Landscape Biographies

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Piet Mondrian’s *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942-44

The Painting as Illustration of the Biography of Landscape

*Jürgen Stoye*

**Abstract**

This chapter investigates Mondrian’s last painting as authored landscape and the role of Piet Mondrian (Dutch: Piet Mondriaan) as ‘author’ of New York. Based on his desire to become a great and well-known painter, from 1905 onwards Mondrian tried to express himself in the most fashionable art styles of his time. But when staying in the Dutch village of Laren during the First World War, Mondrian started to develop a very personal style. Besides painting, dancing was his passion, which at the period earned him the title ‘Dancing Madonna’. After the First World War, when going back to Paris, he became aware that his style of painting was much more radical than that of all other painters. But although or because he was the most modern painter of his time, Mondrian was lonesome, without money and without success. He withdrew from the outer world and turned his studio into a world apart, one that looked like a three-dimensional version of his reduced paintings. The only sign from the outer world was jazz. Mondrian loved to dance around his studio to jazz music he played on his gramophone – alone. Mondrian’s life changed when from the mid-twenties on, the American artist and Maecenas Katherine S. Dreier became interested to buy his paintings. The moment Mondrian became a successful painter, his austere style began to change as well; it changed dramatically when he moved to New York in 1940, to escape war. Here the ascetic monk turned out to be a lounge lizard. He loved the city as he loved its rhythm – ‘Boogie Woogie’.

In terms of the biography of landscape, ‘Victory Boogie Woogie’ can be seen as testimony of the influence which New York had on Mondrian. It illustrates the relationship between mental and material worlds. Mondrian’s life and his affection for music are mirrored in this painting. As a painter, Mondrian becomes author of New York.

**Keywords:** landscape biography, New York, Mondrian, authored landscape, authorship, dwelling perspective
You should be able to make Piet a bit more comprehensible.

‘I don’t believe that Mondrian ever can be done justice,’ said Paul...
She immediately picked it up and said: ‘If you don’t try, you will resign in advance.’
And then, in one breath: ‘How do you prefer to see Mondrian yourself?’
He slowly said: ‘As a dear fool who used to dance the Charleston.’
(Dendermonde, 1994, p. 138)

38 ‘U moet Piet toch een stuk begrijpelijker kunnen maken.’
‘Ik geloof niet dat Mondriaan ooit volledig recht kan worden gedaan,’ zei Paul ...
Ze ging er dadelijk op in en zei: ‘Als je het niet probeert geef je het bij voorbaat al op.’
En toen, in één adem door: ‘Hoe ziet u Piet Mondrian eigenlijk het liefst?’
Hij zei langzaam: ‘Als een dierbare gek die de charleston danste.’
Introduction

New York is a city of extreme dimension. Its rectangular pattern, its verticality and density have a strong impact on the image of the city as well on how the city is imaged and imagined. Lyonel Feininger, Georgia O’Keefe, Alfred Stieglitz, Erich Mendelsohn, to name just a few, all were impressed by it. When setting their impressions on canvas or capturing it in a photograph, almost always the same perspectives are chosen: a flight of endless streets, a view from below to the heights of the towering buildings, a view from a certain height on a collage-like cityscape, or the view from above in an attempt to get a grip on the complexity. The last three paintings by Piet Mondrian show none of these features. New York City (1942), Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942-1943) and last but not least Victory Boogie Woogie (1942-1944) seem to ignore all this. Yet, there is no doubt that their titles refer to the place where they were painted: New York City.

Victory Boogie Woogie has a unique biography. Mondrian had just started working on it in 1942 when his gallerist Valentine Dudensieg urged him to sell it to him for $200. In 1944, after the painter’s death, the painting was sold for the then enormous amount of $8000 to Emily and Burton Tremaine for their Miller Company collection of abstract art. Dudensieg himself was able to buy a chateau in France with the proceedings. After the death of Tremaine, the painting came into the hands of Victoria and Si Newhouse. In their turn, they sold it in 1998 for the again enormous amount of 80 million guilders to the Dutch foundation Nationaal Fonds Kunstbezit. It was sensation and scandal alike: so much money paid for one single painting! On 31 August 1998 Queen Beatrix granted Mondrian’s painting to the Dutch state ‘as a visible memory of the period 1814-2002 during which the Dutch Central Bank was responsible for the guilder’ (Locher, 2000, p. 3). Mondrian, the one man who could live on practically nothing and very often was forced to live so, honoured as a symbol of the Dutch guilder: the irony of history.

Piet Mondrian, the man behind the painting, seems to remain invisible or at least, as so often during his life, tries to withdraw from the outside world. But are things what they seem? Does not the quadrangle of 1.26 x 1.26 metres say as much about Mondrian in New York City as it says about Mondrian and New York City? Does Victory Boogie Woogie reflect the influence the city had on Mondrian? Is it perhaps possible to read in it the relationship

39 “als een zichtbare herinnering aan de periode 1814 tot 2002 gedurende welke De Nederland-sche Bank verantwoordelijk was voor de gulden als betaalmiddel”
between the mental and material worlds? Can this painting be seen as an illustration of the biography of the landscape?

Based on the texts of Marwyn Samuels (1979) and Michel de Certeau (1984), I will define the context of the biography of the landscape within which the painting will be investigated. Apart from this theoretical investigation, the biography of Mondrian will be an important source for my research. In this regard, his second period in Paris, following the First World War, will be important, as well as the last years that he spent in exile in New York City. The short period in between, which Mondrian spent in London, will not be discussed. The biography of Mondrian is also important because he adored music. Rhythm is one of the central themes of his abstract paintings. He was fond of jazz music and already when he lived and worked in the small Dutch village of Laren he was known as the ‘Dancing Madonna’ (Stap, 2011, p. 95).40 It is likely that Victory Boogie Woogie refers to this passion as well.

The Biography of the Landscape

Until far in the 20th century, landscape was approached mainly by its morphology. The dynamic interaction between human perception and spatial structures was hardly investigated. For a long time, landscape morphology thus remained an anonymous approach, which changed only in the 1970s. At that time, the shortcomings of the reductionist vision of this naturalistic approach became criticised. Geographers adopted the term ‘Lebenswelt’ from phenomenology. This focuses on the principal dialectic connection and equality of people and their life world. ‘Although shaped by their environment to a certain measure, people actively contribute to their world by constantly (re)creating it within the context of their thinking and acting, doing and leaving, in short, by participating in the world with their everyday lives. Being shaped by the world and presenting to it and realising in and by means of the world take place in one dialectic movement’ (Kolen, 2005, p. 13).41

The constructivist approach will be applied in the following. We will study the concept of ‘authorship’ with Samuels and De Certeau in order to investigate the interaction between people and landscape, in our case

40 “Dansende Madonna”
41 “Hoewel tot op zekere hoogte door hun omgeving gevormd, leveren mensen aan hun wereld een actieve bijdrage door deze voortdurend te (her)scheppen in de context van hun denken en handelen, doen en laten, kortom, door met hun alledaagse leven aan de wereld deel te nemen. Het gevormd worden door de wereld en het zich tegenwoordig stellen en realiseren in en door middel van de wereld vinden plaats in één dialectische beweging.”
between Mondrian and New York. As what kind of an author does Mondrian appear against the background of these texts?

**Marwyn Samuels**

Samuels, in his text, shows that for a long time, western history did not take into account the individual. As a consequence, landscape was studied without studying its inhabitants and ‘authors’. Samuels mentions the shortcomings of this morphological approach: ‘Yet there is something vaguely amiss here. However rational, there is something unreasonable about a human landscape lacking in inhabitants; something strangely absurd about a geography of man devoid of men’ (Samuels, 1979, p. 52). Without inhabitants, Samuels cannot imagine landscape: ‘The biography of landscape deals with what was and is: notably the concrete World of individuals in their contexts, a World of authored landscapes’ (Samuels, 1979, p. 67). He makes a distinction between mental and material landscapes and calls them ‘Landscapes of Impressions’ and ‘Landscapes of Expressions’ respectively.

According to Samuels, ‘Landscapes of Impressions’ are based on the perception of landscape. The resulting ideas and images, e.g. in literature and visual arts, influence the way other individuals perceive landscape. Finally, the ‘impression’ becomes ‘impressive’. This imaging plays an important role in the physical change of the landscape, when the ‘Landscape of Expressions’ comes into being. This explains the strong reciprocal influence between mental and material worlds. In a biographical approach man becomes author of the landscape. Most of these authors will remain anonymous. In their everyday lives they do not leave (m)any traces. They are what Samuels calls the ‘nobody in particular’.

Looking at New York City, the ‘nobody in particular’ disappears behind the big names. Samuels mentions members of well-known families of New York City who become individual authors. Not only are they known as individuals; with their big factories and imperia these tycoons were decisive for the life and work of thousands of others. Samuels talks about these authors as ‘elite’. They form a group of people who within society are claiming a prominent position or, as ‘the elite’, as one prominent person. Not only did they foster economic growth, but they also changed the appearance of the cityscape and architecture of New York City. People like Louis Sullivan as the ‘father of the skyscraper’ or Robert Moses, whose numerous buildings are synonymous with the city, belong to this group. ‘Landscape by Moses,’ Robert Caro calls it (Samuels, 1979, p. 66). According to Samuels, they are the authors of Manhattan.
Michel de Certeau

‘Walking in the City’ is a complex research on ‘the parallelism between linguistic and pedestrian enunciation’. In this text, Michel de Certeau looks upon New York City. Literally. He is standing on the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre, looking out over Manhattan. From here the city looks like a wave of verticals. The elevated view on the city from above makes him a ‘voyeur’ and transforms the city from a known world into a text, stretching out before his eyes. The liveable city becomes a readable city. The wish to (over)look a city in one glance goes back to the Middle Ages and Renaissance. From that time on, cities were depicted from (then still inaccessible) heights. The spectator looks down on the city from a divine position. This perspective is also applied in the hermeneutic images of the mnemonic cityscapes from these periods to which De Certeau refers (Yates, 1966). There, the cityscape becomes a place for storing information, an artificial memory. Manhattan seems to be its built Utopia. It is also the abstract perspective from which architects and urban planners look at cities and design them. However, their only concern is structure. The everyday lives themselves take place ‘down below’.

The city can only be experienced by means of movement. ‘They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it’ (De Certeau, 1984, p. 93). According to De Certeau, in this parallelism moving in the city functions as speech does for language: the city comes alive through movement just as language comes alive through speech. De Certeau is fascinated by the anonymous mass of people, roaming its way along the facades and the shop windows of the city. They are the authors of Manhattan, even though De Certeau does not consider it an appropriate term. The movement is ordinary and unconscious. In the end the authors cannot read the ‘text’ they are writing: ‘The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other’ (De Certeau, 1984, p. 93).

Victory Boogie Woogie

Victory Boogie Woogie comes to mind. On a formal-aesthetic level one could draw a parallel between the text of De Certeau and the image. It looks like
a view of the city from a divine perspective, an excerpt of the city structure with its rectangular shapes. They immediately make one think of the street pattern of New York City. The black lines that are so typical for Mondrian have given way to hundreds of small coloured dots that for a large part have been glued to the canvas with colour tape. The searching is still tangible in this unfinished painting. The lines show signs of the nervous, blind movement that characterizes New York City according to De Certeau. It is as if we are looking at the blindly written text without authors and spectators.

Together with *New York City* (1942) and *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-44) forms a triptych. One immediately recognizes Mondrian as author. However, it is evident that the pure style of Mondrian from the two preceding decades dissolves more and more in these paintings. The vertical and horizontal lines, cutting coloured patches or defining them, used to be black. Now these lines are coloured. In the next stage the lines dissolve into stripes of different colours. In the final stage lines and patches even mingle. The result is a vibrating, rhythmic whole. ‘The more or less incidentally added colour accents soon started to spread out to a full and frivolous emancipation of colour’ (Locher, 2000, p. 65). What could be the reason for this change in Mondrian’s austere style?

Samuels writes: ‘Viewed in terms of individual responsibility, the created landscapes of man are much like any other product of human creativity. They have much in common with the manifold forms of human art and artifice. That is, that they are constrained by need and context, but they are also expressions of authorship’ (Samuels, 1979, p. 65). In a biographical approach one could follow Samuels and investigate the triptych as ‘authored landscapes’ of New York; as urban landscapes, a result of the interaction between Mondrian and the city, like impressions that have become impressive. It becomes interesting to take a closer look at the biography of the painter. This should include the period in Paris from 1919 until his death in 1944 in New York, the period in which Mondrian occupied himself with neo-plasticism. Are there biographical clues explaining the change from the cool and stylized rhythms of his classical period to the vibrating rhythms of his last canvases?

42 “De min of meer terzijde toegevoegde kleurige accenten gingen zich snel uitbreiden tot een volledige en uitbundige emancipatie van kleur.”
Mondrian

Despite the international fame of his paintings, Mondrian as a person remains almost invisible. Partly, this was his intention, yet it is very significant that the biography by his dear friend Michel Seuphor, first published in 1951, is still the most personal one. Seuphor had gotten to know Mondrian in Paris in April 1923. It is very touching to see the admiration for the ‘master’ that still resonates in his book. In Germany, this biography was first published in 1957. The editor mentioned that Mondrian is still almost unknown among the broader public and that he wants to save Mondrian from oblivion.

In terms of visibility, Mondrian is the complete opposite of the ‘world champion of self-promotion’, Le Corbusier. Every time I see a photograph of Mondrian I have to think of Le Corbusier, too. The two men share a lot. They incorporate a new type of man in the modern industrial era. Both dress elegantly in ready-made suits, both sport their significant round glasses. The modern man is universal, not individual anymore. The photos that were made in Mondrian’s New York studio right after his death, his round glasses neatly lying on a small side table, immediately remind me of Le Corbusier’s interior sketches. Coincidence? In 1920 Mondrian published his brochure “‘Aux homes futures’. In 1926 ‘Vers une architecture’ was published by Le Corbusier. Zeitgeist?

Everyone will recognize a Mondrian painting immediately, at least a painting from his neo-plasticist period. But his early paintings will make one doubt. From 1905 – when Mondrian had his first studio on Rembrandt Square in Amsterdam – he experiences the evolution of modern painting on his own. It is his ambition to become a well-known and well-regarded painter. While searching for his own expression, Mondrian becomes inspired by French Fauvism and Cubism. His first period spent in Paris is supposed to get him closer to Picasso and Braque. In the Netherlands he signed his work with his proper name, Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan Jr. In a Paris exhibition catalogue dating from 1912, he is listed as Pierre Mondrian. He liked the spelling ‘Mondrian’ very much and used it from then on. It gives his name a certain allure and can be seen as an outer sign of breaking free from the small-town background of his father’s world (Stap, 2011, p. 87).

While he is staying in the Netherlands for a holiday in 1914, the First World War unexpectedly breaks out. Mondrian cannot go back to Paris. He is forced to stay in Holland, where he lives in seven different locations in the artistic village of Laren. There he spends the Sunday afternoons with ‘heavenly glance and head askew,’dancing in hotel Hamdorff (Stap, 2011, p. 95). The art historian H.P. Bremmer gets him into contact with the
wealthy Helene Kröller-Müller. In exchange for a small grant, Mondrian has to make four paintings per year for the lady. Mondrian leads a humble life of his own.

When the First World War is over in 1918, Mondrian wants to go back to his studio in Paris. The period 1918-1919 may not be the beginning of Mondrian as an artist, yet it marks the beginning of his (theoretical) work in neo-plasticism. It is a beginning full of disappointments. Mondrian will no longer receive the yearly grant from H.P. Bremmer. He also has to face that, on an artistic level, he has left his idols Picasso and Braque far behind, which makes him feel very lonely. Although Mondrian wants to leave Paris, going south to the countryside, he stays in the city.

26, rue du Départ, near Gare Montparnasse, will be his address until 1936. From 1920 onwards, his studio becomes a world apart. ‘This ... is an indication of Mondrian’s desire for a social framework for his art. Since there was none, Mondrian constructed it himself. He exhibited his own studio as the workplace of a creative artist of enduring merit’ (Deicher, 1994, p. 57). The well-known photographs from this period show a white and sober interior, just like a three-dimensional interpretation of his own paintings. It also shows his contact with Theo van Doesburg and De Stijl. Everything is white; the walls are covered with coloured patches which he continuously kept shifting, creating new situations over and over again (Locher, 2000, p. 21). Mondrian himself remains invisible. He withdraws from public life and keeps working on his paintings, which at first glance appear very simple. ‘In so doing he established a myth. He has since been repeatedly described – in an almost unacceptable stereotype of what he really was – as a monk or a saint of painting, a priest “officiating the white altar”’ (Deicher, 1994, p. 64). After having visited Mondrian in his studio, the American journalist Charmion von Wiegand characterizes him as follows: ‘Mondrian is a light, thin man, half-bold with ascetic features of a catholic priest or a scientist’. (Seuphor, 1957, p. 62) Something that cannot be missed in his studio is his gramophone. Mondrian has a collection of jazz records and is always eager to get the latest records from America. Duke Ellington is his favourite.

Michel Seuphor characterizes the period between 1920 and 1926 as the period of the classical Mondrian paintings, a time that for Mondrian as a person is characterised by solitude, disease and poverty (Seuphor, 1957, p. 160). It is the period in which he keeps developing the theme of vertical and horizontal lines from his ‘pier and ocean’ paintings from 1916-1917, which he made in the coastal town of Domburg. The playful lines are getting more and more abstract, the tempered colours finally give way to the basic
colours. His paintings are no longer supposed to be a representation of reality, but of universal truth. Mondrian hardly sells a painting, and if so, at a very low price. When he is broke, he paints a little piece, showing a flower. There are dozens of paintings by him like this, showing a chrysanthemum. Mondrian is disgusted. This has nothing in common with his art, and he would rather starve than continue with the flower pieces. As a result he bans green from his pallet of colours. When sitting in a café, he places himself with his back towards the window, so that he does not have to see the trees. Life and art are one to Mondrian.

Changes

From 1926, life changes for Mondrian. The American artist and Maecenas Miss Katherine S. Dreier buys a painting, which is exhibited that very year in an exposition by the Société Anonyme in Brooklyn. In the acknowledgements of the catalogue, Ms. Dreier writes: ‘Holland has brought forth three great painters, who – even if they are logical expressions of their country – have broken up the limits of their country by their personality. The first one was Rembrandt, the second van Gogh, the third is Mondrian ... Here is Mondrian, who – starting from a strong individualistic expression – reached a clarity, which has not been reached before him’ (Seuphor, 1957, p. 164).43 A first recognition for Mondrian and his new art, of which it is very interesting to note that it comes from the New World. That same year, Mondrian publishes his ideas on neo-plasticism. It can be seen as resume and manifesto of his work, created in solitude.

Mondrian is selling paintings more often now, and his life becomes less lonely. He has a group of friends and receives visitors from The Netherlands. He becomes a member of the group ‘Cercle et Carré’, founded by Michel Seuphor in 1930, and may be regarded as its intellectual centre. Later he also becomes a member of the group ‘Abstraction – Création’. Dancing remains his favourite occupation in his spare time. In an interview with the Dutch newspaper DeTelegraaf dating from September 1926, Mondrian is very upset that the Charleston has been forbidden in The Netherlands. If this is not

about to change, Mondrian will never go back to his home country. The title of the novel by Max Dendermonde Mondriaan, de man die charleston danste refers to this interview (Dendermonde, 1994).

In 1934, Mondrian becomes acquainted with two men who will be of great influence for his further life. They are the English painter Ben Nicholson and the young American art student Harry Holtzman. Due to the international political tensions caused by the ‘Sudetenkrise’, Mondrian does not feel safe in Paris anymore. He fears war and bombings. On 21 September 1938 he accepts the invitation by Ben Nicholson and his wife Barbara Hepworth and leaves Paris for good. When arriving in London he claims, ‘I’m on my way to America’ (Stap, 2011, p. 141). Mondrian becomes used to London. He tells his brother that he got rid of the endless fatigue he suffered in Paris. ‘Maybe they are having too many aperitifs and wine over there’, he assumes (Stap, 2011, p. 142). He does not find the courage to go to America until the house next to him is destroyed in the London Blitz. The threat of war that he wanted to escape has come close. At the end of September 1940 Mondrian leaves England, and on 3 October 1940 he arrives in New York Harbour, where Harry Holtzman is waiting for him. Mondrian is then 68 years old.

Mondrian in New York

In 1938, Mondrian wrote in a letter: ‘Dear Holtzman, you know that I always had the wish to live in New York, but never dared to take the risk’. Finally Mondrian has made it and is staying in New York with his friend. He loves the city and its modern vitality; he likes the skyscrapers, which in an interview he describes as ‘not too high, but just good like this’. Seuphor assumes that the rectangular street pattern reminds Mondrian of the Amsterdam canals. On 22 September 1942 Piet Mondrian becomes an American citizen.

Under the patronage of the rich Holtzman, life changes for Mondrian. He now has a gallerist, Valentine Dudensieg, who is able to sell his paintings fairly easily in his Valentine gallery. In January/February 1942 and March/April 1943 Valentine organises exhibitions for Mondrian in his gallery. Among the people buying his art is Peggy Guggenheim, who Mondrian knew in Paris. Mondrian participates actively in the artistic life of New York.
York, and gets to know many other artists like André Breton and Max Ernst, who also stay in New York because of the war in Europe. According to Peggy Guggenheim, Mondrian does not miss a party or an opening, where very often he is the focus of attention. He enjoys stepping out, going out dancing with his friend Sidney Janis. Charmion von Wiegand writes:

But his delight of dancing to Boogie Woogie music was unfeigned. He asked most earnest whether I thought he was too old to ask the ladies to dance and seemed much relieved when I said no. He had a wonderful sense of rhythm but liked very complicated steps, and he held me at a disconcerting distance – which did not make dancing with him easy. In the middle of the dance, when the orchestra switched from boogie-woogie to jazz, he stopped abruptly: ‘Let’s sit down. I hear melody’ (Nieuwenhuis, 2012, p. 38).47

Despite all the changes and the incentives of the city, Mondrian’s studio on East 1st Avenue, and from 1943 onwards on East 59th Street, resembles his Paris studio. White and sober, decorated with the well-known colour patches on the wall and white lacquered fruit crates as furniture. Seuphor calls it the hermitage of an ascetic. Yet, something has changed. The Paris studio was an artificial world apart with Mondrian as its creator and lonely inhabitant. Now, there is a difference between the inner world (the studio) and the outer world (the city). Mondrian feels completely at ease in New York. He feels safe with regard to the threats of war, his economic situation is better than it has ever been before and he has many friends. The outer world contrasts with the inner world of his studio. As in Paris, Mondrian withdraws to the inner world for working. But it is no longer the abstract and theoretical work of the years between 1920-1926 when he was working on a painting like an architect with sketch paper and ruler. In this white world with its colour patches, the rhythm of the city can now be heard. The outer world has entered the inner world. The Madonna dances the ‘Boogie Woogie’.

In 1941, the painter Carl Holty introduces a new invention to Mondrian: coloured tape. Along with his changed attitude, Mondrian radically changes his manner of working. The black lines disappear and give way to coloured

47 “Maar zijn plezier in het dansen op boogiewoogiemuziek was ongeveinsd. Hij vroeg in alle ernst of ik dacht dat hij te oud was om de dames ten dans te vragen en leek zeer opgelucht toen ik nee zei. Hij had een geweldig gevoel voor ritme, maar hield van zeer gecompliceerde passen en hield mij op een oncomfortabele afstand – wat het dansen met hem er niet makkelijk op maakte. Toen het orkest midden in een dans plotseling van boogiewoogie op jazz overging, stopte hij abrupt: ‘Laten wij gaan zitten. Ik hoor melodie.’"
(tape) lines. While in Paris, Mondrian was reflecting the height and thickness of his black lines for days. Now, he is experimenting with the tape, working playfully and intuitively. He no longer talks about his painting but about his finds. ‘I am not interested in paintings, I am interested in finds’, he claims (Stap, 2011, p. 154).48

Victory Boogie Woogie is one of those finds. Mondrian first tells Charmion von Wiegand about a composition he had dreamt of and of which he already has made a sketch. On 13 June 1942, he begins to work on it. He experiments with the tape, so that according to Charmoin von Wiegand the canvas looked ‘as a mummy, completely consisting of coloured lines’ (Stap, 2011, p. 155).49 Because the painting remained unfinished, it is still covered with tape. Locher regards it as research in new accents and rhythms. ‘The intensity of the colours dancing around and the vital dynamics of the broken-up network of lines undoubtedly reflect the dynamic life of New York City’ (Locher, 2000, p. 30).50 His vision matches what Mondrian himself states: ‘Plastic art is not the expression of space but of life in space. Life establishes itself in plastic art by means of continuous opposition of forms and colors that determine space’ (Mondrian 1942/1944 in Wieczorek, 2012, p. 263).51

The title of the painting is mentioned first by Sidney Janis in his book Abstract & Surrealistic Art published in December 1944 (Nieuwenhuis, 2012, p. 48). But on 17 January 1944, Mondrian had already declared to Charmion von Wiegand that he was very content with Victory Boogie Woogie (Stap, 2011, p. 161). The meaning of Victory in the title remains unclear, since Mondrian never gave an explanation himself. It could refer to the longed for victory of the allied forces. But it could also mean the victory of New York City, as it could be the victory of ‘Boogie Woogie’. Mondrian states in an interview in 1943: ‘True Boogie Woogie I conceive as homogeneous in intention with mine in painting: destruction of melody which is the equivalent of destruction of natural appearance; and construction through the continuous opposition of pure means – dynamic rhythm’ (Nieuwenhuis, 2012, p. 48).52

48 “Ik ben niet uit op schilderijen, ik ben uit op ontdekkingen”
49 “als een mummie die volledig uit gekleurde lijnen bestond.”
50 “De felheid van de door elkaar dansende kleuren en de vitale dynamiek van het opengebrokken netwerk van de lijnen weerklinkt ongetwijfeld het dynamische leven van New York City.”
51 “Beeldende kunst is niet de uitdrukking van ruimte, maar van het leven in de ruimte. Het leven komt in de beeldende kunst tot stand door middel van de voortdurende tegenstelling van vormen en kleuren die de ruimte bepalen.”
52 “De intentie van de ware boogiewoogie beschouw ik als homogeen met de mijne in de schilderkunst: destructie van de melodie, wat gelijk staat aan destructie van de natuurlijke verschijning; en constructie door de voortdurende tegenstelling van zuivere middelen – dynamisch ritme.”
The Rhythm of New York

The first day after his arrival in New York, Harry Holtzman let Mondrian hear a recording of the ‘Boogie Woogie Kings’. Mondrian is enthusiastic, shouting ‘Enormous – enormous’. In Paris, Mondrian already had a great collection of jazz records, but here in New York he falls under the spell of the ‘Boogie Woogie’. This piano music is built from the ‘walking bass’ of the left hand and short improvisations of the right hand, literally playing upon it. ‘Boogie Woogie’ is no composed music, having a real beginning and end. The bass line keeps revolving; the short solos are always different. Looking at ‘Broadway Boogie Woogie’ and ‘Victory Boogie Woogie’ one can easily see the analogy of the musical structure and the paintings. On the bass line of the coloured lines and patches, the coloured dots are dancing like fugitive notes. The curator of the Museum of Modern Art, J.J. Sweeny, writes in 1944: “… led from one group of colour notes to another at varying speeds; (against the) constant repetition of the right angle theme, we experience simultaneously a persistent bass chord sounding through a sprinkle of running arpeggios and grace notes from the treble’ (Wieczorek, 2012 p. 264).

Tim Ingold refers in his article ‘The Temporality of Landscape’ (Ingold, 2000), to the analogy of orchestral performance and social life. A musician in an orchestra playing an instrument has to look at the conductor as well as listen to his fellow musicians at the same time. This is a condition for a successful performance. Ingold calls it resonance. He recognizes the same kind of resonance in the movement and behaviour of people, which he regards as a condition for sociality. Just like in music, life has its rhythmic cycles and repetitions. Movement, the ups and downs of the cycles, is rhythm. Tension can delay the cycles, but cannot stop it. The more tension, the more resolution is required. As in music, in life there is not only one, but many cycles at the same time. There is a whole network of rhythms. The moment the music plays, everything comes to life. This immediately reminds us of De Certeau and the movement of the Wandersmänner. ‘Boogie Woogie’, with the revolving bass line, can thus be regarded as the rhythm of New York. It becomes the metaphor of the city.

Victory Boogie Woogie as Authored Landscape

In 1941, Mondrian publishes a small piece of prose of only six pages that can be seen as his autobiography: ‘Towards the True Vision of Reality’, edited by the Valentine gallery. Susan Deicher notes:
This ‘true’ vision was, of course, the one that Mondrian had thrown out of his studio window, and through which he had tried to prove from 1914 onward that the essence of the world could better be captured by abstract painting than by representational methods of portrayal. In a survey of his life, Mondrian now wrote as if he had lived in his studio from the time of his birth. He described a life such as he had never lived, a dream life, stylised as a work of art and as the imaginary source of his art. This goes some way towards explaining why, in his later years, Mondrian abandoned all the helpful theories he had put together throughout his life to underpin the meaning of abstract art. He was now certain that it was enough to live in order to be able to paint correctly (Deicher, 1994, p. 85-86).

There may be no bigger contrast between the lonely theosophist, who in 1926 published his pamphlet on neo-plasticism in which he defines the elements of which a painting may or may not consist, and the vital man, who eagerly absorbs the rhythm and modernity of New York City. Just like New York, Mondrian remains a man of extremes. His last three paintings, *New York City*, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and *Victory Boogie Woogie* in particular witness the change. They are undoubtedly images of New York, but much more, they portray the change in the painter’s attitude, who – at the age of 68 – begins a new, artistic life. It is important to see the impact ‘Boogie Woogie’ had on this development. Cooper writes: “(...) a new technology of unity, suggesting a single, active texture. This degree of fusion is what really distinguishes *Victory Boogie Woogie* from *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. In *Victory*, one can no longer tell a thick mosaic line from a column of planes, or a group of adjacent lines from a checkered grid’ (Cooper 1998, pp. 136-137). Cooper sees this single active structure in the painting in analogy to a good boogie-woogie piano player, where you cannot distinguish between the left and the right hand playing anymore.

Of course there is a big group pointing to the visual association with New York like the ‘flashing lights’ and ‘the grid-iron pattern of the city streets’ (Cooper 1997, p. 289). The most intriguing summary of this kind is written by Mondrian’s dear friend Michel Seuphor. Apparently he considers Mondrian’s passion for ‘Boogie Woogie’ a ‘derisory spectacle’ (Wieczorek 2012, p. 264), but in his 1951 biography he translates the visual excitement of New York as ‘Boogie Woogie’: ‘I would like to recognize a picture of New York in this last painting ... The brightly lit skyscrapers, just like one can see from the steps of the Plaza Hotel, are a Victory Boogie Woogie. But at night time this applies to all of New York. The flight of the big buildings,
from Central Park West to Columbus Circle, which appear just like a wall, is a Victory Boogie Woogie. And when walking up 42nd Street from Public Library to Times Square, at your left you will face another Victory Boogie Woogie. And the whole Rockefeller Centre, no matter from which side you look at it, once more a Victory Boogie Woogie’.

One can conclude that each artist – whether conscious or not – is influenced by the environment in which he lives. A threefold and inevitable collaboration on the piece is performed by the direct environment (which the artist perceives), by the inner compound of his individuality (which the artist feels), and finally by his motivations (thus, what the artist wants)” (Seuphor, 1957, p. 186).53

It is stunning to realize how close Seuphor comes to the text of Marwyn Samuels from 1979. With the three elements mentioned by Seuphor, we have all the ingredients named by Samuels for authored landscapes. We have the landscape, which in our case is New York, we have the impression, which Seuphor attributes to the individuality of the artist, and we have the interaction of the two, which in fact is the act of portraying by the artist. Like this, Victory Boogie Woogie can be regarded as authored landscape avant la lettre.

Mondrian may be seen as author of New York, taking a position between Samuels and De Certeau. In terms of Samuels one can see him as ‘the elite’, as a prominent maverick. His paintings reflect his fascination for the rhythm of the city, whether as movement of the Wandersmänner described by De Certeau, or as a metaphor for the city according to Ingold. Mondrian in fact does not change the appearance of the New York cityscape with his paintings, as Sullivan does with his skyscrapers. Yet he has developed a new and abstract image of the city, which leads to a totally new image of New York City. It is no longer based on visual perception, which for Mondrian

was never a subject of interest in his neo-plasticist paintings. Instead, these paintings visualize the interaction of Mondrian's mental and material world.

Tim Ingold, who approaches landscape from the ‘dwelling perspective’, in which the difference between naturalistic and constructivist approaches is no longer made, defines landscape as follows: ‘As the familiar domain of our dwelling, it is with us, not against us, but it is no less real for that. And through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it’ (Ingold, 2011, p. 191). Mondrian’s biography makes it obvious that he has become a part of New York. The rhythm of the city, the attention he receives and the success as a painter that he had always longed for leave their traces in his paintings. Michel Seuphor cites a theosophical quotation, which he thinks can be seen as the credo of Mondrian’s life: ‘Be a force focussed on evolution’ (Seuphor, 1957, p. 178). Mondrian always keeps renewing himself. *Victory Boogie Woogie* is the beginning of a new phase in Mondrian’s oeuvre, which alas he could not work out. On 1 February 1944, Mondrian died at the age of 72 in New York.

**About the Author**

Jürgen Stoye is an Amsterdam-based architect who originates from Berlin. He served as guest teacher at the Academies in Amsterdam and Tilburg. Between 2011 and 2013 he followed the Master Heritage studies at VU University Amsterdam. In his master thesis he investigated the meaning of colour theory in relation to architecture around 1900, a forgotten heritage issue.  
E-mail: contact.stoye@upcmail.nl

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