it is tempting to read intentionalist explanations as accounts of how behaviour in the external world are caused by intentions occurring in the inner world of the mind. Consider again the intentionalist pattern in one of its uncomplicated versions:

A intends to bring about p.

A considers that he cannot bring about p unless he does a.

Therefore A sets himself to do a.<sup>141</sup>

If, for instance, Piet Mondrian intended to make painting autonomous and considered that he could not bring this about unless he let the illusory treatment of space go,<sup>142</sup> then this might be interpreted to mean that the painter first formed an intention in his mind and then looked around for ways of realizing his intention and finally, after having found the means which he considered necessary to realize his intention, he started the process of doing away with the illusion of space. As an account of how Mondrian reached the position that pictures – at least his own pictures – should be simple arrangements of rectangles in a strictly limited scale of colours, this sounds rather unconvincing. In one of the papers which he contributed to *De Stijl*, he has given a much more convincing account of the road to Neoplasticism, as he called the pictorial practice that he arrived at about 1917:

A: But I still don't understand why you favour the straight line and have come entirely to exclude the curved.

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<sup>140</sup> The view can be traced back to Descartes and 18<sup>th</sup> century British empiricism. Cf. R. Woolheim's inaugural lecture “On Drawing an Object”, reprinted in *On Art and the Mind*, in which a difficulty which this view gives rise to for the subject of intention in art is briefly discussed.

<sup>141</sup> G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, Cornell University Press 1971, p. 30. Cf. section 2.3 above.

<sup>142</sup> Example 6 in section 2.1 above.

B: In searching for an expression of vastness, I was led to seek the greatest tension the straight line, because all curvature resolves into the straight, no place remains for the curved.

A: Did you come to this conclusion suddenly ?

B: No, very gradually. First I abstracted the capricious, then the freely curved, and finally the mathematically curved.

A: So it was through this abstracting that you came to exclude all naturalistic representation and subjectmatter ?

B: That's right, through the work itself. The theories I have just mentioned, concerning these exclusions, I developed afterwards.<sup>143</sup>

A, the interested layman, has a problem of understanding: he does not understand why B, the neoplastic painter, only uses straight lines in his pictures. (Consider e.g. Fig. 1 - Fig. 5 above.) B increases A's understanding by clarifying his intentions. He intended to "express vastness", he explains, and considered that it was necessary to eliminate all curved lines in order to do so. Given a certain set of assumptions, which has to be described in more detail in order to make the explanation transparent, his intention may be said to explain the choice of pictorial means. The argument fits the intentional pattern well. But it is not plausible to assume in this case that the intention existed in advance of the search for the means and the pictorial experiments. Rather, it belongs to the logic of creative processes that the intentions and the means are clarified along the road. Mondrian was searching the questions as well the answers, one might say. The aim was as much to clarify the ultimate intentions as it was to find the suitable means to realize those intentions.

The traditional view, according to which intentions precede and perhaps cause behaviour in the external world, fits a certain selection of examples only, and Mondrian's case does not belong to those examples. A paradigm case of pre-existing intentions being translated into behaviour is the building of a house following a set of instructions. I shall refer to the relation between intention and action illustrated by such cases as *the blueprint*

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<sup>143</sup> P. Mondrian, "A Dialogue on Neoplasticism", *De Stijl*, Vol. II, pp. 37-39; quoted from the English translation in H. L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl*, London 1970, p. 120.

*model*.<sup>144</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that at least some attempts to reduce the intentionalist pattern to causal explanations on deductive-nomological lines have been based on a predilection for cases which fit the blueprint model rather than cases of creative searching.

A comparison between blueprint cases and cases of searching will help to bring out some of the ways in which intentions might differ from case to case. In the first place, intentions do not have to be clear. In the cases which fit the blueprint model they are; the building instructions are (one hopes) sufficiently clear for the builder to perform the succession of actions required to erect the building in the desired shape. In creative processes, intentions are often not clear at all. They exist, at least to start with, in the form of hunches, intuitions, ideas, a general sense of direction, which is a good reason for a painter to say (as Picasso did ) that it is not permitted to talk to the driver. In the second place, intentions do not have to be fully articulated. In the building instructions they are. In the painter's case, the intentions exist more in the eye and the fingertips than on the tongue. Intentions, like the competence which makes them possible, often exist in the form of practical knowledge, knowing how to do things, rather than in the form of theoretical knowledge, that is knowledge *about* how to do things ("knowing that").<sup>145</sup>

Creative processes are characteristically processes in which means and ends continually modify each other. The search process which led up to Mondrian's neoplastic paintings was obviously characterized by an interplay of this kind between intentions and attempted ways of realizing the intentions pictorially. That the intentions were developed along the road is not incompatible with Mondrian's own statement that the theories were developed afterwards. For intentions are not the same as theories. The intentions in question are Mondrian's institutional intentions, that is his pictorial intentions, which, if

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<sup>144</sup> When Miss Anscombe wants to clarify the notion of practical knowledge in *Intention*, she starts by considering someone who is directing a project like the erection of a building. In the utilitarian tradition in moral philosophy, business administration, decision theory and similar disciplines, it has been customary to consider only well-structured situations with clear, pre-existing intentions. eprint model is firmly entrenched in our tradition.

<sup>145</sup> On the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, see G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p.57 and 81ff. The distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how" was made by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*, London 1949, Ch. 2. The distinction goes back to Aristotle.

successfully embodied in a work, may be referred to as “the intention of the work”.<sup>146</sup> The theories propounded by Mondrian in *De Stijl* and elsewhere are attempts to clarify for himself and others what the search processes resulting in pictures like the *Composition* from 1922 reproduced on the front page of this essay amounted to. The “theories” are partly attempts to formulate the intentions in words, *ex post facto*, and partly attempts to justify the intentions embedded in the works with reference to an ideological superstructure; to this we shall return shortly.

In order to make the intentionalist pattern of explanation fit our art-historical material, it is also necessary to recognize that the intention to clarify unclear intentions may be a permissible entry into the schema. The overall intention of Mondrian’s work may, in retrospect, be characterized as an intention to find out what he really intended. The result was a process of continuous searching and experimenting, with the overarching aim of finding more and adequate expressions for the aim that was gradually becoming clear through the work itself. Mondrian did not have the competence required to do what he did in his neoplastic period when he started his series of pictorial experiments. It was only when he had built up that competence through a process of trial and error that the intention of it all could be clearly formulated. And, similarly, the beholder has to build up the required competence in himself in order to be able to see what Mondrian intended him to see as intended in his paintings.

A man’s intention of doing something is not the same as his intention in doing it, and a man’s intention in doing something is, again, not the same as what he wants to achieve doing it. By painting a picture a man may want to earn enough money to make another trip to Paris, for instance, which is irrelevant for us to know if we want to understand his intentions in painting it. One might refer to the aims that a person wants to reach by doing something as his “motives”. Motives have, then, to be distinguished from intentions, and particularly the intentions which have been successfully embodied in a work, i.e. the intention of the work.

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<sup>146</sup> Cf. M. Roskill, “On the ‘Intention’ and ‘Meaning’ of Works of Art”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Spring 1977, pp. 99-110.

If one makes the distinctions between institutional and private intentions and between intentions and motives, noticing that the kind of intentions that are relevant in aesthetic contexts are the intentions in doing the works of art, then ( I conclude) one has to agree with Quentin Skinner’s anti-intentionalist moral: “it must actually be an exegetical duty, and not a fallacy at all, for critics and historians to concentrate on attempting to recover the intentions of speakers or writers *in* the performance of these complex types of linguistic action,”<sup>147</sup> adding that what is true of words is also true of pictures.

#### 4.4. Words and works

Unlike Picasso, Piet Mondrian has written extensively on art. His theory of art should not be identified with the pictorial intentions which have been expressed in his paintings. Mondrian was above all a painter, and the results he arrived at are the results of his pictorial work, his attempts to solve the aesthetic problems that arose in the gap between his general aims and the resources at his disposal. As he himself emphasized, the process of abstracting and its products, paintings like the *Composition* from 1922 and the *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* from 1944, came about “through the work itself”.<sup>148</sup> When he hit upon new resources for painting the kind of paintings that he wanted to do in more adequate ways, he let himself be “influenced”, as it is called, that is, he adapted the resources to his own purposes. The process of searching and experimenting lasted for more than thirty years, until he found his mature style around 1921-22. But then the searching and experimenting continued within the pictorial universe that he had settled for as the result of trying a number of different idioms. Within the limits that he imposed on himself – working with the three primary colours red, blue and yellow, and the two “non-colours” black and white, and straight lines on flat surfaces only – he continued to experiment with different combinations of lines and colours, varying the number of black lines, the width and length of the lines, the shape and size of the rectangles. His primary criterion for judging on the satisfactoriness of the results must have been aesthetic: did

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<sup>147</sup> Q. Skinner, “On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, January 1971., p. 15.

<sup>148</sup> See the quotation in the foregoing section.

the attempted arrangement balance without losing the tension that is necessary to achieve an interesting picture ? The primary reason why he sometimes let the black lines stop short before the edges must (I submit) have been the same as the reason why many of the rectangles on the canvasses are open on at least one side: the reason must have been that this was required in order to get a result which was adequate from the pictorial point of view.

In order for the public to be able to appreciate the unfamiliar kind of paintings that Mondrian began to produce after his Cubist period, it had to learn to see the paintings from the right point of view. The possibilities for misinterpretation were overwhelming. A public which was used to representational painting of the academic and realistic type and which was gradually learning to appreciate the works of the impressionists and *l'art nouveau* was liable to reject the purely abstract works of art as a kind of decoration, at best, and as rubbish, at worst. Kandinsky was well aware of the first danger when he warned that a too sudden shift to non-representational art might lead the public to look at it in the ways in which they were used at looking at carpets and ties, as pure decoration.<sup>149</sup> As for the second type of reaction, it might be mentioned that Mondrian was one of the few artists from outside Germany who had the honour of being represented at Hitler's attempt to solve the problem of contemporary art, the exhibition for "degenerate art" in Munich in 1937.<sup>150</sup> One Mondrian's reasons for writing on art was to attempt to forestall misunderstandings of that kind and to build up the required competence in the public, teaching the beholders what to look for and, perhaps even more important, what not to look for in his paintings.

When Mondrian pointed out that the subject-matter of his earlier paintings was not important and that the beholder should look for the same kinds of things in his earlier paintings as in his rectangular compositions – "the plastic expression of relationships through oppositions of colour and line" – he was writing with the undeniable authority of

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<sup>149</sup> Cf. the quotation from *On the Spiritual in Art* in section 3.3 above.

<sup>150</sup> I. Dunlop, *The Shock of the New. Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art*, London 1972. The reason why some foreigners were included seems to have been, primarily, the wish to demonstrate the incompetence of the directors of the German museums.



the master of a pictorial practice trying to initiate others into the practice. Still, his declarations of intention do not necessarily coincide with the intentions in his works. The words are instruments intended to guide the beholder's perception. When the beholder has acquired the competence which is necessary for seeing the intentions in the works, he can throw the instruments away, like a ladder which is no longer of any use. Unlike the art historian, whose task it is to transform the beholder's practical knowledge into theoretical knowledge through a reconstruction of the conditions which made the beholder's aesthetic experiences possible.

On the basis of his pictorial work, Mondrian erected a theoretical superstructure, which makes up the rest of his theory of art. He had a great faith in the possibilities of reforming man's life through art. In a letter from 1909, from which we have quoted earlier in this essay, Mondrian explains that according to his view "art can provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm."<sup>151</sup> This was written during his most active period of interest in theosophy. Some years later, Mondrian got to know a Dutch thinker who elaborated his own version of theosophy, which he referred to as "Christosophy". The thinker, Dr. M. H. J. Schoenmakers, was the author of some books which influenced Mondrian's thinking considerably (*Mensch en Natuur*, 1913; *Het nieuwe Wereldbeeld*, 1915; *Beginselen der Beeldenden Wiskunde*, 1916). For some time (1915-16), Mondrian was also in close personal contact with Schoenmakers. Mondrian's Dutch name for his pictorial practice, *de nieuwe beelding*,<sup>152</sup> was inspired by *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld*, and to judge from the quotations from Schoenmakers which I have seen, Mondrian's ideology owes a great deal to this source.

It would, I think, be possible to reconstruct Mondrian's ideology as it is expressed in his art-theoretical writings under four headings: aesthetics, anthropology, social philosophy, and world view. The world-view which Mondrian said he wanted to express in his painting seems to have been particularly strongly influenced by the writings of Schoenmakers. "Our desire is to penetrate nature in such a way as to reveal the internal

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<sup>151</sup> See section 3.4 above.

<sup>152</sup> When he moved abroad in the 1920s, he translated this as "Neo-Plasticism".

structure of the real,” wrote Schoenmakers. “However persistent, however capricious it may be in its variations, nature always functions fundamentally with absolute regularity, that is, with plastic regularity.”<sup>153</sup> Similarly, Mondrian aimed at eliminating “the capricious” in order to be able to express “the universal – the core of all things”.<sup>154</sup> Also the ideas of the basic colour triad and of the vertical and the horizontal as the basic forces of the world had been formulated by Schoenmakers.<sup>155</sup> In order to shed light on the world-view which Mondrian tries to formulate in this writings, one should (it seems) make a detailed comparison with Schoenmakers’s books. Mondrian’s view of the nature of man, his anthropology, is closely tied to his views on the nature of the world: man’s consciousness develops from the individual to the universal, natural feeling is being replaced by spiritual feeling, which is said to be “reason-and-feeling in one”.<sup>156</sup> A new consciousness is developing, and it is the function of art to express it plastically. Art is seen in a Hegelian way as an expression of its time: “The consciousness of an age determines the art expression: the art expression reflects the age’s awareness.”<sup>157</sup> Mondrian’s social philosophy is a vague corollary of his views on art and the nature of man. He envisaged a new culture, in which the masses would have developed to the point where they would be capable of uniting with the universal, an aesthetically advanced culture where everybody has developed “a consciousness of the universal within himself”.<sup>158</sup> He saw the first signs of this new culture in the development of abstract art, in the new architecture, in the new cities. “The truly modern artist sees the metropolis as the supreme form of abstract life; it stands closer to him than nature.”<sup>159</sup>

How important is it to familiarize oneself with an ideology of this kind in order to understand Mondrian’s paintings ? Mondrian was well aware that his field of competence was that of the painter and not that of the philosopher. Yet, he felt compelled to venture into the fields of ontology and social philosophy, stating his reason as

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<sup>153</sup> Quoted in F. Elgar, *Mondrian*, Thames and Hudson 1968, p. 105.

<sup>154</sup> P. Mondrian, “De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst”, *De Stijl*, Vol. 1, 1917/18. English translation in Jaffé, *De Stijl*, pp.36-92.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. the reference to Schoenmakers in “De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst”, Jaffé, p. 55.

<sup>156</sup> *Op. cit.*, Jaffé, p. 61.

<sup>157</sup> *Op. cit.*, Jaffé, p. 39.

<sup>158</sup> *Op. cit.*, Jaffé, p. 53.

<sup>159</sup> Mondrian, *op. cit.*

follows: "At present, the new plastic is still so new and unfamiliar that the artist himself is compelled to speak about it. Later the philosopher, the scientist, the theologian or others will., if possible, complement and perfect his words. At present the practice is perfectly clear only to those who evolved it through practice."<sup>160</sup> The answer to the question seems to be, then, that familiarizing oneself with the ideology might help the beholder to acquire the competence needed to understand the intended meaning of the paintings. For the art historian who attempts to reconstruct aesthetic practices, the ideology will not only be helpful but essential in the attempt to map the social space to which the works of art belong.

To see why this is so, we can return to the intentionalist pattern of explanation once again. In the premisses of an intentional explanation, the intentions and the means - end considerations of the agent are described. Now in order to make the means-end considerations of an agent understandable, they will have to be related to the assumptions that the agent makes about the world, about the nature of man, about the society in which he lives. Mondrian's selection of means for reaching his pictorial aims are far from self-explanatory. Some of the arbitrariness one might feel when confronted with Mondrian's particular choice of colours is removed when the choice of the colours is seen against the background of Schoenmakers's writings, if one takes the fact into account that those writings were deeply respected by Mondrian.

An ideology need, however, not be a true picture of the world. It may be that one's attempts to formulate one's assumptions in words are distorted, to some extent, and that the true reasons on which one acted remained hidden to oneself, to a greater or less extent. Again, we are reminded that a man's intentions need not coincide with his formulations of his intentions. The reading, understanding and reconstruction of the ideology must, therefore, be supplemented with a critical examination of it. The ideology remains essential for the historical reconstruction, but it is necessary to add that it is no more than the starting-point.

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<sup>160</sup> P. Mondrian, *op. cit.*, Jaffé, *De Stijl*, p. 60.

There is a kind of critical work which is a part of the construction of any intentional explanation. (Even in the trivially simple cases which philosophers tend to discuss one has consider the possibility of lying and pretense.) There is also a kind of critical work which can be done on the basis of intentional explanations and which will result in explanations of other kinds, for instance explanations in terms of subconscious needs and drives or explanations in terms of underlying politico-economic forces. It is tempting to psychologize about Mondrian and his art, looking at his paintings as well as his behaviour as expressions of a rigid personality on the verge of a neurosis. The unity of life and painting, is striking in Mondrian's case, as the anecdotes about his idiosyncrasies illustrate. He lived as he painted, and it is only natural that one of his studios has been reconstructed and shown at an exhibition as another work of art. The historian Peter Gay has attempted to study the works of Mondrian from a psychological point of view. The results are, not surprisingly, not very startling ("Mondrian's aesthetic choices emerged from his unconscious conflicts" etc.). Explanations of this kind do not contribute to our understanding of what the works of art are. From the art historian's point of view they are peripheral.

"It is part of the historian's conventional wisdom that he must respect intentions, writes Gay. "his is a useful injunction. But respectfulness must not cripple skepticism; the second quality is as essential, and as professional, as the first."<sup>161</sup> He finds that Mondrian's explanations "precisely because they are so single-minded and so doctrinaire, explain so little."<sup>162</sup> And therefore he turns to a consideration of Mondrian's unconscious intentions. This is, I think, a good illustration of a confusion of pictorial intentions with underlying motives, which only has the result that the historian removes himself from the field of art to that of psychology. Gay finds it necessary to go to psychology in order to answer the question why Mondrian's paintings are what they are.<sup>163</sup> This seems to me to be the result of another confusion, which is connected with the belief in deductive-nomological explanations. "I accept Hempel's argument that in principle causal

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<sup>161</sup> P. Gay, *Art and Act*, p. 210.

<sup>162</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>163</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 226.

explanation in history is like causal explanation in other sciences,” he writes.<sup>164</sup> This, I submit, is part of an ideology which does not correspond to the actual practice of historians.

#### **4.5. Summary**

It has been maintained that it is a mistake to pay attention to intentions in the study of literature and art (“the intentional fallacy”). The view has been criticized by a number of writers, and we have found reason to agree with the critics.

It one makes a number of distinctions (we argued), the relevance of intentions for the history of art and literature can be clearly seen. The first two distinctions which have to be made are the distinctions between the re-enactment and the reconstruction of aesthetic experiences and between art criticism and art history. Next, one has to distinguish between institutional intentions and private intentions. Then one has to dissociate oneself from the traditional picture of action according to which an action is the result of the agent’s previous deliberations, and to see instead that intentions may be more or less unclear, more or less well formulated by the agent, and more or less conscious to the agent. And, finally, the external motives of the agent must be distinguished from his intentions in doing what he does. The kind of intentions that are directly relevant for the history of art are the artists’ intentions *in* making the works of art, the intentions falling under the aesthetic practices which is the field of study of the history of art.

Accordingly, it is the institutional aesthetic intentions embedded in the works of art which are the relevant entries into intentionalist explanations in the history of art. Other types of explanation, e.g. psychoanalytic explanations, have a subsidiary interest for the history of art.

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<sup>164</sup> In a comment on Hempel’s *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science* towards the end of *Art and Act*, p. 238.

We also considered, more briefly, Mondrian's art-theoretical writings, suggesting that his "theory of art" might be reconstructed under the headings aesthetics, anthropology, social philosophy, and world-view. His theory of art might be regarded as an ideology which, if handled critically, is important for the historical reconstruction of Mondrian's aesthetic practice and therefore also for the historical understanding of his oeuvre.

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this essay, we made a distinction between two ways of increasing our understanding of works of art, which we referred to as the intentional and the transformational way of explaining works of art. Works of art may be illuminated by relating them to the painter's intentions, and by comparing them with other works of art, particularly by constructing sequences of works which exhibit a direction of development. As the reader will have suspected all along, the two ways of explaining works of art are ultimately identical. For the kind of intentions which are relevant for the understanding of art are the institutional aesthetic intentions which have been successfully embedded in actual works of art and which, therefore, can be read from the works themselves, given a certain competence in the beholder. An artist's intentions are not an assembly of isolated items; rather they make up a programme, and that programme can be seen from the works themselves, at least in the cases where the programme has been successfully realized in the works of art. On the basis of the works, a painter may erect an ideological superstructure in the form of a "theory of art", as Mondrian did. To acquaint oneself with a superstructure of that kind may be helpful for the beholder who wants to reach a deeper understanding of the works in question, and for the art historian the ideologies produced by artists may be invaluable as starting-points for the reconstruction of the aesthetic practices of earlier times which, we have suggested, is the central task of the discipline called "the history of art".