



A Centrifugal Reading of *De Stijl*'s Constructivist Poetics: On the Literature of Blaise Cendrars, Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and László Moholy-Nagy¹

De constructivistische poëtica van *De Stijl* centrifugaal gelezen: over de literatuur van Blaise Cendrars, Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondriaan, Theo van Doesburg en László Moholy-Nagy

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Abstract: The type of literature promoted by the Constructivist avant-garde magazine *De Stijl* is often reduced to the writings of its editor-in-chief, Theo van Doesburg. In this article we look beyond van Doesburg's work and explore a more open approach to the diverse literary output published in the magazine. Not so much the literary aesthetic at the centre of the magazine, but the many experiments in the margins of the journal are paid attention to. This 'centrifugal' reading of the magazine not only casts new light on Van Doesburg's work at the centre of *De Stijl*. It also unearths how Blaise Cendrars, Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondrian and László Moholy-Nagy deserve to be ranked among the magazine's key literary figures.

Keywords: De Stijl, Constructivism / Constructivisme, Theo van Doesburg, Blaise Cendrars, Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondriaan, László Moholy-Nagy

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What, if anything, typified *De Stijl* literature? What kind of writing was promoted by this magazine, which appeared from 1917 until 1932 and was one of the longest running avant-garde periodicals in the interwar period? Literary historians so far have answered these questions mainly by taking a tested route in periodical studies: they have turned to the views and types of literature put forth by Theo van Doesburg, who acted as a rather single-minded and authoritarian editor-in-chief of the magazine and who was, thanks to his pseudonyms I.K. Bonset and Aldo Camini, also the journal's most conspicuous author of literary texts, including manifestoes (often co-signed by others).² Following the lead of Van Doesburg is a viable option in order to reconstruct the magazine's literary aesthetic or poetic. This approach, which we could call 'centripetal' as it tries to isolate a poetological centre of gravity within the magazine, has among other things exposed how Van Doesburg's own literary aesthetic went through various phases and had many faces.³ Indeed, if the words 'De Stijl'⁴ today instantly recall iconic design objects such as Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair*, or the abstract visual style of Piet Mondrian's painting, the same words lead to more searching responses when it comes to literature.

One disadvantage of the more tested, centripetal approach to *De Stijl* is that it all too quickly relegates to the margins of inquiry a wide range of poets and writers who also figured in the magazine's columns. Texts by many others, including Hugo Ball, Til (Mathilda) Brugman (until 1936 Hannah Höch's partner), Blaise Cendrars, Bruno Corra, Theodor Däubler, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck, Stanisław Kubicki, Else Lasker-Schüler, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara, appeared in the journal as well. In addition, an impressively long list of authors is mentioned or discussed throughout the magazine – from Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, André Breton, Jean Cocteau, Kasimir Edschmid, René Ghil, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Yvan Goll, Victor Hugo, Maurice Maeterlinck, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Marquis de Sade, Rabindranath Tagore and Leo Tolstoy to Paul Valéry, Paul Verlaine and Wyndham Lewis. This colourful collection of names adds up to a substantial variety of writing and many literary aesthetics. Thus, a 'centrifugal' approach – one that takes into consideration these other, apparently marginal writers – instantly evinces how the journal voiced not one poetic but a whole series of often conflicting poetics. Some of these had a lasting impact – the 'typo-plastic' by Stefi Kiesler, for instance, which promoted a form of visual poetry made by using a typewriter,⁵ today figures prominently in the history of concrete poetry and typewriter art. Other poetic projects to appear in *De Stijl* never matured or quickly proved dead-ends – Piet

² For a discussion of *De Stijl* in this respect, see S. Bru, "The Will to Style": The Dutch Contribution to the Avant-Garde', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, Volume III: Europe 1880-1940, Part I, ed. by P. Brooker, S. Bru, A. Thacker and C. Weikop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 293-312.

³ For a thorough analysis of Van Doesburg's writings, see H. L. Hedrick, *Theo van Doesburg: Propagandist and Practitioner of the Avant-Garde, 1909-1923* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980).

⁴ When not in italics, in what follows 'De Stijl' refers to the art movement, not the magazine.

⁵ Kiesler published her pieces in *De Stijl* using the pseudonym Pietro Saga: 'Typo-Plastique VII', *De Stijl*, 12 (1924-25), 137 (cover); 'Typo-plastiek 10', *De Stijl*, 75-76 (1926-27), 50; 'Dactyloplastique 1925', *De Stijl*, 77 (1926-27), 65. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are ours.

Mondrian, for example, co-signed *De Stijl*'s manifesto on literature;⁶ today he is arguably not remembered as a writer. Some of the mentioned authors or their poetics are presented favourably in the magazine, while others are evoked just as often in rather derogative terms. The latter, that is, writers and works presented in a negative way, of course again reaffirm the poetological centre carved out by Van Doesburg. Yet the literary experiments which often led nowhere but which at times were presented marginally in an appreciative or even neutral manner still hold the potential of reconfiguring our views of *De Stijl*'s role in literary history.

This article attempts a centrifugal reading of *De Stijl*, not so as to deny the central poetological project presented by Van Doesburg, but in order to bring into the limelight certain aspects of the magazine's literary experimentation that so far have been largely ignored. Limiting ourselves to just the first five years of the journal, we have no intention of canvassing the full complexity of *De Stijl*'s poetics. Rather, we wish to show how turning to magazines as complex intertextual and self-reflective literary objects inextricably connected to the work of all their contributors outside the magazines' pages as well, always allows us to open up admittedly less stable but nonetheless excitingly new perspectives. In the case of our reading of *De Stijl* here, it will become apparent, for example, that further research on the precise nature of Constructivist literary aesthetics and writing may well be required – Constructivism of course being the international avant-garde movement under which *De Stijl* is generally subsumed.⁷ Furthermore, we will see that Blaise Cendrars and László Moholy-Nagy, among others, were perhaps as vital as Van Doesburg to the development of *De Stijl*'s poetic.

Rereading 'X-Beelden', or Blaise Cendrars Ignites *De Stijl*

Explicit reflection on literature enters *De Stijl*'s columns at a remarkably late stage. It was only in early 1920, with the publication of the second manifesto, on literature, that an attempt was made to flesh out a coherent literary aesthetic backed up by several contributors. The main points of the manifesto are well rehearsed, but for our present aims some of these points are worth repeating. In line with the first, founding manifesto⁸ (which claimed that the Great War had installed a new, collective consciousness of time in flux and a universal, geometrical sensibility, and which stated that it was the task of the post-war artist to help shape a new, pure and abstract art in tune with modern scientific and technological advances), the second manifesto on literature asserted that psychologism and sentiment had to be cast aside, along with naturalist and realist modes of writing. Instead of 'describing' ('beschrijven') an author was to 'scribe' or 'write' ('schrijven'), to deploy language in such a way that it captured the new collective sensibility evoked in the first manifesto. To do so, literature was to find its own, abstract means of expression and so language's material or medium specificity had to be isolated first. To this specific aim syntax, prosody, typography, orthography and arithmetic

⁶ T. van Doesburg, P. Mondrian and A. Kok, 'Manifest II. De literatuur', *De Stijl*, 6 (1920), 49-54.

⁷ See H. van den Berg, "'Übernationalität" der Avantgarde, (Inter-)Nationalität der Forschung: Hinweis auf den internationalen Konstruktivismus in der europäischen Literatur und die Problematik ihrer literaturwissenschaftlichen Erfassung', in *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer: Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*, ed. by W. Asholt and Walter Fähnders (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 255-288.

⁸ T. van Doesburg, R. van 't Hoff, V. Huszár, A. Kok, P. Mondrian, G. Vantongerloo and J. Wils, 'Manifest I van "De Stijl"', *De Stijl*, 1 (1918), pp. 2-3.

would be the means to be used and experimented with. As such, the manifesto above all announced a phase of intense investigation. Indeed, how, then, was writing to look?

Centripetal analyses as a rule turn to Van Doesburg's work at this point, exemplifying how the author published a series of his own searching experiments starting with the poetic 'X-beelden' (X-Images) and the first instalment of the essayistic 'novel' *Het andere gezicht* (The Other Face/Vision, *De Stijl*, 3:10, August 1920), both signed by his alter ego I. K. Bonset. A centrifugal reading, by contrast, might inquire what types of writing had appeared in the journal up to this point, in part informed by the assumption that the publication of the manifesto on literature and subsequently published work built upon works and insights that previously appeared in *De Stijl*. Striking in this respect is that during the first two and a half years there is almost no literature to be found in the magazine's pages. Guillaume Apollinaire is briefly commemorated, mainly by praising his work as an art critic,⁹ Jean Cocteau is honoured,¹⁰ references to literary works occasionally appear in the 'Books Received' section and after a while also in the 'Rondblik' (Overview) section, which touched upon international exhibitions and publications. Only two proper poems were published before the literary manifesto appeared in 1920: Blaise Cendrars' 'La tête', dedicated to Alexander Archipenko,¹¹ whose black painted bronze statue *Le Gondolier* (1914, see <http://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489338>) is also reproduced in the same journal, and Georges Vantongerloo's closely related rewriting of Cendrars' poem 'La Force ("La tête")'.¹²

Cendrars' 'La tête', which according to the author was reproduced in *De Stijl* without his consent,¹³ would eventually find a place in the 1919 collection *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*. Slightly different from the version included a year earlier in *De Stijl*, it there reads:

La guillotine est le chef-d'œuvre de l'art plastique
 Son dé clic¹⁴
 Crée le mouvement perpétuel
 Tout le monde connaît l'œuf de Christophe Colomb
 Qui était un œuf plat, un œuf fixe,¹⁵ l'œuf d'un inventeur
 La sculpture d'Archipenko est le premier œuf ovoïdal
 Maintenu en équilibre intense
 Comme une toupie immobile
 Sur sa pointe animée
 Vitesse
 Il se dépouille
 Des ondes multicolores
 Des zones de couleur

⁹ See Redactie, 'Guillaume Apollinaire† Parijs November 1918', *De Stijl*, 2 (1918), 13; G. Severini, 'Mon cher Van Doesburg', *De Stijl*, 2 (1918), p. 14.

¹⁰ P. Colin, 'Notes sur Jean Cocteau', *De Stijl*, 11 (1919), pp. 125-27.

¹¹ B. Cendrars, 'La tête', *De Stijl*, 10 (1918), 124. Cendrars is mentioned briefly only once more in a discussion of Dada in Redactie, 'Rondblik', *De Stijl*, 11 (1920), p. 95.

¹² G. Vantongerloo, 'Le Gondolier d'Alex. Archipenko', *De Stijl*, 11 (1918), 134-35.

¹³ See B. Cendrars, *Poésies complètes, avec 41 poèmes inédits*, ed. by C. Leroy (Paris: Denoël, 2005), p. 366, note 72.

¹⁴ The version in *De Stijl* contains a typo or misprint here, reading 'dé clic'.

¹⁵ In the version of *De Stijl* part of this line was contaminated as 'un œuf plat fixe'.

Et tourne dans la profondeur
 Nu.
 Neuf.¹⁶
 Total.¹⁷

Cendrars had originally intended 'La tête', conceived before the Great War, as an ekphrastic poem celebrating Archipenko's 1913 attempt at kinetic art in a sculpture of the same name (see <https://www.dorotheum.com/uploads/pics/141125Archipenko.jpg>).¹⁸ Nonetheless, it is presented in *De Stijl* as an ekphrastic ode to Archipenko's *Le Gondolier*, which, as we saw, is also included in the same issue. Despite being a clear misreading, Cendrars' poem and Archipenko's *Le Gondolier* can indeed be read in tandem – this in fact works so well that it might have led to the first 'X-Beelden' by Van Doesburg. Indeed, together with Vantongerloo's poem, Cendrars' text can be shown to have prefigured Van Doesburg's own 'X-Beelden'.

The first line of Cendrars' poem calls the guillotine the masterwork of plastic arts because its 'déclit' creates the impression of setting things in perpetual motion. The fast and vertical downward movement of the guillotine might be said to evoke the perpendicular position of Archipenko's gondolier, who indeed stands exactly upright. The guillotine's movement, the remains of the poem can be said to suggest, is encountered in various parts of Archipenko's work: the gondolier's head is the first egg-like shape whose smooth surface evokes a fast-spinning top; the intense equilibrium the poem evokes could be read as referring to the diagonal line of the oar held by the rower, which further suggests movement as well as balanced immobility. Yet the black painted surface of the statue again could be said to create the impression that the figure's movement is so intense that it has cast off all colours, moving at the speed of light, 'Naked. New. Total.'

If this is a misreading, it is exactly the interpretation picked up by Belgian Constructivist painter and architect Georges Vantongerloo in the next issue in which he devoted an essay to Cendrars' poem and Archipenko's *Le Gondolier*. Vantongerloo's short essay, too, is accompanied by an image and through a technical analysis of the force lines made visible on that image suggests how Cendrars' poem is a rather apt evocation of Archipenko's statue. Among other things, Vantongerloo argues, the horizontal lines suggest balance and rest, while the vertical and diagonal lines in the statue give way to a sense of movement, the combination

¹⁶ The version reproduced in *De Stijl* contains either a pun or another typo here: 'Nœuf'.

¹⁷ The guillotine is the masterpiece of plastic arts / Its click / Creates perpetual movement / Everybody knows the egg of Christopher Columbus / Which was a flat egg, a fixed egg, the egg of an inventor / The sculpture by Archipenko is the first ovoidal egg / Kept in intense equilibrium / Like an immobile spinning top / On its animated point / Speed / It rids itself of / Multicoloured waves / Of zones of colour / And spins in the deep / Naked. / New. / Total. (B. Cendrars, 'La tête', in B. Cendrars, *Poésies complètes*, p. 91).

¹⁸ For a discussion about the relationship between Archipenko's and Cendrars' work in this context and its historical significance, see J.-F. Thibault, "'Le Tableau qui bouge': Art in Motion 1913-1930", in *European Culture in a Changing World*, ed. by D. Meyer-Dinkgrafe (Amersham: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2004), pp. 202-11. Readers can also find an English translation of the poem here on p. 209. Of further interest are the notes provided by J.-P. Goldenstein in his edition of Cendrars' *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1986), pp. 101-04, and J.-C. Flückiger, 'La Tête à couper', in *Blaise Cendrars: Un imaginaire du crime*, ed. by D. Martens (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), pp. 11-34.

of all lines leading to the impression of a statuette containing immense energy and tension within itself. Like an egg, indeed, it contains life. Vantongerloo then ends his essay with no less than a rewriting of the Cendrars poem, dis- and then reassembling it as such:

La force commande	va en action et crée	déclie
le déclie commande	va en action et crée	point animé
le point animé commande	va en action et crée	mouvement perpétuel
le mouvement perpétuel	va en action et crée	ondes multicolores
les ondes multicolores commandent	vont en action et créent	zones de couleurs
les zones de couleurs	vont en action et	tournent dans la profondeur.
Nu.	Neuf.	Total. ¹⁹

In short, while Cendrars might not have intended his poem to be related to Archipenko's *Le Gondolier*, Vantongerloo's rewriting of it not only masterfully evokes Cendrars' original poem; it also adds to the ekphrasis, the poem's columns among others drawing attention to the fractured, Cubist planes of Archipenko's gondolier.

When we now read Van Doesburg's (or I. K. Bonset's) first poem to have appeared in *De Stijl* and which has often been deemed the first attempt at a distinct *De Stijl* type of writing, that is 'X-beelden' (X-images), it becomes almost impossible not to notice how the Dutchman might have picked up on the sequence of poems so far discussed. Appearing on the opening page of the issue immediately after publication of the manifesto on literature, and accompanied by a note stating that the poem figures in a series of 'Kubistische verzen' (Cubist verse) dated 1913-1919, Van Doesburg's 'X-Beelden' evokes a sort of X-ray of a room at the centre of which we find a lyrical 'I'. Through this I's body and consciousness, various objects and impressions flow in seemingly straight geometrical lines: a tram glides through the room and his body; sounds penetrate his body as well and smash to pieces as they exit again. Rays of light are added, suggesting the body is but a translucent membrane, and then the poem ends:

4 x HORIZONTALAAL

ontelbare verticale palen

en ook de hoge

gekromde blauwe

RUIMTE

BEN IK²⁰

¹⁹ The force commands / goes into action and creates / click // The click commands / goes into action and creates / animated point // The animated point commands / goes into action and creates / perpetual movement // The perpetual movement commands / goes into action and creates / multi-coloured waves // The multi-coloured waves command / go into action and create / zones of colour // The zones of colour / go into action and / spin in the deep. // Naked. / New. / Total.

Clearly, the recurring horizontal and vertical lines here, central also in the writing of Cendrars and Vantongerloo on Archipenko,²¹ makes Van Doesburg's poem in turn an ekphrastic poem conjuring up Vantongerloo's visual dissection of Archipenko's *Le Gondolier*. In fact, it is almost as if 'X-Beelden' was composed with Vantongerloo's sketch on the writing table, with Van Doesburg in turn writing over the same palimpsest of poetic (mis)readings. The black of the gondolier is now blue. The subject has obviously changed as well, literally, from a gondolier to a more anonymous, suggestively static I (the curved blue line at the end evokes a sky being witnessed through a window). Finally, the energy contained within Archipenko's *Le Gondolier* and in part turned outward by the lines on Vantongerloo's drawing is in Van Doesburg's poem again internalised or made indeterminate, as it is the external factors or lines contingently crossing through the lyrical I that make it the receptive centre of energy. Nonetheless, echoing Vantongerloo's lines entering and exiting the gondolier's body, 'X-Beelden' can be said to have presumably not come out of the blue, provided we sift through *De Stijl* in a centrifugal manner and take notice of poems alongside Van Doesburg's. Such a centrifugal reading not only opens up new possibilities of reading the poetics and poetry of Van Doesburg that occupy the poetological centre of the magazine. It also allows us to draw out the hitherto ignored potential significance of Blaise Cendrars within *De Stijl*. Cendrars here appears as a figure that ignited a fuse in the magazine that, once lit, led to literary experimentation.

Whether Cendrars' and Vantongerloo's writings actually played a substantial role in the overdetermined genesis of Van Doesburg's 'X-Beelden' is not so important. To our knowledge they could have played some part here,²² and that is good enough – we aim to open up possibilities of interpretation, not limit them. Still, it is a fact that Van Doesburg quickly cast aside as imperfect the type of writing represented by 'X-Beelden'. To ascertain why a year later, in 1921, he would come up with an entirely different form of writing for which he coined the name 'Letterklankbeelden' (Lettersoundimages), another detour to the literary margins of the magazine and back to its centre proves rather illuminating.

²⁰ 4 x horizontal / countless vertical poles / and also the high / curved blue / space / am I (T. van Doesburg, 'X-Beelden', *De Stijl*, 7 (1920), 57).

²¹ One might think of others here, too, of course, in particular of Dr. Schoenmaekers. His *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld* (The New Image of the World, 1915) deeply influenced the luminaries of *De Stijl*. In Schoenmaekers' Neo-Platonic philosophy of mathematics, the 'two fundamental complete contraries that shape our earth are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun and the vertical, profoundly spatial movement of rays that originate in the centre of the sun.' Schoenmaekers as quoted in H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1956), p. 58.

²² As far as we have been able to determine, Van Doesburg could have written this poem after seeing the publication of Cendrars' and Vantongerloo's previous efforts. The end of his 'Cubist verse' phase, in 1919, leaves this option open. Much later, in 1927, Van Doesburg (as I. K. Bonset) dated this phase to 1917-1918 (see his 'Van het woord en de letterkunde 1917-1927', *De Stijl* 79/84 (1927), pp. 10-3). This might be one of his various attempts to antedate works. See also: E. Hoek, M. Blokhuis, S. van Faassen, I. Goovaerts, N. Kamphuis, M. Kramer (eds.), *Theo van Doesburg. Oeurecatalogus* (Bussum: THOTH, 2000), pp. 684, 732.

Re-reading Van Doesburg's 'Letterklankbeelden' through Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy

As *De Stijl's* manifesto on literature had made explicit, one of the main objectives in literature would be to isolate the specificity of writing and to determine the basic building blocks of language's materiality. In doing so, the literary project of the magazine embarked on clearly fits within the larger artistic programme of the *De Stijl* movement as a whole. Michael White has analysed this programme in detail,²³ arguing that the new and possibly monumental Gemeenschapskunst (Communal Art) which *De Stijl* projected into a utopian future was one in which all the arts would eventually be united in a total, coalescent art or *Gesamtkunst* headed under the banner of 'Nieuwe Beelding' (the New Plastic). For all artists and writers involved in the movement, this projected endpoint could only be reached when the individual arts had first come into their own and every artist had managed to isolate the material or medium specificity of his or her art form. Thus, a painter was to determine first the basics of painting and then work with these and only these. The same applies for writers or poets, composers and musicians, filmmakers and so on.

The pages of *De Stijl* record this search for medium specificity as well. During the first two and a half years of its existence, the magazine's focus was almost exclusively on painting, architecture, design and sculpture. In such serials as Piet Mondrian's 'De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst' (The New Plastic in Painting)²⁴ and Gino Severini's 'La peinture d'avant-garde' (Avant-Garde Painting), the bare means of painting were laid out.²⁵ In among others an entire issue dedicated to architect Robert van 't Hoff's *Zomerhuis te huis ter Heide* (1915) and articles like Rietveld's 'Aantekeningen bij kinderstoel' (Notes on Baby Chair),²⁶ the possibilities of creating a living environment for a modern, New Man were considered.²⁷ The vast number of articles dealing with painting, architecture, and sculpture thus clearly show how *De Stijl* initially favoured the *visual* arts and, as exemplified by our discussion of Cendrars, the visual also figured centrally in the poetry that would appear in *De Stijl's* first years. The first issue of the third volume (November 1919) is the only issue to contain a contribution devoted to an art said to appeal to another sense than vision: Theo van Doesburg's 'Aantekeningen over de nieuwe muziek' (Notes on the New Music).²⁸ Here, the ear, the sense of hearing or listening, was foregrounded as well in an attempt to isolate the specific materiality of music. It is only after this point, that is, the point at which both the visual and the aural dimensions of certain art forms had been discussed, that the manifesto on literature appeared.

Mondrian, as we saw, was one of the co-signers of that manifesto. Although there is no clear further proof of his literary competence within the *De Stijl's* columns, around this time the renowned visual artist did engage in literary experimentation elsewhere. What is more, his literary experiments evince how seriously Mondrian reflected on what could be the basic

²³ M. White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

²⁴ P. Mondrian, 'De nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst', *De Stijl*, 1 (1917) – 12 (1918).

²⁵ G. Severini, 'La peinture d'avant-garde', *De Stijl*, 2 (1917) – 10 (1918).

²⁶ G. Rietveld, 'Aantekeningen bij kinderstoel (bijlage no. XVIII)', *De Stijl*, 9 (1919), 102.

²⁷ See for instance *De Stijl*, 3 (1919), which is devoted entirely to architecture.

²⁸ T. van Doesburg, 'Aantekeningen over de nieuwe muziek. De symmetrie in de muziek. Naar aanleiding van Paul Bekker's "Neue Musik" Verlag Erich Reiss, Berlin', *De Stijl*, 1 (1919), pp. 5-8.

parameters of *De Stijl* writing, as literature and language in general were, to Mondrian, not just there to be seen or to make see. Language and literature were also to be heard and to make listen. In other words, not only the visual dimension brought out so far by Cendrars, Vantongerloo and Van Doesburg's 'X-beelden' was vital to Mondrian in literature. Sound was just as significant. A new *De Stijl* type of writing would thus have to find a way of dealing with both the visual and aural aspects of language. Mondrian himself tried to put this idea into practice, as we will presently see. Yet the problem he himself came to recognise was that, while his ideas in theory proved a leap forward in poetological terms within the context of *De Stijl*, in practice his writings proved rather jejune finger exercises. Indeed, in 1932 he himself told fellow writer Lodewijk van Deysse that he had never been able to go beyond a descriptive, 'deepened Futurism'.²⁹

Mondrian's literary writing has so far received little attention.³⁰ Between February and March 1920, while debating the manifesto on literature with Van Doesburg in Paris, he worked on two literary sketches of Parisian city life, one of which, 'De groote boulevards' (The Grand Boulevards), was to be published in the magazine *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* (1920), the other, 'Klein restaurant – Palmzondag' (Small Restaurant – Palm Sunday), rejected and filed away. Harry Holtzman and Martin James aptly observe how these writings bear the signs of 'Cubist fragmentation', Dadaist 'disjunction and sound poetry' and 'Futurist simultaneity of the visual and the auditory'.³¹ Especially the latter appears to be rather salient in the impressionistic 'scribing' of Mondrian:

Ru-h-ru-h-ru-h-h-h-h. Poeoeoe. Tik-tik-tik-tik. Pre. R-r-r-r-r-uh-h. Huh! Pang. Su-su-su-ur. Boe-a-ah. R-r-r-r. Foeh ... veelheid van klanken, dorelkaar. Auto's, autobussen, karren, rijtuigen, menschen lantaarnpalen, boomen door elkaar; tegen café's, winkels, kantoren, affiches, étalages: veelheid van dingen. Beweging en stilstand: verschillend beweeg. Beweeg in ruimte en beweeg in tijd. Veelheid van beelden en velerlei gedachten.³²

²⁹ H. Holtzman and M. S. James (eds.), *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 133.

³⁰ See for reprints of the original Dutch texts P. Mondrian, H. den Boef (ed.) and C. Blotkamp (contr.), *Twee verhalen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1987). For English translations of Mondrian's literary writings, see Holtzman and James, *The New Art – The New Life*, pp. 126-31.

³¹ See Holtzman and James, *The New Art – The New Life*, p. 124. Janka Wagner, by contrast, contextualizes Mondrian's writings by relating them to the traditional poetics of the 1880s Generation or 'Tachtigers', the literary manifesto of *De Stijl* and Marinetti's futurist manifestoes. She concludes that Mondrian's prose is on a par with the 'traditional', 1880s striving for individualist expression, but that its use of sound and onomatopoeia are clearly oriented towards *De Stijl*'s avant-garde experimentation, though lacking the futurist fascination for technology (See J. Wagner, "'Zulke literatuur is voor veel later komenden bestemd": Piet Mondriaan als schrijver', *TNTL*, 2 (2015), pp. 171-86).

³² P. Mondrian, H. den Boef (ed.), C. Blotkamp (contr.), *Twee verhalen*, p. 13. (Ru-h ru-h-h-h-h-h. Poeoeoe. Tik-tik-tik-tik. Pre. R-r-r-r-r-uh-h. Huh! Pang. Su-su-su-su-ur. Boe-a-ah. R-r-r-r. Foeh ... a multiplicity of sounds, interpenetrating. Automobiles, Buses, carts, cabs, people, lampposts, trees ... all mixed; against cafés, shops, offices, posters, display windows: a multiplicity of things. Movement and standstill: diverse motions. Movement in space and movement in time. Manifold images and manifold thoughts) Translation: Holtzman and James (eds), *The New Art – The New Life*, p. 126).

Despite the fast-paced and elliptic syntactic style and the omission of finite verb forms here, the sounds and images evoked in Mondrian's writing are by no means out of the ordinary. In the quoted paragraph, we first *hear* the sounds and then *see* the sources that produce them. Drawing on onomatopoeia, Mondrian's writing did not quite point to the mixed visual-aural qualities of language itself, but to those qualities' referential effects. In so doing, he mainly furthered a pre-war Futurist poetic, a claim supported by a further literary experiment he sent to Van Doesburg in June 1920, which simply seemed to emulate Marinetti's 1912 poetic theory of 'sostantivo-doppio' (or double-nouns) in an attempt to emancipate the noun to the level of the verb and to cancel out the defects of individual nouns by pairing them up with (contrapuntal) others: 'man-vrouw / jongen-meisje / soldaat-marketentster / enz. enz.' (man-woman / boy-girl / soldier-sutler / etc. etc.).³³

In sum, while Mondrian's attempt at literary innovation above all recalled pre-war Italian Futurism, it was of note to a search for a typical *De Stijl* literary aesthetic, because it highlighted how such an aesthetic, in contrast to the initial, mainly visually-oriented literary experiments, was also to take into account the aural dimension of language and writing. In doing so, his poetic and writing might have prompted others, Van Doesburg not in the least, to come up with still other experiments, as we will presently indicate. Mondrian himself, however, gave up soon after. His reasons for this went back to the overall aesthetic project of *De Stijl*: he believed that the aural or sonic aspect of art, music in particular, was still underdeveloped. Only when music, the aural art par excellence, had come into its own, could a literary art of *De Stijl* that combined sound and sight emerge. As he suggested in *Le Néo-Plasticisme: Principe général de l'équivalence plastique* (Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence, 1920), his own Futurist compromise in literature was informed by his belief that at this point painting, as a purely visual art, was already up to the standards of the New Plastic and that the expressive means of the other arts, most notably of literature, were lagging behind: 'Et pourtant... c'est l'évidence même que la beauté abstraite finira par se montrer également dans ce dernier art. De même que la Musique, l'Art du verbe devra, pour atteindre une plastique vraiment nouvelle, parcourir un trajet beaucoup plus long que les arts dits plastiques.'³⁴ (And yet... it is clearly evident that abstract beauty will ultimately reveal itself in this art too. Just like music, verbal art will have much further to go than the so-called plastic arts in order to attain a truly new plastic).³⁵

It is to Van Doesburg's credit that a few months later he came up with a masterfully simple solution to Mondrian's challenge, when in July 1921 his alter ego I. K. Bonset published the essay 'Grondslagen tot een nieuwe [sic] versbeelding' (Foundations for a New Poetry),³⁶ followed by a series of 'Letterklankbeelden' (Lettersoundimages, see https://nl.wikisource.org/wiki/I.K._Bonset/Letterklankbeelden).³⁷ It has often been pointed out that here Van Doesburg was influenced by the sound poetry Kurt Schwitters had produced earlier – and, indeed, a series of Schwitters' poems was printed right after the 'Letterklankbeelden' by Van Doesburg in the same issue. Yet it would appear that Mondrian's

³³ C. Blotkamp, *Mondriaan: destructie als kunst* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1994), p. 134.

³⁴ P. Mondrian, *Le néo-plasticisme* (Paris: Editions de l'effort moderne, 1920), p. 7.

³⁵ Holtzman and James, *The New Art – The New Life*, p. 140.

³⁶ I. K. Bonset, 'Grondslagen tot een nieuwe versbeelding', *De Stijl* 7 (1921), pp. 99-102.

³⁷ I. K. Bonset, 'Letterklankbeelden I-III', *De Stijl* 7 (1921), pp. 103-06.

literary exploits might have been equally significant, considering Van Doesburg's sudden turn to sound in *De Stijl*. In 'Grondslagen' Van Doesburg/Bonset literally wiped the table clean and claimed to have isolated the basic qualities of the material poets had to work with for them to attain pure abstraction in poetry. His 'Lettersoundimages', Van Doesburg averred, were intended to make clear that '[p]oëzie is geen filosofie en allerminst historie, zij dient niet het begrip. Zij is het zijn zelf, dat zich door klank, klankverhouding en klankcontrast uit' (poetry is not philosophy and least of all history; it does not serve understanding. It is being itself expressed through sound, sound relations and sound contrast).³⁸ His new poetry – whose very name suggested how out of the combination of sight ('letter') and sound ('klank') abstraction was born ('beelden') – aimed at completely reinventing orthography. Van Doesburg borrowed characters from the regular alphabet, but changed their use so that they were no longer at the service of linguistic notation, but rather expressive in their own graphic presence and visual materiality. These geometrical signs functioned as a set of fundamental building blocks for a new type of 'dichterlijke spraak' (literary speech) as well as a training device or a sort of 'phonogymnastics' for writers to sharpen their poetical sense of hearing.³⁹ A strict set of rules established new conventions for how the visual traces on the paper were to be read aloud and turned into sound so as to free language from all sentimentalist baggage and to end up with the pure materiality of language. The conventionalised or formalised typographical values of signs in Van Doesburg's system were to completely determine the mechanical readings of the poems. The volume of each sound was prescribed by the typeface of its character (bold for emphasis), its duration by the dashes (either short, long or doubled) that followed it. Even in rapid succession, pauses indicated by white spaces prevented sounds from blending into one another. Future writers were to familiarise themselves with this new spelling system as soon as possible. In an effective and elementary – or, as Steve McCaffery has it, perhaps all too evident⁴⁰ – manner, Van Doesburg's 'Grondslagen' and 'Letterklankbeelden', thus rid poetry of its referential ballast and made it, as Mondrian had projected, the art uniting the visual and the aural.

An interesting repercussion of Van Doesburg's system was that it installed a new type of mechanical poet who while composing was given little room for creativity and while reading aloud or performing in part resembled a talking or reading machine. References to the gramophone, perhaps unsurprisingly, can also be found in his reflection on writing at this stage,⁴¹ but they as a rule come with negative overtones. 'Gramphonic' writing, Van Doesburg claimed in *De Stijl*, was mimetic writing; akin to the sound-recording medium patented by Emile Berliner around the turn of the century, heteronomous, 'gramphonic' language was there to merely mimic reality; to write down (graph) pre-existing sounds (phone).⁴²

³⁸ I. K. Bonset, 'Grondslagen tot een nieuwe versbeelding', p. 100.

³⁹ I. K. Bonset, 'Grondslagen tot een nieuwe versbeelding', p. 101.

⁴⁰ S. McCaffery, *The Darkness of the Present: Poetics, Anachronism and the Anomaly* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), p. 19.

⁴¹ See I.K. Bonset, 'Beeldende verskunst en hare verhouding tot de andere kunsten', *De Stijl*, 6 (1922), 90. In his magazine *Mécano*, Van Doesburg mentions a 'gramophone without a voice' in his Constructivist literary manifesto; see I.K. Bonset, 'Tot een constructieve dichtkunst', *Mécano* 4 and 5 (1923), n.p.

⁴² I.K. Bonset, 'Beeldende verskunst en hare verhouding tot de andere kunsten', *De Stijl*, 6 (1922), 90.

A year later, *De Stijl* opened with Hungarian Constructivist László Moholy-Nagy's classic essay, 'Produktion-Reproduktion',⁴³ which asserted that the gramophone was not only a *reproductive* medium, but that it could also be used to *produce* a new type of sound by simply scratching its records. Though media and synthetic music scholars have amply covered this landslide-essay and its wide-ranging technical implications, the ramifications of Moholy-Nagy's essay in the context of *De Stijl*'s search for a distinct type of writing has gone by unnoticed.⁴⁴ In essence, Moholy-Nagy showed how precarious an enterprise like the 'Letterklankbeelden' was when it was thought through to the extreme, while also demonstrating what further routes for literary experimentation lay open still. Indeed, if anything, Moholy-Nagy's essay took the notion of 'literature' much further than Mondrian and Van Doesburg before him.

'Produktion-Reproduktion' opens by stating that the artistic evolution of man depends on the full exploitation of the means already available to him. Most notable here, Moholy-Nagy observed, was the vast yet so far unexploited potential of productive means or 'Apparate', 'Mittel'. The main purpose of the gramophone, for example, had thus far been to reproduce acoustic phenomena. To do so, its vibrating needle inscribed sound waves into a wax plate, which a microphone could later convert back into sound. Deviating from this mechanical procedure, Moholy-Nagy claimed, man himself could carve traces or 'Ritzen' into the record, which, upon replaying, would create new, previously non-existing sounds and sound combinations without having to build new instruments or orchestras from scratch. To experimentally refine these carvings, man would first have to investigate the types of traces (long, wide, deep) making sounds, then improve upon his own scratches, and finally, move on to 'mechano-technical' attempts to develop a scratch-handwriting or 'Ritzen-Handschrift' that could be stored onto mechanically scaled down versions of the larger scratch-handwritten records or 'Ritzschriftplatten'.

While Moholy-Nagy's interest was not primarily literature, it is clear how his projected industrial workflow took the emancipation of language much further than Van Doesburg's 'Letterklankbeelden'. With minimal effort and a readily available technical model, traces as primitive as ancient icons scratched into the bark of trees or the walls of caves, could now harbour sounds, connotations, affects and experiences that went beyond anything humans ever sensed. If Van Doesburg's 'Letterklankbeelden' rid language or the alphabet of all semantic conventions reducing it to a mere visual trace to be sounded, Moholy-Nagy went one step further and substituted even the convention of the alphabet with an entirely new notational system. This system, which within the context of *De Stijl* was inevitably tied to Mondrian's and Van Doesburg's thinking, went far beyond the notion of 'literature' at work in the two Dutchmen. Following Moholy-Nagy's lead, any type of art combining visual traces that could be turned into sounds, fell under the banner of literature. In fact, Moholy-Nagy himself would later suggest in his posthumously published *Vision in Motion*, a didactic book that familiarised its readers with the many achievements of the avant-gardes, that the sight-sound

⁴³ L. Moholy-Nagy, 'Produktion-Reproduktion', *De Stijl*, 7 (1922), pp. 98-100.

⁴⁴ While leading sound scholars like Douglas Kahn (*Noise, Water, Meat. A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 91-9) and Friedrich Kittler (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 46) have stressed the importance of Moholy-Nagy's text for the development of synthesised sound as well as the renewal of writing and the alphabet, its relation to the poetics of *De Stijl* remains to be fleshed out.

reconfigurations or so-called 'opto-acoustics' in the poetry of Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Marinetti, Mayakovsky and Schwitters were not as far removed from those of technological innovations such as film, but even more so, sound-on-film.⁴⁵ Read from this centrifugal point of view, in short, we not only come to see Van Doesburg's poetic of 'Letterklankbeelden', so central within *De Stijl*, from a new perspective. We also come to recognise how Moholy-Nagy perhaps deserves to be ranked among the people proposing a distinct literary aesthetic in the magazine's columns.⁴⁶

By Way of Conclusion

De Stijl, so we have tried to make clear here through a selective reading only of just the first five years of the magazine, is a real treasure trove to scholars interested in literary experimentation. Centripetal readings of the magazine so far have highlighted the key role of Van Doesburg's work in this context, but as our own centrifugal approach has tried to demonstrate, various avenues of interpretation and re-reading still lie open. The large number of re-readings available to us, and the complex international and plurilinguistic networks this in turn opens up, could further lead us to new insights about the literary feats of international Constructivism. *De Stijl* as a movement (and of course the magazine as well) formed part of the international avant-garde movement of Constructivism, which spanned the entire European continent. While scholars of the classic or so-called 'historical' avant-gardes in recent decades have invested laudable energy into mapping the complex networks of magazines, people and institutions involved in this movement, the challenge to avant-garde scholars remains to chart the rich and manifold types of writing Constructivism launched. Indeed, if the words 'De Stijl' already lead to searching responses when we ask what distinguished the Dutch movement's literary output, any inquiry about the type of writing produced by the international movement of Constructivism is usually met with silence. In *The Constructivist Moment* (2003), Barrett Watten situates manifestations of the poetic of international Constructivism (be they historical or of a more recent date) between two poles: on the one hand, Constructivist literary aesthetics, which as a rule stress the imperative to radically foreground literature's formal construction, and, on the other hand, the cultural poetics or context in which these literary aesthetics are

⁴⁵ L. Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1965), esp. pp. 168, 276-77, 301-10.

⁴⁶ Moholy-Nagy certainly was not the first to acknowledge the productive capacities of gramphonic technologies in the context of (creative) use of or reflection on language. The visual rather than auditory investigation of sound waves was in fact already dictated by the workings of the first sound-recording medium to ever see the light of day: French inventor, printer and bookseller Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's 1857 phonautograph. This device could visually trace sound waves on a soot-covered cylinder, but could not replay them. This incited a tradition of visual examination of sounds, which was continued long after Thomas Edison's famous 1877 phonograph had been introduced. Many late nineteenth-century linguists, for instance, were no strangers to graphical touch-ups of the damaged grooves of their so-called 'phonograms', the visual traces of sounds. Modern phonology and above all phonetics would be unthinkable today without these phonograms, as they allowed linguists to study the properties of sound in the form of visual representations/registrations. To imply, then, as Moholy-Nagy did after Mondrian and Van Doesburg, that a type of abstract 'writing' could also be attained with gramophones rather than by use of the pen, paper or typewriter, was not all that far-fetched at this point. For more details, see S. Bru, T. Willaert and T. Vandeveldel, 'Phonogrammatic Reading: On the Sight of Sound in Paul van Ostaijen's Poetry', MDRN, *Modern Times. Literary Change* (Peeters: Leuven, 2003) pp. 65-80.

launched and which they seek to transform.⁴⁷ The space between these two poles is immense, and so the work lying before us is vast as well.

This work will probably not produce easily digestible or simplistic responses to questions about the distinctiveness of Constructivist writing. As Stephen Bann already highlighted, the label of Constructivism was used in the post-World War I era to denote a wide range of poetics, which also displayed a panoply of different influences as well as a striking geographical diversity. Whereas the Russian Literary Centre of Constructivists proclaimed in 1924 that Constructivism was a (socially and politically) ‘motivated art’, for example, Van Doesburg’s manifesto ‘Tot een constructieve dichtkunst’ (Towards a Constructive Poetry) furthered the premise that it did not matter whether art was useful or not.⁴⁸ Even within the Russian faction of Constructivism, as Christina Lodder has shown, a variety of literary aesthetics was at work.⁴⁹ As we move towards the centre of Europe, to Hungary, for instance, we encounter yet a different take on literary Constructivism put forth by Lajos Kassák.⁵⁰ It is more likely, then, that by charting the Constructivist literary exploits in the Low Countries, and far beyond, scholars will find more possibilities and an even greater variety of experimentation – and perhaps that too will be good enough.

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⁴⁷ B. Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ S. Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press 1974), p. xxxvi.

⁴⁹ C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁵⁰ É. Forgács, ‘Between Cultures: Hungarian Concepts of Constructivism’, in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930*, ed. by T. Benson (Cambridge, MA, and London 2002), 146-166 (p. 151).

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