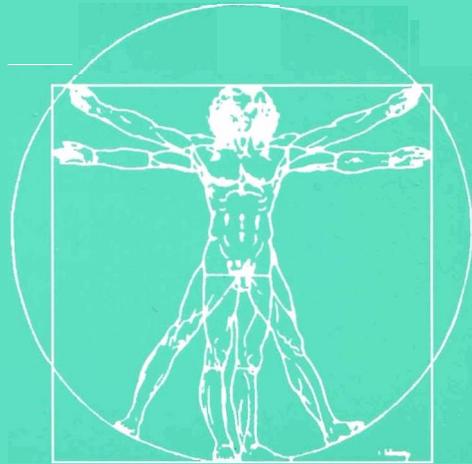


# Understanding the Arts

Contemporary Scandinavian Aesthetics

Jeanette Emt & Göran Hermerén (eds.)

STUDIES IN AESTHETICS 3



Lund  
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# Convention and Creativity

*Tore Nordenstam*

## 1. To Truly Appreciate Something New

'Only through intuitive feeling, through long contemplation and comparison, can one come to complete appreciation of the new.' This statement by the painter Piet Mondrian, first published in the journal *De Stijl* in 1919,<sup>1</sup> is a very precise description of the way to approach his own works and other creative and original works of art. Why is that so?

If one looks at a number of Mondrian's paintings from his 'neoplastic' period, from around 1920 up to his death in 1944, one will immediately notice a number of similarities, which connect all the works from this time to something which has a distinct quality of unity or cohesion and, at least to the more experienced eye, a distinct quality of its own, a stamp of originality, in spite of innumerable paths to other contemporary works of art of a more or less similar kind.

But those pictures are, more clearly so than most other works of pictorial art, ambiguous (to put it mildly). For those who have concerned themselves with the development of Mondrian's painting, a mass of information is activated when I remind them of the fact that the *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue*, in the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague, was painted in the year 1921. What I shall do now is to sketch an answer to the question of what it is that gets activated in such a situation, what kinds of knowledge and insights it is all about. It has to do with both natural and cultural constraints of different sorts (section 2 and 3). I shall pay particular attention to the role of *intentions* and *comparisons* in the world of art (section 3). I shall conclude with some comments on the role of intentions in creative processes (section 4), throughout using the development of the painter Piet Mondrian as a model of understanding in the cultural sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Mondrian, 'Dialog over de Nieuwe Beelding', *De Stijl*, February and March 1919; quoted from the English translation in *The New Art—The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, edited and translated by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, London: Thames and Hudson, 1987, p. 78.

## 2. Natural Constraints

To those who have little experience with pictures of this kind, Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* from 1921 will remain infinitely ambiguous. To see why it is literally true of all pictures that they are infinitely ambiguous to those who are sufficiently inexperienced, we can devote a few minutes of our lives to the conditions of perspectival drawing. Dürer's woodcut from *Unterweisung der Messung* (1525) shows how a lute will be projected onto a screen or a sheet of paper from a given point of view in accordance with rules of projection delimited by nature (the laws of optics) (Fig. 1).

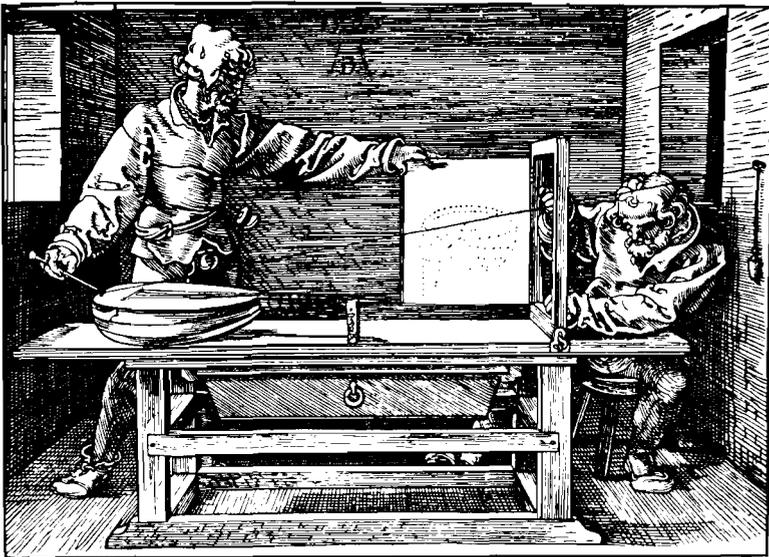


Fig.1. A. Dürer, From *Unterweisung der Messung* (1525).

The lute may be represented in infinitely many ways by varying the position of the lute. And it is also true of any given projection that it might be taken as a projection of infinitely many other things than this lute. As Gombrich puts it in *Art and Illusion*, 'any number of objects can be constructed that will result in the identical aspect from the peephole'.<sup>2</sup> One can, e.g., think of any

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*,

number of wire constructions which will result in the same projection on the screen.<sup>3</sup> Or think of all the things that can be represented, more or less adequately, by a couple of circles (Teacup and Saucer, Dime on Dollar, Mexican Siesta, Football in Moonlight, you continue).

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

- (1) Any given picture can be a picture of an infinite number of objects.
- (2) A given picture cannot be a picture of whatever objects you like; there are restrictions on the kinds of things that a given picture can be a picture of.

The first point is uncontroversial. Some reflection on the Mexican Siesta and Dime on Dollar examples should be enough to remove disagreement about this condition. The second is more controversial, it seems. Semioticians like Umberto Eco and philosophers like Nelson Goodman would seem to defend the thesis that all pictures are wholly conventional. If someone denies the existence of 'iconical signs', that is signs which depend upon a natural similarity between picture and object, like the representations of the male and female genitals you find in public toilets, if someone poses himself/herself in that position, I do not want to argue in any other way than by drawing attention to the geometrical necessities exploited in perspectival drawing. And I should also insist on making a distinction between natural and unnatural pictures. By a natural picture I mean a picture which can be *seen* to be a picture of a certain kind of object. By an unnatural picture I mean, for instance, a drawing which can only be taken to be a representation of a certain kind of object after a process of calculation, decipherment, decoding (in the everyday sense of that word, not in the strained semiotic sense which goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure, which makes all understanding a matter of coding, decoding and interpretation). Dürer's woodcuts could be systematically disformed in such a way that you would have to use a suitable computer programme in order to be able to correlate them rightly with situations in our world. Søren Kjørup's drawing from 1980 (Fig. 2) is unobjectionable as a (somewhat clumsy) drawing of a snake. When he makes a heroic attempt to persuade us that the same picture is a possible picture of a cat in our world, he is not equally convincing.<sup>4</sup> That drawing is neither a natural picture of a cat nor an unnatural one, it seems. In the absence of a

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kjørup, 'Notat om kattebilder og slangebilder' (A Note on Cat-Pictures and Snake-Pictures), *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, 1980:2, pp. 87-92.

specification of a suitable system of rules of projection, the example is left hanging in the air. Kjørup seems to assume that some such system is possible, but does nothing to substantiate the claim. (What would the *Mona Lisa*, for instance, represent when treated in the same way as the snake?)

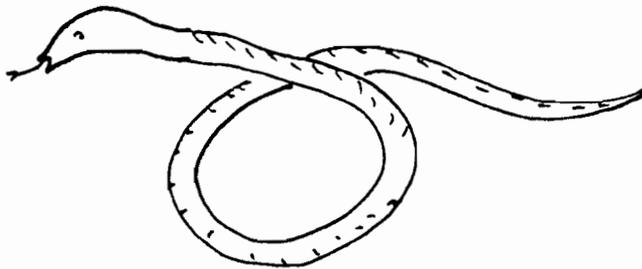


Fig. 2. S. Kjørup, *Drawing* (1980).

The moral I want to draw from this is that there is a strong element of conventionality in the understanding of all pictures. In the case of non-representative abstract art, this is obviously so. The same applies to representative pictures. If you lack experience with the relevant parts of the world, you will not be able to select the right kind of situation from the infinite range of situations which can be matched with it. And if you lack all experience with pictures, you cannot even get started.<sup>5</sup> A picture with a faulty perspective can be interpreted as a convincing rendering of a possible but unfamiliar world, as Sir Ernst points out in *Art and Illusion*.<sup>6</sup> It is only against the background of our experience with both the world and with other pictures that a given picture can be characterized as 'faulty'.

So much for the natural constraints on picture communication. The

<sup>5</sup> Members of the Fur and Daju tribes in the Sudan were completely unfamiliar with pictures as late as 1967, according to the social anthropologist K. Lindqvist Nordenstam, who made extensive field-work in Western Sudan at that time. They could not see a passport photograph as a picture of her, for instance. (Personal communication.)

<sup>6</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

conventions to be found are situated in a space delimited by the natural constraints which happen to be part of the limits of our world. To shed some light on the cultural constraints, I shall return to Mondrian's neoplastic paintings.

### 3. Cultural Constraints

If one looks at Mondrian's paintings from the twenties and thirties, one can see a number of family likenesses. Not all the members of the family show all characteristics, but they are all similar in some interesting ways. After a while, and perhaps helped by better informed beholders, we can begin to see a number of conventions at work in those pictures. Some of the conventions can be formulated without much difficulty: 'Use only two or more of the following five colours: yellow, red, blue, black and whitish-greyish nuances', 'Use only horizontal and vertical lines and contours', 'Avoid all curves'. Some of the conventions may be more difficult to formulate, e.g., concerning number and size of the black stripes and coloured rectangles. Some of the conventions may be impossible to formulate in so many words, although we can see them at work.

It is obvious, then, that in a sense the first picture we considered here, the *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* from 1921 is no unique painting. It belongs to a series of works in which the same formal means are used. Now, why does anybody choose to paint pictures like this? 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 these pictures? Do the chosen colours have any symbolic meanings, for instance? What about the triangles which in some pictures (the diamond shaped ones) break the rule that only rectangles should be used? And why do the bands sometimes stop just before the edge of the canvas, as in the first one of the two paintings from 1921 with the title 'Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue'?<sup>7</sup> Why are there only two or more of precisely those colours, blue, red and yellow? Why are there no monochromatic paintings, for instance? Are the pictures intended to represent anything at all? If so, what?

Looking for answers to such questions, one can turn to the literature on Mondrian, of which there exists a good deal by now. Commenting on the second *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* from 1921, Hans L. C. Jaffé begins as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert M. Rothschild, Ossining, New York. Both paintings are reproduced in Hans L.C. Jaffé, *Piet Mondrian*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977, pp. 135, 137.

There is a clearly marked difference between this *Composition* and that of the first half of the same year, 1921. An elementary triad has now been decided on. This decision, which Mondrian arrived at empirically in 1921, was formulated in 1926, with the help of his friend Michel Seuphor, in a little statement of neo-plastic principles, the first paragraph of which runs: 'The plastic medium should be the flat plane or the rectangular prism in primary colors (red, blue and yellow) and in non-color (white, black and grey). In architecture, empty space counts as non-color' (Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 166).

Another aspect of the same development reached by Mondrian in this critical year of 1921 is outlined in the second paragraph of the statement: 'There must be an equivalence of plastic means. Different in size and colour, they should nevertheless have equal value. In general, equilibrium involves a large uncolored surface or an empty space, and rather small colored surface or space filled with matter.'<sup>8</sup>

Jaffé goes on to describe a number of details in the picture ('the white area forming the painting's center of force is not a geometrically precise square, a fact reminiscent of the small deviations from geometry that Ictinus and his workshop employed in building the Parthenon in Athens, precisely in order to obtain the optical suggestion of complete regularity'), and he elaborates on the difference between this picture and the preceding one with the same title:

It is striking to see how Mondrian, in a very short period of time, has arrived at an effect that is so much loftier and more monumental than before. The subdivision of the planes is now on a larger scale, and the color harmony is tighter and simpler; otherwise, however, this painting is closely related to the preceding one. Here too there is a blue-grey color contrasting slightly with the white and with the primary colors; here too the black lines do not always run to the edge of the canvas.<sup>9</sup>

I see two things happening in these quotations from Jaffé's *catalogue raisonné* which illustrate characteristic features of explanations in the arts and, generally, in the human sphere: (1) the characteristic reference to the *intentions* of the artist, and (2) the characteristic use that is being made of *comparisons*.

References to the intentions of artists and authors abound in the aesthetic disciplines, *pace* Wimsatt's and Beardsley's rejection of intentional terminology in 'The Intentional Fallacy'.<sup>10</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley presented

<sup>8</sup> H.L.C. Jaffé, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> W.K. Wimsatt & M.C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review*, 1946:54, pp. 468-488; reprinted, e.g., in D. Newton-De Molina (ed.), *On Literary Intention*, Edinburgh: The University Press, 1976.

a neat argument for not dealing with intentions in the arts: either the artist's intentions have been successfully embodied in the work, and then we need not bother about them since we are interested in the work; or else the intentions have not been successfully embodied in the work, and then we need not bother with the intentions since we are interested in the actually existing work and not possible but non-existent ones.

It is easy to accept the main points behind this criticism: the impossibility of reducing works of art to ideas in the artists' minds (the romantic theory of artistic creation), and the impossibility of reducing works of art to declarations of intentions. The notion of intention which is of primary interest in art criticism is the notion of *embedded intentions* in contrast to the *verbalized, declared intentions* of the artist. The fact that in the arts we are primarily concerned with the intentions which have been successfully embedded in actual works of art explains the facility with which one switches in criticism from talking about features of the work to talking about the author and his intentions. In order to explain why some lines break off before reaching the edge in some of Mondrian's works from the twenties and thirties, you may refer to the *artist's aims*, proposing for instance that he wanted to give the whole 'a hovering, immaterial quality' (Jaffé).<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, you can describe the same situation by saying that *the work* expresses that kind of quality.

Conceding that much, it does not seem necessary to follow Wimsatt's and Beardsley's suggestion that all references to the artist's declared intentions are irrelevant in the world of art. I have, for instance, found some of Piet Mondrian's own comments on his painting rather clarifying. Listen to the beginning of the dialogue between 'the Singer' and 'the Painter' from which we quoted earlier in this essay:

- A. I admire your earlier work. Because it means so much to me, I would like better to understand your present way of painting. I see nothing in these rectangles. What are you aiming at?
- B. My new paintings have the same aim as the previous ones. Both have the *same* aim, but my latest work brings it out more clearly.
- A. And what is that?
- B. To express *relationships* plastically through oppositions of color and line.
- A. But didn't your earlier work represent *nature*?
- B. I expressed myself *by means* of nature. But if you carefully observe the sequence of my work, you will see that it progressively abandoned the naturalistic appearance of things and increasingly emphasized the plastic expression of relationships.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> H.L.C. Jaffé, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> P. Mondrian, 'Dialogue over de Nieuwe Beelding', *De Stijl*, 1919; quoted here from the

One way of explaining Mondrian's rectangular compositions is indeed to follow his own advice and observe the sequence of his works carefully. One can, e.g., look at the series of tree studies by Mondrian, beginning with his landscapes from the beginning of this century, through *The Red Tree* (1908), *The Grey Tree* (1912) and *The Oval Composition (Trees)*, painted in 1913, up to the abstract paintings from 1913/14 onwards.<sup>13</sup> Or one can consider the sequence of works representing the façade of the church in Domburg from the years 1910-1914, starting with fairly naturalistic and ending with purely abstract versions of the motive.<sup>14</sup>

Starting from more or less naturalistic depictions of motifs like the church façade, waves in the sea, trees, the dunes on the Dutch coast, we can follow the work of abstraction and simplification step by step in Mondrian's works from around 1910 up to the beginning of the twenties, where the sequence of clearly neoplastic paintings begins. Just because Mondrian managed to embed his intentions so clearly in his works, it is possible for us to follow the path of gradual abandonment of reliance on naturalistic motives and to see what he meant by 'the plastic expression of relationships through oppositions of color and line' (which taken in isolation is hopelessly imprecise).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty for many of us is to get rid of the idea that there must be something more to look for. Further comparisons might be helpful to cure us of such tendencies, e.g., comparisons with non-representational paintings by other artists. If we compare Mondrian's pictures with, say, Olle Baertling's paintings and prints from the sixties and the seventies, with their emphasis on movement, we might come to appreciate the equilibrium that Jaffé emphasizes when talking about Mondrian's works.

The difficulty is to make the right comparisons and to avoid the irrelevant ones, for instance by avoiding an unduly heavy stress on some iconographic content which might not be there. We might even begin to take Mondrian's theosophic interests seriously, not by trying to see his pictures as attempts to express certain doctrines in pictorial form, but by beginning to realize that the pictures might be approached in a certain way—as meditation objects, as icons. And to clarify what a meditation object and an icon is, new comparisons will be necessary (e.g., comparing Mondrian's works with Russian icons or with 18th century gouaches from Rajasthan and Nepal, which in some ways are strikingly similar to contemporary abstract art).

The overwhelming openness of artifacts like Mondrian's pictures, taken in

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English translation in *The New Art—The New Life* (cf. n. 1, *supra*).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., H.L.C. Jaffé, *Piet Mondrian*, or M.G. Ottolenghi (ed.), *L'opera completa di Mondrian*, Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1974.

<sup>14</sup> See M.G. Ottolenghi, *op. cit.*, plate no. 242.

isolation, can be reduced by weaving them into contexts of rather different kinds. We may increase our understanding of a particular picture by considering it in the context of the painter's own *œuvre*, by comparing it with paintings by other artists, by relating it to surrounding aesthetic and non-aesthetic practices. A necessary condition of understanding (I suggest) is relating the object of understanding to other objects of understanding, thus establishing a *series* which includes the present object of understanding. Within the area of freedom delimited by the given natural conditions, series may be constructed in literally innumerably many ways. Not all of the possible sequences will be equally illuminating. What comparisons and contrasts are illuminating is again a question of cultural constraints, depending both on the given objects and on the beholder's previous experience and current interests.

#### 4. On the Nature of Creative Processes

There is a traditional view according to which an action consists of an intention which occurs in the mind, and in the behaviour which occurs in the world. 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 sometimes it is considered to be the 'cause' of the behaviour.

On the background of the traditional view, it is tempting to read intentionalist explanations as accounts of how behaviour in the external world is caused by intentions occurring in the inner world of the mind. 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>15</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, 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. Nor is it compatible with his own accounts of the road to 'neoplasticism' (in *De Stijl* and elsewhere). It is not plausible to assume 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

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Besset, *Art of the Twentieth Century*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976, p. 65; and T. Nordenstam, *Fra kunst til vitenskap* ('From Art to Science'), Bergen: Sigma Forlag, 1987, p. 129ff.

for the questions as well as 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 seem to 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 model'.

A comparison between blueprint cases and cases of searching will help to shed some light on the nature of creativity. 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, to start with. They exist in the form of hunches, unrest, 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 relatively explicit. In the painter's case, the intentions exist more in the eye and fingertips than on the tongue. Intentions, like the competence which make them possible, may 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).

Creative processes are characteristically processes in which means and ends continually modify each other. The over all intention of Mondrian's work (and Mondrian is no mean model of creativity) 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 overall aim of finding more and more 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 has built up that competence through a process of trial and error that the intention of it all could be clearly formulated, i.e., shown.