
Defining Art

A Worthwhile Endeavor?

Defining Definiton

- ❖ Definitions come in various forms:
 - ❖ Lexical—roughly what one encounters in a dictionary
 - ❖ descriptive: seek merely to capture meanings in circulation (e.g. fortuitous =_{df} happening by a lucky chance, fortunate)
 - ❖ prescriptive: seek to reform or precisify ordinary usage (e.g. fortuitous =_{df} happening by chance rather than by intention)
 - ❖ Philosophical—definitions which capture and display the *essence* or *nature* of some kind or property
 - ❖ such definitions are, in general, the results of philosophical investigations
 - ❖ in this respect, they are, or at least aim to be, akin to definitions in natural science (e.g. water =_{df} H₂O)

Essence-specifying Definitions

- ❖ Using as a model: water =_{df} H₂O:
 - ❖ We do not expect just any competent speaker of the language to have access to this definition (as we do for lexical definitions).
 - ❖ Once identified, however, we expect such definitions to be in a certain way *regulative*: if a scientist synthesizes *xyz* in her laboratory, and *xyz* seems an awful lot like water, but upon analysis turns out to be not H₂O but *xyz*, then she has synthesized not water but something water-like—just as some sugar substitutes are not sugar, but are in some respects like sugar
 - ❖ Such definitions are, in this sense, privileged, as are those who discover them.

What We Expect of ESDs I

- ❖ An ESD must be at least *extensionally adequate*:
 - ❖ it must capture everything in its domain and nothing else
 - ❖ two grades of being extensionally adequate:
 - ❖ factive: it must cover all actual cases
 - ❖ e.g. cordate =_{df} renate
 - ❖ modal: it must cover all possible cases
 - ❖ e.g. triangle =_{df} three-sided polygon

What We Expect of ESDs II

- ❖ An ESD must be *univocal*
- ❖ An ESD must be *non-disjunctive*
- ❖ An ESD, as essence-specifying definition will be more than extensionally adequate, even modally so. It must be *intensionally adequate* as well:
 - ❖ So, e.g. nonagon =_{df} a polygon with more sides than an octagon but fewer than a decagon
 - ❖ As intensionally adequate, an ESD should be *explanatory*; it should capture the *nature* of its *definiendum*.

The Gold Standard

- ❖ In sum, we are seeking for art an ESD, which is to say a definition which:
 - ❖ captures and displays the essence of art, of all kinds
 - ❖ and is thus extensionally adequate in the modal sense
 - ❖ and is thus also intensionally adequate as well
 - ❖ is univocal
 - ❖ is non-disjunctive

So...

❖ *Art* =_{df} ?

Some Failed but Understandable Approaches

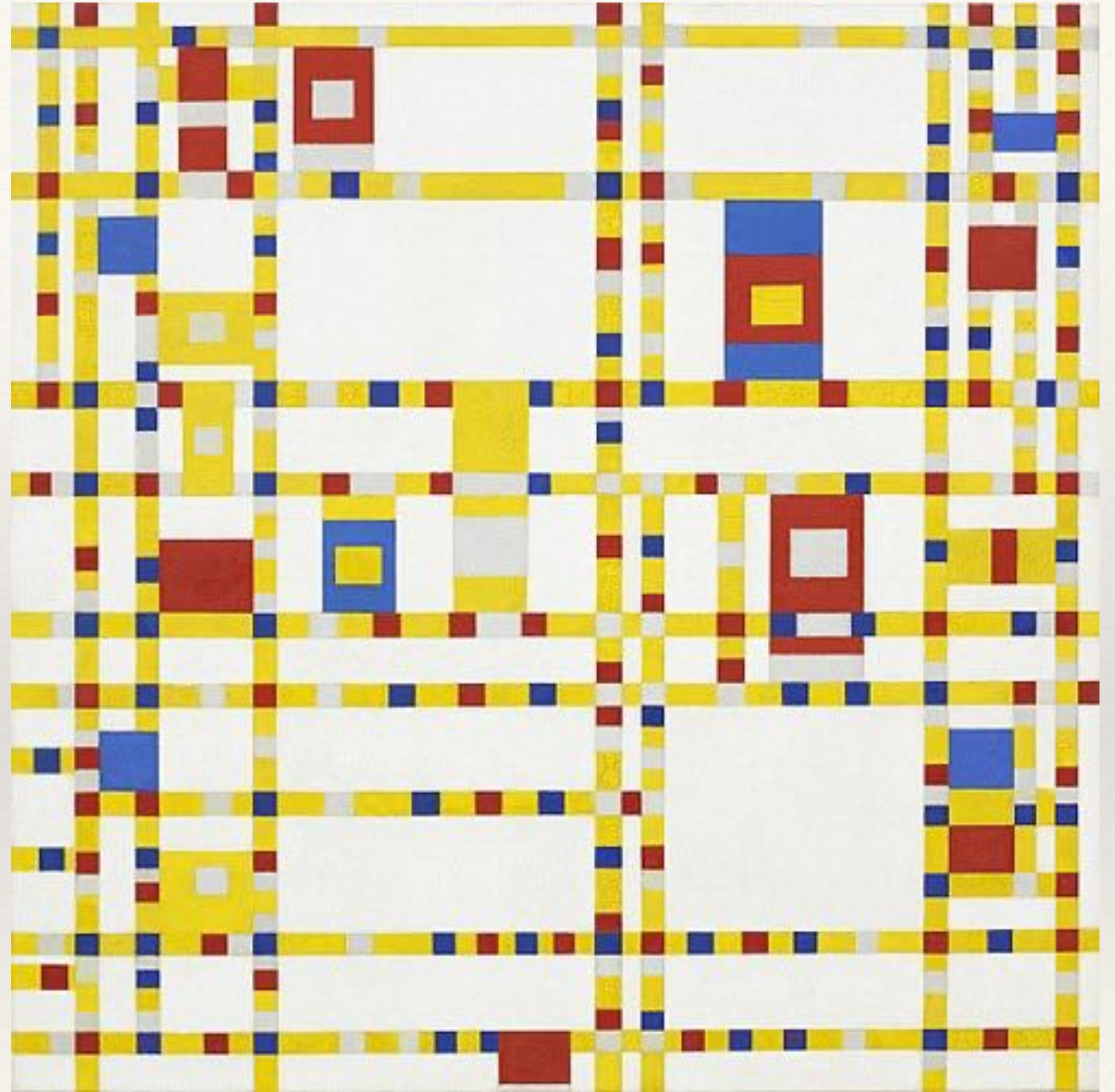
- ❖ A view wrongly but understandably ascribed to Plato:
 - ❖ x is a work of art $=_{df}$ x imitates nature
 - ❖ here we may speak of imitation as *depiction* or *representation*—both notions to which we shall return

Piet Mondrian

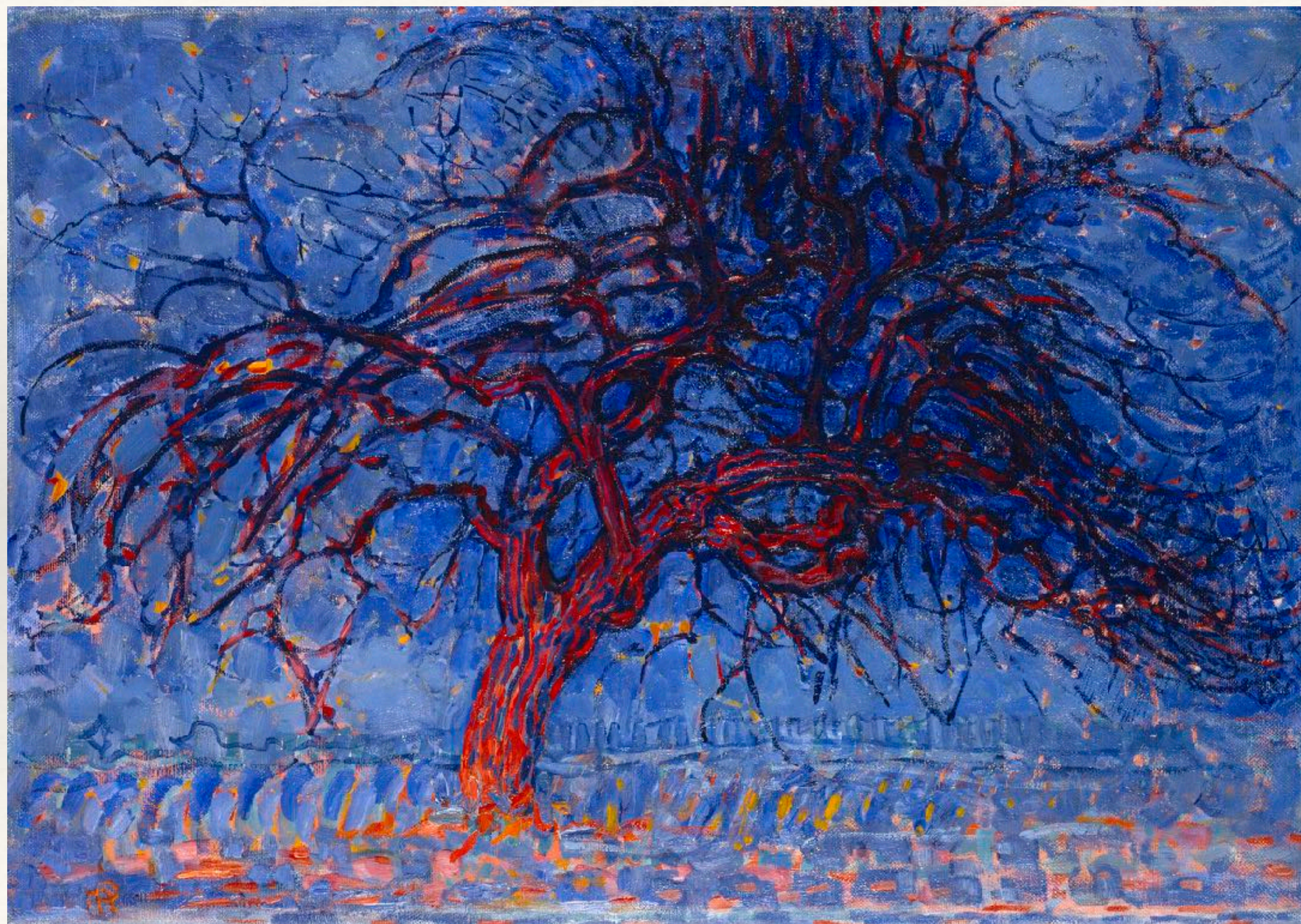
An early work by Piet Mondrian (1892-1944), Dutch painter and theoretician of art.

A Progression

- Post-Impressionism: The Red Tree (1908)
- Cubism (or Cubist flirtation): The Grey Tree (1911)
- Abstract: Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow (1930)



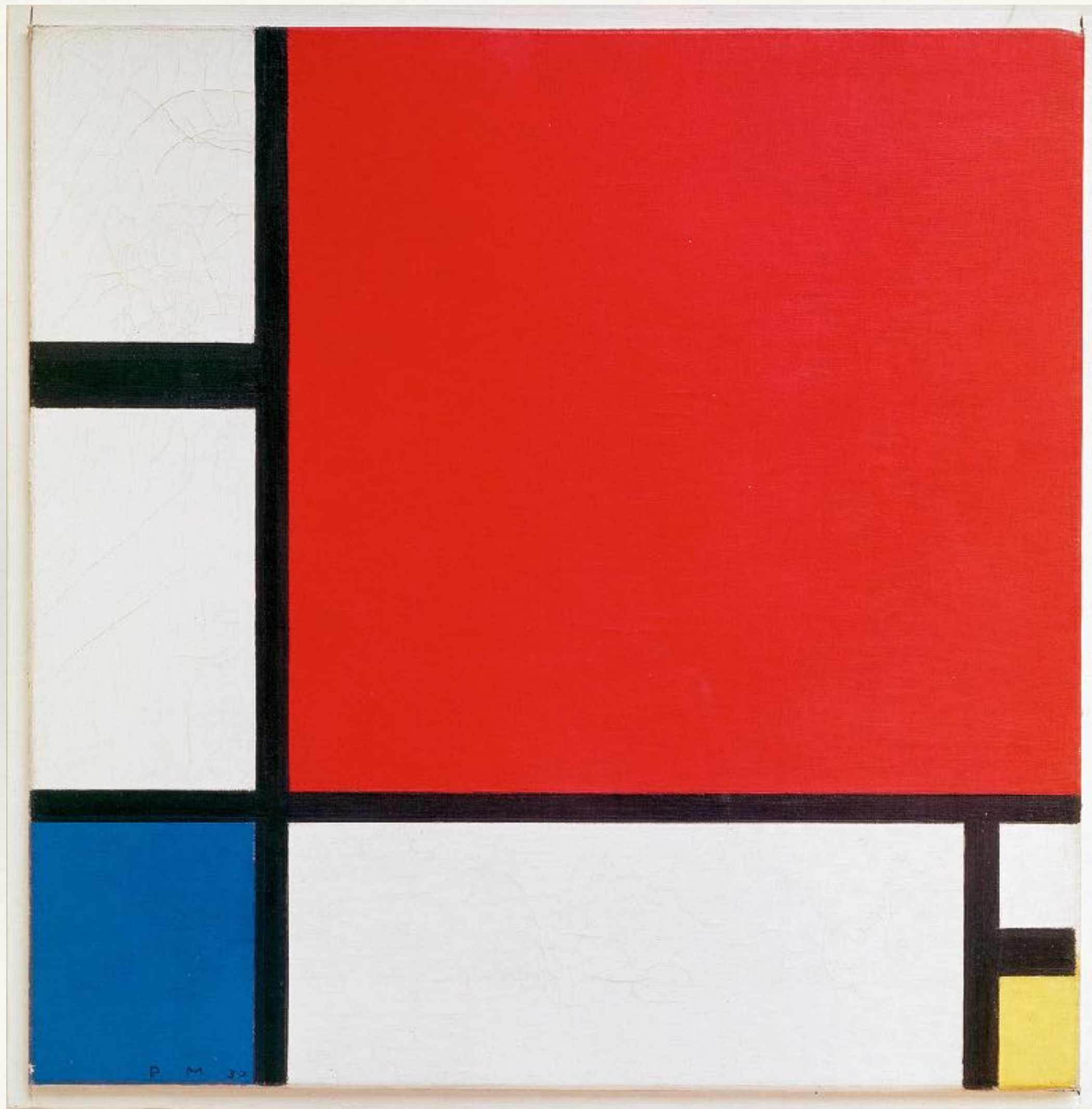
Red Tree (1908)



Grey Tree (1911)



Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow (1930)

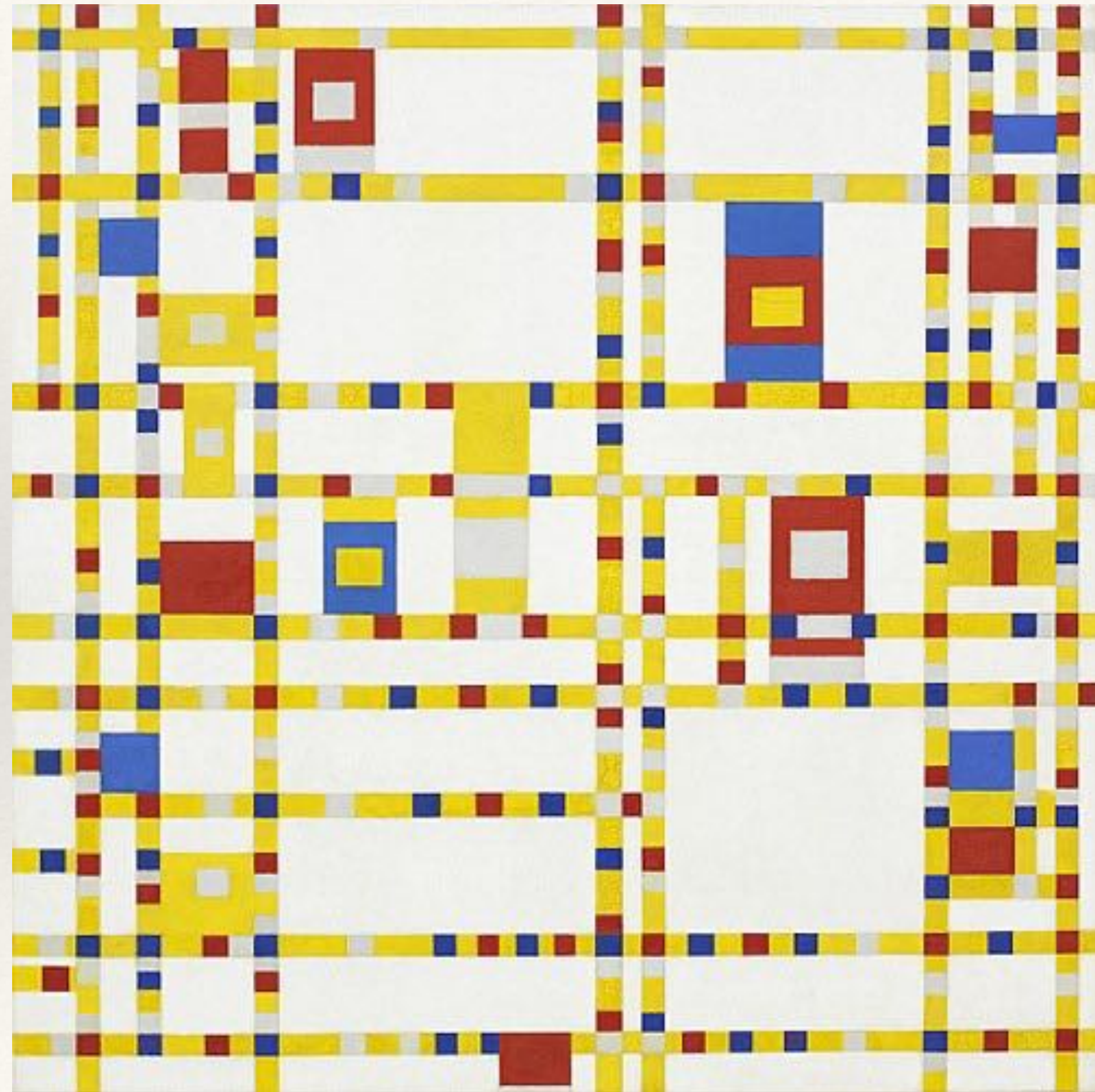


Two Comments:

Student in an Aesthetics class of mine: 'That's not art—I could do that with a T-Square!'

Mondrian: 'Art is higher than reality and has no direct relation to reality. To approach the spiritual in art, one will make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual. We find ourselves in the presence of an abstract art. Art should be above reality, otherwise it would have no value for man.'

Boogie Woogie Broadway (1942-43)



Dialing out to Definition

- ❖ How does Mondrian run afoul of the 'Platonic' definition of art?
 - ❖ It's not extensionally adequate:
 - ❖ not all art represents nature; indeed, not all art represents anything at all.
 - ❖ It's not explanatory:
 - ❖ it says nothing at all about why such activity commands our attention or is otherwise valuable.
- ❖ In general, artists like Mondrian deny that verisimilitude or the representation of recognizable scenes in nature, or events, persons is necessary for art—it doesn't even hold for paintings, let alone sculptures, musical compositions. . .
- ❖ No one denies that many, many paintings are depictions of events, persons, natural scenes, what have you, but we should not even think at all representations are depictions.

Lorem Ipsum Dolor

The T-Square Situation

- ❖ Implicitly reflects a judgment about the value of art:
 - ❖ The student seemed to assume that if *he* could do it with a T-Square, then it could not be art.
 - ❖ This in turn reflects an interesting, unstated, and plausible judgement about value:
 - ❖ Art, if it is to be art, must be *valuable*.
 - ❖ Why is that?



Mondrian's Response

- ❖ Mondrian: 'I construct lines and color combinations on a flat surface, in order to express general beauty with the utmost awareness. Nature (or, that which I see) inspires me, puts me, as with any painter, in an emotional state so that an urge comes about to make something, but I want to come as close as possible to the truth and abstract everything from that, until I reach the foundation (still just an external foundation!) of things...I believe it is possible that, through horizontal and vertical lines constructed with awareness, but not with calculation, led by high intuition, and brought to harmony and rhythm, these basic forms of beauty, supplemented if necessary by other direct lines or curves, can become a work of art, as strong as it is true.' —Letter to Bremer, 1914

Why, then, define art?

- ❖ The influential aesthetician Clive Bell (*Art*, 1914):
 - ❖ We talk about art; we criticize art; we interpret art; we evaluate art; we, more fundamentally, judge some things to be art and other things to be non-art; we, broadly speaking, value art.
 - ❖ Without an explicit definition of art, suggested Bell, we merely ‘gibber’ on and on, without any clear appreciation or understanding of what we’re talking about.
 - ❖ To some extent, the definitional enterprise is inescapable for the educated person: critical reflection implicates us in definition—of some kind.

An Important Distinction. . .

- ❖ . . .but not one always observed:
 - ❖ The Descriptive and the Normative
 - ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.
 - ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm* as a standard; they are generally evaluative or prescriptive.

Descriptive Claims

- ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.
- ❖ One may fairly and uncontroversially ask, when confronted with a descriptive claim: is this claim true or false? What fact, if any, makes this claim true?
 - ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
 - ❖ The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,459 metres per second.
 - ❖ N.b. that we may not actually know the truth value of this or that claim:
 - ❖ Uruguay won the first World Cup, in 1930.
 - ❖ It is not possible that anything can travel faster than the speed of light.

Normative Claims

- ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm* as a standard; they are generally evaluative or prescriptive.
- ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Wagner is the greatest opera composer of all time.
 - ❖ One should never harm another person willingly.
 - ❖ ‘Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.’ (Benjamin Franklin)
 - ❖ You really should do something about that brother of yours.

A Dispute about Normativity

- ❖ Although many people suppose this is so, we do not want to make it *definitional* of normativity that normative statements are not truth evaluable.
- ❖ Consider:
 - ❖ Murder is always and everywhere wrong.
 - ❖ If there are *moral facts*, then this is simply true.
 - ❖ The sunset over the Alps was simply gorgeous.
 - ❖ Could there be *aesthetic facts*?
 - ❖ Abstract art is crap.
- ❖ The crucial point: such statements make implicit or explicit appeal to some norm, either prescriptively or by being evaluative.

‘That’s not art!’

- ❖ One difficulty we’ll encounter over and over again:
 - ❖ Some claims about definition in art:
 - ❖ (i) blur the descriptive / normative distinction;
 - ❖ (ii) ignore (or are unaware of) the descriptive / normative distinction; or
 - ❖ (iii) misunderstand the descriptive / normative distinction

One Strong Impulse

- ❖ Art cannot be defined: it is simply too variegated, comprising too many disparate activities.
 - ❖ Perhaps, as Weitz (1956) argued, following the lead of Wittgenstein, all we can find in the case of art are *family resemblances*—which is to say, criss-crossing similarities of the sort a family may evince, similarities which mark someone as a member of that family, even though there is no one trait which all and only the members of that family have.
- ❖ One general thought: we do not know this until we have tried and failed.
 - ❖ What's more, it's not always entirely clear when we've failed.

Two Approaches

- ❖ Functional: the key to classifying art is to look to art's function.
 - ❖ After all, works of art are artefacts, and artefacts are defined by their functions.
 - ❖ So, e.g., something is a light just in case it illuminates (it doesn't really matter from the standpoint of qualifying as light that a bulb is incandescent or fluorescent or LED or . . .)
- ❖ Procedural: the key to classifying art is to look to the processes and contexts in which it is made
 - ❖ Here the thought is that we simply look to the 'artworld' and defer to the people it recognizes as artists, and the works it treats as art, and the practices which follow upon that (galleries, museum, auctions, private collections, critical assessments . . .)
 - ❖ So, e.g., someone is a *politician* just in case they are active in a political context (standing for office, running for office, engaging in the various activities that government comprises, and so on).

Functional Approaches

- ❖ First approximation:
 - ❖ x is a work of art $=_{df}$ x is an arrangement of materials made to be capable of affording aesthetic experience
 - ❖ The notion of ‘materials’ is as broad as you like.
 - ❖ The conception of ‘aesthetic experience’ is *normative*—it will typically be understood, in the first instance, as valuable in so far as the materials in question are arranged so as to be beautiful.
 - ❖ It follows, then, that this definition is at root normative, in that it appeals to a norm in the very definition of art.

Procedural Approaches

- ❖ First approximation:
 - ❖ x is a work of art =_{df} x is an artefact; and (ii) x is produced in accordance with the canons of the artworld; and (iii) x has had conferred on it the status of candidate for appreciation by the artworld
 - ❖ Most trenchantly articulated by Dickie (1974, 1984): this approach appeals to the social context of production and consideration, and so is an *institutional theory of art*
 - ❖ Note that the notion of production is *descriptive*; although artworks are here regarded as candidates for appreciation, their being artworks does not require their being in fact capable of affording appreciation.