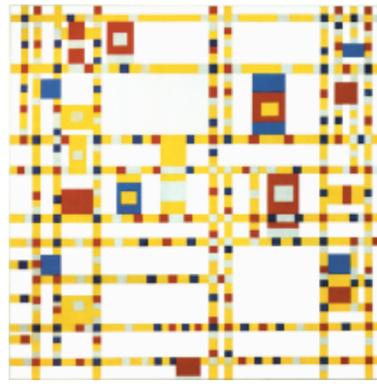


New York City 1 1942



Broadway Boogie Woogie 1942-43

## How to see Piet Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie.

Here is a Summary of part of my studies on Mondrian which will help to explain the last period of his work, the so called american, a period that has not really been fully understood yet.

I shall analyze in purely visual terms two paintings, *New York City 1* (from now on referred to as *NYC1*) and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (*BBW*), that Mondrian painted in New York City between 1942 and 1943.

The ten diagrams I shall use to analyze *BBW* will help us to visualize a dynamic process within the painting. These diagrams do not pretend to suggest a possible sequence in which *BBW* was really painted; rather, they are just a way of seeing and understanding the picture

Diagrams 1 and 2 are not directly evident in the actual configuration of *BBW*. The first two serve as a link between *NYC1* and *BBW*. To understand the latter one has in fact to start from the former.

Diagrams 3, 4, 5, 6 refer to the actual configuration of the painting.

The last four diagrams (7, 8, 9, 10) illustrate the potential that the geometry of *BBW* hints at but does not show directly. In both cases of diagrams 1 and 2 at the beginning and diagrams 7, 8, 9, 10 at the end, the graphic work is mine and the drawings will help us understanding the actual painting.

After two preliminary sketches, Mondrian began painting the *BBW* in the summer of 1942.

At first glance, this picture looks quite different from the traditional and better known works of Mondrian: it seems to be more complex and with more layers of meaning than all his preceding abstract works.

For the first time in a painting by Mondrian, the lines are discontinuous and made up of three primary colors together.

In *NYC1* the lines are in fact colored but each one is uniformly yellow red or blue while in *BBW* each line is made up of yellow, red and blue combined, as well as a faint shade of grey.

Starting in 1941, a network of multicolored lines took over from the traditional black lines: at the point where lines make contact, there is no longer a homogeneous color but the domination of one color over the other (see *NYC1*). This overlaying creates a three-dimensional effect, and in *NYC1* the yellow, red and blue seem to lie on three different planes. Such an effect was not intended by Mondrian whose real aim (amongst others) had been to eliminate the illusion of a third dimension in perspective, so as to concentrate wholly on the two tangible dimensions of painting.

How was it possible to bring to the surface in a single plane the deep space that had been created in *NYC1*?

If one looks at *NYC1* and *BBW* side by side, one gets the impression that the even lines in yellow, red and blue of the former, become interwoven in the latter, exchanging fragments of their respective colors (**diagrams 1 and 2**).

In diagram 1, I have shown a configuration similar (but not identical) to *NYC1* adding two grey lines, since this color is presented again in the *BBW*.

In diagram 2, the interweaving of the lines, barely visible in diagram 1, continues to evolve.

In this way the three colors lie again on the same plane.

The compenetration of colors in *BBW* creates a field made up of dozens of little grey, yellow, red and blue rectangles positioned within a group of perpendicular lines (**diagram 3**).

To be more precise, the yellow sections are not true rectangles so much as varying amounts of space between the different colored rectangles. The yellow color is hardly ever used as a rectangle, almost always as a linear segment. For this reason, the *BBW* lines seem to be predominantly yellow, while containing a pattern of grey, red and blue rectangles.

Through the rectangles, the opposed and continuous lines of *NYC1* enter into direct and visible communication in *BBW*: fragments of horizontal lines find their way into vertical lines and vice-versa.

For the first time in a painting by Mondrian, each line visibly displays opposed tensions within its pattern.

The rectangles are in fact small, very partial unitary elements of the two opposed directions in constant unstable equilibrium between horizontal and vertical. And, in fact, on closer inspection, the rectangles are not the same size but are all slightly different. Taken as a whole, they appear as a multitude of entities that make the space change continuously in its proportions and color. A dense network of pulsations that seems to be in continuous slight expansion and contraction within the lines.

**Diagram 4:** By their mutual interaction, some of the rectangles grow larger in one or other of the directions and outgrow the width of the containing line; in so doing, they become largish areas of yellow, red and blue within the overall framework of the painting.

A variety of 90 degree relationships with different colors in unstable equilibrium between horizontal and vertical. Some of these areas are larger horizontally and others vertically, while yet others seem to achieve a more stable equilibrium between the two opposing directions. A varying network of perpendicular ratios in yellow, red and blue.

In the highlighted areas of **diagram 5** we can see new areas or planes which, by contrast with previous ones, create internal space amongst themselves.

Two are composed respectively of a vertical red segment on a yellow horizontal background, and a grey horizontal segment on a vertical red background.

A vertical yellow plane has a grey figure within it, where the horizontal dimension dominates slightly but which in fact seems to be almost square.

Then three yellow planes (one vertical, two horizontal) contain a grey shape that is a true square.

Observing these planes in the sequence described above, it seems that their internal spaces evolve

from segments into squares, or from a linear pattern where one of the two directions dominates (in distinct contrast to the direction of the plane) to a more static form in which the horizontal and the vertical achieve a degree of equilibrium: in this way the tension within the plane is reduced.

At the same time, this layout of the internal framework of the plane means that two colors tend to concentrate simultaneously in one space.

So we have seen that the lines give rise to rectangles (**diagrams 1, 2, 3**) and that these evolve into planes that incorporate a fragment of space in another color. (**diagrams 4, 5**). An internal space arises which moves from a position of sharp contrast towards a more balanced relationship with the surrounding plane.

From now on we shall consider the lines as external space and the planes as internal space within a single structure which transforms itself from external to internal, without any break in the continuum.

The internal rectangles give increased visual stability and an added sense of permanence to the structure, compared to the dynamic and ever-changing space of the lines.

As in all Mondrian's neoplastic works, the lines tend to spread out beyond the edges of the painting toward infinite space. As we observe the finite areas of the planes, the lines spread out and the eye finds itself in unstable equilibrium between the expanding space of the lines and the space of the planes that tends to contract and concentrate. Between absolute space tending towards infinity (each line excluding the opposing line) and relative space which is always finite (relationship between two opposite directions, that is, a plane).

Space that expands in absolute terms, and space that contracts in a series of more or less balanced relationships.

In **diagram 6** at points A and B, we can see how space continues to turn in on itself, and how four colors are now concentrated in the area of only two planes: yellow/blue in one plane, grey/red in the other. And at point C we finally have a single plane which alone combines the three primary colors.

From the outset, the opposing yellow, red and blue directions have split the field of vision with an interminable series of contrasts, forcing the eye to stay in continuous movement from one point to another in the picture; here for the first time they achieve a balanced unity and a relatively tranquil state.

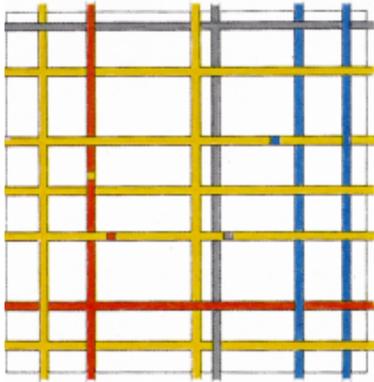
In the lower and upper parts of the two planes A and B, note how one can see segments that counteract the direction of the field containing them.

In both planes a central rectangle expresses a certain equivalence of the opposing directions, but a segment with the same color as the rectangle still tends to create opposition. The space still seems to be influenced by the dynamism of the external lines, if compared with that of plane C where, by contrast, the whole internal field achieves a more balanced relationship between the horizontal and the vertical. Passing over the red, the vertical blue strip becomes a slight horizontal enlargement of the yellow: a vertical/horizontal unit no longer all that disturbed by the dynamism of the external lines.

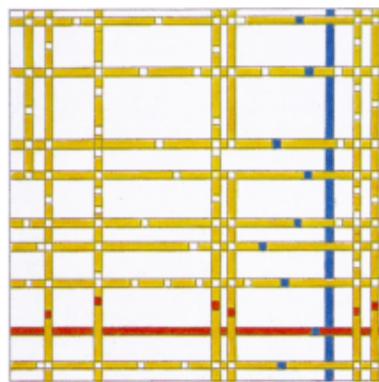
The yellow, red and blue lines, which expand dynamically towards infinity in *NYC1*, have gradually contracted in *BBW* to a plane containing those three colors.

For the first time in Mondrian's neoplastic works, the three primary colors are combined simultaneously in a single plane (compare all the other canvases painted between 1920 and 1943).

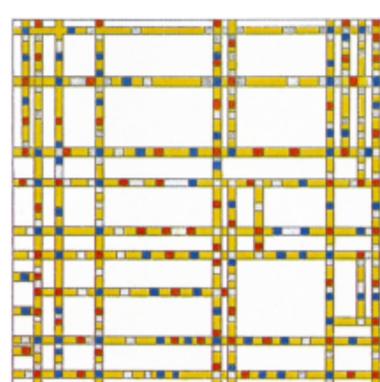
And for the first time, the colored planes are not outlined with black lines as in all works painted between 1921 and 1940, but they emerge freely from the white background. The "drawing" (black outlines) no longer controls the "painting" (the colored planes) but merges with it to become one.



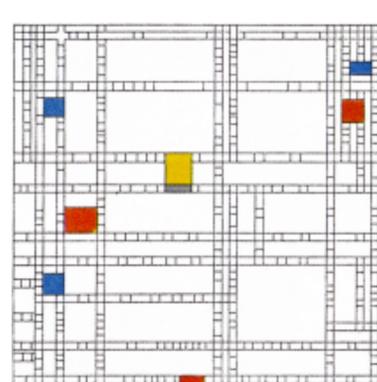
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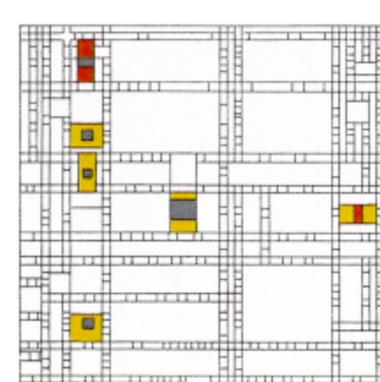
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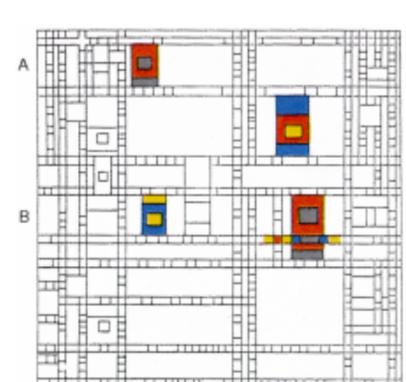
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Summarizing the space analyzed up to now in single parts, we could say that in *BBW* the infinite lines gradually become a myriad of small squares or rectangles, and in turn the rectangles become a number of monochromatic planes. These are then transformed into a variety of two-color planes, which then become a single plane. Within the same spatial structure, the eye moves without interruption from a dynamic and varied situation towards a relatively static condition which summarizes the whole space. In *BBW* the space transforms itself gradually from a multiple condition towards a unitary state. From multiplicity to unity.

Hold out your open hand with the palm uppermost, and look at your five fingers; then slowly bend your fingers to make a closed fist. Some wise men from the Far East do this to show that the ten thousand different things we see in nature are in fact only one. The human intellect never ceases to analyze and dissect things into ever smaller, apparently unrelated parts, but the heart knows that these things are an interconnected and indissoluble unity. Intellect and heart, analysis and synthesis, expansion and contraction, multiplicity and unity: traditional opposites in our way of thinking (mainly in western thought), themes that are as ancient as mankind, stated and restated in different ways by religions and philosophies which, one after another, try to establish once and for all what constitutes "truth". With all his work, but principally with *BBW*, Mondrian talks about this in purely visual terms saying profoundly new things; but it is not possible in the space of this short presentation to analyze and explain their deeper meaning.

Let's now continue our examination of the painting:

**Diagram 6:** Plane D is the same size as plane C, but is not composed of three primary colors; rather, it is made up only of red and grey. Two small blue squares are positioned halfway between the internal plane and a horizontal line that crosses it; but in fact they seem to belong more to the line than to the plane. The internal space of the plane contains a grey rectangle and two segments of the same color: in other words, a signal of permanence and increased equilibrium between the two opposed directions, and two signals of movement that from inside accentuate the horizontal direction in sharp contrast to the vertical layout of the plane.

Following the equivalence and the synthesis of the three primary colors achieved in plane C, in the internal space of plane D the colors are reduced again and the external dynamism of the lines re-asserts itself, creating fresh contrasts and imbalances. The line that suddenly crosses the internal field and the resulting imbalance between horizontal and vertical shown by the two segments opposing the plane direction that contains them, tends to break up visually the equivalence of opposites previously achieved.

After the relative degree of quiet, constancy and unity achieved in plane C, with plane D space seems to start moving again; the unitary synthesis expands again, the colors break down and from the relatively static position of plane C they start moving again inside plane D. This plane shows an increasing instability which by successive degrees transforms its inner space into the external space of the lines: a more dynamic and always different space from one point to another. **Diagrams 7, 8, 9, 10.**

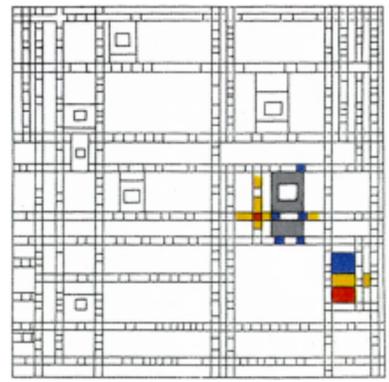
First space became more concentrated passing from the lines to the planes which continue to hold the chromatic components of the whole field in a single plane made up of those three colors (**diagrams 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6**); now the same space shows a tendency to re-expand from the condition of a plane towards the more dynamic and complex structure of the lines (**diagrams 7, 8, 9, 10**). From an external space to one that is all internal and then again from internal to external.

The painting does not show directly the whole process of reopening which I have visualized in Diagrams 7, 8, 9, 10 (as it could have been...) but, with plane D, it gives us a clear indication in that sense. An indication that is confirmed in plane A Diagram 7 where blue, yellow and red find themselves juxtaposed but, note well, no longer interwoven as in plane C Diagram 6. Juxtaposition creates an impression of reduced compactness and solidity for the whole plane, as distinct from the interweaving which combines the three colors into a single, more stable structure.

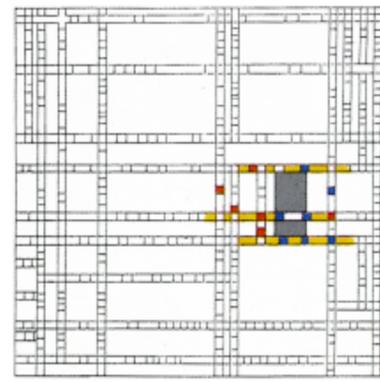
Plane A Diagram 7 appears like plane C Diagram 6 while it is dissolving. Notice how the yellow, on the right, is already tending to move beyond the perimeter of the plane almost to the point of blending into the yellow of the lines all around.

From a condition of synthesis and equivalence of opposites, the colors yellow, red and blue disintegrate again into an almost infinite variety of contrasts.

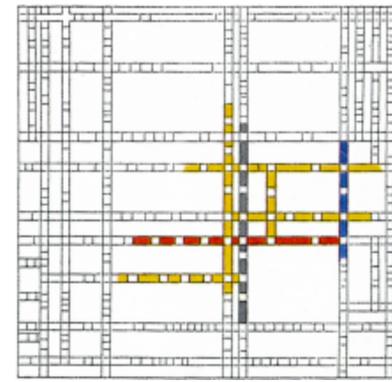
The geometry of *BBW* can be summed up as a process in which many lines achieve the unitary synthesis of one plane, and from a unified plane they then expand again towards a multitude of lines.



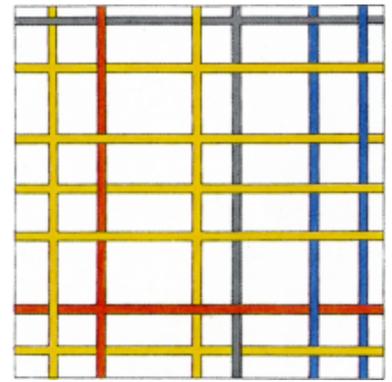
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From expansion towards an ever-increasing concentration and from concentration again towards expansion. This is how the painting breathes.

The entire space of *BBW* flowers in a myriad of different contrasts of the chromatic material which, by successive degrees, concentrates itself at a single point, then return to the condition of multiplicity. From chaos towards order, then from order again towards disorder. And such a process takes place ideally an infinite number of times following an interminable flow that the artist has fixed in this particular form which he then called *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. I feel that all this has little to do with Boogie Woogie music and even less with Manhattan skyscrapers or Broadway theaters; rather, it has much to do with a universal vision of life.

When we look at a landscape, whether urban or rural, space continues well beyond our field of vision with a virtually infinite series of colors and different shapes. The observer's conscious perception cannot take in that infinite variety all at once, except by isolating parts of it and reducing them to smaller synthetic elements.

From earliest perception to the development of scientific theories, philosophical thinking and artistic expression, human intellect always tends to reduce to finite groups and unitary structures everything in space or in life that is multiple and dense with interconnected and simultaneously occurring phenomena. Through space/time perception, man necessarily perceives parts of what in nature and life is actually a whole, an unbroken continuum. The syntheses produced by the human mind are therefore always partial and relative. It is therefore inevitable that the complexity of existence and the natural world always call into discussion man's ideas. The infinite variations and changeability of nature expand the finite units that man's brain has devised so that they have to be permanently re-examined and reworked in new forms; this continues in an interminable dialogue between nature and mind, between life and its representation, between material and spirit as Mondrian used to say.

The relationship between observer and landscape, between thought and nature, ideal representation and material life, is symbolized in neoplastic painting by the space of the lines and the planes, the former tending towards multiplicity and infinity, the latter towards synthesis and unitary elements. In *BBW*, the infinite space of the lines with their variety of small squares/rectangles, all different from one another (symbol of the multiplicity and diversity of urban or rural space) gradually transforms itself into the space of the planes, the expression of multiple space becoming ever more concentrated until all its complexity can be considered as a unit.

This process of progressive synthesis is akin to the activity of the human mind faced by the multiple aspects of nature or urban life. It's not by chance that *BBW*'s unitary plane consists of a vertical element with an internal horizontal element; one needs to know that Mondrian identified the spirit (the mind) with the vertical, and the natural (physical) with the horizontal. In *BBW* we move from an external and potentially infinite space to an internal and finite space. That is to say, from the physical (external and virtually infinite space) to the spiritual (finite internal space) and from the spiritual again to the physical. The objective becomes subjective and then the subjective again becomes objective, It is a unique path.

Mondrian has written «by the interiorization of that which is known as matter, and the exteriorization of that which is known as spirit - up to now, all too separate - matter/spirit becomes a unity». (Michel Seuphor, "Piet Mondrian, Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre" (His Life His Work), Paris 1956, page 166.)

In all Mondrian's european neoplastic works, the black lines marked off the colored planes from the exterior, without participating directly in their own space: on one side, the infinite space of the uniformly black lines; on the other side, the finite and colored space of the planes, space between the lines. The two terms were present together but remained separate and distinct. In 1942 for the first time, in *BBW*, the lines become the planes meaning that infinite space becomes finite space without a break in the continuum. The natural element becomes spiritual and the spiritual goes back to nature. In *BBW* for the first time the equivalence of opposites is dynamic, as the artist had always tried to accomplish, because here for the first time one term transforms itself visibly into the opposite.

Without taking anything from Mondrian's better-known neoplastic works, I believe we can say that what is generally recognized as his painting (with the black lines and few small colored planes) is in fact a transitory step towards the space that finally comes to light in *BBW*. This is the image that Mondrian had at the tips of his fingers throughout all his activity. He worked right through his life in order to achieve this type of space: as dense and as complex as possible, just as the natural world around him always appeared; but at the same time, sufficiently synthetical as required by his conscience, and, generally, more or less always by the human spirit. «I was struck by the vastness of nature and I tried to express expansion, tranquillity, unity», said the artist about his series of *Pier and Ocean* in 1914. A space expanding dynamically towards infinity which gradually becomes concentrated in a finite and more stable dimension. But not stopping there. Life never stops. The natural universe is infinite and human thought only proceeds by finite steps; the equilibrium between life and ideas will therefore always be dynamic, not static. The unitary synthesis opens up towards the immense variation of multiplicity, and then turns back to synthesis, and so on in an endless process. A fluid geometry that gives tangible form to becoming rather than being, to relationship rather than single elements; an indefinite continuum, please note, expressed in quite clear and definite terms.

The entire process observed in *BBW* is a process of growth, of construction and of continuous transformation, like all nature's processes, and just as in nature, nothing remains as it is for long. Separate entities do not have value in themselves but acquire value through their relationship with the other parts. Each point is unique and unrepeatable but, at the same time, part of a whole, a single process that unites everything like a universal rhythm. A space without pre-arranged plans where everything is free and new, tending simultaneously towards order and disorder.

A geometry that is in fact anything but rigid, cold and rational, as has often been said about Mondrian. On the contrary, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*'s space very closely resembles life, in my opinion.

This is not the moment to go deeper into the matter. I'm aware of having touched on several subjects that will be amply dealt with in a work which is about to be published.

At present I'm completing a more detailed analysis of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, together with all the preceding works from 1908 to 1943, explaining their meanings at visual and existential levels. The aim is to show that one can construct a treatise without words on nature and life, using only shapes and colors in relation to one another.

The entire work of Mondrian will be viewed as a single unique visual process through which the working space gradually transforms itself and evolves, leading up to the two final Boogies painted in New York City. A new space that represents a new way of viewing reality.