

## PIET MONDRIAN'S NEO-PLASTIC ART IN THE TOUCHSTONE OF ORGANIC THEORY OF ART

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*Abstract— One of the main objections to Clive Bell's aesthetic theory of formalism is form-content dichotomy. Commentators of extreme formalism reject this thesis that art status and aesthetic value of works of art merely depends on form and their relations, and that they disregard content. As such, scholars propose neo-formalism as a surrogate theory which is based upon an organic approach to form-content dichotomy. Nevertheless, the authenticity and expediency of organic theory of art and neo-formalism have not yet been satisfyingly demonstrated in relation to Modern art and particularly pure abstract painting. This article examines the validity of this hypothesis that pure abstract paintings, best epitomized in Piet Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art, could be more genuinely evaluated on the basis of a neo-formalist standpoint which is subservient to the organic theory of art. As such, this article aims to examine the feasibility of organic theory of form and content, for the aesthetic evaluation and appreciation of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic paintings. At the end of this article, it is realized that by endorsing the organic theory of art and exploiting a neo-formalist approach one is equipped with a more objective criterion for aesthetic appreciation of pure abstract art, especially Mondrian's Neo-Plastic paintings, compared to the prevailing formalist approach.*

*Index Terms— Form and content, Formalism, Neo-Formalism, Neo-Plasticism, Piet Mondrian.*

### INTRODUCTION

Form and content as two substantial constituents of works of art have been one of the central topics in the realm of aesthetics and philosophy of art. Arguments like whether a putative work of art should essentially possess form and content as *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions for art status, and how these two factors ought to be defined, identified, and related to each other have been always one of the most pivotal and controversial topics in philosophy of art (particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), art evaluation, and aesthetic experience. Noteworthy that nature of form and content, and their dichotomy or unity is not a new topic in aesthetics as it is propounded by Plato and Aristotle and later discussed by prominent philosophers such as Hegel in his *Lectures on Fine Art* [23, p. 322]. Nevertheless, it was mainly after proposal of Clive Bell's polemical aesthetic theory of formalism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and emergence of the late Modern and post-Modern art styles, that the demand for a more compelling exposition of the

nature of form and content, their relation to each other, and most importantly their role and relevance to the art status and aesthetic value of artworks becomes a crucial subject of study for philosophers, aestheticians, and art critics.

It is notable that formalistic approach to art, mainly as a criterion for definition of art, is not only emerged in England in works of scholars like Clive Bell and Roger Fry, but also it has been widely scrutinized in German-speaking nations by philosophers like Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin, or in France and Italy it has been explicated by Henri Focillon, Roberto Longhi, and Lionello Venturi respectively. Furthermore, one should not disregard contribution of renowned American art critic Clement Greenberg who proposed his Modernist theory (mainly concentrated on flatness and strict abstraction of representational elements in painting) as a result of amalgamation of all these novel formalistic standpoints to historical evolution of art styles. [27]. Amongst these seminal scholarly attempts, Heinrich Wölfflin's formalistic attitude, reflected in his seminal book *Principles of Art History*, is of great significance.

Wölfflin propounds principles which are essential for categorization of art history based on classification of style. [32, p. vii]. In fact, he narrates formalism in the discourse of art history. In the late 19th century and first decades of the 20th century, Riegl and Wölfflin repudiate Gottfried Semper's argument who advocates traditional idea of understanding art history based on successive life cycle of styles: namely the birth, development, its decay, and its death. [27, p. 75]. In this regard, Wölfflin speculates the history of styles, from Renaissance onward, from a linear-tactile (haptic) phase to a pictorial-optical phase. As such, in Wölfflin's view, the history of styles is closely bounded with aesthesis that is the historical evolution of perception and sensation [27]; a perceptual viewpoint to aesthetic attitude or experience which has been narrated by Bell and Fry within an aesthetic paradigm.

Considering that each and every style can be primarily identified by means of form, hence, studying the development of styles throughout art history is indeed an extreme formalist historical approach to art. Taking into account various levels of styles such as personal style, style of school, national style, race, and style of period, Wölfflin did a comprehensive examination of different styles (from Renaissance to Modern art) to demonstrate how form and formal properties have been developed in each of these categories based on evolution of artists' imagination, personality, and demographics. Indeed, he once again resuscitates the neglected importance of 'form' which is closely bounded to 'style' in history of art. Thus, it is not surprising that a revived interest toward notion style is concurrent with the great tendency of art historian to notion form in the beginning of the 20th century [27, p. 75], the period which is also synchronous with rise of diverse avant-garde experimentations of Modern painters, namely Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, on form and formal properties.

Moving to formalism within an aesthetic scope, majority of objections to form-content dichotomy has been raised against Bell and Fry, and their proponents, who allege that only formal properties (plastic values and their relations) – what Bell called *significant form* - are

relevant for defining art and aesthetic value of artworks. Bell defines significant form as a certain juxtaposition of lines and colors [1, p. 8] which they provoke in spectator what he called *aesthetic emotion*. According to Bell and Fry, the aesthetic value of artwork is primarily and solely reliant on the existence of significant form, as certain arrangement of formal elements of a work of art, and it has nothing to do with its content (particularly its representational or expressive content). Moreover, formalists, especially Bell, assert that the arousal of the so-called *aesthetic emotion* by means of *significant form* in spectators is the main determinant factor to art status. As such formalism considers possession of significant form (form and formal relations or properties) as necessary and sufficient conditions for art status. As a results of such objections to Fry and Bell's extreme formalism, scholars namely Eldridge and Carroll suggest neo-formalism<sup>1</sup> that it is subservient to organic theory of art (resolution of form-content dichotomy) as a more versatile and credible aesthetic theory than Bell's formalism.

The organic theory of form and content can be best comprehended against what is called a mathematical dichotomy between form and content. In this regard, scholars like Ducasse and Herbart, advocate a mathematical approach to form and content. Within this viewpoint, formal elements of art and their relations are two separate things, either they are form (order or arrangement of elements) or content (subject matter). A mathematical account considers elements of a work of art *versus* their relations as two segregated things. Whereas, other scholars and philosophers like Bell, Fry, and Parker are proponents of organic theory of form and content. Within organic theory, form and content are delineated as an organic complex in relations. In other words, form and content are defined as *elements in relations* where elements and their relations are inseparable from each other.

Based upon the premises of organic theory of art, neo-formalists consider three conditions for art status: 'x is an artwork if and only if (1) x has content (2) x has form and (3) the form and the content of x are related to each other in a satisfyingly appropriate manner.' [2, p. 125]. Hence, Neo-formalism, unlike extreme aesthetic formalism, considers the possession of both form and content (meaning or subject matter) and the way form satisfyingly and properly presents the content (meaning) as essential conditions for evaluation of aesthetic values of putative works of art. It is evident that such philosophical deduction of neo-formalism is primarily derived from tenets of organic theory of art where form and content as two inseparable things and their relations are equally and unitedly fundamental in art status. Neo-formalists allege that form and content in a work of art are related in a satisfyingly appropriate manner. Such phrase means that form, the way the meaning or content of a work of art is presented, what Weitz called *howness* of an artwork, highly matches or fit its content. As such, in neo-formalism, the aesthetic value of a given artwork is assessed by endorsing this condition that form and content are correlatively bounded to each other in unity. In fact, one finds a very close analogy between tenets of neo-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Ellegood the root of emergence of form-content theory and the idea that form is correlatively and inseparably bounded to its content (meaning) goes back to ideas of pioneers of post-modern art – mainly it is related to emergence of conceptual and pop art - and philosophical tenets of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the 1960's and 1970's.[12, p. 88].

formalists and Wölfflin's thesis that form (manifested as style) in different periods of art history has been always subservient to the content, subject matter, of its epoch. That's why, as Wölfflin postulates, one notices that various styles emanated throughout art history at different levels such as personal style, national style, style of school, and race. Thus, a neo-formalist does not look for and examine formal elements apart from its content. Instead, he looks at the relation of form (formal elements and properties) to the content. Whereas, formalists like Bell merely consider form and formal properties relevant for art status and aesthetic value of artworks.

Considering wide ranges of arguments raised by philosophers and art critics on issue of form and content, it is surprising that little has been written about organic theory of art in relation to art of painting compared to other topics like aesthetic experience. Moreover, neo-formalism, particularly the idea of form-content unity, has been mainly scrutinized by scholars, namely Cleanth Brooks in 1950s and later by Peter Kivy and Peter Lamarque, in relation to Literature, especially Poetry.<sup>2</sup> However, in the recent years scholars namely but not limited to De Witt Parker, Morris Weitz, Noel Carroll, Richard Eldridge, Arthur Danto, and Francis Edward Sparshott contributed to this field.

In fact, Neo-formalists' main objection to Bell's extreme formalism is that it disregards content for art status and aesthetic evaluation of works of art. Nevertheless, despite the significance of neo-formalism, its merit and efficiency over Bell's formalism has not yet been satisfyingly corroborated in relation to pure abstract art. When we look at art criticism and evaluation of Modern art, we realize that art critics have been mostly inclined to adopt an extreme formalist approach, substantiated by Bell. Perhaps, the best archetype of such formalist tendency of scholars, is discernible in criticism of Piet Mondrian's pure abstract Neo-Plastic paintings which has been so far analyzed by scholars like Carel Blotkamp, Yve-Alain Bois, Serge Fauchereau, and John Milner based on a Greenbergian formalist approach, mainly in relation to the flatness of painting.

One of the main reasons for lack of the propensity of aestheticians to neo-formalism is indeed lack of true knowledge about nature of form and content and their relation in pure abstract paintings. It is because pure abstract art is mostly assumed to be empty of content (i.e., subject matter, representational elements, ideations, recognizable objects, and so on). Nevertheless, in the past decades with the contributing works of philosophers like Arthur Danto on definition of art in case of the most polemical Modern and post-Modern artworks of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, aestheticians further appealed to Neo-formalism, and tried to validate its credibility. On this subject, Carroll and Eldridge acknowledge the authenticity and feasibility of neo-formalism for evaluation of aesthetic value of pure abstract art [11]. Or Danto most controversially took a step further and demonstrated the workability of his historical content-oriented approach to definition of art for even an empty canvas or an untitled artwork.

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Thomson-Jones remarks that although the inadequacies of form-content dichotomy have been demonstrated for aestheticians and inseparability of form and content is often supposed in art criticism, but it has not really used in practice as an authentic criterion for art status and evaluation of art. [29, p. 375].

Nonetheless, the credibility of such allegations has not yet ascertained in respect to an enriched pure abstract art theory like Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism which is proposed as a universal and paradigm theory of non-figurative art. As such, these questions arise and need to be addressed: What is the nature and relation of form and content in Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism? What is the credibility of organic theory of art and neo-formalism in the case of pure abstract art?

The result of this article is substantial since it demonstrates the strengths and credibility of neo-formalism and organic theory of art compared to Bell's formalism, for art status and assessment of the aesthetic value of pure abstract paintings. Moreover, the findings of this article authenticate this assertion - proposed by scholars like Eldridge - that neo-formalism even works in case of abstract works of art which are seemingly devoid of content. Lastly, the results of this article are momentous, since it provides beholders and art critics with a genuine and clear criterion for evaluation of pure abstract paintings, compared to the prevailing formalist approach.

### **Nature of form and content**

Before analysis of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art within an organic theory of art, it is indispensable to grasp a solid understanding of the way aestheticians, particularly formalists like Bell and Fry, define form and content as two essential components of a work of art. Although, there is no unique definition for form and content and their characteristics, as scholars like Ingarden (1960) and Weitz (2013) discussed in detail, but for the sake of clarity and relevance to the topic of this article, the analysis is confined to the general distinction of form and content pertaining to the formalist doctrine and particularly ideas of those twentieth-century's philosophers or aestheticians like Parker, Ducasse, Ingarden, Bell, Weitz, Carroll, and Eldridge whose ideas are relevant to the topic.

Commonly, content is construed as the meaning, subject matter, theme of a work of art, and simply what it is all about. Whereas, form is defined as the way, such content, or meaning, is presented, manifested, or articulated. [2]. Aristotle defines form (*morphe*) as the *determining factor*, and content as *what is determined*. Morris Weitz delineates form as the *howness* and content as *whatness* of a work of art which is analogous to Aristotle's exposition. Within this standpoint, form is defined as *how* something is depicted, articulated, or manifested, and content is *what* that thing is.<sup>3</sup> [30, p. 39; 19, p. 226]. Although such rendition of form and content as *the what* and *the how* of artworks seems easy to fathom, but as Ingarden also holds, it is evident that the dichotomy between such whatness (content) and howness (form) is not explicit enough. Because, as long as one does not have a clear idea on nature of *the what* and *the how* of a work of art, the same level of ambiguity on the essence of form and content exists between whatness and howness of an artwork. [19].

### **Organic versus mathematical dichotomy between form and content**

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that interpretation of form and content as the *what* and the *how* of a work of art, goes back to as early as ancient thesis of Cicero and recent arguments of scholars like Houseman and Ducasse. [31, p. 355].

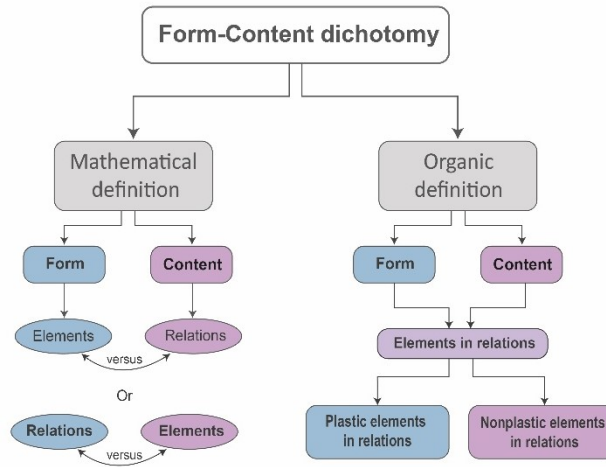
Overall, scholars hold two systems for form-content distinction. Some aestheticians like Ducasse, Bradley, and particularly Herbart consider a *mathematical* dichotomy between form and content which means that they ponder elements and their relations as two separate things as form or content (*elements versus relations*). For example, Ducasse defines an aesthetic object composed of both form and content as follow:

Aesthetic objects have both Content and Form. In any aesthetic object it is possible to distinguish two fundamental aspects: Form, and Content (or Material). By form is meant simply arrangement or order; and by content or matter, whatever it happens to be that is arranged, ordered. [8, p. 202]

Whereas, other aestheticians like Parker, Bell, Fry, and Weitz attends to the *organic* character of work of art for the distinction between form and content. They define form and content as an organic complex or elements in relations. That is to say, they regard form and content as *elements in relations* and they postulate that one cannot explicitly demarcates between elements and relations. In this regard, Parker delineates content ‘as being constituted by certain elements in relation’ [30, p. 50], while he describes form as a set of abstract properties of elements in relation.

Moving to ideas of two pioneers of formalism in visual art, it can be said that Parker’s and Weitz’s organic approach toward form-content dichotomy is comparable to Bell and Fry’s exposition of form and content. It is however noteworthy that Bell’s explication of form, what he called *significant form*, ‘as an aesthetically moving combination of lines and colors’ [30, p. 42] differs from that of Parker and Weitz. For Bell form is constituent of ‘certain elements in certain relations’ [30, p. 42] that they aesthetically stir our peculiar kind of emotions, called *aesthetic emotion*. In Bell’s rendition of form-content distinction every work of art possesses both *whatness* (content) and *howness* (form). But in both form and content there are elements in relation which is indeed ‘an organic complex of elements and relations.’ [30, p. 42]. Based on Bell’s interpretation, content, or the *whatness* of a work of art, is all representative elements in causal relations. Whereas, form, *howness* of an artwork, are all lines and colors (plastic elements) in spatial relations. Therefore, Bell’s formalism is a doctrine which considers only plastic elements in relations as aesthetically important values in art, while nonplastic elements in relations are entirely irrelevant for art status. As it will be elucidated, Bell’s thesis on form and content dichotomy is the most intimate to what Mondrian construes form and content within his theory of Neo-Plasticism.

Having a succinct analysis on various renditions of aestheticians on form-content dichotomy (see Fig. 1), it is now time to examine Mondrian’s view on the nature of form and content and the way they are related to each other.

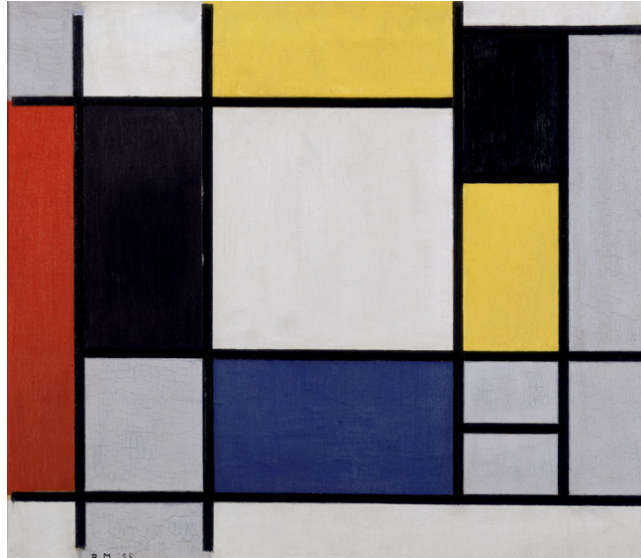


**Fig. 1.** Two kinds of systems for form-content dichotomy

### Form as significant form in Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art

In a nutshell, in Neo-Plastic paintings form is an irresolvable combination of plastic elements of painting and their spatial relations. In this regard, Mondrian in his 1931 essay *The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships* delineates form in Neo-Plastic painting in this way: ‘In painting, the true mutation, the new form of art, can be defined in general terms as the pure manifestation of line and color by neutral or universal forms in pure and equivalent relationships.’ [24, p. 247]. Hence, it is deduced that Mondrian, like Bell and Weitz who define form and content based on an organic approach, construes form as *elements in relations* rather than to hold either elements or relations alone as form. In fact, form in Neo-Plastic painting is the perfect manifestation of Bell’s key concept *significant form*.

As such, for Mondrian, significant form in his Neo-Plastic painting is composed of two inseparable components: plastic means and their relationships. He delineates *plastic means* as the most abstract elements of painting - flat rectangular planes of primary colors and noncolors (white, grey and black), and vertical and horizontal lines - that are essential for expression of a universal unity, harmony, and beauty as truth. The second component of such significant form in Neo-Plastic art is the *relationships* between plastic means. He reckons two kinds of relationships within theory of Neo-Plasticism: immutable relationship of position of lines (vertical versus horizontal lines) which it determines and explicitly distinguishes the planes, and mutable relationships between color and noncolor planes: the relation of size (dimension) and proportion of planes (see Fig. 2). It is evident that these two components of form in Neo-Plastic paintings, are also two irresolvable constituents of Bell’s significant form. As Bell remarks: ‘certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions.’ [1, p. 8]. Overall, it is inferred that both Bell and Mondrian characterize form based on an organic approach as certain plastic *elements in spatial relations*. However, it should be noted that Mondrian strictly excludes nonplastic elements (representational and descriptive elements) in relation as content.



**Fig. 2.** Piet Mondrian. 1920. Composition with Yellow, Red, Black, Blue and Gray. Oil on canvas. 74 x 82.5 x 9.5 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

<https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection>

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### **Content as equilibrium (new harmony) in Neo-Plastic art**

Although, Mondrian postulates that his pure abstract paintings are entirely purified from subject matter, recognizable objects, and representational elements, he purports that his paintings possess content.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his idea is reminiscent to argument of contemporary scholars, especially Arthur Danto and Richard Eldridge, who claim that even abstract art and pure orchestral music which are apparently empty of perceptible objects or ideas possess content. Eldridge asserts that the content of pure abstract paintings is ‘embedded in their formal structures and the way their elements combined and composed’ [11, p. 310]. In fact, such thesis is also analogous to what Mondrian, as well as Bell and Fry, holds within his theory of Neo-Plasticism. For Mondrian content of his Neo-Plastic paintings is the manifestation of harmony which is the outcome of formal relationships between plastic elements (form). He maintains that although pure abstract art, particularly his Neo-Plastic art, is apparently devoid of subject matter and descriptive elements, but its content has not only abolished, but also its true and deepest immutable content most ostensibly manifested to the spectator: ‘[o]nce “art” is cast into the “abyss,” its true content will still exist.’ [24, p. 239]. Furthermore, in his 1936 essay *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* he holds that non-figurative art possesses both form and content. He rejects the ideas of critics and spectators who assert that non-figurative art, or pure abstract painting in particular, is insipid because it overlooks the presentation of any recognizable and descriptive content. In his view, if an artist creates a pure abstract art which it lacks universal content, it is only the mistake of the

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Hans L. Jaffé, unlike majority of scholars, holds that Mondrian’s Neo-Plastic paintings possess content. Jaffé maintains that although Mondrian’s works is devoid of descriptive and recognizable content, but it possesses an essential and spiritual content in which is embodied in Neo-Plastic paintings. For Mondrian such essential content is indeed depiction of a universal harmony that is a pure manifestation of universal laws of universe: unity and balance.[20, pp. 39-41].



artist to embody such spiritual content in his work. [24, p. 298]. As it will be discussed later, such positive account of Mondrian to content on his pure abstract artworks is analogous to tenets of Arthur Danto who considers content for even an empty canvas.

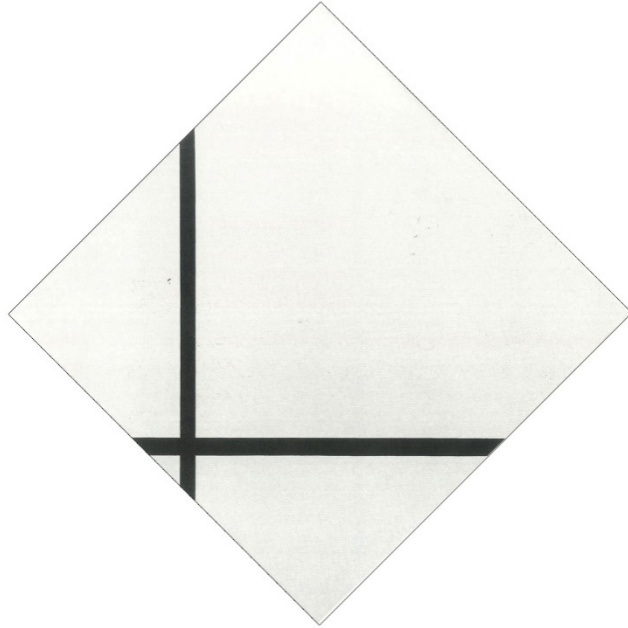
Noteworthy that content for Mondrian is the pure manifestation of beauty as truth (realization of mystical and primordial laws of universe). Yet, such spiritual content in painting should be expressed on a two-dimensional canvas through plastic means and their relationships in accordance to principles of Neo-Plasticism. As Mondrian explicates in his writings, the content of his Neo-Plastic painting is the embodiment of the *equilibrium*, or what he called *new harmony*, of the plastic means in relations: 'The clear manifestation of equilibrium is the content of the new.' [24, p. 386]. He expounds that harmony<sup>5</sup> in representational art, what he also coined as *morphoplastic art* in general, achieves through traditional rules (repetition and symmetry) applied on naturalistic, or particular, forms. As he remarks, the universal expression of harmony and beauty is veiled in the particular (representational elements) forms and colors [13, p. 4]. As such, he construes content of Neo-Plastic art a complete and pure equivalence between the most abstract elements of painting (plastic means) that is realized through exact and equilibrated relationships. [24, p. 223].

It is noteworthy that Mondrian, unlike Parker and Weitz who allow nonplastic elements and their relations (representational and descriptive elements) as content of artworks, strictly excludes nonplastic elements and their relations as content. Yet, for Bell representation is just irrelevant for art status and aesthetic value of artworks: 'This is not to say that exact representation is bad in itself. It is indifferent. A perfectly represented form may be significant, only it is fatal to sacrifice significance to representation.' [1, p. 23]. For Bell, the value of a representative form is because of its form and not what it represents. [1, p. 25]. Nevertheless, Mondrian, unlike Bell, strictly prohibits representational form or content. He maintains that content of Neo-Plastic painting cannot be articulated or realized through representation or subject matter. [24, p. 31]. In his view, beauty, or essential content of art, is not the result of objects of representation. In fact, he truly expands the avant-garde theory of Cezanne as a forerunner of this thesis that beauty in painting is created by relationships of line and color and not representational elements. [24, p. 63]. Such negative attitude of Mondrian to manifestation of representational elements in his painting is evident both in his most stark artworks like in his 1931 work *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines* (Fig. 3), and in his late Neo-plastic oeuvre, where he multiplied lines to even deface the identity of lines as lines, and to obliterate the possibility of visual perception of intersection of lines as rectangular shapes (Fig. 4), and particularly in his late New York works when the identity of his plastic means (line as line, color as color, plane as plane, etc.) is entirely annihilated by breaking lines into tiny blocks of squares (Fig 5.). However, even in these artworks which are apparently devoid of representational content, as Mondrian remarks, a universal and objective content is best manifested. It is through interrelations and neutralizations

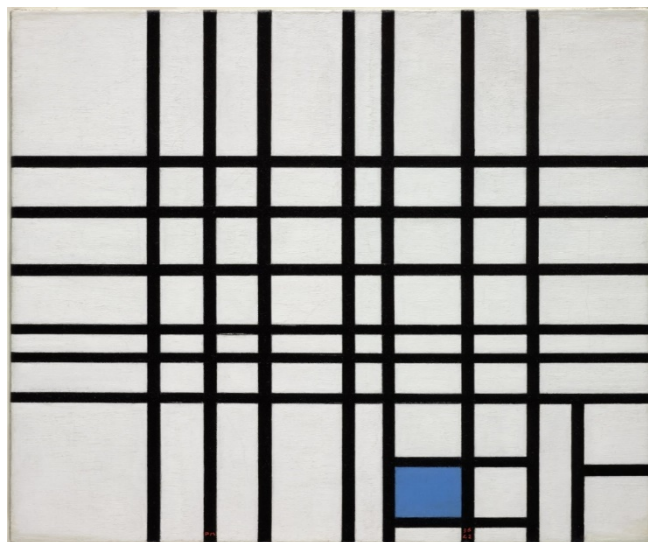
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<sup>5</sup> Mondrian in his writings, called the harmony in representational art *old harmony* which is in direct opposition to the new *harmony* of his new art or Neo-Plastic art.

of dual oppositions (vertical versus horizontal, color versus noncolor, large planes versus smaller ones, and so on) and their immutable and mutable relationships, that a universal and timeless content of a Neo-Plastic painting (objective expression of universal harmony or equilibrium and unity) is manifested to spectators.

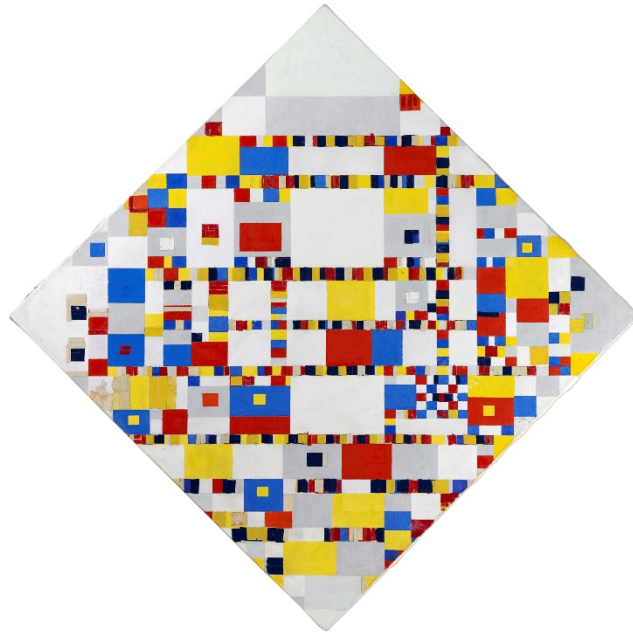


**Fig. 3.** Piet Mondrian. 1931. Lozenge Composition with Two Lines. Oil on canvas. 149.5 x 149 x 6 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection/3023-piet-mondriaan-ruitvormige-compositie-met-twee-lijnen>



**Fig. 4.** Piet Mondrian. 1936-1942. Composition No. 12 with Blue. Oil on canvas. 62 x 60.3 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1970. Accession number 15911.

<https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/composition-no-12-with-blue>



**Fig. 5.** Piet Mondrian. 1942-1944. Victory Boogie Woogie. Oil, tape, paper, charcoal and pencil on canvas. Height 178.4 cm, width 178.4 cm. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. Object number: 0810747. <https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/en/collection/victory-boogie-woogie?origin=gm>

### **Organic theory of art and unity of form and content in Neo-Plastic art**

By now, it is deduced that form for Mondrian, like in case of Bell, are plastic elements of painting in relation. And content is the universal expression of beauty as truth that is realized through the pure expression of new harmony, or what Mondrian called *equilibrium*. Mondrian in his writings also explicates about the relation between form and content. In his view, form and content are two inseparable things in unity. In 1936 he remarks that the tendency and emphasis of artists on either form or content in the expense of the other is due to the lack of awareness on irresolvable unity of form and content. And that such ignorance of unity between form and content, similar to negligence of unity between physical and spiritual in realm of life, is the source of wrong emphasis of artists on either form or content throughout the evolution of painting.

In life, sometimes the spirit has been over-emphasized at the expense of the body, sometimes one has been preoccupied with the body and neglected the spirit; similarly in art content and form have alternatively been over-emphasized or neglected because their inseparable unity has not been clearly realized. [24, p. 292]

Furthermore, Mondrian in the same essay points to the momentous role and unity between form and content in non-figurative art.<sup>6</sup> He propounds this idea that a true non-figurative art includes both form and content which are integrated into each other. [24, p. 298]. He asserts that the universal expression of beauty as truth in painting can only be understood through unity between form and content. As such, in his view, neither form nor content should be neglected in the expense of the manifestation of the other. [24, p. 176].

Overall, it is construed that Mondrian's idea on unity between form and content is not in conformity with proponents of mathematical dichotomy between form and content like that of Ducasse.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, I argue that amongst the early 20<sup>th</sup> century aestheticians, Parker and Bell's organic approach to form and content distinction that is in accordance with the organic theory<sup>8</sup> of art endorsing the unity between form and content is the most analogous to Mondrian's idea that form and content are *inseparable* but *distinguishable* things. In this regard, Parker repudiates Bell's conception of aesthetic form, what he called significant form, as a mystical and unknown thing which is distinct from content. Instead, Parker asserts that form and content are inseparable not only in fact but also in origin. [26, p. 33]. He holds that there is not only a unity between elements of an artwork (components of form and content), but also the form and content are in unity. [25, p. 97].

It should be emphasized that as Jolley argues, unlike the thesis of Peter Kivy on poetry, inseparability of form and content does not mean that form and content have no recognizable identity. [21, p. 193]. Indeed, as it is evident in case of Mondrian as a pure abstract painter, form and content are two distinguishable things with different identities. In his Neo-Plasticism, form and content in works of art are irresolvable in a sense that they should be perceived and evaluated simultaneously in relation to each other within an organic unity as a whole. For instance, when we look at Mondrian's Victory Boogie Woogie (figure 5), not only one deals with some dotted blocks of colors arranged in vertical and horizontal rows, but also he/she realizes a pure articulation of a universal content (pure and objective manifestation of equilibrium and unity: primordial laws of universe).

Overall, it is really improbable to deny the well-acknowledged thesis of unity between form and content. In this regard, majority of contemporary philosophers and aestheticians namely Arthur Danto, Alan Goldman, Paul Crowther, and Morris Weitz insists on the unity between form and content as a prerequisite for aesthetic evaluation of artworks. For example, Goldman following

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<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that by *non-figurative art*, Mondrian in general means a pure non-representational or pure abstract art which is best epitomized in his Neo-Plastic style.

<sup>7</sup> Although scholars like Ekman and Rosenbaum argue that because Bell influenced by principle of organic unities of Edward Moore, form and content in Bell's theory are not two distinct things, and significant form is indeed a *significant whole* (comprising both form and content), yet such claim is not true in all cases on Bell's theory.

<sup>8</sup> The merit of organic approach toward form and content has been acknowledged over other systems, particularly a mathematical form-content dichotomy, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars like Walter Pater (1839-1894). In this regard, Fishman explicates that in Pater's view, form and content cannot be construed and evaluated as two separate things. Fishman advocates the organic unity of form and content as the most contributing and beneficial discoveries of modern critical theory. [15, p. 70].

Danto remarks that all works of art embody meaning or content. And content is reflected in and partly expressed through their forms.

According to Danto whose philosophical insight is very significant for understanding many avant-garde experimentations of artists, particularly works of Dadaists like Marcel Duchamp, beauty of form and beautiful form are not necessarily substantial in art. Indeed, he, defines art historically and functionally and in relation to its historical context. Danto, like Kendall Walton, construes historical context of artwork as a momentous factor for aesthetic experience and art evaluation. He maintains that works of art are pertinent to particular art-historical presuppositions. That is to say, a work of art cannot exist as a thing for itself and apart from its art-historical context and form is just a method by which such historical context is being manifested or denoted. [7, p. 147]. Unlike formalists, he holds that art, especially conceptual art and performance art, mainly aims to eschew from proposing a mere beautiful form as the source of arousal of pleasure. [10, p. 68].

Danto considers content for almost everything; even an empty canvas. In his seminal article *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* he exemplifies empty canvases or artworks with no title. He asserts that although these works are seemingly about nothing, but even a picture of the void is not really without meaning or content. [7]. He holds what the most abstract artworks, like empty canvases, are about is 'aboutness, and their content is the concept of art'; they are merely exempted from interpretation. [7, p. 148]. He, therefore, defines something as a work of art if it is (i) about something and (ii) if it embodies its meaning. In fact, Danto defines work of art as 'an embodied meaning.' Following Hegel, in his ontological approach to propose a philosophical definition of art, Danto construes *meaning* and *embodiment* as two conditions for art status. [6, pp. 129-30]. In this regard, Hegel reckons two factors on the logical speculation of art: '(i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation.' [5, p. 98]. It is clear that the latter is the form or what the twentieth century's scholars, namely Weitz, called *howness* (form) of an artwork; or as Danto expounds, the way content is embodied. That is why Danto construes artworks as 'embodied meanings.' He repudiates Kantian art criticism, where form and content are considered as two separate things. He maintains that 'beauty is part of the content of the works it prized, and their mode of presentation asks us to respond to the meaning of beauty' [5, p. 98]. By embodying the meaning Danto means to find 'a mode of presentation' that is satisfyingly appropriate to its meaning or content. [3, p. 386]. It goes without saying that Danto's *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions for art status are actually a perfect delineation of main tenets of neo-formalism; though one should not overlook Danto's overt skepticism to role of form and formal properties in art status.

Overall, based on Danto's philosophy, one deduces that a good art is constituted of both aesthetically form (whether beautiful and appealing or not) and content. As such, a success in formal arrangement and relations (*howness* of an artwork) is not segregated from the success in representation or expression of its concept, subject matter, or its *whatness*. Thus, both form and content are correlatively bounded to each other as two irresolvable and essential constituents of a

work of art. Such exposition is reminiscent of neo-formalists' main thesis where form and content 'are related to each other in a satisfyingly appropriate manner' [2, p. 125]. Within a neo-formalist standpoint, form and formal elements and their relations are subservient for manifestation of its content (artworks' historical, social, religious, ethical, or political context), and the more satisfyingly artists exploit formal arrangements and relationships to represent, express, or convey its intended content, the more genuine that artwork would be.

Moving to Goldman's thesis, he, influenced by Danto, claims that form and content are experienced altogether as one thing. [16, p. 585]. Or in his other work *Aesthetic value*, Goldman<sup>9</sup> suggests this thesis that one cannot provides a true exposition of base properties of a work of art, unless one utilizes all his mental faculties (imagination, intellect, perception, and cognition) for realization of form and content altogether. [17, p. 62]. Although Goldman's plural approach to aesthetic experience may not be directly relevant to our discussion of form-content theory,<sup>10</sup> but his recent thesis reveals that form and content in the contemporary art can no longer be examined in isolation from each other. And as it is by now evident that Mondrian also endorses the union of form and content.

Overall, it is inferred that Mondrian's account on inseparability of form and content conforms to the organic theory of art. Indeed, he construes form and content as an organic complex of elements in relations. Within an organic theory of art, every work of art is an *organic complex* – manifested in a sensuous medium. And this complex is comprised of elements, their expressive qualities or characteristics, and relations among them. [30, p. 44]. Within such an organic complex, content of an artwork includes all of its expressive elements organically related to each other. On this subject, it is argued that Mondrian's view on form and content is akin to ideas of scholars like Graham who maintains that works of art are *organic unities*, meaning that removal or alteration of one element (whether as part of form or content) changes the meaning of the whole work. [18, p. 61]. This means that every constituent of artwork is correlatively related to others, and that the work of art should be perceived in union of his form and content as a holistic one.

To further illuminate the nature of an organic complex, one needs to understand about another system called a *mechanical complex*. In the mechanical complex, the nature and meaning of components remain the same regardless of the type of relations among them. Within such system, content (the what of a work of art) is distinct from form (how the content is presented). While, in an organic complex, components make a difference to each other because of different

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Cascales who did a thorough analysis of Danto's seminal work *The End of Art*, reveals that Danto also holds a union between form and content. In Danto's view, theme of artworks (content) is not the only significant aesthetic factor, and the union between form and content should also be taken into account when one evaluates a putative work of art. [4, p. 86].

<sup>10</sup> Fallahzadeh and Rahbarnia in *Goldman's Pluralistic Approach to Aesthetic Experience and Piet Mondrian's Intuitive Neo-Plastic Art* investigated Goldman's pluralistic approach to aesthetic experience in regard to pure abstract artworks of Piet Mondrian. In this article they demonstrate that even in case of pure abstract art, spectators should use all mental faculties (perception, imagination, cognition, and emotion) to truly understand form and content of Neo-Plastic paintings. [14, p. 62].

characteristics of their relations. That is to say, in an organic complex every component, whether as element, characteristics, or relation, plays its role not only in terms of itself, but also in terms of the other components.<sup>11</sup> In other words, no component can be discerned by itself and it should be comprehended in relation to other elements. [30, p. 55]. At this point, it is evident that Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art should be realized within an organic complex rather a mechanical one. And that is why Mondrian maintains that form and content are two inseparable things in unity. For Mondrian, like in the case Weitz and Sparshott,<sup>12</sup> form and content are *inseparable* but *distinguishable*. Such organic complex, or what Mondrian in his philosophical writings remarks as *unity in diversity*, is most ostensible in his late New York works (see Fig. 5), where all elements and their relation are seen as a holistic one, manifesting a universal harmony or equilibrium. Within such system, no element can be eliminated without sacrificing the pure articulation of harmony or beauty as truth.

It is notable that while Mondrian emphasizes on the unity between form and content, yet he distinguishes between form and content of painting. He delineates content as something which is universal, immutable, and timeless in all works of art. Whereas he construes form as a transitory thing that is subordinated for manifestation of such immutable content. For Mondrian form is 'the external manifestation' of the content. Hence, form in Neo-Plastic painting is merely a vehicle for the articulation of such immutable content. [24, p. 17]. In his view, as Wolfflin indicates as well, each tradition of art demands for a new set of rules for depiction of such unchangeable content. As such, form in his idea is reliant to the time, whereas the content is timeless and it is emancipated from constraints of time. [24, pp. 360-1].

### **Mondrian's Neo-Plastic art in the touchstone of neo-formalism**

At this point, it can be concluded that the aesthetic value of Neo-Plastic paintings, as one of the notable paradigms of pure abstract art, cannot be truly assessed by relying on a formalist approach, as it has been so far overly discussed by scholars namely Blotkamp, Bois, and Carmean. Firstly, as Mondrian expounds, non-figurative art, especially pure abstract painting,

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<sup>11</sup> It is inferred that Mondrian's view on unity between form and content, subservient to organic theory of art, is epitomized in his philosophical notion *unity in diversity* which is out of scope of this article to be further expanded.

<sup>12</sup> While Sparshott shows a negative attitude to Weitz's idea that the dichotomy between form and content obscures the organic nature of artworks, and that subscribing to the form and content distinction prevent 'adequate discussion of the kind of unity that a work of art presents' [28, p. 348], however, Sparshott is more skeptical to Weitz's idea that organic definition of form and content entails for endorsement of this thesis that form and content cannot be two distinct things.

possesses both form and content. Secondly, he holds that while form and content can be distinguished from each other, but they should be seen as two inseparable things in unity.

In fact, Mondrian's thesis on unity between form and content authenticates the efficiency and merits of neo-formalism over Bell's extreme formalism. Inasmuch as form and content in pure abstract painting should be discerned in unity, therefore, it is contended that neo-formalism, considered as expanded and sophisticated version of formalism, is more appropriate for aesthetic evaluation and appreciation of pure abstract art.

In fact, for employing a neo-formalist approach for art criticism of pure abstract art, or for art in general, one first needs to endorse the relevancy of both form and content. Secondly, it is essential - as substantiated by scholars and artists like Bell, Weitz, and Mondrian – to hold form and content within organic theory of art as two inseparable but distinguishable things. By acknowledging these two conditions, one is ready to adopt a neo-formalist approach for evaluation of art. At this point, it is elicited that form and content in Mondrian's Neo-Plastic painting, and in pure abstract art in general, should be seen in relation to each other in unity. In fact, Mondrian's rendition of form and content can be recapitulated in this way: while he apparently defines form and content as two distinct things, yet firstly he outlines form, like Bell, as an organic complex of elements in relation, and secondly, he construes a unity between form and content. Indeed, Mondrian's thesis on union of form and content conforms to contemporary organic theory of art which attends to organic characteristics of art, like in the case of Bell, and this thesis that form and content are two inseparable but distinguishable things.

It is also argued that neo-formalism has at least three main benefits over formalism. Firstly, unlike formalism, it considers for content a similar role and significance as form. This merit of neo-formalism is especially momentous in case of pure abstract art which its content is usually overlooked in favor of its dominant form and formal relations. Secondly, neo-formalism leads one to seek for and realize genuine content of pure abstract art which is often, within a common sense, assumed to be empty and meaningless. Furthermore, neo-formalism validates this claim, propounded by scholars like Danto, Carroll and Eldridge, that even pure abstract art possess content, and such content, though it is not palpable or recognized within representational or descriptive elements, is indispensable as equal as form for aesthetic evaluation of pure abstract paintings. And that neo-formalism is a valid aesthetic theory in regard to pure abstract art.

Thirdly, neo-formalism provides spectators, critics and aestheticians with a more principled and objective method for criticism of pure abstract artworks, like in the case of Neo-Plastic paintings. Having equipped with an explicit criterion, spectators can go through successive and clear stages to evaluate a work of art. In the first place, spectators are required to seek the content, what a work of art is all about, which requires basic research on a few online or printed sources. Secondly, they should find the form that is distinguished from content; pure elements of painting in spatial relations. Lastly, spectators need to understand whether the identified form could satisfyingly and appropriately present or articulate such content or not. After all, as Carroll also



asserts, knowing about the content in the first place, is easier than just analyzing form and formal relations. [2, p. 128]. And this prevents us to stuck in a monotonous formalist approach to analyze geometric and pure forms.

### Conclusion

At the end, it is deduced that aesthetic value and art criticism of Mondrian's Neo-Plastic paintings, as paradigm of pure abstract painting, is best determined by virtue of an organic theory of art and using a neo-formalist approach. We found that not only in Bell's aesthetic formalistic approach to art status, but also in works of philosophers like Wofflin who examined evolution of forms (styles) in the discourse of art history, form and content are not really two separate things. Instead, form and content are defined as *elements in relations* rather than *elements versus relations*.

After the scrutiny of Mondrian's writings, it is contended that for Mondrian, like Bell, form is an organic complex of plastic elements (the most abstract lines and colors) and their spatial relations. However, it is understood that in case of Mondrian, unlike Bell, content is not defined as nonplastic elements, namely representational, narrative, or descriptive elements, and their particular or causal relations. Instead, content for Mondrian has an unchangeable and spiritual nature that is defined as pure manifestation and realization of harmony, or what he called *equilibrium*, in painting. Fig. 6 outlines Mondrian's view on form and content and his inclination to the organic theory of art in comparison to Bell's formalism.

Such account of Mondrian on possession of content in his most stark Neo-Plastic compositions, endorses Danto's argument, that even an empty canvas possesses content; its *aboutness* as concept of art. And the form is on the service of embodiment of its content (its historical context by which that artwork is created); an assertion which validates the aesthetic value of many controversial art objects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Duchamp's ready-mades or Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes, as genuine art.

It is also contended that Mondrian's position on unity between form and content distances him from tenets of formalism and brings him closer to neo-formalists who argue that aesthetic value and art status of works of art should be evaluated based upon criterion of satisfying appropriateness of form to content. Indeed, this thesis that pure abstract paintings possess both form and content and that these two constituents of art are in unity as two inseparable things, validates the credibility of neo-formalism for art status and assessment of aesthetic values of pure abstract artworks.

At the end, it is suggested that a neo-formalist approach can also be utilized in case of representational painting which its form and formal relations are commonly overlooked in the expense of its descriptive content. Moreover, endorsing to the organic theory of art and a neo-formalist approach paves the path for future research on evaluation of credibility of contemporary thesis of anti-formalists like Artur Danto who insists on the importance of

historical context (content) of artworks in art status, and Goldman who propounds that one should use a pluralistic mode of aesthetic attention to artworks (using all mental faculties: imagination, intellect, perception, and cognition) for appreciation of both form and content, and that these two components of a given artwork should be realized in relation to each other in unity as inseparable but distinguishable things.

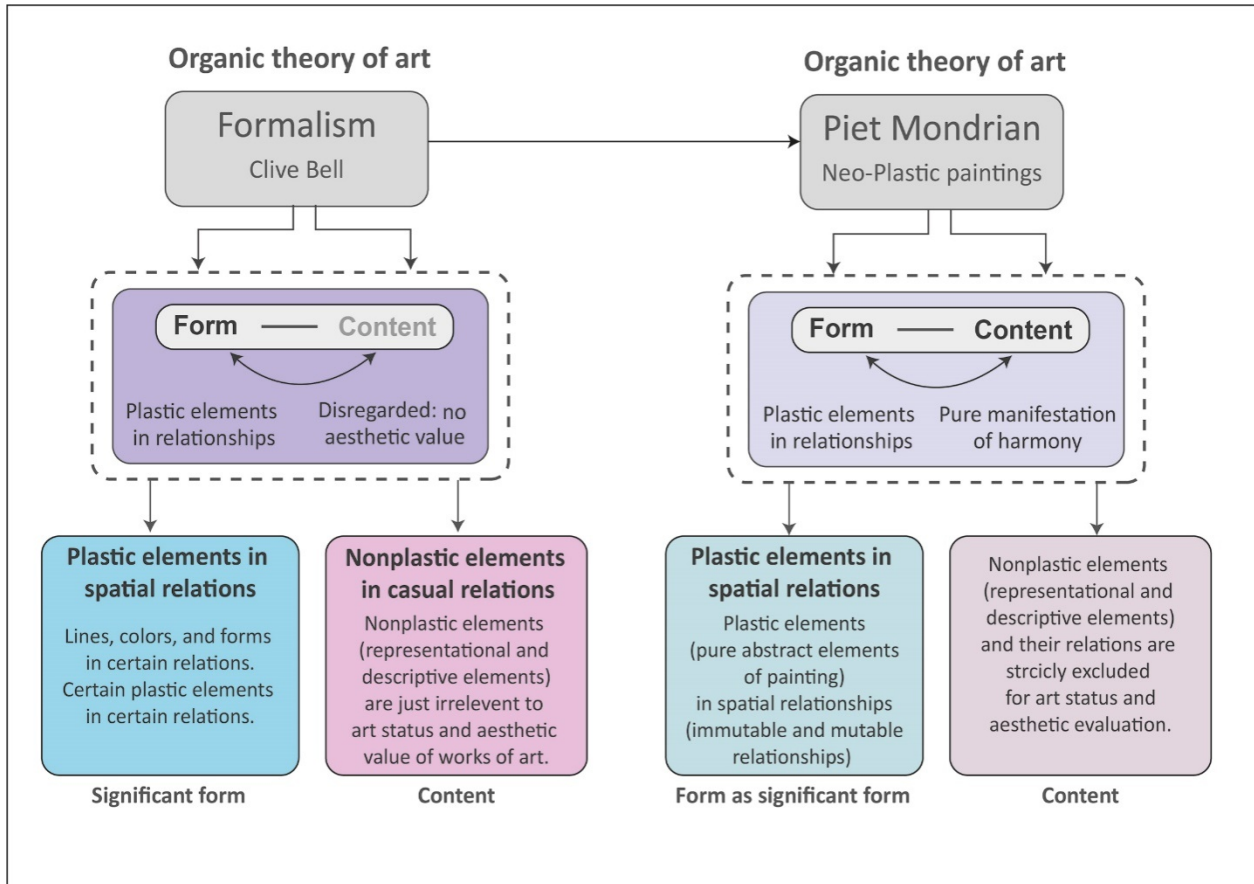


Fig. 6. Piet Mondrian’s viewpoint on nature of form and content and their relationship

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