

//PIET MONDRIAN. PROTO-FASHION THEORIST//

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to contextualize Mondrian's few writings on fashion within his larger interest in oppositions and the work of early fashion theorists, who similarly framed dress in terms of binaries and antonyms. Like Mondrian, early fashion theorists were invested in ideas of opposition and universality, similarities that suggest that Mondrian may find conceptual allies in the first generation of fashion theorists, particularly J. C. Flügel, Thorstein Veblen, and Georg Simmel. Mondrian's largely overlooked approach to fashion theory sheds light on the understanding of his complex aesthetic philosophy, and, while much has been written about Mondrian's influence on fashion, there remains a need to navigate Mondrian's own inspiration *by* fashion.

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Piet Mondrian's legacy has escaped the historical limits of his own discipline—his influence has been felt in nearly every sphere of the visual arts, seemingly by osmosis. He has had a demonstrable visual impact on graphic design, home decor, and fashion, and his presence can be experienced by any hapless shopper who finds himself in a department store surrounded by handbags decorated with divided planes of red, yellow, and blue. Mondrian's uncompromisingly abstract, neoplastic style has long oscillated between high art and popular culture (Troy 2006: 15-36), and when one is determined to find an elegant intersection between Mondrian and design, the most frequently cited example is that of his influence on fashion.

The most famous instance of Mondrian's impact on dress is undoubtedly Yves Saint Laurent's application of the artist's motifs in a collection of minimalist sack dresses, which debuted in the 1960s. One magazine reported, "The Mondrian style in fashion has existed precisely since August 2, 1965. On this day, Yves Saint Laurent showed his Winter Collection in Paris for the first time" (MacKrell, 2005: 148). The collection of spare, playful, primary-colored dresses was first inspired by a book on Mondrian given to the young Saint Laurent by his mother, and the designer's tribute to neoplasticism resulted in a collection he credited with the feat of "opening him up" as a designer for the first time (*Life Magazine*, 1965: 46-53).

Saint Laurent was also inspired by the simple construction of the sack dress, a minimalist shape which easily lent itself to a design method which utilized the planes and lines employed by Mondrian. The dresses were, like the painter's own canvases, far more complex than they seemed. Saint Laurent reworked Mondrian's motifs to investigate different parts of a woman's body and the way they could interact with dress in the simplest way possible (Rubenstein, 2012: 128). The planarity of the dresses was ideal for a color block technique, which required piecing together individual squares of colored wool jersey in order to build a garment in a sensitive and logical way. This approach simultaneously allowed seams to be hidden by the structure of black lines. In this manner, Saint Laurent's black lines function similarly to Mondrian's own, shaping the spaces between the planes and the form of the canvas or garment. This practical construction method reveals a great attention to the details of Mondrian's own working methods and demonstrates Saint Laurent's esteem for De Stijl experimentation. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000)

Mondrian's investigations helped Saint Laurent infuse the simple look of the 1960s with intellectual seriousness and a concern with minimalism. His frocks were referred to "the dresses of tomorrow" (*Harper's Bazaar*, 1965) and Saint Laurent's concept of treating garments like canvases was a radical departure for fashion and its relationship to art (MacKrell, 2005: 148). The Mondrian dress succeeded in bringing the concepts of planarity and line that had preoccupied the artist throughout his life to the boutiques of Fifth Avenue.

The relationship between Mondrian and fashion is usually limited to these types of dialogues about Saint Laurent's design, and nearly any investigation of De Stijl and fashion will engage with the YSL 1965 Winter Collection. However, Mondrian also held his own beliefs about fashion, ideas that predated the "Mondrian dress," sometimes by almost fifty years. Restricting the relationship between Mondrian and fashion to Saint Laurent's work is reductive, and does not serve the process of evaluating the artist's own complex perspectives on the practices of fashion.<sup>1</sup>

While Mondrian's writings have been analyzed to reveal his thoughts on art, philosophy, and spirituality, the artist's ideas about fashion and the meaning of dress still demand more attention. This seems like a serious omission, as Mondrian's few documented ideas on dress can serve as concrete examples of his sometimes-esoteric perspectives on form.

Mondrian was fascinated by the idea of dress as a referent to the larger world. In 1932 he wrote: "people do not see why a painter should concern himself with the laws of

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<sup>1</sup> In her book *Couture Culture*, Nancy Troy describes the way in which the connection between art and fashion has traditionally been underestimated and limited to surface connections, like designers visually responding to art in their garments. *Couture Culture* is rare in its hesitance to compare art with clothing in this way, which Troy prefaces by stating, "Settling for a narrow definition of the relationship between art and fashion in terms of garments designed by artists or clothing that qualifies as art, (previous approaches) privileged formal similarities that are often visually powerful but, nevertheless, generally lack substance when it comes to the exploration of deeper, structural relations which, in turn, do not necessarily result in any stylistic or formal resemblances between particular items of clothing and specific works of art." (Troy, 2003: 3).

life; they do not understand that the laws of life realize themselves perhaps most clearly in art” (Lipsey, 1988: 67). Is fashion not a system within which the laws of life are expressed? Mondrian wrote ceaselessly about his quest for unity in a single outlet. Does this impulse not find its most convenient expression in the study of dress, which is essentially the study of externalization as it is written on the body?

Mondrian’s few writings on fashion complement his larger interest in oppositions, ideas that can be placed in a conversation with those of the early fashion theorists, who also framed dress in terms of binaries and antonyms. Like Mondrian, many early fashion theorists were similarly invested in ideas of opposition and universality, and these similarities suggest that Mondrian may find allies in his conceptual investigations among proto-fashion theorists like J. C. Flügel, Thorstein Veblen, and Georg Simmel.<sup>2</sup>

In her essay on Mondrian’s late style, Nancy Troy writes, “It is not certain that Mondrian himself would have been entirely unhappy with the uses to which his work has been put in the popular domain” (Troy, 2006: 25). Mondrian’s adoration of popular culture was well documented, both in his own writings and in the accounts of friends. His ideas on dress, while generally overlooked, can be found in the same sphere as his praise for these other popular arts, most of which can be found in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, the definitive source for English translations of the artist’s essays (Mondrian, 1993)<sup>3</sup>. In this collection of texts, it is clear that Mondrian approached his experience of life and art with a regulatory compulsion, and this impulse extended to his thoughts on dress.

Mondrian has been characterized by his interest in searching for the inherent character of things (James, 1963-4: 108) and his utopian aims held that the progressive development of culture should eventually express itself in the culmination of the total suppression of the natural, simultaneously aiding the expression of absolute beauty. The same inclinations that fueled his drive towards the exploration of the plane is shared by his impulse towards finding the pure and universal in other cultural products, like fashion.

Mondrian’s organizational inclination, most often articulated in his writings as systems of dualities, is mirrored in his thoughts on fashion, which are structured around oppositions. His ideas on dress are shaped like the ideas of conflict he expresses in pairs like inward/outward, spirit/nature, mind/matter, abstract/real, universal/individual, expansion/limitation, joy/suffering, and male/female (Crowther, 1997: 130). In addition to a system of oppositions, Mondrian’s ideas on dress also mirror the Theosophist notions that every person and object has a reason for existence and an intrinsic necessity (Ibid, 129). While fashion is not often regarded in terms of its role in the spiritual progressions found in Theosophy, it is Mondrian’s unique perspective that allows him to expand dress in this way.

Mondrian’s personal philosophies elude fixity (Troy, 2006: 15) in ways that are in turn unpredictable and sometimes disconcerting, and his ideas on dress are suspect to such characterization. One of his earlier ideas on dress falls in line with his predilection for the unexpected: in 1917 he wrote in *The New Plastic in Painting*: “In all fields, life grows increasingly abstract while remaining real. More and more the machine displaces natural

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to briefly discuss J.C. Flügel, Thorstein Veblen, and Georg Simmel as the “first generation” of fashion theorists based on chronology (in relation to Piet Mondrian’s writings), my own experiences with their texts, and the frequency with which they have been cited in other works on the foundations of fashion theory. I have also selected these three writers based on their inclusion in Michael Carter’s book *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle to Barthes*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. In his text, Carter clearly argues the case for the classification of these writers as members of the first generation of fashion theorists along with Herbert Spencer, Alfred Kroeber, James Laver, and Roland Barthes. For more texts by early fashion theorists, see *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress*, edited by Kim K.P. Johnson, Susan J. Torntore, and Joanne B. Eicher. Oxford: Berg, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> From this point on, *The New Art—The New Life* will appear in abbreviated form as *NANL*.

power. In fashion we see a characteristic tensing of form and intensification of color, which signifies the departure from the natural” (Mondrian, 1917: 43). In this early reference to fashion in his collected writings, Mondrian approaches the topic from the perspective of machines and reality. He sees in fashion an ally in his campaign for the universal, a goal that can be achieved by the same departure from the natural that he embodies in his paintings.

The year in which Mondrian wrote this statement should not be overlooked: 1917 was the same year that the *De Stijl* magazine was first published. The eponymous magazine was a testing ground for many of the group’s theories on oppositional forces like masculine/feminine and horizontal/vertical. It also existed as a space in which the *De Stijl* artists could grapple with their ideas about universality and one’s experience of the world. 1917 was also the year in which Mondrian was painting his early colour plane compositions, like *Composition with Color Planes V*. The “tensing of form and intensification of colour” that he describes in the world of dress can also be found in his own artistic investigations of the same year. This early idea about fashion fits within Mondrian’s work and the larger text *The New Plastic in Painting* in its search for the intuitive structures of modern life and culture.

Fashion in Mondrian’s writing functions as a convenient delivery system for larger ideas—dress is a common experience, and it is this essentialness that makes it an ideal vehicle for the delivery of theoretical concepts.

Of all of Mondrian’s writings on dress that followed, it is this initial statement in this 1917 excerpt that seems to have engendered the most scholarly attention. This passage seems to be one of the few to specifically address Mondrian’s views in terms of fashion. Maarten Doorman, Professor of Criticism of Arts and Culture in the department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam responds to this text in his book *Art in Progress: A Philosophical Response to the Avant-Garde*. Doorman describes the manner in which Mondrian:

...went on to illustrate the changing spirit of the time through fashion, where he observed a ‘characteristic tensing of form and intensification of colour that signifies the departure from the natural...The focus on the spirit of the time reflects the inherent importance of the general, the universal, about which *De Stijl* felt so strongly (Doorman, 2003: 89).

Doorman identifies this text within its larger context (it accompanies an exaltation of modern dancing) and he positions this idea of dress and form within the topic of Hegelian ideas in Mondrian’s art and writings.

Pavel Machotka also responds to this passage in his argument for the consideration of the artist’s neuroses and his desire to organize his world. After citing the same 1917 passage, Machotka responds by describing the ways in which Mondrian’s private reservations found an ideal means of expression in the rigid and even forms of his later works, creating a balanced aesthetic that conveyed his private attitudes about gender and equilibrium.

In his view, the female principle, which in life stands for body and in art for the portrayal of nature, must be counterbalanced by the male principle, which in life stands for mind and in art is abstract and universal; this restoration of equilibrium—otherwise reasonable—seems in Mondrian to say that woman is naturally the stronger, and much to be feared....Thus in Mondrian more than in any painter I can think of, neurotic inhibition in the person is very close to the expression of the artist. (Machotka, 1992: 141)

In his interpretation of this passage, Machotka looks at Mondrian’s text through the concept of what he calls “psychic organization,” a name he gives to the recurring theme of Mondrian’s impulse for seeing the world in terms of oppositional principals like inwardness/outwardness. He sees Mondrian’s desire to view fashion and dance in terms of

natural/unnatural as an expression of the artist's greater desires and his attempt to understand the world through its antonymic constructions.

Mondrian's use of fashion as a means for the expression of oppositional ideas finds support in his 1922 essays "The Realization of Neo-Plasticism in the Distant Future and in Architecture Today." In this text, Mondrian describes how dress functions as a manifestation of the new philosophies expressed by Neo-Plasticism:

"Fashion" in dress, for instance, shows the abolition of natural structure and the transformation of natural form: *an annihilation of nature* that does not impair beauty but *transforms* it. *Today structural and aesthetic purity merge in a new way. We also see it in art.* Whereas naturalistic expression required that anatomy (structure) be expressed, there is no place for this in the new art (Mondrian, 1993: 171-172).

Again, fashion is cited as an example of oppositions in practice. Mondrian uses fashion to introduce the contrasting ideas which will function as the support structure for "the new art." In this statement alone, fashion functions in exemplifying the potential for the new art in the destruction of the natural, the transformation of structure. Here Mondrian's intent is the denaturalization of his environment, as seen in the transformative nature of dress. This idea appears again in his 1926 essay "Home—Street—City." Here, he writes:

To denaturalize is to abstract. By abstracting one achieves pure abstract plastic expression. To denaturalize is to deepen. Denaturalization takes place consciously or unconsciously. The progress of fashion exemplifies the latter. Aren't our clothes becoming purer in form, even opposed to natural forms? (Ibid, 211)

In this excerpt, fashion is again used as an example for describing oppositional forces, but in this case the forces include consciousness/unconsciousness. Naturalness remains a driving interest in Mondrian's writing, and he sees naturalness in opposition to abstraction in dress, making some of his primary concerns clearer when they are put in such common terms. Mondrian understands that "fashion has a deep meaning: fashion is cultural expression. Although it may be an exteriorization, like the various forms of art, it nevertheless shows inner content" (Ibid.: 225). Fashion serves as a convenient expression for the more complex ideas that consumed Mondrian's labours as a writer and voice of De Stijl thought. Again, Mondrian finds fashion to be a convenient model upon which he can transpose his more essential concepts of inwardness/outwardness ("exteriorization/inner content").

The last excerpt from Mondrian's writings on fashion that I will include in this paper is "A Note on Fashion" from 1930. In this short text, the artist describes fashion as a reflection of its period, as well as an incomparable tangible expression of cultural development. It is in fashion that Mondrian identifies the tensions produced by desires to move towards or away from natural forms.

In order not to fall back merely into a new expression of the past, it is therefore most important for fashion to create an appearance expressing "man-nature" in equivalence...to oppose the undulating lines and soft forms of the body with taunted lines and unified planes so as to create more equilibrated relationships (Ibid.: 226).

Here Mondrian demonstrates his understanding that fashion functions on the frontlines of modernism's desires, making it possible to see the physical forms from daily life that might eventually find articulation in the grammar of modern art. Mondrian's discussions of dress in terms of line/plane relationships and the dichotomy of development/regression correlate with his larger ideas about painting.

The oppositional ideas he finds in dress also contain the essential structures of gender that fascinated De Stijl artists like Mondrian and van Doesburg. It is worth noting

that Mondrian seems to be addressing women's fashion in these excerpts, which might be a more obvious starting point than men's fashion. Leila Kinney's idea that "women's clothes stand for fashion and men's for standardization" (Kinney, 1999: 477) might explain Mondrian's approach to dress through the lens of women's wear.

An interest in fashion is natural for someone whose work and writings are structured around oppositions. Fashion is a system of tangible oppositions—this is obvious to any person who experiences dress. Fashion is the unity of opposites, and is often described in these terms: short/long, tight/loose, big/small. Mondrian's paintings contain the dueling impulses of expansion and limitation, and what is fashion but the ability to wear competing strategies of expansion and limitation on our person? Regardless of the fluctuating values of beauty, technology and production, the limitations of the human body remain constant through every epoch. As Paul Crowther writes, "In the corporeal world of closed natural form, limitation is the overriding factor. It does not simply define expansion, it dominates it." (Crowther, 1997: 136) In this way, it seems only natural that Mondrian would find parallels for his artistic interest in contemporary fashion.

Dress has found its place in serious intellectual investigations since Thomas Carlyle's labyrinthine *Sartor Resartus* was published in 1836.<sup>4</sup> Other significant texts on the theory of fashion followed from Thorstein Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, 1899)<sup>5</sup> Georg Simmel (*Fashion*, 1904)<sup>6</sup> and J.C. Flügel (*The Psychology of Clothes*, 1930),<sup>7</sup> and together these writers are generally considered to be the first generation of fashion theorists. I have selected this group of theorists for discussion as their works appeared before and during Mondrian's lifetime and may be compared to the artist's own ideas on dress. They all formulated significant concepts around systematic binaries much like Mondrian, showing that Mondrian's worldview was echoed in that of other contemporary disciplines.

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is dependent on an opposition that is intrinsic to its premise (leisure class/non-leisure class). His text is still frequently cited, and has had a great deal of influence on the development of a Western history of dress. Veblen's theories stressed the idea of historical development in fashion, and he prioritized the collective result over individual effort. His emphasis on the collective nature of dress is not far removed from Mondrian's own ideas about the universal. Veblen claims, "It may be stated broadly that each successive innovation in the fashions is an effort to reach some form of display which shall be more acceptable to our sense of form and colour or effectiveness than that which it displaces" (Carter, 2003: 56). In many ways, this statement seems as though it would feel at home between the pages of *The New Art—The New Life* and its collected statements about development and innovation. Veblen was an economist and sociologist who was interested in dress as a social process, a sentiment shared by sociologist Georg Simmel, widely considered to be Veblen's successor in constructing an early formal theory of fashion.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*. Originally published in 1836. Reissued in 1987, eds. K. McSweeney and P. Sabor, Oxford: Oxford University Press. It is difficult to synthesize Carlyle's text, as it resolutely refuses clarity and a simple declaration of its intent. The book tells the story of Professor Teufelsdröckh, who formulates a complex theory of fashion through his observations of the people of the fictional German city of Weissnichtwo. Michael Carter writes, "*Sartor Resartus* is Thomas Carlyle's first book-length publication and the one in which many of the major themes of this most Victorian of writers are first discernable. After its initial appearance in serial form in 1833, the book gradually gained in popularity and fame until it became recognized as one of those magical texts that seems to embody the entirety of an epoch's interests and aspirations...it is my contention that *Sartor Resartus* may be seen as a founding text, one that imaginatively prefigures the discourse on dress that follows." (Carter, 2003: 1-2).

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in 1994, New York, Penguin.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in *Simmel on Culture*, David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Third printing, 1950. The International Psycho-Analytical Library, Ernest Jones, M.D., ed. London: The Hogarth Press, Ltd., 1950.

Like Mondrian, Simmel sees something about human development in fashion. He was also similarly interested in process, seeing fashion as a kind of process capable of appearing in areas of life other than clothing (Ibid.: 61). In *Fashion*, Simmel writes about the antonyms that produce dress:<sup>8</sup> Imitation/distinction, heredity/individual variation, universality/particularity, submission/sense, duration/mutability, femininity/masculinity, stillness/movement, connection/differentiation, receptivity/productivity, and creation/destruction (Benvenuto, 2000: section 1.4.) In many ways, these oppositions are similar to Mondrian's own ideas. Simmel sees fashion as a product of the interaction of these opposites,<sup>9</sup> not unlike Mondrian, who envisioned fashion as something that could oscillate between many antonyms like the ones mentioned above.

In 1930's *The Psychology of Clothes*, J.C. Flügel frames fashion as the process of historical change that happens to clothes. Oppositions, like the struggle between the internal/external, also define his ideas. He also shares a similar interest in development, like Mondrian's own view of dress as something moving from the natural towards the abstract. Flügel wrote extensively about progress,<sup>10</sup> and he was the first theorist who explicitly stated that fashion was fundamental for the modern world. (Hollander, 1992: 28) He also took a Hegelian view of fashion similar to that employed by Mondrian towards the trajectory of painting, looking towards social development as the motor behind fashionable or stylistic change.<sup>11</sup> Also, like Mondrian, Flügel was interested in constructing a system of oppositions against which he could evaluate his interests. His binaries, granted, are more centred on modesty and display: decoration/plain, body/clothes, phallic/uterine, past/future, part/whole, and youth/maturity. The ideas of the external and the internal are also a theme in *The Psychology of Clothes*, and it is this duality that probably best resonates with Mondrian's interests.

While Veblen and Simmel are known for writing about the concepts of fashion theory from an early date, it is Flügel who is usually credited with some of its more radical innovations. But Flügel's text was published in 1930—Mondrian's writings (which are also focused on the dichotomies of fashion) predate Flügel in some cases by thirteen years. While Flügel was by no means the first fashion theorist, he is regarded as one of the century's more important voices in this field. He articulated his ideas of opposition in dress after Mondrian described some of the same concepts in his own essays. In many ways, Mondrian's belief in fashion's ability to seriously participate in the intentions of De Stijl is itself more modern than Flügel's work, which does not explicitly associate dress with any particular avant-garde movement.

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<sup>8</sup> An example of the oppositions Simmel invokes: "The first (force of fashion) is provided by the physiological foundation of our nature: the latter requires motion as well as rest, productivity as well as receptivity. Continuing this analysis into the life of the mind, we are directed, on the other hand, by the striving for the general, as well as by the need to grasp the particular; the general provides our mind with rest, while the particular causes it to move from case to case." Simmel's *Fashion*, in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997: 187.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Carter expands on Simmel and duality in "Fashion." He writes, "No matter how these opposite forces are related, be it as compromise or synthesis, both have to be present for fashion to come into existence" (Carter, 2003: 67).

<sup>10</sup> Flügel writes, "Progress implies change in a desirable direction, but when it comes to social affairs, the changes usually contemplated are such as are likely to encounter the disapproval and opposition of conservatively minded persons. Our conception of 'progress', in fact, implies a revolt against certain existing conventions, interests, or ideals..." (Flügel, excerpted in Carter, 2003: 98).

<sup>11</sup> Much like Hegel's views on the end of art, Flügel similarly spoke of a conceptual end of fashion. In *Fashion Classics from Caryle to Barthes*, Michael Carter includes Flügel's thoughts on the death of fashion: "with attainment of complete democracy, the conditions become once again less favorable for fashion. When every man is as good as his fellows, there are no superior social strata left to imitate, and it would seem as though the race of fashion must end, once those behind have definitely caught up with those in front." (Ibid.: 111.)

Leila Kinney describes the way that modern clothing can be used as an index of attitudes towards modernism, and it is Mondrian's writings that seem to most clearly acknowledge this relationship (Kinney, 1999: 475). Although other modern artists and architects wrote about fashion at this time, Mondrian was one of the few to suggest the parallels between modern art and modern social life (Fer, Batchelor, Wood, 1993: 156-157).

Mondrian's attitude towards modernity, which is exemplified in his few writings on dress, brought together disparate ideas such as machines, modernity, naturalness, and abstraction. As Bryony Fer describes,

However arbitrary, or even eccentric, (these) connections may appear, the fact that they could have been made at all reveals some underlying set of beliefs about what the 'modern' entailed, and at some level enabled Mondrian to produce the work that he did (far more complex work than the sum of such statements) (Ibid.: 157).

Mondrian reveals a prescient understanding of fashion's role as an accompaniment to the avant-garde, an idea that was only beginning to receive widespread recognition during his lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

Mondrian's modernist view of dress was also probably influenced by what he observed in the world of Parisian interwar fashion. He lived in one of the radical fashion epicenters of the twentieth century when he was residing in Paris throughout the 1920s. These years saw widespread changes in the world of women's fashion, and Paris had become a world capital of the modern concept of fashion promoted by Baudelaire as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half it the eternal and the immutable" (Steward, 2008: xii). This attitude is also reflected in the commonly held notion that women's bodies were liberated after the First World War, an idea reflected in Mondrian's writings.

The interwar years in Paris introduced the *garçonne* look, a style characterized by straight lines, higher hems, and shorter hair.<sup>13</sup> This style was predominant throughout the 1920s, promoting modernity through the freedom and the autonomy of the wearer. (Ibid.: xv) This look signaled a departure from the previous decade's established styles that were characterized by long, sweeping skirts and high waistlines. Many popular early twentieth century women's fashions were modelled on the shape of the body, using S-curves and accessories that emphasized a woman's feminine features, like Mme. Jeanne Paquin's resolutely feminine designs. But by the 1920s, fashion had departed from this traditional model, favouring lines and planes over organic forms. This development can be seen in an

<sup>12</sup> "Of course, the history of fashion does have a significant and well-attested modernist phase. The insistence on purity and function, along with the hatred of superfluous ornament, that are expressed in the work of architects like Mies van der Rohe, artists like Piet Mondrian and theorists like Alfred Loos, resulted in attempts to rationalize dress, and figures like Victor Tatlin, Kasimir Malevich, Sonia Delaunay, Walter Gropius and Jacobus Ord were all interested in extending the modernist revolution in the arts to matters of clothing. It is even possible to conceive of the invention of something like a 'modernist body', the slim and functional female figure of the 1920s, liberated from the corset and the paraphernalia of female ornament." Stephen Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, 1991: 190, cited in David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> A more detailed description of the fashion innovations of the 1920s can be found in Stewart, 2008: xv-xvi: "In 1921, an article in the general interest paper *L'Illustration* was accompanied by two drawings of women, one wearing a typical dress of 1903 and the other wearing a typical dress in 1921. In the first drawing, the dress has a cinched waist, a full-length, semi-full skirt, puffy sleeves, and finishing touches on the bodice; it is worn with a wide-brimmed hat. In the second drawing, the dress has a low, loose waistline, the skirt is slightly flared, the hemline at mid-calf, the bodice plain, the sleeves narrow, and head-hugging cloche completes the ensemble. The text asserts that differences in dress style accounted for differences in gestures bodily freedom. The author commented on the disappearance of the "gasp for breath" from tight-laced corsets and of the sweeping gesture to gather up long, full skirts in order to walk. He observed that modern women were one hundred times less "packaged" than women in 1906. These observations, like many others, exaggerated the differences between prewar and postwar women."



afternoon dress by Paul Poiret from 1923, a floor-length concoction in silk lines and planes. This evolution in women's wear mirrors the trajectory of Mondrian's own art, which desired similar planarity and simplification.

In the 1920s, Parisian fashion designers like Coco Chanel campaigned for the simplification of women's fashion. Her innovations would not have been possible if not for the earlier experiments by designers like Paul Poiret, Jean Patou, and Callot Soeurs. It is very likely that Mondrian was familiar with the work of this previous generation that instituted changes in gender's role in dress and the slimming of skirts. Mondrian was most likely familiar with the work of Sonia Delaunay,<sup>14</sup> who designed clothing from 1923 to 1931.<sup>15</sup> Delaunay's designs treated clothing as a form of moving art (Ibid. :13) and expressed modern values like those that fascinated Mondrian. She also helped to popularize the geometries of dress, using elements like grids, the chevron, the stripe, and the square (Apter, 2005: 139)—geometric motifs that must have appealed to Mondrian and his ideas about dress.

For example, when Mondrian describes the “tensing of form and intensification of colour, which signifies the departure from the natural” (Mondrian, 1917: 43) he could very well be describing one of Delaunay's designs. In one fashion illustration from 1922-1923, Delaunay sketched five figures wearing her modern, geometric outerwear. The lines and bold colours embodying the “tensing of form and the departure from the natural” characterize her designs. This same impulse can also be seen in earlier drawings made during this period, as Delaunay often reimaged the modern woman's body through experiments with colour and geometry.

Mondrian's ideas did not emerge from a vacuum, and many of his investigations of fashion can find a correlation both with Parisian fashion as well as within his own paintings. His *Composition No. II* of 1920 reveals ideas of tense forms and bold colours apparently similar to those mentioned in his own writings and those seen in Delaunay's experiments. This thread of inquiry was reworked until Mondrian's mature Neoplastic style emerged, and as his thoughts on fashions evolved, so did his expression of his aesthetic theory. In 1926, he writes, “Denaturalization takes place consciously or unconsciously. The progress of fashion exemplifies the latter. Aren't our clothes becoming purer in form, even opposed to natural forms?” (Mondrian, 1993: 211). His paintings reflect a similar preoccupation. In the same year he writes this statement, Mondrian paints *Tableau I: Lozenge with Four Lines and Grey*, a painting that, in many ways, could be read as progressively “purer in form” than his earlier works.

While this example should by no means be as read as conclusive evidence correlating Mondrian's fashion writing with his paintings, it does point to the manner in which the painter's artistic interests made themselves known within another visual realm. For Mondrian, the look of the modern Parisian woman could have held a similar appeal to that of his utopian visions for the future of art. In some ways, Mondrian's ideas on dress depict women as more than mascots of modernism—instead, they *are* modernism: the living personification of line, form, and colour (Apter, 2005: 137).

Mondrian viewed fashion much in the way that he viewed everything else in the world around him. Marek Wieczorek writes, “[Mondrian] sought to look beyond, or rather,

<sup>14</sup> Although I have not been able to find concrete evidence of Mondrian's awareness or admiration of Sonia Delaunay, reference have been made to his familiarity with the work of Sonia's husband, Robert Delaunay (Blotkamp, 1994: 50, 70, 75, 77). I base my assumption on this fact along with the supportive information about Mondrian's circles, artistic relationships in 1920s Paris, and Sonia Delaunay's own responses to Mondrian in her work.

<sup>15</sup> While Delaunay is mentioned here as an example against which we can compare Mondrian's ideas, she warrants far more investigation than this paper can serve. As a painter and colorist, Delaunay was a modernist heroine. A wonderful source for more information on her design and art is the recent exhibition catalogue *Color Moves: Art & Fashion by Sonia Delaunay*, by VVAA, 2011.

“through” surface appearances, at the forces underlying matter, forces that he thought should be expressed in painting through emphatic lines placed in various directions”(2004: 155). Mondrian’s interest in the composition of things is reflected in his desire to see their true nature. This desire is clear in his views on fashion, and the correlation between his own ideas and those of fashion theorists should be viewed as evidence of the painter’s perceptiveness.

Although the relationship between Mondrian and fashion is most often anchored by Saint Laurent’s interpretation of De Stijl motifs, it might be the artist’s own writings on dress that reveal more interesting content for future scholarship. His ideas on clothing reveal an oppositional impulse similar to his larger concerns with art and spirit, and this oppositional impulse creates a connection between Mondrian’s texts and those of established early fashion theorists. A closer investigation of 1920s Paris fashion and Mondrian’s own work serves to emphasize the relevance of these ideas. Much more could be said of these connections, but due to the limits of space, it should suffice to say that Mondrian’s writings on dress deserve serious attention as they can serve to situate his ideas in relation to other disciplines. Saint Laurent’s “Mondrian” dresses have earned their place in fashion history—perhaps Mondrian’s personal thoughts on dress can someday find a similar position.

While dress does not dominate Mondrian’s utopian writings on new art and new life, the presence of dress in his essays could function as a referent that makes his ideas more accessible to a larger audience. Fashion is something easily understood and widely experienced, and as the embodiment for Mondrian’s esoteric theories, it can function as a kind of shorthand in clarifying his ideas to a wider audience. Dress is nothing if not a shared human condition, and Mondrian’s writings reveal its potential for better understanding his own oeuvre as well as the expression of the universal.

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