



JOHNSON COUNTY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

JCCC Honors Journal

Volume 3
Issue 1 Fall 2011

Article 1

2012

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Recommended Citation

Rockrohr, Dillon (2012) "Expression and Existence," *JCCC Honors Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/honors_journal/vol3/iss1/1

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Expression and Existence

Abstract

Salvador Dalí and Piet Mondrian both created works of visual art during the era commonly labeled the “Age of Anxiety,” the time period between World War I and World War II. The Age of Anxiety was so-named for the massive societal upheaval occurring globally, and particularly in Europe, as a product of the desolation brought about by World War I and the shifting tides in philosophy and the arts. The world was going through drastic changes in this brief period of time, and we find in the work of these two artists a diversity of expression and perspective. Mondrian, affiliated with the art movement de Stijl, created simple paintings of right-angled lines and neutral and primary colors in an effort to find a truer experience of essential reality. Dalí, on the other hand, was found in the Surrealist camp, a group heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud’s ideas about dreams and the human unconscious. Dalí sought to understand the world through the irrational processes of the mind, and his art reflected this through his uncensored, eclectic imagery performed with masterful precision. These two dynamically different artists were both greatly influenced by the Age in which they lived, and they both left their mark on history as they attempted through their art to face the questions of life and existence.

The period of human history from the end of World War I to the beginning of World War II, particularly in Europe, has come to be labeled as the “Age of Anxiety.” After the catastrophe that was World War I, along with the shifting tides in culture and philosophy, many people were experiencing overwhelming disorder in their lives and consequential disillusionment with their previously held optimistic beliefs. Suddenly the world was changing in ways no one was able to predict (Benton and DiYanni 380). It appeared that society was unraveling around itself. As William Butler Yeats so eloquently put it in his famous poem “The Second Coming,” “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold... The darkness drops again but now I know/ That twenty centuries of stony sleep/ Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle...” (Yeats) The world was awaking from its sleep, but the sight they found was not the dawn for which they had hoped. Though some would take years to shake off the lethargy, there were a small number of people that rose with vigor above the crowd to process what was actually happening around them.

Salvador Dalí and Piet Mondrian were two artists who created some of their most significant artwork during this Age of Anxiety, but their expressions of the Age were drastically different. In analyzing their work, one finds that many of the core philosophical bases of the pieces are polar opposites, while some are the same. We find in Mondrian and Dalí an extraordinary diversity of expressions of one of the most intense periods of change in modern history, and in order to understand these contrasting expressions, we must first understand the time that created them. We must look at the political events, the philosophical notions, and the artistic movements that set the stage for and became influential players during this era of history.

World War I, the Great War, the “war to end all wars,” has the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28th, 1914, as its commonly decided starting point, and it lasted until Germany finally negotiated an armistice with the Allies, finalized at 11 o’clock am on November

11th, 1918, “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” (Duffy). After 1,500 days of some of the most brutal warfare the world has ever seen, the death toll of the battlefields was around nine million human lives (“Introduction to the Great War”). This war scarred the European landscape with thousands of miles of trenches and buildings demolished by air raids as far as the eye could see. It saw giant leaps in warfare technology, such as the fully automatic machine gun developed by Hiram Maxim, an American inventor who did not become successful until he moved to Europe and was told about the lucrative venture of warfare technology. As he said, “In 1882 I was in Vienna, where I met an American whom I had known in the States. He said: ‘Hang your chemistry and electricity! If you want to make a pile of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each others' throats with greater facility’” (Browne). Maxim went on to do just that, creating the weapon that was the cause of much of the casualty rate in World War I.

Before the destruction caused by the war, western culture had generally been optimistic about what increases in technology would bring. The world had undergone a massive Industrial Revolution, blazing the trail for continually growing progress in technology. People got excited about this; the many issues globally dealt with would finally be able to be solved, and the means would be technology. Unfortunately, the Great War showed them all that the world they created was not what they had envisioned. “You get this notion that modernization actually *didn't* make the world a better place” (Conrad). The events in the world were growing ever more chaotic, and the presumed sense of order was falling apart. Political factions were rising up to take over where society was losing its grip, factions such as the Communist Party in Russia and Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party in Germany. Economic collapses were occurring all over the world, especially in the United States with the Great Depression brought on by a crash in the stock

market. The world was struck with the stark concept that they really did not have as much control as they had imagined and their foundations were crumbling. Because of all these things, there was a profound loss of optimism in society at large during that era (Conrad). As Ernest Hemingway wrote in the epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises*, quoting Gertrude Stein, “You are all a lost generation” (“Ernest M. Hemingway”). Martin Heidegger, a philosopher during and after the period, put forth the following idea: “Anxiety arises when we realize our whole system of meanings and our values have no ultimate ground other than that this is how our historical tradition has developed. This makes us realize that what we are is not what we could choose to be” (Lawhead 541). It is no wonder that this period was called the Age of Anxiety.

Apart from the influence these political events and movements would have on the expressions of artists such as Dalí and Mondrian, the philosophical ideas being discussed and developed just prior to and during this era also had an incredible impact on the arts. One philosophy that was prior to the Age of Anxiety but had a tremendous impact upon it was the concept of existentialism, which has its roots in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard in the early to mid-nineteenth century and Nietzsche in the mid- to late nineteenth century (Conrad). Fyodor Dostoevsky was one of the first to question society’s optimistic, scientific view of human nature. He also questioned their view of human history being a rationally designed course of events. He voiced his opposition to that view through the mouth of one of his literary characters: “One may say anything about the history of the world – anything that might enter the most disordered imagination. The only thing one cannot say is that it is rational. The very word sticks in one’s throat” (Lawhead 356).

In the same critical mood as Dostoevsky, Søren Kierkegaard challenged prior philosophy’s focus on speculative metaphysics. He believed that to build a logical philosophical

system of existence was like building an enormous, magnificent castle while you live in the small wooden shed next door (Lawhead 406). Kierkegaard viewed existential truth as something that can only be understood subjectively, in the context of an individual's life and choices. He saw knowing existential truth as more similar to being physically fit than to understanding a mathematical formula. Physical fitness is something that can only be known through the process of doing. It is a knowledge that cannot be taught but can only be obtained on one's own; whereas a mathematical formula is something that can be taught by another and is the same in whatever context in which it is obtained (Lawhead 404). To Kierkegaard, life is a thing which cannot be understood or lived passively but must be taken ahold of and directed passionately. His opinion was that life cannot be lived objectively in the third person but subjectively in the first, and good philosophy should be understood the same way.

Friedrich Nietzsche joined in Kierkegaard's philosophical stream in that he also questioned what we can objectively know. However, he took that skepticism much farther than Kierkegaard, presenting the idea that we cannot know anything. Nietzsche held a view called "perspectivism," which said that every truth is interpreted through a certain perspective, depending on the subject who holds that perspective. "According to Nietzsche, three things can be said about perspectives: they are unavoidable, they are false, and yet they are useful" (Lawhead 418). In other words, we all have perspectives of truth, and they never perfectly correspond to objective reality. However, we must utilize our perspectives in order to live in the world, an idea that would much later be expounded upon in the pragmatic postmodernism of Richard Rorty.

Now, as for the grand scheme of Nietzsche's philosophy, we find in it a persistent central thread of nihilism, which is "the belief that there are no enduring values on which to build our

lives” (Lawhead 417). Nietzsche was an incredibly atheistic individual. In fact, one of his most famous pieces of literature is the “Parable of the Madman,” which describes a man who runs into a town center in the middle of the day holding a lantern and proclaiming, “Whither is God? ... I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. ... God is dead. He remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche). With such a strong atheism as his basis, Nietzsche consequentially determined that since there is no god, there can also be no meaning or order to the universe. Therefore, words have no meaning; “truths” mean nothing beyond the one who holds them; and the pursuit of systematic answers is futile and foolish. This philosophy totally undermined the basis of western belief (Conrad).

Nietzsche also believed that the driving force in a human being’s life, the psychological motivation which causes him to do everything that he does, is the “will to power” (Lawhead 424). What this means is that the decisions we make in our lives spring forth from a central urge to gain mastery over another, to exert power over another. Contrary to the views of many social institutions, he viewed this will to power as a good thing that should not be stifled. He believed that competition brought out the best in people and that it would therefore be wrong to level every mountain and valley. He even challenged the very value of democracy, expressing the idea in his book *Beyond Good and Evil* that meaning is found in service to a great man (Conrad).

One of the most influential philosophers contemporary to the era, having a tremendous impact on the arts and still driving much of contemporary psychology, was Sigmund Freud, who lived during the years of 1856 to 1939. Freud is most well-known for creating the psychological theory and clinical treatment of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis’ main goal is to bring into balance the three parts of the trichotomous human mind, an idea also put forth by Freud, which consists of the *id*(the sexual drive), the *ego*(the conscious self), and the *super-ego* (the socially-

constructed censoring mechanism). The process of psychoanalytic treatment involves a patient freely expressing whatever comes to mind, seated in a posture of minimal sensory stimulation, with the psychoanalyst as the interpreter of the unconscious ideas expressed in the patient's speech. The unconscious is at the root of Freud's psychology and philosophy, the view that the majority of one's mental processes are found buried at this level that is unattainable for understanding except through the careful treatment of psychoanalysis. It is at this unconscious level that the *id* and the *super-ego* are located (Thornton).

In contrast to Nietzsche's view of the will to power as the base human motivating force, Freud believed that the major driving force behind most human behavior is what he called the *libido*, or the sexual drive. This could also be called the "will to pleasure" as it was considered by Freud to be the desire and pursuit of attaining bodily sexual pleasure. He did not, however, believe that the sexual drive was the sole determinant on a person's actions. According to Freud, the two main basic human instincts, besides the numerous smaller ones, are the "*Eros* (the life instinct), which covers all the self-preserving and erotic instincts, and *Thanatos* (the death instinct), which covers all the instincts towards aggression, self-destruction, and cruelty" (Thornton).

In line with his theory of psychoanalysis, Freud believed that one dimension of human thought that most expressed the unconscious without censorship by the conscious self is the world of dreams. He believed that there are two types, or levels of content in dreams: the *manifest* and the *latent*. The *manifest* content in dreams is the surface-level content in a dream, that which appears to be expressed. The *latent* content, however, is the deeper unconscious content represented by the *manifest* content in the dream (Thornton). Freud wrote about this concept in his book published in 1899 and titled *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Because of the existentialist philosophical heritage handed down to the Age of Anxiety and carried on by Frenchmen such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, there came a movement in the visual arts that almost totally abandoned representational art (Conrad). The existentialists said that reality was not quite as rational as one would like to think, and artists of the twentieth century picked this up and used it in their art work. With the abandonment of strictly representational art, there were movements both toward abstract art and even completely non-objective art.

This movement toward pure abstraction did not happen all at once; it first appeared bit by bit in a few different movements right at the beginning of the twentieth century. These particular art movements have come to be known as the Avant-Garde styles, *avant-garde* being a military term for the unit at the foremost point of an attack (Benton and DiYanni 320-321), and they are the Fauvist, Cubist, and German Expressionist movements.

Fauvism actually gets its name from a particularly scathing review of one of the movement's gallery shows when the critic called the artists *Les Fauves*, which translated into English means The Wild Beasts. Fauvist art, primarily exhibited by the leader of the movement Henri Matisse, is characterized by intense colors from all over the spectrum painted in such a way that they do not at all resemble the colors of the objects as they would exist in nature. The Fauvists did not value expressing the reality of the external world as much as prior art movements had. Instead, they more wanted to express how the artist was feeling internally, an idea picked up from Van Gogh and Gauguin (Benton and DiYanni 321). They used huge streaks of vivid color to paint nice, domestic environments, evoking the idea of wild beasts rampaging through quaint middle-class dwellings.

The Cubist movement was mainly headed by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, each of whom did not find out about the other's work until after beginning to venture down that artistic style. Cubist art pieces depict their objects at odd angles and poses, because the artists' goal is to show the viewer all dimensions of the objects depicted. This style comes from the Cubist idea that reality is more than simply what we immediately perceive, but rather it is also comprised of what we bring to the table ourselves, what we already know about it (Benton and DiYanni 323).

Of the German Expressionists, there are two main movements: Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter. Die Brücke is a German phrase meaning "The Bridge," because the artists intended their art to be the bridge linking "all the revolutionary and fermenting elements" (Arnason 126). The artists of this movement depicted a strong sense of expressive subject matter and characteristically jagged Gothic structure and form and later inherited influences from the French Cubists and the Fauvists, but with a German excitement and narrative impact. Die Brücke was mostly guided by the ideas of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The other German Expressionist movement was Der Blaue Reiter, the leader of which was Vasily Kandinsky. In fact, its name came from the title of a book written by Kandinsky and Marc, which came from the title of a painting by Kandinsky, and it is translated as "The Blue Rider" (Arnason 134). The central thrust of the artists behind Der Blaue Reiter was the belief that art had to express the spiritual rather than the material, calling into question the "reality" of tangible objects. Kandinsky, who was obsessed with Theosophy, spiritism, and the occult, said about artistic design, "The harmony of color and form must be based solely upon the principle of proper contact with the human soul" (Arnason 135). He was also one of the first modern European artists, alongside Mondrian, to break through the representational barrier and carry painting into total abstraction.

A few years later an art movement began that could actually be described as an anti-art movement. Mainly directed by the ex-Cubist Marcel Duchamp, the name of this movement was Dada, a name purposelessly chosen out of a French dictionary expressing the nonsense of the movement as a whole (Matthews and Platt 580). The Dada artists chose to celebrate chance and irrationality in their work after society's illusions of order and meaning were disrupted by World War I. As the Swiss Dadaist Hans Arp said, "Repelled by the slaughterhouses of the world war, we turned to art. We searched for an elementary art that would, we thought, save mankind from the furious madness of these times" (Benton and DiYanni 381). A fantastic example of Dadaist art would be Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," which was actually a porcelain urinal that he signed "R. Mutt" and put on display.

Amid all of the politicians, all of the philosophers, and all of the artists, there are yet two artists that were true men of their time, and they expressed the era in very different ways through their art. These men were the artists Salvador Dalí and Piet Mondrian. Though the two men each hail from different places, Dalí from Spain and Mondrian from the Netherlands, they both spent a considerable amount of time in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Paris was the central hub of the arts in Europe during the early twentieth century, and the artists that dwelt there had influences on each other and took influences from each other. As the American poet Ezra Pound said, Paris was "the laboratory of the ideas in the arts" (Benton and Diyanni 384).

Salvador Dalí lived during the years of 1904 to 1989. He was born in the city of Figueras in the Spanish province Catalonia, the home of other famous Spanish artists such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. Dalí's Catalan heritage had a great influence on his work as it was one of the most culturally rich regions in Europe during that period. Apart from his Catalan upbringing, Dalí's experiences as a child had a very strong effect on his later artwork. "The landscape of

these early years appears constantly in his paintings, which are marked by the violence of his temperament—ecstatic, filled with fantasy, terror, and megalomania” (Arnason 303).

Throughout his life, Dalí was filled with overwhelming mental tension, his mind consumed with various torments and sexual fantasies. It was not until he later discovered the writings and philosophy of Sigmund Freud concerning the active life of the unconscious and dreams that he believed he had found the answer. Dalí happened upon the group of artists that called themselves the Surrealists in 1929 when his Surrealist friend Joan Miró introduced him while he was visiting Paris, and the following year Dalí officially joined the movement (Arnason 304).

As an individual, Salvador Dalí was quite an interesting specimen. His life was marked by absurd and nonsensical behavior, a sort of celebration of irrationality. When he would speak, it would be difficult to follow what he was saying, because he would intentionally say things in such a way that it would cause the listener confusion. One of the trademarks of his appearance was his mustache, which he often waxed to stand straight up tall from his upper lip. Many of his famous photographic portraits depict him with wide eyes and his characteristic mustache as he held in his arms a cat or a chicken. In looking at Dalí’s life, it is difficult to tell whether he truly was a madman or a brilliant genius who was so consistent in his philosophy and his art that he let it influence his entire life. He even wrote an autobiography in 1942 titled *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, which was a generally fictionalized account (Arnason 304).

Piet Mondrian lived during the years of 1872 to 1944. Born in the Netherlands with the name Pieter Mondriaan, he went on to study at the Amsterdam Rijksacademie. In Mondrian’s work we see a progression from his earliest pieces, which were actually quite representational landscapes, to a form of Cubism mixed with the intense and diverse colors of Fauvism, to his final pure, geometric style which was in line with the art movement he helped to found with

Theo van Doesburg called de Stijl, which means “the Style” in Dutch (Arnason 214-216). One of Mondrian’s most significant artistic relationships was his friendship with American sculptor Alexander Calder. It was actually upon visiting Mondrian’s art studio that influenced Calder to become an abstract artist himself. Mondrian’s workplace quite closely paralleled his work, minimalist in color and pure in form, lacking of clutter and chaos. Calder said about his visit, “This one visit gave me a shock that started things. . . . Though I had heard the word ‘modern’ before, I did not consciously know or feel the term ‘abstract’” (Arnason 362).

One important fact to note about Mondrian is that he was more than a mere painter; he was also a philosopher and a spiritual seeker. Mondrian, like Kandinsky and many other artists of the era, was very interested in the occult and the Theosophical movement in particular. In analyzing Mondrian’s art, we must be aware of what he was aiming at on a spiritual and ideological level rather than merely on an aesthetic level. “. . . although his canvases are satisfying purely as aesthetic objects, they cannot be fully appreciated on that level alone, for they always refer to the artist’s experience—intuitive and intellectual—of forces and the order that he understood to exist beyond the casual irregularity of nature’s surface” (Henning 248). Mondrian sought to understand the ontological nature of the universe and express it as purely as possible in his work.

The work of these artists’ is better understood by first having a basic understanding of the movements of which they were apart. Their level of involvement in each movement differs slightly, as Mondrian was the main theoretician behind de Stijl and Dalí joined Surrealism after its founding. Concerning de Stijl, the primary guiding force behind its creation as a group was Theo van Doesburg, and it was structured essentially behind the philosophies of Mondrian. De Stijl was very much against the art of previous movements like Impressionism, filled with

sentiment and lyricism. They viewed those prior movements to be complicating and obscuring what they believed to be the nature of reality, and they therefore perceived a need for simplification and an emphasis on the abstract. In its period of 1917-1928, a period in which there was much chaos and confusion going on in the world, the artists and theorists of de Stijl sought a more unifying reality based on mathematical structure and geometric forms. They simplified their art to simple rectangles and lines for shapes and the neutrals and primaries for colors. The group kept this as their basis and built off of it until van Doesburg later began to alter his style a bit. He began to add forty-five degree angles to his pieces and named his newly adjusted form Elementarism. Because of this, he and Mondrian had a falling-out, and Mondrian left de Stijl (Arnason 214).

Surrealism as a movement was founded by the poet André Breton. A couple years after gathering like-minded writers and artists to himself, those who believed that art should be unhindered by pre-conceived subjects and moral or aesthetic values, Breton penned the “First Surrealist Manifesto” in 1924. In the manifesto, Breton cried out against the constricts of logic that society placed on intellectual pursuits and art. He began the piece, “We are still living under the reign of logic, but the logical processes of our time apply only to the solution of problems of secondary interest” (Breton). Just as Kierkegaard believed a person could not understand the more important issues of existence within man-made logical systems, Breton believed that the most important issues were solved outside of logic. Breton took this another step in a different direction by choosing to use irrationality as the method of understanding existence. Breton believed that artists and thinkers ought to be allowed and liberated to explore their own minds, even the hidden unconscious things, without boundaries imposed upon them. Breton and the Surrealists put a huge emphasis on the unconscious and the world of dreams as disciples of

Freud, albeit often rather mischievous ones. As Breton said about Freud, “On the evidence of his discoveries a current of opinion is at last developing which will enable the explorer of the human mind to extend his investigations, since he will be empowered to deal with more than merely summary realities” (Breton). Though they emphasized Freud’s influence in their work, they often based it off of a misinterpreting of his philosophy, which they did on purpose much of the time. That which Freud viewed as neurotic behavior that needed to be treated by psychoanalysis, the Surrealists celebrated in all of its neurotic irrationality. Dalí’s art was very much in line with the ideas of Surrealism, even after a rift between him and Breton caused him to be expelled from the group.

It is obvious that the movements of de Stijl and Surrealism were nearly polar opposites of each other, so it causes one to wonder how they could have both sprung out of the same era. However, when you begin to analyze their differences, the philosophies influencing the different art become more evident, and commonalities at the root are able to be seen. There are several themes confronted in the work of Dalí and Mondrian that are taken in opposite directions by the two artists.

The most easily perceived theme in the work of Dalí and Mondrian is that of Irrationality vs. Rationality, and it is actually most clearly seen in each artist’s process of going about the creation of a piece. Consistent with the essential method of the Surrealists, what Breton called “pure psychic automatism” and is comparable to Freud’s psychoanalytic method of free association (Arnason 289), Dalí tried to paint whatever image came into his head, no matter how seemingly absurd. As he himself described the visualization of one of his pieces, “...I spent the whole day seated before my easel, my eyes staring fixedly, trying to ‘see,’ like a medium (very much so indeed), the images that would spring up in my imagination. Often I saw these images

exactly situated in the painting. Then, at the point commanded by them, I would paint, paint with the hot taste in my mouth..." (Finkelstein 61). He did not allow himself to adjust the images in such a way that they would be more palatable to the eyes or logical norms. He celebrated the absurd and the irrational, the juxtaposition of things unnaturally juxtaposed. Dalí had no preconceived purpose for his artistic expressions other than to express what was inside of him, even his unconscious, for to Dalí truth is not found in the rational world but rather in the uncensored, irrational world of dreams. He sought simply to express, and it was up to everyone else to interpret his work. He was the man on the couch, and the world was the psychoanalyst.

On the other hand, Mondrian highly valued rationality and reason in his method. You cannot separate the artist and the philosopher in Mondrian, for every piece of visual art he created was carefully crafted as an off-shoot of his philosophy. Whereas Dalí expressed anything and everything that came to mind on the painting, Mondrian was very meticulous in his method and selective in what was expressed in a piece and how it was expressed. He was very censoring of his own initial impulses in the creating of his work. "It was his aim to remove every element that did not contribute directly and vitally to the essential form and meaning of the work" (Henning 244). To Mondrian, the concept came before and presided over the work. He reasoned through each step of the process to decide whether or not that particular thought or piece was consistent with his concept for the piece.

Now, in looking at the actual textual content of each of their work, one contrast that comes to mind is the idea of Order vs. Chaos. When you look at a Mondrian painting, for instance *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930), you see a large square of red, a small square of blue, a tiny rectangle of yellow, four rectangles of white, and some black lines intersecting at ninety degree angles. He has distilled his form to the very basic element of form,

eliminating anything that could distract from the essence of the piece and the essence of reality. His work implies a universal sense of order, that the things that are most “real,” the rectangle, the line, and the basic primary and neutral colors, are the things that are most pure, orderly, and free of ornamentation.

When you look at a Salvador Dalí painting, however, you see a dream-world full of twisted biomorphic figures in grotesque positions, vivid colors blended seamlessly into each other, and objects ripped out of their typical context and placed with non-similar objects. He twists the reality we are used to until our perceived sense of order is corrupted. As in his famous painting *Persistence of Memory* (1931), Dalí took the common image we each have of a pocket-watch, a resolute object made of hard metal and glass stiff to the touch, and depicted it as if it were made of soft, melting material. It is especially significant that he did this with a timepiece, as if he were throwing into question our whole concept of time and speculating that it is less linear and firm and more random and fluid. The end of this stream of thought can only be entropy, as we would no longer have any system of order around which to build our lives. Without order, there can only be chaos. They are mutually exclusive.

Additionally, we find in the work of Mondrian and Dalí the theme of Universality vs. Individuality, and along with that goes the theme of Objectivity vs. Subjectivity. Dalí gives the viewer through his work an extremely personal, intentionally honest portrayal of himself at his deepest unconscious level. He put on the canvas everything that came to mind even if it could have been humiliating, because he believed that reality is understood through the diversity of individualized interpretations of experience and existence. There came a point when Dalí even moved past the passive use of psychic automatism as a means of understanding himself to the active use what he called “paranoiac-criticism” as a means of understanding reality itself

(Finkelstein 63). This would then mean that to Dalí reality is a highly individualized, subjective thing. It is comprised of the dream objects of every individual and must be interpreted from that standpoint, which seems an impossible task.

Mondrian, on the other hand, sought to make his paintings universal, transcending the diverse experience of the tangible world and finding a purer reality that exists beyond it. In Mondrian's work you find no human beings, no national symbols, and no association with any sort of political faction or people group. There is nothing in a Mondrian painting, textually speaking, that can be associated congruently in any way with the tangible world. In fact, neither the straight line, nor the pure colors of black, white, red, blue, and yellow exist in nature. Not only can you not associate his work with a particular person or region, but you cannot even associate it with the natural world as the painting is. Instead, Mondrian sought to understand external, transcendental reality in its purest form, which is done through these basic forms, very much in the same stream as Plato. Therefore, the conclusions reached, if accurately and reasonably sought out, should be the same for every person, confirming them as objective truth despite the diversity of subjective interpretation.

Overall, the art and philosophies of Mondrian and Dalí are centered on seeking the answer to the basic metaphysical question "What is real?" However, it appears that they each found different answers. Mondrian's goal in his work was to clear away all of the illusions corrupting his vision and his experience in order to find a purer reality, which he believed to be an orderly and transcendent, universal reality. In stark contrast, it seems that Dalí celebrated and exaggerated the illusions in order to throw into question all the mainstream conceptions of reality. For Mondrian, reality was found in the experience of taking in the art. Through the pure forms and colors, we are able to connect with something outside our physical, tangible sphere of

existence. For Mondrian “the new reality was the presence of the painting itself, as opposed to the painted imitation of nature or the romantic evocation of the artist’s emotions” (Arnason 215). For Dalí, reality is found in the illusions, in the irrational experiences of existence found in dreams and neuroses. The line between illusion and reality, between madness and sanity, is extremely blurry, almost non-existent.

Both of these men felt and acknowledged that they were living in an Age of Anxiety, when that lost generation was losing sight of the foundation of their meaning and values. In the midst of that era of existential crisis, Piet Mondrian sought through his art and theory to solve it, to bring the loose ends into unity so that the unsettled minds of the masses may experience the solution and find their rest, while Salvador Dalí sought through the same means to express it, to understand the crisis, and after accomplishing that, to control it until it is no longer viewed as a crisis but merely one interpretation of illusory reality. Their focus was on something deeper and more transcendent than mere visual art. They sought to know themselves, to know the world, and to know what all of this existence is about. I do not know that they found it, but it is possible that we have the opportunity to learn from their pursuits, to ask the questions they asked and see if we come away with a different answer. We have the opportunity to seek out a firmer reality, so that when the next Age of Anxiety comes, our foundation will not crumble, and our meaning will not be lost.

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