

The Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of Abstract Art: Emergence and Relevance

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Abstract

This research paper explores the philosophical underpinnings of abstract art, focusing on its emergence in the twentieth century as a response to industrialization, socialist movements, and the world wars. It examines the phenomenological and hermeneutic dimensions of abstract art through the works and theories of pioneering artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian. The study delves into the concepts of inner necessity, non-objectivity, and the rejection of representational forms, analysing how abstract art transcends traditional artistic conventions to present universal meanings. By investigating the interplay of colour, line, and form, the paper highlights the ethical, metaphysical, and spiritual dimensions of abstraction, as well as its impact on modern design and visual culture. Drawing on phenomenological and hermeneutic frameworks, the paper argues that abstract art serves as a rebellion against materialism, offering a pathway to existential and ontological truths.

Keywords: Abstract art, phenomenology, hermeneutics, inner necessity, non-objectivity, suprematism, neo-plasticism, modernism, theosophy, visual culture.

Introduction

The twentieth century marked a radical shift in the trajectory of Western art, driven by unprecedented socio-political upheavals, including industrialization, socialist movements, and the catastrophic impacts of two world wars. These events left indelible imprints on human activity, including artistic expression, giving rise to a proliferation of art movements, with abstract art emerging as one of the most revolutionary. Unlike earlier movements that spanned centuries, the twentieth century witnessed the rapid succession of short-lived yet distinct artistic styles, each challenging the representational traditions rooted in Greco-Roman conventions. Abstract art, in particular, posed two fundamental questions: why does it exist, and what is its meaning? This paper investigates these questions through the lens of phenomenology and hermeneutics, focusing on the philosophical principles of abstract art as articulated by pioneers like Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian. By analyzing the roles of colour, line, and form, the study explores how abstract art reflects a rebellion against materialism, a quest for inner necessity, and a pursuit of universal truths.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, examines the structures of experience and consciousness, offering a framework to understand how abstract art engages the viewer's perception and subjectivity. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, provides a method for interpreting the meanings embedded in abstract forms, which often resist straightforward representation. Together, these frameworks illuminate the existential and ontological dimensions of abstract art, revealing its significance as both a philosophical and artistic endeavor. The paper also considers the influence

of spiritual movements like Theosophy on abstract art and its practical applications in modern design, demonstrating its enduring relevance in visual culture.

The Emergence of Abstract Art

The emergence of abstract art in the early twentieth century was deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural transformations of the era. Industrialization introduced mechanization and mass production, reshaping human labor and societal structures. Socialist movements challenged traditional hierarchies, while the world wars exposed the fragility of human existence and the limitations of rationalist ideologies. These upheavals prompted artists to question the relevance of representational art, which had long been anchored in mimesis—the imitation of nature. As Meyer Schapiro notes, "In renouncing or drastically distorting natural shapes, the abstract painter judges the external world" (Schapiro 1978, 185). This judgment reflected a broader cultural shift toward introspection and skepticism about material reality.

The transition from representational to abstract art was not merely stylistic but philosophical. Artists like Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian sought to transcend the limitations of the material world, creating art that expressed inner truths rather than external appearances. Kandinsky, in his seminal work *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), argued that the "inner necessity" was the sole criterion for artistic creation, equating it to an ethical imperative (Kandinsky 1977, 54) [7]. He viewed the material world as transitory and illusory, positioning his art as a rebellion against the materialistic tendencies of modern society. Similarly, Malevich's Suprematism emphasized the "supremacy of pure feeling"

over objective representation, as seen in his iconic *Black Square* (1915), which he described as an expression of “objectlessness” (Malevich 1968, 67) ^[9]. Mondrian’s Neo-Plasticism, meanwhile, aimed to create a “denaturalized” world through geometric abstraction, seeking equilibrium and ontological truth (Mondrian 1986, 29) ^[12].

Phenomenological Dimensions of Abstract Art-

Industrialization, socialist movements and the world wars had telling consequences and imprints on all stratas of activity of the human race, so they did, on the artistic avenues of man. The twentieth century saw the furthest possible movements in the western art world. So far, in the antiquity of Greco-Roman conventions, art was restricted in the comfort of representation. Each of the movements which preceded abstract art, had a span of either a century or more. But the twentieth century saw the emergence of much of art movements-short lived, yet distinct in their approach, style and rhythm. The study aims at understanding the basic principles of philosophy of abstract art in the light of study of colour, line and form.

The modern art’s manifestation of abstract art poses two basic problems.

- i). Firstly, its very portrayal so as to why it exists and
- ii). Secondly it raises the question of its meaning.

In his book ‘*Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst*’ published in 1912, the painter Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstract art, considers inner necessity as the sole factor in order to arrive at the choice of the elements, equating this to ethics wherein we find inner freedom to be the sole criterion. He posits the illusionistic and transitory nature of the material world and points that the same is foreign to the spirit. He attributes the role of science and the social movements to be two determining factors towards materialistic approach of the modern man against which he places his art as a rebellion. He says that when religion, science and morality (the last through the strong hand of Nietzsche) are shaken and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze away from the external and towards himself. This internalization is the quest of the soul-which he feels is ever derogated by the materialistic approach of the modern world.

As per Meyer Schapiro, in renouncing or drastically distorting natural shapes, the abstract painter judges the external world. He points the non-conformity of certain experiences with art and attainment of higher realities of form. But by this very act, the mind’s view of itself and of its arts, the intimate contexts of this repudiation of objects, become directing factors in abstraction. When personality, feeling and formal sensibility are absolutised the values that underlie or that follow from such attitudes suggest new formal problems, just as the secular interest of the later middle ages made possible a whole series of new formal types of space and the human figure. The qualities of cryptic improvisation, the microscopic intimacy of textures, points and lines, the impulsively scribbled forms, the mechanical precision in constructing the irreducible, incommensurable fields, the thousand and one ingenious formal devices of dissolution, penetration, immateriality and incompleteness which affirm the abstract artist’s active sovereignty over object- these and many other phenomena of modern art are arrived at experimentally by painters who seek freedom outside of nature and society and constantly negate the formal aspects of perception, e.g., the connectedness of shape and colour or the discontinuity of object and surroundings-that enter into the practical relations of man in nature.

The avowals of artists show that the steps to abstraction were accompanied by great tension and emotional excitement. The artists justify themselves by ethical and metaphysical standpoint or in defence of their art, attack the preceding style as the counterpart of a detested social or moral position. Not that the processes of imitating nature were exhausted, but the variation of nature itself had changed. The philosophy of art was also a philosophy of life. In terms of phenomenology, abstraction poses the problem of the inner necessity, a hidden purpose or the essential element which is contrary to the representational elements in realistic works of art. Art here attains the stature of enigma which necessitates the intervention of an interpretation. On the other hand, abstraction cares for no interpretation as it does not represent, but presents itself in whatever form it is shaped. Thereby, one is faced with the syntactic and expressive qualities of abstract art which avows universality and openness of meaning. The Russian painter Malevich, the founder of ‘*Suprematism*’ had described his approach to abstraction in revealing terms- “By Suprematism I mean the supremacy of pure feeling or sensation in the pictorial art.....in the year 1913, in my desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world, I fled to the form of the square and exhibited a picture which was nothing more or less than a black square upon a white groundit was no empty square which I had exhibited but rather the experience of objectless ness.” Later in 1918, he painted in Moscow a series called ‘*White on White*’ including a white square on a white surface. He propounded the supremacy of an inherent feeling, a purity that reveals the essence of an object rather than a mere representation. He defined suprematism as a new realism of colour conceived as non-objective creation. He further says that the appearances of natural objects are, in themselves, meaningless; the essential thing is feeling in itself, completely independent of the context in which it has been evoked. In their purity his paintings seemed to parallel the efforts of mathematician to reduce all mathematics to arithmetic and arithmetic to logic. His approach was to establish art beyond every rule. He claimed that art no longer wanted the support of objects to reveal itself, but it can exist as an independent entity and present itself on its own.

Where Malevich dreamed of a world without objects, Mondrian dreamed of a world without nature or a ‘denaturalized’ world, which is of man’s own making and ‘a new eden’ where he would be happy. De-naturalization is essential to the doctrine of neo-plasticism, a term used by Mondrian in around 1920 and also one of the essential stages of human progress. Neo-plasticism’s value is established only by its instrumentality, because for Mondrian painting must function as part of a broad, philosophical and social enterprise that seeks immutable ontological truth, as well as social justice and stability through ‘equilibrium’.

The importance of the subjective conditions of the artist’s work in the formation of abstract styles is verified in this study. Mechanical abstract forms arise in modern art not because modern production is mechanical, but because of the value assigned to the human being and the machine in the ideologies projected by conflicting interests and situation in society, which vary from country to country. Thus, the modern conception of man as depicted as machine is found to be more economic than biological in its implication.

Especially after the World War II, the qualities of the machine as a rigid, constructed object, and the qualities of its products and of the engineer’s design suggested various forms to painters which enhanced the formulation and portrayal of

shape. As per Naom Gabo, the shapes created by abstract artists are termed as absolute and the emotional force in an absolute is immediate, irresistible and universal. He says that it is impossible to comprehend the content of an absolute shape by reason alone. Human emotions are real manifestations of this content. By the influence of an absolute form, the human psyche can be broken or moulded. He further says that shapes exalt and shapes depress, they elate and make one desparate. Newer possibilities of forms and shape endowed larger expressive character of their work. The older categories of art were translated into the languages of modern technology; effecting transference of the very fundamentals that hitherto went into the making of art-texture was reflected with new materials, representation was replaced with photography, drawing with the ruled or mechanically traced lines, colour with flat coat of paint and design with the model of the instructing plan. Thereby, at a greater level of the process of creativity, the essential was identified with the efficient, the most with the standardized element. These transformations resulted in the synergy of unification of the archaic activity and the most advanced and imposing forms of modern productions and precisely because technology was conceived abstractly as an independent force with its own inner conditions, and the designing engineer as the real maker of the modern world. The step from their earlier standpoint of expressionist, cubist or suprematist to the more technological style was not an easy one. In applying their methods of design to architecture, painting, the theatre and the industrial art, they remained abstract artists. They often looked upon their work as the aesthetic counterpart of the abstract calculations of the engineer and the scientist. If they admitted an alternative art of fantasy, somehow related to their own, it was merely as a residual field of freedom or as a hygienic relaxation from the rigours of their own efficiency: a wish of reconstructing culture through the logic of sober technique and design and in this wish they considered themselves the indispensable aesthetic prophets of a new order in life.

Phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl and later expanded by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides a robust framework for understanding abstract art's experiential qualities. Husserl's concept of the "phenomenological reduction" encourages bracketing out preconceived notions to focus on the essence of phenomena as they appear to consciousness (Husserl 1962, 91) ^[6]. In abstract art, this translates to a focus on the immediate sensory experience of colour, line, and form, stripped of representational content. For Kandinsky, the act of painting was a phenomenological exploration of the soul, where colours and forms evoked spiritual resonances. He wrote, "Colour is a power which directly influences the soul" (Kandinsky 1977, 25) ^[7], emphasizing the direct, unmediated impact of abstract elements on the viewer's consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception further enriches this analysis, as he argues that perception is an embodied act that bridges the subject and the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 203) ^[11]. In abstract art, the viewer's encounter with a work like Malevich's *White on White* (1918) is not about decoding a narrative but experiencing the purity of form and colour. The minimalist composition invites a pre-reflective engagement, where the viewer's perception becomes the locus of meaning. This aligns with Malevich's assertion that "the essential thing is feeling in itself, completely independent of the context in which it has been evoked" (Malevich 1968, 68) ^[9]. The phenomenological approach thus underscores abstract art's capacity to transcend

representation, presenting itself as an immediate, universal experience.

Hermeneutic Interpretations of Abstract Art

Hermeneutics, the art and theory of interpretation, is crucial for understanding the meanings embedded in abstract art. Unlike representational art, which often relies on recognizable symbols, abstract art presents an enigma that demands interpretive effort. Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, which emphasizes the dialogical nature of understanding, is particularly relevant here (Gadamer 1975, 306) ^[4]. For Gadamer, understanding is not a fixed process but a dynamic interplay between the artwork and the viewer's horizon of experience. Abstract art, with its open-ended forms, invites multiple interpretations, resisting a singular meaning. As Malevich noted, his *Black Square* was not an "empty square" but an "experience of objectlessness," challenging viewers to interpret its significance beyond conventional frameworks (Malevich 1968, 67) ^[9].

The hermeneutic challenge of abstract art lies in its non-representational nature, which paradoxically both demands and defies interpretation. Kandinsky's emphasis on "inner necessity" suggests that the meaning of abstract art resides in the artist's subjective intent, yet its universality lies in its ability to evoke varied responses. For instance, Mondrian's grid-based compositions, such as *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930), aim to achieve "equilibrium" through the balance of horizontal and vertical lines (Mondrian 1986, 32) ^[12]. However, as Donald Kuspit argues, this equilibrium is "conditional and transient," reflecting the tension between the artist's intent and the viewer's perception (Kuspit 1993, 112) ^[8]. Hermeneutically, abstract art thus becomes a site of negotiation, where meaning emerges through the interplay of form, feeling, and context. Rudimentary positions of content and form seem blurred and exalted towards integration in case of some abstract artists such as Kandinsky. For some abstract artists, feeling is seen to form the basis, whereas reason reigns supreme for others. Also there remains parallel between the development of non-objective art and the development of psychoanalysis. In abstraction, it can be said, the instinctive feeling is incarnated in an irreducible form to match its own irreducibility which are then inter personalised in a symbolic image.

The Role of Spirituality: Theosophy and Abstract Art

A significant yet often overlooked influence on abstract art is the spiritual movement of Theosophy, founded by Helena Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century. Theosophy's emphasis on superconsciousness and the unity of all souls resonated with artists seeking to transcend material reality. Kandinsky, Mondrian, František Kupka, and Joseph Beuys were all influenced by Theosophical ideas, which encouraged the visual portrayal of spiritual states. Kandinsky's *Improvisations* series, for instance, was inspired by Theosophical notions of heightened consciousness, where colours and forms were imbued with symbolic meanings (Ringbom 1970, 89) ^[15]. He assigned specific emotional and spiritual qualities to colours—blue as depth, yellow as warmth—and geometric shapes like the circle and square (Kandinsky 1977, 37) ^[7].

Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism similarly reflected Theosophical principles, particularly the idea of universal unity. His grid compositions sought to express a "new eden" where harmony and balance prevailed (Blotkamp 1994, 45) ^[2]. Theosophy's influence extended beyond individual artists to the broader

development of abstract art, as it provided a philosophical framework for exploring non-objective forms. This spiritual dimension underscores the phenomenological and hermeneutic significance of abstract art, as it invites viewers to engage with works on a transcendental level, beyond the material world.

From Abstraction to Design: The Practical Legacy

Abstract art's influence extends beyond the canvas, profoundly impacting modern design and visual culture. The Bauhaus movement, led by figures like Theo van Doesburg, applied abstract principles to industrial design, architecture, and typography, bridging the gap between art and utility (Droste 2006, 67) ^[3]. The geometric forms and minimalist aesthetics of abstract art were translated into functional objects, from furniture to graphic design, democratizing artistic elements for mass consumption. For example, Mondrian's grid-based compositions inspired the design of everyday objects, such as textiles and furniture, at the Bauhaus, establishing a visual language that remains influential today (Bax 2004, 123) ^[1].

The application of abstract forms in typography and graphic arts revolutionized visual communication. Techniques like typo-collage and photo-collage, pioneered by artists associated with the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements, elevated mundane objects like book covers and posters to the level of high art (Meggs 2016, 245) ^[10]. This synthesis of art and utility challenged the traditional divide between free expression and practical function, demonstrating abstract art's transformative potential. As Herbert Read observes, the shift from realism to abstraction was not a "deep psychological evolution" but a "change of direction" that expanded the possibilities of artistic expression (Read 1959, 78) ^[14].

The Anti-Materialist Ethos of Abstract Art

At its core, abstract art was a reaction against materialism, as articulated by its pioneers. Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian viewed objects as emblematic of materialist values, which they sought to transcend through non-objective forms. For Malevich, the object was "meaningless" in itself, and true art lay in the expression of pure feeling (Malevich 1968, 68) ^[9]. Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism aimed to abolish the "tragic" in art by reducing naturalistic forms to pure geometric elements, creating a universal aesthetic (Mondrian 1986, 34) ^[12]. This anti-materialist ethos positioned abstract art as a philosophical and ethical stance, aligning it with broader existential questions about human existence and purpose.

However, as Kuspit argues, the rejection of representation did not fully resolve the tensions inherent in modern society. Mondrian's pursuit of equilibrium, for instance, remained precarious, as the balance of opposites was never fully achieved (Kuspit 1993, 115) ^[8]. This tension underscores the enigmatic nature of abstract art, which communicates through a language that is both universal and obscure. As Alfred Nolde suggests, geometric forms in non-objective art function as "eternal objects," transcending temporal and cultural boundaries to evoke a sense of the universal (Nolde 1965, 92) ^[13].

Critiques and Challenges

Despite its revolutionary impact, abstract art has faced criticism for its perceived inaccessibility and lack of clear meaning. Kuspit contends that abstract art's rejection of representation reflects a "deflection of direct experience," shielding artists from the turmoil of modern reality (Kuspit 1993, 117) ^[8]. This critique raises questions about whether

abstract art's universality is compromised by its enigmatic nature. If, as Malevich suggests, a work like *White on White* communicates "nothing at all," does it risk alienating viewers who seek tangible meaning? (Malevich 1968, 70) ^[9].

To counter this, one might argue that abstract art's strength lies in its ability to elevate form and colour to the status of central subjects. By presenting a square or a line as the focal point of a composition, artists like Malevich and Kandinsky endow these elements with new meaning, making them objects of philosophical inquiry and aesthetic experience (Golding 2000, 56) ^[5]. This reverence for form not only redefines the function of art but also lays the foundation for modern design and visual culture.

Conclusion

Abstract art, as a product of the tumultuous twentieth century, represents a profound shift in artistic and philosophical paradigms. Through the phenomenological lens, it engages viewers in a direct, sensory experience of colour, line, and form, while hermeneutically, it invites interpretive dialogue that transcends representational constraints. The spiritual influences of Theosophy, combined with the anti-materialist ethos of pioneers like Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, underscore abstract art's role as a quest for inner necessity and universal truth. Its legacy extends beyond the canvas, shaping modern design and visual culture through its application in industrial and graphic arts. While abstract art's enigmatic nature may challenge accessibility, its ability to present rather than represent elevates it to a universal language that continues to resonate in contemporary society. This study affirms abstract art's enduring relevance as a philosophical and aesthetic rebellion against materialism, offering a pathway to existential and ontological exploration.

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