

In *The Rhetoric of Purity*, Mark A. Cheetham explores the historical and theoretical relations between early abstract painting in Europe and the notion of purity. For Gauguin, Sérusier, Mondrian, and Kandinsky – the pioneering abstractionists whose written and visual works Cheetham discusses in detail – purity is the crucial quality that painting must possess. Purity, however, was itself only a password for what Cheetham defines as an “essentialist” philosophy inaugurated by Plato’s vision of a perfect, non-mimetic art form and practiced by the founders of abstraction.

The essentialism of late nineteenth-century French discussions of “abstraction,” Cheetham argues, also infects the work of Mondrian and Kandinsky. These visions of abstraction are central to the development of Modernism and are closely tied to the philosophical traditions of Plato, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. As a conclusion, Cheetham provides a postmodern reading of Klee’s rejection of the rhetoric of purity and claims that Klee’s refusal speaks to contemporary concerns in visual theory and culture. By acting as an antidote to the seductive appeal of purity in art and society, Cheetham’s final critique of the trope of purity seeks to preserve the possibility of visual discourse itself.

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Mark A. Cheetham

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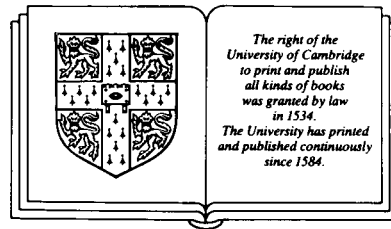
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# *The Rhetoric of Purity*

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Essentialist Theory and the Advent of  
Abstract Painting

MARK A. CHEETHAM



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*for Elizabeth D. Harvey*

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## INTRODUCTION

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**T**HIS BOOK is about the historical, conceptual, and theoretical relations between the advent of abstract painting in Europe and the notion of purity that attends this radical innovation in remarkably constant and crucial ways. When we read texts by the pioneers of abstraction, the term purity, or a cognate such as purification, is habitually used to describe and indeed to define the work that they have achieved or that they envision. Purity is for these artists nothing less than *the* quality that abstract painting must possess, and they go to great material and conceptual ends to achieve it. If the ubiquity of references to purity in this context stands out for us now and invites investigation, however, this same pervasiveness must also be evidence for the unchallenged normality of the term for those who used it to portray and legitimate abstract painting, a sign, in other words, of its naturalization. In addition, the ideas that we render with the word “purity” must also have had a widely accepted range of connotations across Europe at this time. Although the foundational texts of abstraction were written in languages as different as Russian, Dutch, French, German, and Czech, “purity” remains common despite the nuances of translation. My first aim in this study is to upset the naturalness of the linkage between purity and abstraction, to make this conceptual twinship stand out in order to understand why it was such a potent part of what was arguably the most daring change in (and challenge to) Western painting since the Renaissance.

My claim is that purity managed to seem innocent because it was itself only a shibboleth, a seemingly unproblematic and compact surface that nonetheless enclosed a complex and extensive essentialist metaphysics that powered the initiation of abstract painting to a very considerable, but not exclusive, extent. By essentialism I mean the search for immutable es-

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sence or truth and the concomitant ontological division between reality and mere appearance.<sup>1</sup> Plato inaugurates this discourse, and it has remained fundamental to Western philosophical thought. It is this distinction that underlies his rejection of mimesis in art and that leads him to banish its practitioners from the ideal state. As I will argue more fully as I articulate the characteristics of essentialism throughout the chapters that follow, Plato's insistence that we have access to truth rather than appearance is also an important basis for *defenses* of art, both in the *Republic* itself (the site of banishment) and, more explicitly, in the writings of subsequent thinkers like Plotinus, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. I argue that Plato himself – and those who construct apologies for art in reaction to his ideas – hypothesized a perfect art form that would escape the charges of inadequacy by being non-mimetic. I claim in addition that the founders of abstraction from Gauguin to Mondrian quite unambiguously answered Plato with their new art. For these philosophers and painters alike, purity is the touchstone for what art must become if it is to be valid metaphysically and therefore functional within society.<sup>2</sup>

In the essentialist tradition embraced by Gauguin, Sérusier, Mondrian, and Kandinsky, purity as the image of and vehicle to absolute, universal truth is a very serious matter. Why then do I give the notion of rhetoric – commonly seen as mere wordplay<sup>3</sup> – equal voice and emphasize its relation to purity with the spatial propinquity of these terms in my title? For Plato, rhetoric and the Sophists who employ it stand in dangerous opposition to the silent wisdom of pure knowledge that Socrates embodies but is loath to speak let alone write, since purity is by definition immaterial. My strategy in consciously bringing these traditionally opposed ideas together is to create a new set of tensions between them in the context of early abstract painting and thereby to unsettle the normality of purity. For the essentialist, rhetoric is appearance, it is transient and untruthful and thus exactly the mode of discourse that civilization should evolve away from. In abstract painting as in the philosophical tradition on which it drew, purity strove – in the face of paradox – for absolute and *immaterial* values that were by definition beyond the grasp of mere rhetoric. Rhetoric deals with the quotidian and changing aspects of experience, and again, purity in abstraction sought to transcend such contingency. Yet purity in this context is indeed a rhetoric in the classical, pejorative sense: its repetition seeks to persuade, it longs impossibly for the

immaterial in the material, it is attracted to the promise of ahistorical security for decidedly historical reasons. Like Socrates and Plato, then, the artists on whom I focus became rhetoricians in spite of themselves by pleading art's case both plastically and theoretically. Art is thus at best a *way to* purity, but where does this leave art once perfection is achieved? Put another way, I will argue that the abstractionists inadvertently constructed an inverted hierarchy between purity and rhetoric by making the pure rhetorical. In trying to escape the danger of this impurity in the self-transcendence of art, they sought silence, the pure transparency and presence of the non-mimetic ideal. But here an even less savory plateau is reached, since art's purity now entails art's loss of its definitive freedom, autonomy, and potential to effect change.

Rhetoric works in another way in this book, a way that opposes purity but not from the negative vantage of our ruling philosophical conventions. Rhetoric points to the metaphorical and ideological dimensions of visual and written language; where purity was in the discourse of early abstract painting quite literally a way to close down the material practice of all art, rhetoric exposes the ever-changing tropology of a term like purity. My invocation of this sort of rhetoric is thus not in the least negative. As I will suggest in the Postscript, a postmodern, rhetorical investigation is in fact a much-needed antidote to the perennially seductive appeal to purity in art and society. In the four chapters that follow, I elaborate this reading in ways that are at once traditional and unconventional within the discipline of art history, so in previewing the steps in my arguments here I also want to characterize my methodology. Given the present flux and controversy within art history, some will no doubt see this move as "defensive," but my aim is more to suggest what readers may expect (and not expect) from this study.

In the first chapter, "Out of Plato's Cave: 'Abstraction' in Late Nineteenth-Century France," I establish an essentialist frame of reference for Gauguin's and then Sérusier's discussions of "abstraction." My point of entry is the crucial Platonic and Neoplatonic\* notion of memory as an eidetic faculty that yields access to Reality, a notion that is central to Synthetism. These analyses work against several conventions in art history. In taking artists like Gauguin seriously as theorists and offering detailed readings of their texts, I seek not only to revise the received wisdom about their intellectual

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\*See note 3 in Chapter 1.1 for an explanation of this terminology.

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abilities but also (and more significantly) to begin an argument against the frequent division of artists' labors into "theory" and "practice." This bifurcation is hierarchical and usually puts practice on top, with theory relegated to the lowly status of a second-order parasite. My claim here and throughout the book is that this distinction will not hold historically or "in theory" when we examine the beginnings of abstract painting. In discussing abstraction and purification in France before the turn of the twentieth century, I do not make the attempt to be exhaustive. This is partly a practical consideration, since the terms come up with tremendous frequency. But my more pressing reason is that I do not wish to present a survey but, on the contrary, a paradigm, a model of a set of issues whose greatest critical success would be the recognition that these questions apply to other artists and thinkers. My thematic focus entails other emphases and exclusions. When I discuss Gauguin's participation in a tradition of Neoplatonic thinking, for example, I might seem to be neglecting his "work," his paintings. But this distinction goes beyond being untenable to obstruct our comprehension of Gauguin's plastic production as well as his prolific writing. By analyzing Sérusier's reliance on Derrida's deconstructed Plato, as I do in the second part of this chapter, I aim to augment recent trends towards non-formalist readings in the study of abstraction, but again this means that I do not dwell on the spiritual and mystical dimension of such artists' concerns.<sup>4</sup> As a final example of this sort of exclusion, in my examination of memory here and in Chapters 2 and 3, I do not discuss Bergson, because in spite of his tremendous interest in memory and his influence in modern painting (especially Futurism), he was overtly anti-Platonic in his theorizing and so did not affect artists like Kandinsky and Mondrian to nearly the extent that the essentialist equation of memory with noetic access did. These exclusions are the result of conscious choices of emphasis, and I hope that what I do offer far outweighs any omission: a new reading of the entire inception of abstract painting, coeval reinterpretations of already canonized works of art, and attention to the implications of abstraction's rhetoric of purity for present concerns.

Chapters 2 and 3, "The Mechanisms of Purity," I and II, extend the terms of reference established in Chapter 1 to the work of Mondrian and then Kandinsky. As further evidence for my contention that theoretical texts and paintings are for these artists equal partners in a common enterprise, I present

detailed analyses of both their textual and visual production. Again, my arguments also bear on (and are borne out by) other pioneering abstractionists, especially Malevich and Kupka, who remain unexamined in this book, but whose work is so intricately involved with the notion of purity that we can safely see this rhetoric as foundational to the entire edifice of early twentieth-century abstraction. Notions of purity are also central to Cubism and Orphism, as Apollinaire makes clear, and Mondrian and Kandinsky were closely involved with the first and second of these predominantly French directions respectively. My practical reason for doing little more than alluding to this attention to purity is again the frequency with which such references are made and my desire to look at the rhetoric of purity intensively rather than extensively. It is also true, as Mondrian claimed, that Cubism itself didn't produce abstract art. This is not true of Orphism, however, and its reliance on metaphors of purity would certainly repay detailed analysis. By maintaining my emphasis on Mondrian and Kandinsky, however, I am able to present a pattern in the advent of abstraction of sufficient clarity that it can work as an example for what I believe is an overdue *evaluation* of this phenomenon, to which I turn in Chapter 4, "Purity as Aesthetic Ideology."

Here I take up ramifications of abstract art's purity in four areas, the philosophical, the art historical, the social, and the political. Pure abstraction has, I argue, committed itself to each of these domains by adopting an essentialist position. This stance is important philosophically in part because it claims absolute and universal status: I offer an historical and theoretical critique of this attempt to colonize a would-be Archimedean point. Plato's hypothetical demand for a non-mimetic art form also requires that art be capable of affecting social and political change, and we find in Mondrian and Kandinsky an art that tries to meet this challenge. I argue, however, that abstraction's obsession with purity seeks the perfection of stasis through processes of purification that are so relentlessly exclusive – of the diagonal principle, if we take an example from art's plastic means, or more significantly, of the "female element," in Mondrian's Neoplasticism – that the only hope for "evolution" lies in the direction of art's absorption into a very male authoritarianism. In this chapter I also address the important question of purity as an ingredient of Modernism. If abstract painting is to a considerable degree inspired and molded by the notion of a transcendental purity, and if this new painting is to be considered as central to our

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understanding of Modernism, then the rhetoric of purity should, I hold, figure centrally in our view of that problematic designation. I claim that the purity model augments in important ways the two most common paradigms of the Modern, its material self-reflexivity (as championed most notably by Clement Greenberg), and its political engagement through the avant-garde.

In a concluding Postscript, I offer what I define as a post-modern's reading of Paul Klee's rejection of the rhetoric of purity in abstract art. I do not claim Klee as a prize winner in a hypothetical race to be the first postmodern, nor do I suggest that he ends the quest for purity in art. This search in fact continued somewhat cyclically with the transcendental aspirations of much Abstract Expressionism – only to be countered by the impurities of Pop – and it is still an open possibility addressed to and not infrequently adopted by the “men of the future,” to borrow Mondrian's loaded words. What I see and want to display in Klee's work is a rhetorical move in the positive sense I have alluded to, a move that refuses the closure of purity and thus preserves the possibility of artistic discourse itself. In self-consciously reading Klee through a postmodern filter, I am suggesting both the positive potential of this much-maligned term in relation to Modernism's now often forgotten nostalgia for purity *and* that the keeping open of interpretive possibilities, the *discursiveness* that Klee demonstrates, is – as Paul de Man suggests with respect to Nietzsche – “the very model of philosophical rigor,”<sup>6</sup> a model that is much preferable to that of purity.

I see this study as a contribution to what is more and more widely known as “new art history.”<sup>7</sup> But just as I work against the empiricism and the expectation for exhaustive presentation of evidence that characterize traditional work in this field, so too my relation with the very welcome and increasingly institutionalized recent developments that go by the name “new art history” is somewhat unconventional and therefore deserving of comment. Thomas Crow has aptly deemed the widespread practice of one or another version of the social history of art as the “new orthodoxy” in the discipline.<sup>8</sup> Social history conventionally focuses on economies of class and gender, and – whether overtly or not – relegates discussions of (other) “theory” – whether historical or contemporary – to the now epistemologically and even morally inferior status of intellectual history. It is my contention, however, that such “intellectual” pursuits are just as “social” in their foundations and manifestations as are economic de-

terminates. This is especially true in the case of an essentialist abstract painting like Mondrian's, where his confessed reliance on Schopenhauer, for example, is causally related to his articulation of an explicitly revolutionary form of art that nonetheless excludes all women on principle. It is also the case that the rhetoric of purity in abstract painting had at its very center the avoidance of historical specificity. In trying to understand this rhetoric, my own analyses thus often focus on arguments and influences that are not immediately historical in the senses currently validated by most social historians of art. It is my hope, however, that a critical examination of abstract painting's yearning for purity can nonetheless be seen as part of its continuing social reality and can thereby serve to keep open the reference points of the discipline and make moments in its history more visible to present concerns.

## INTRODUCTION



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**T**HIS BOOK is about the metaphor of purity, but through writing it I have come to understand and even enjoy the impurity of the scholarly process. If I was ever at all persuaded by the rhetoric of purity that attends the beginnings of abstract painting in Europe, this faith was quickly displaced by my appreciation for the eclectic range of intellectual inspirations, institutional encouragement, and most importantly, personal support, without which this study would never have been completed.

It is a great pleasure to acknowledge the inspiration I have received from many people as this book took shape. For comments on my first chapter in its earliest forms, I would like to thank Reed Dasenbrock, Nancy Troy, and especially Linda Henderson. William Vaughan has been for me a model of generosity, both scholarly and personal. The initial ideas for this book were developed in graduate and undergraduate seminars I taught while at McGill University, and I would like to thank the students in those classes, as well as those in my seminars at the University of Western Ontario, for their ideas and criticism. Most recently, four individuals whom I have come to think of as colleagues in the best – that is, noninstitutional – sense have read or heard parts of this book and offered support that has been invaluable to me: Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, Patricia Mathews, and particularly Linda Hutcheon. Finally, there are the numerous scholars – many of whom I have not met – on whose work I depend: I have tried to recognize as many as possible of these inspirations in my notes.

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This book is dedicated to Elizabeth Harvey. It is impossible for me to record adequately the debts of inspiration, encouragement, and support I owe her for the many years of incomparable and invaluable intellectual sharing that we have had. I can only trust that she will understand the gesture.

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