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mondriaan en steiner, wegen naar nieuwe beelding *[mondrian and steiner, paths to neo-plasticism]*

Jacqueline van Paaschen, 2017
The Hague: Komma/ d'jonge Hond
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"The Ego began to show its self-consciousness by departing from the rhythm of nature." This is one of the sentences that was highlighted by painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), in his copy of a publication of lectures given by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) in the Netherlands in 1908. This annotated publication, which is held by the Yale Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, is the *raison d'être* of the monograph *Mondriaan en Steiner, Wegen naar Nieuwe Beelding [Mondrian and Steiner, Paths to Neo-Plasticism]* by Dutch art historian Jacqueline van Paaschen. Mondrian bequeathed his copy of the Steiner publication to the American painter Harry Holtzman, who had been a close friend in his later life (which he spent in New York). Mondrian had discarded many of his material possessions upon fleeing continental Europe in 1938, but his legacy did contain a couple of publications about spirituality that he had kept throughout his life. For Van Paaschen, the pencil marks in the Steiner volume function as an impetus to explore the parallels between the Dutch painter and the German founder of Anthroposophy (a philosophy advocating the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world that is accessible by direct experience through inner development). In her book, she explores the possibility that Steiner's esoteric ideas played a crucial role in Mondrian's thinking, in his search for a new visual language, and the formulation of the reasoning behind this search.

Van Paaschen has a strong interest in the relationship between modern art and theosophy. She has previously authored a monograph on painter Jacoba van Heemskerck, and is currently working on a biography of art collector Marie Tak Van Poortvliet (Van Heemskerck's life partner, who was responsible for establishing the first modern art collection in The Netherlands) at the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen. Mondrian knew both of these women from the summers he spent in the coastal town of Domburg, and he remained friends with them until 1914, although his friendship with Van Heemskerck ended when she definitively opted for a colorful expressionism as a means to convey spirituality in her work. With these three books, Van Paaschen is thus documenting the unique place of Domburg in the story of modern art, as well as the wider prevalence of esoteric interests in modern Dutch society.

The monograph begins with the 1908 lectures of Steiner, who was then still president of the German chapter of the international Theosophical Society, and it ends with a letter Mondrian wrote to Steiner in 1921. Mondrian, who had displayed theosophical interests since the 1890s, joined the Theosophical Society in 1909 and remained a member for the rest of his life. In the fifteen short chapters of this well-designed and richly illustrated book, Van Paaschen creates a posthumous conversation between Mondrian and Steiner, who never actually met in person during their lifetimes (Steiner never responded to Mondrian's letter). Overall, it explores the corresponding developments of the philosopher's thinking and the painter's visual style through a comparison of Mondrian's paintings, theoretical texts, and personal documents like letters and notebooks, with the texts of Steiner's lectures.

At times, this comparison offers insightful interpretations. One example is the reading of *Evolution* (1911), the largest painting that Mondrian ever made (66–72). This triptych displays three female figures painted in bright shades of purple and blue—two with their eyes closed, the middle one with eyes wide open. The current dominant interpretation of this painting, offered by Robert Welsh in 1972, is that each figure represents a particular state of mind, from the "earthly" to the "elevated." Yet in the light of Steiner's cosmology, Van Paaschen claims it is a representation of the different phases through which a human soul passes after death. The soul temporarily remains in the spirit world, before it returns, reincarnated, to earth again. For Mondrian, *Evolution* was ultimately an unsatisfactory attempt at the visualization of a spiritual dimension. After finishing this painting, he departed from the use of symbolic figuration—which may be seen as a departure from "the rhythm of nature" that he had highlighted two years earlier in Steiner's lecture notes—in favor of an early abstraction that he found in Cubism. In a letter of 1914, Mondrian described this departure from figuration: "I want to come to the truth as close as possible and therefore abstract everything until

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I arrive at the fundament (the fundament of the appearance!) of things. For me it is a truth that the intention of saying nothing in particular, actually says the most particular, the truth (which is greatly encompassing)." Mondrian wanted to leave behind the "particular" (a reference to anything specific in visible reality) in order to arrive at a universally true representation of reality.

The most convincing parts of van Paaschen's book are those that identify similarities in how Steiner and Mondrian approached their work. Steiner developed new words and sentence structures in order to stimulate the inner activity of the person reading his texts. Mondrian, meanwhile, was concerned not only by *what* he painted, but just as much of *how* he painted it and how the viewer would relate to it. In the 1910s, both men were greatly concerned with implied and representational meaning. Theirs was a search for presenting words and images on their own, independent merit. As a result, Mondrian coined the name *Neo-Plasticism* to describe his art, a translation of the Dutch *Nieuwe Beelding*. The term *beelding* does not exist in the Dutch language, but it was for Mondrian a necessity to come up with a new word reinforcing the difference between imagination (*verbeelding*), representation (*afbeelding*), and his approach to abstraction (*beelding*).

As he explained in a letter of 1918, Mondrian's geometric abstraction was to be seen in direct relationship to a universal dimension, the reason why he characterized his art as truly religious (115). By liberating visual language from its conventional meaning and symbolism, the art would be able to capture the intangible, spiritual dimensions behind visible reality. Mondrian's abstraction was eventually dominated by primary colors, horizontals, and verticals, which for him were a means to free color from individual expression. By realizing a harmonious balance of colors, the universal unity of the natural and the spiritual would emerge. Meanwhile, Steiner saw art as a way of initiating viewers into a cosmic world. Colors, he said, should have a radiating effect, enforced by the use of natural pigments in thinned paints; he wanted to appeal to the inner creativity of his viewers (145). While Mondrian was inspired by Steiner's theosophical and anthroposophical ideas, their convictions led to two completely different forms of artistic expression. As Van Paaschen puts it, when Mondrian was confronted with Steiner's artistic expressions in 1922, he was "utterly disconcerted" (101).

This disagreement about the translation of spiritual ideas into visual language is reflective of one of the core complexities of this book. Despite the thorough research underpinning it, the observations about the impact of Steiner's philosophy on Mondrian's visual language are ultimately based on association and are difficult to substantiate. However, while there is no conclusive evidence about his exact authorial intention, interpretations of Mondrian's visual language and the elaborate cultural-historical contextualization demonstrate the pivotal role of spirituality in modern visual culture. Until now, histories written about Mondrian generally give prevalence to either modernist formalism or esotericism. Yet this book provides a strong case for a combination of both fields, with the aim of pinpointing the spiritual qualities of the art objects.

While religious studies scholars will demand definitions of the interchangeably-used terms "occult," "esoteric," and "mystical," this work demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary research in histories where artistic objects and religion meet. While much scholarship departs from a sort of "minority complex" maintaining that religion is ignored in the study of modern and contemporary art (cf. Spretnak 2014—reviewed in this journal's issue 12:3), Van Paaschen's book is an example of work successfully situated at the intersection of these two fields. At the time of writing, the book has only been published in Dutch. It is surely deserving of an international audience, since it will appeal both to Mondrian scholars and to those interested more generally in the spiritual qualities of material culture.