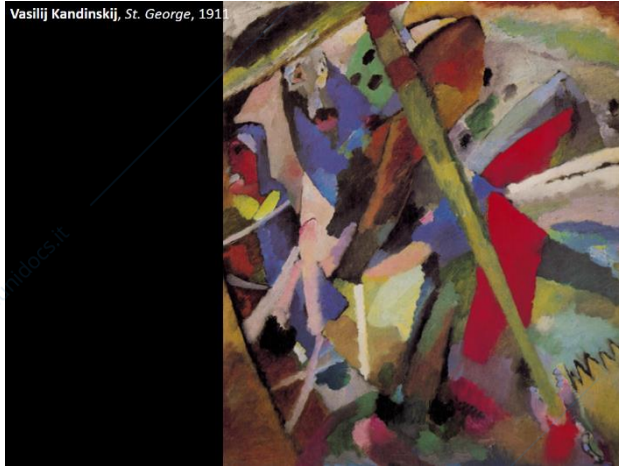


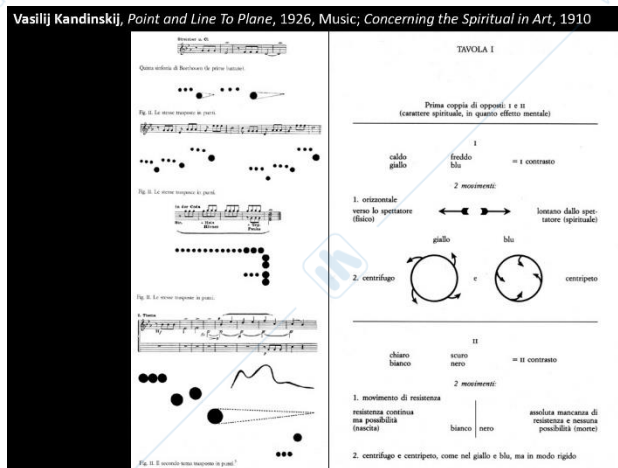
THE BIRTH OF ABSTRACT ART

We will talk fundamentally about two artists and two fundamental movements in that of the avantgardes. Abstract art is probably the most remarkable research throughout the 19th century, the one that has more aspects of novelty if compared to the art of previous centuries. It is also the one that is bound to the idea of modernism in architecture and design. It is an attempt of finding a completely new language that is not related in any respect with what we could define as the visible reality.

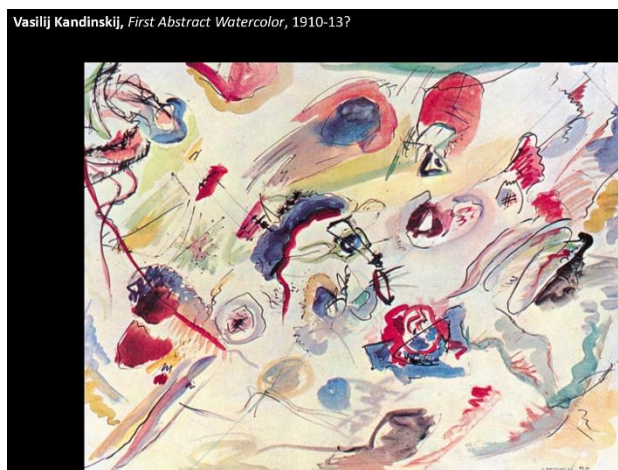


The first author we need in this research is Vasilij Kandinskij. This is an example of his paintings of 1911 called St. George. As you see, the three fundamental elements of an elements are signs, forms and colours. These three elements are those that should build up this language. When thinking about language we think about a kind of communication between at least triangle of: painter, painting and viewer. This is the relationship between the three. The viewer should be able to understand the content of the painting, this kind of language made of forms,

colours and lines. We usually say it is abstract, meaning it is not related to visible reality but in fact there is always a kind of linkage specially in the way in which Kandinskij interprets this research; kind of link between things that are part of a visible language and this new abstract language. If we look at the title St. George we know the story: the knight who kills the dragon and rescues the princess. In this particular case, if we look carefully at the painting we can recognise the three protagonists of the story. This long green stain crossing, cutting in two the canvas is the spade, and St. George is the brown patch in the upper part of the painting. In the left border of the painting, you can recognise the princess dressed up in blue. In the lower right part of the painting you can see the dragon and blood spreading out from its mouth. There is always a kind of mixing between the tradition, the way in which a story has been painted in the past and the way Kandinskij interprets the story itself using this new language. In those years, in the early 19th century (precisely in 1907) a young art historian (Wilhelm Worringer) wrote a book (his thesis) whose name could be translated as Empathy. The fundamental thesis of it is Mediterranean civilizations in the history have a kind of empathic relation with nature. For this reason, their art is representing nature as it is. While Northern European civilizations such as the Germans, the Swedish, etc. have to face a completely different nature because of climate conditions; there is not this feeling of empathy, rather they prefer to represent their relationship with nature using a kind of abstract language. Starting from this thesis book we may say these artists developed their own research.



On the right, you have an interpretation trying to represent the forces that you can see acting upon the canvas and the visual effects produced by patches coloured in different ways. It says if a patch is painted in yellow, there is a kind of effect of enlargement while if the same patch is painted in blue, there is a kind of opposite effect (reduction/contraction).



The problem all these artists have is that when you want to establish any language, you need to find the origin of the language itself, where it comes from. According to Kandinskij, the canvas is a kind of battlefield. All these lines, points and patches are naturally fighting one with each other, and the result of the painting should be a balancing between these forces. Where is the origin of this new language? Kandinskij says it is the way in which children paint. At the very beginning of our life, we human beings have a way of representing reality which is not realistic. We interpret what we see and paint in a completely original way. We give an interpretation that is precisely made of these elements (fundamental elements of the art). This is considered the first example of a language: it is a watercolour painted by Kandinskij's son, aged 2-3 years old. You can see precisely all the elements and the colours, together with the relationship between the elements of the painting. Childhood is the primitive state of mankind and it is precisely in the childhood that we can find the origin of the language according to Vasily Kandinskij.

These are two pages from two books by Vasily Kandinskij. On the left, you have a page from *Point and Line to Plane* printed in 1926, and on the right from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* published in 1910. It is interesting that an artist is writing books, it is not simply experiencing his research through painting but also he writes books to explain his new language. On the left you see an attempt to finding connections between the language of forms (dots, points) and the typical language of music.

The problem all these artists have is that when you want to establish any language, you need to find the origin of the language itself, where it comes from. According to Kandinskij, the canvas is a kind of battlefield. All these lines, points and patches are naturally fighting one with each other, and the result of the painting should be a balancing between these forces. Where is the origin of this new language? Kandinskij says it is the way in which children paint. At the very beginning of our life, we human beings

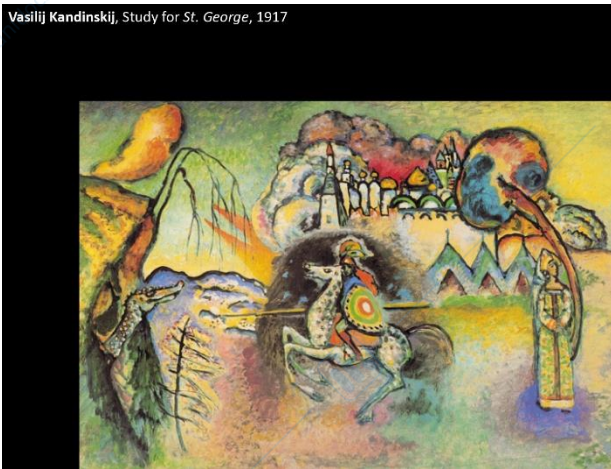
Drawing of a child two and a half years old



Some years ago, professor asked his elder daughter to draw something with felt-tip pens and this was the result. She only had a red and a blue felt-tip pen, and the result is really similar to Kandinskij's watercolour. It is true that very young boys and girls have this idea or way of using a pen on a sheet of paper. It is doubtful whether they are representing anything, if they are trying to find a connection with what they do on a sheet of paper with the colours and what they see around them. This is precisely one of the problems. It is

the typical problem that artists have when they try to establish a completely new language. The comparison, however, is really astonishing since it is precisely the same language.

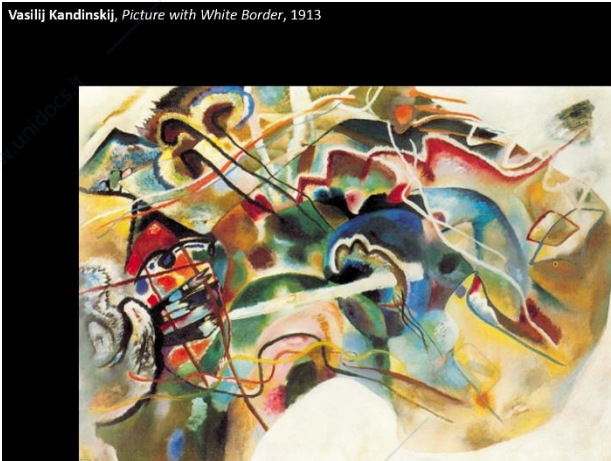
Vasilij Kandinskij, Study for St. George, 1917



It is not only a matter of establishing a new language using abstract forms, but also of finding different connections with the history of the art. In Kandinskij's art specially with the history of Russian art. The traditional religious icons, for example, are very strong in Russia. It is interesting to compare this painting from Kandinskij that was painted in 1917 to the St. George painting, since which you can easily recognise all the protagonists of the legend of St. George (dragon on the left, St. George in the middle and princess on the right). There is also a walled city in the

background of the painting.

Vasilij Kandinskij, Picture with White Border, 1913



In other paintings, similarly to the one seen at the beginning, we have the same history but described with a completely different language. Here it is hard to distinguish St. George but for sure we see the white spade and St. George is in the centre of the painting. We can also recognise the dragon on the left part of the painting, and probably a landscape behind the forefront. Harder is to recognise where the princess is in this particular case. This painting is really interesting because it is called Picture

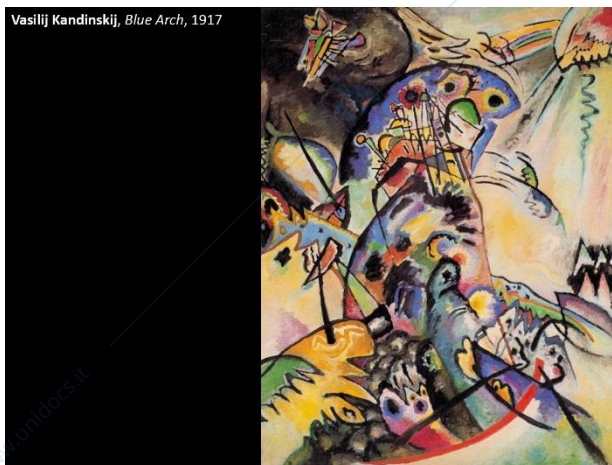
with White Border. There is the idea of a border, a white border protecting the painting from the outside. The space that is inside the painting is the world of the arts, of this new abstract art. The reality, which is outside, doesn't deal with the painting itself. If you compare this painting with last week's Giacomo Balla's one in which the colour of the painting is overlapped to the frame so the colour becomes part of the frame and tries to find a connection with the real world (because futurists want to act with the real world), this is precisely the opposite. The world of the art is detached from reality and there is this big white border. The second thing is the colour: white. We can find this idea in many Russian artists, not only Kandinskij but also Malévich. White is the

summing up of all colours, so it is fundamentally the fusion of all the elements or matter you can put on the surface of a canvas. It is easy to think there is a connection with the Russian culture and the fact that in Russia for many months in autumn, winter and early spring, the whole landscape is completely covered by snow. It is easy to think that Russian artists think about the origin of everything as painted in white. We can also say that typically a cultural interpretation for western countries is the origin of the world to be black (not white). It is precisely the act of creating the world that God does that produces light (produces the coming up of all the colours).



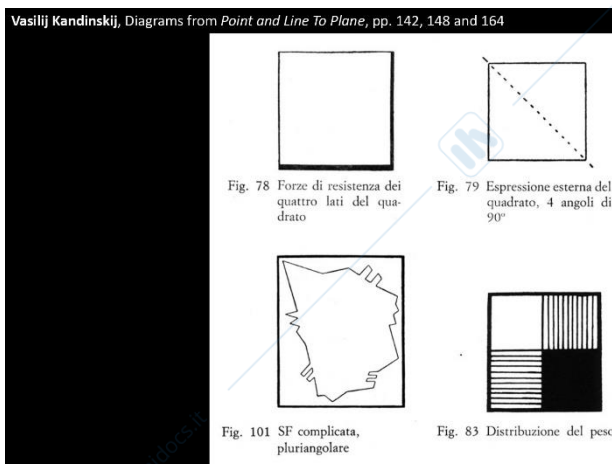
see all the typical Moscow monuments and churches, and the Kremlin Wall. In this case, you see the city in a visible way.

Another interesting topic in Kandinskij's research is the relationship with the big city. There is a message in his writings in which he says that probably many of his paintings are simply representations of Moscow. He likes the big city, the typical sound of big cities, the chaos that you find inside the urban landscape and tries to represent this particular atmosphere in many of his paintings. In this case, it is also in the title *Moscow/Red Square*, and you can in fact see all the elements. You can see if you walk across the red square and



know.

In this other case, instead, everything has been mixed up according to the abstract language. It is harder to see that it is a representation of a city. It becomes more important to underline that it is a description of a blue arch. In fact, it is much harder to see if it is a representation of the city or anything else. We could also think of a completely different environment. Professor likes this painting very much. A friend of the professor made an interpretation saying this was Kandinskij's self-portrait, but we will never



anything in the canvas, the heaviest area is the low-left area and the lighter area is the up-left

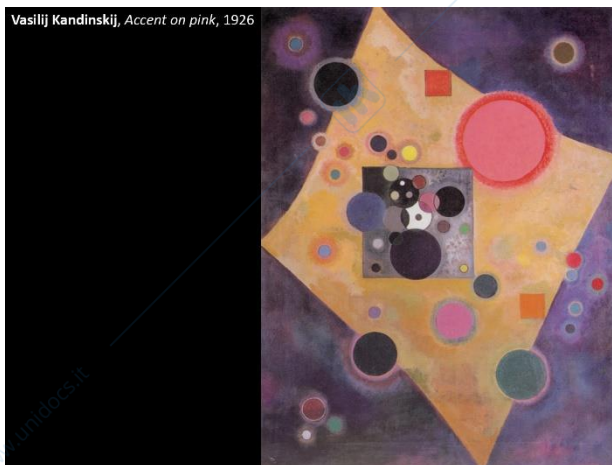
This is another page from the book *Point and Line to Plane*; another attempt to interpret the relationship between the shape of the canvas and the forces that are related both to the border of the canvas and to the place in which you put the elements inside. On the lower left, you see a drawing that is similar to the white border. On the upper part you see that the 4 borders of a squared canvas have different forces (weights): the lower one is the stronger one and the left is weaker than the right. Similarly, if you put

one. There is a diagonal cutting the square canvas in two. Probably this interpretation is related to the fact that we, western people, when we write on a page, we start from left and go on in lines to write. If we were for example, Muslim and were writing in the Arab style it would have been the reverse. The way in which we interpret a sheet of paper should be mirrored the other way round. So, the interpretation by Kandinskij is influenced by his own culture.



When Kandinskij in 1922 went teaching in the Bauhaus, his style changed significantly. All these free forms and lines became much more geometrical and there is a kind of shifting. Probably it is because the kind of atmosphere he found in the Bauhaus that convinced them to change his style using more geometrical shapes rather than free forms. It also becomes more evident that this space is a very complex space. The background (white surface), onto which he overlaps several different layers made of

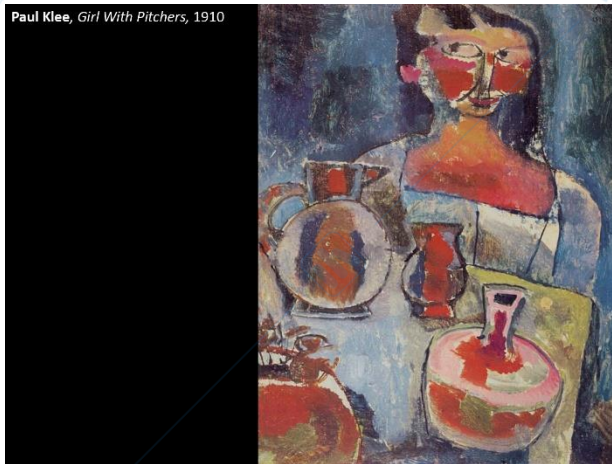
geometrical forms, you can perceive the fact that it is not only a two-dimensional surface/canvas, but it has a kind of three-dimensional effect because of the overlapping and transparency of these layers. In a certain sense, this effect comes from cubism (the transparencies of shapes that makes the vision becoming a 3D space).



Kandinskij was one of the teachers who taught in the Bauhaus for longer period (10 years). Finally, he had to move from Germany to another country because of the Nazis. He moved to Paris in 1933 and the last part of his life was working there. In fact, this beautiful painting (painted in 1926) is inside the *Centre Georges Pompidou* in Paris. Professor likes this painting very much because you can see all the typical elements of the new language Kandinskij developed in the 1920s: the overlapping of different

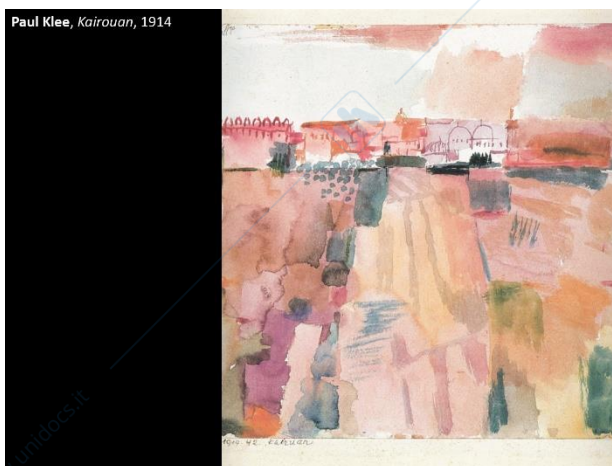
surfaces, the difference between the background and the foreground. The language is reduced to circles, sometimes these circles are empty and some others they are full of matter. In all this there is an effect of ambiguity produced by the big pink round shape in the top right part of the painting. It is hard to decide whether this is an object or a hole; if it is cutting across all the surfaces and going inside in depth into the painting or it is rather on top of the surface. All these paintings are questioned, they are trying to ask us what reality is; in what way we should face reality.

There is another important artist who was teacher in the Bauhaus. A Swiss painter and a good friend of Kandinskij's who was there for the same long time: Paul Klee.



Here you have a early painting by Klee in which all the typical elements of his style are represented: unnatural colours (red face), the importance of the line as all the shapes are described with a strong line (border; the line constructs the space), there is no perspective (it is completely flat) and finally, the style of the painting. The style is similar to Kandinskij's, it is childish. Again, Paul Klee is trying to develop his own language, trying to find a new form to communicate with the viewers and similarly to Kandinskij he

thinks the childhood is the meaningful moment in which we understand the world. We should investigate that particular period of our life to find our own way of describing reality. Usually historians say that the children Kandinskij is thinking about and the children Klee is thinking about are very different one from each other. In Kandinskij what is important in childhood is this idea of showing an action, of participating into the construction of a new image/language for understanding the way we look at the world could be represented on the canvas. Klee thinks that childhood is a more complex moment in our life: we are educated children, embedded in ourselves the history of the art although we are aware of it. In a certain sense we could say that Klee paints thinking about a kind of child that has grown old.



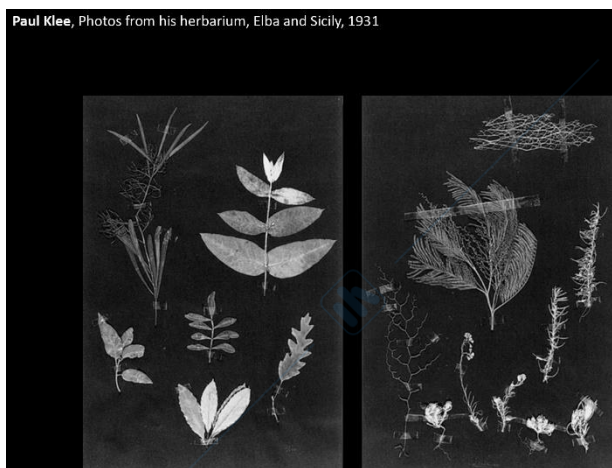
It was very hard for Paul Klee to find out his own style. He used to write diaries throughout his own life. There is a note he wrote after a trip he did in which he already considered himself a painter because he learnt how to use colours looking at Arab architecture and landscapes. The painter is someone who really masters colours (knows how to use and choose colours). Professor agrees with it; painters are those who are able of using colours. It is important even for us, designers, to learn how to use colours.

Many artists (especially German) started going to Arab countries to find out a completely different language from the classical one that probably had stronger linkages with contemporary conditions in Europe (contemporary meaning beginning of the 20th century) and also to better understand the Muslim style in the arts.

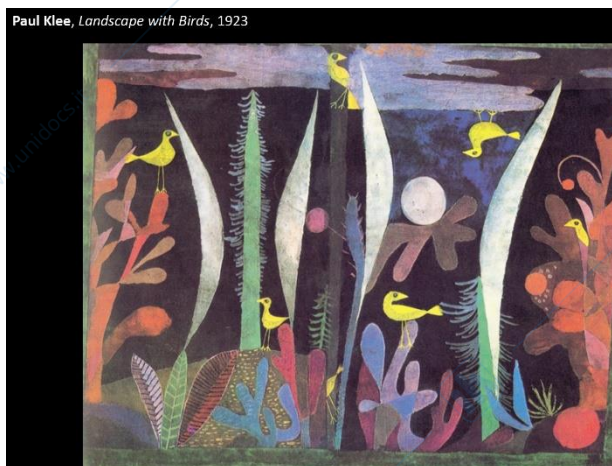


This is another interesting painting. It is a wax by Paul Klee and probably here you can see his typical style. The title is Sexual Knowledge of a Boy, and it is precisely what we expect a boy could say about his own body and body in general. Body is cut in pieces and represented spread up in the surface of the canvas together with other elements coming from nature. We could say in this particular case that we see the way a boy would paint a boy. Most of the paintings by Paul Klee are very small, not bigger than a sheet of paper we

can use for writing notes. This happens precisely because in most of the cases these paintings are similar to notes you can make on a sheet of paper as if it was a diary. A diary talking about your own existence. In a certain sense, he is precisely investigating this: trying to express his own thoughts about what happens to him day by day.

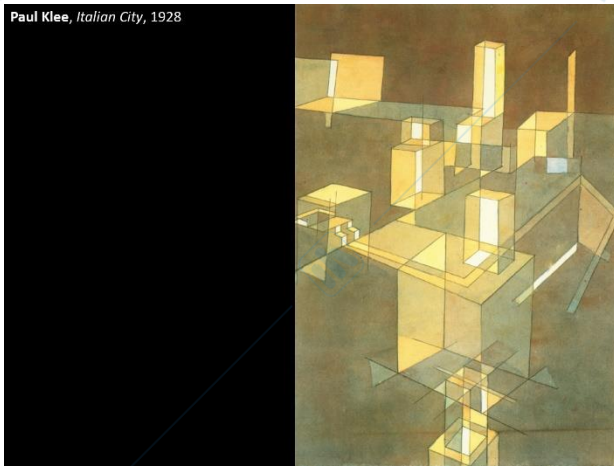


Klee was very interested in natural forms and here you see a couple of pages from his Herbarium; he used to pick up small leaves because it was really interesting understanding how nature was producing forms. This could inspire a painter. There is a kind of scientific interest in this.

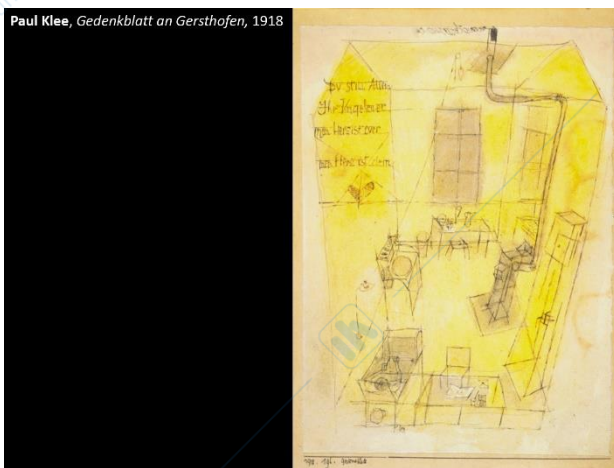


In fact, the result is very often similar to this. The space comes out from Paul Klee's mind. It is a mental action, absolutely mental landscape. It comes out from; if we use Freud's language, from dreams/subconscious. In some respect, we may see a comparison between Paul Klee's research and surrealist research because he is talking about himself. This diary that he is painting is making visible, it is lyrical, it talks about Paul Klee's existence. In this sense, it is a kind of visual poem. Any painting by Paul Klee we see

can be defined as a visual poem.

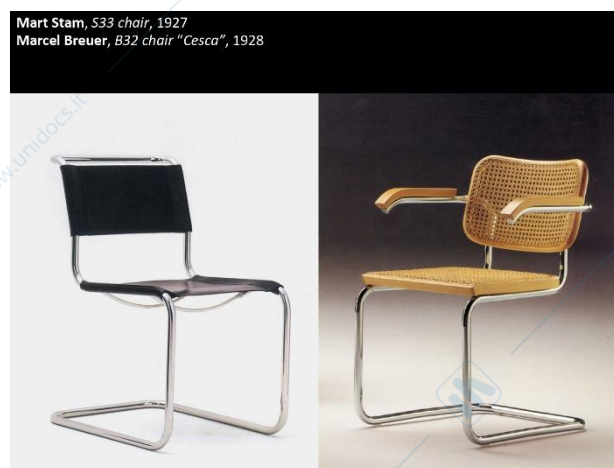


(Italians) are those who can design the best cities, specially because we use this kind of language (simple forms, shapes) and this is also what Paul Klee is trying to do in his painting. It works with the outside, with the urban space but also in the inside.



This is a very beautiful description of an interior; it is a kitchen. In the lower part of the drawing there is a chair made only by thin lines. It is a chair that probably any child could draw. Starting from this very light chair, professor tells us a story about a couple of Bauhaus masters (designers).

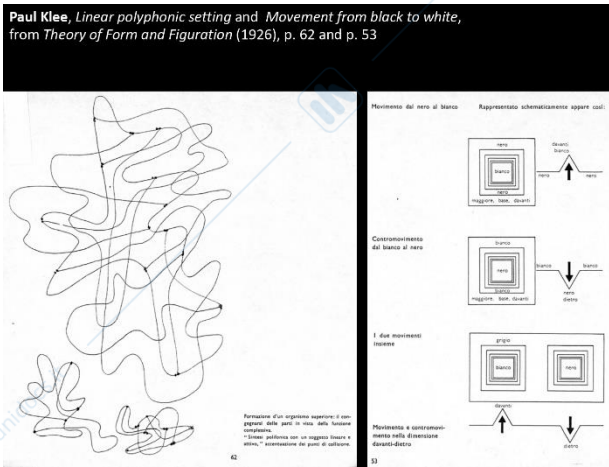
If we look at the down left part of the painting, we move to the following image and we find two different chairs:



Both of them are made with the single line, made in the same way. Both of them are a kind of homage to Paul Klee. There is a long story about the chair that is shown in the left part designed by Mart Stam; the first prototype of this chair was design for Mart Stam's wife while she was waiting for their first child and because she was pregnant, she needed to seat. So, he designed this chair for his wife to let her relax anytime she wanted. It is a very light chair and it is designed in a way she could take the chair with here in any

room she was moving in. Professor likes the chair because, in a certain sense, it is an act of love made while being a designer. It is a mixing up of love and design. Mart Stam designed this chair the first time in 1925 and the prototype was developed in a formal product in 1927. More or less in the same period, another master in the Bauhaus, Marcel Breuer, designed a similar chair. They are more or less the same chair but there is a fundamental difference between Mart Stam and Marcel Breuer with respect to history. Mart Stam made the seat and the back in the chair of leather. In the case of Marcel Breuer there is a wooden frame and there is this Vienna Straw pattern. The Vienna Straw pattern comes from a chair made by the Thonet brothers in the mid-

19th century (Model 11), that was the very first chair produced according to an industrial process. It was the beginning of the history of industrial design. Marcel Breuer made a quotation: "Mart Stam thinks about the present and although the two chairs are very similar, they are talking two completely different languages."

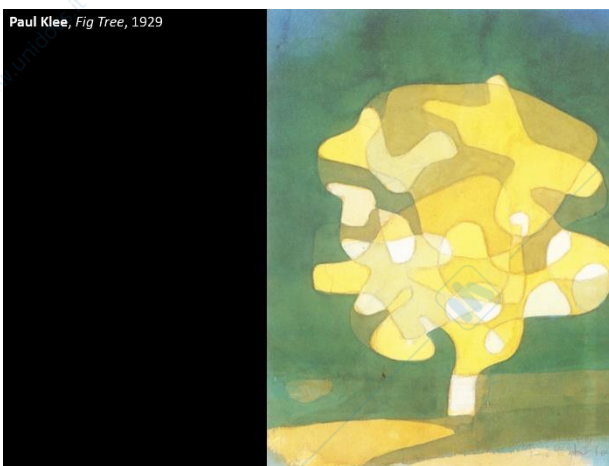


in white, black and grey. He shows the kind of effect you can have on the surface of a painting.

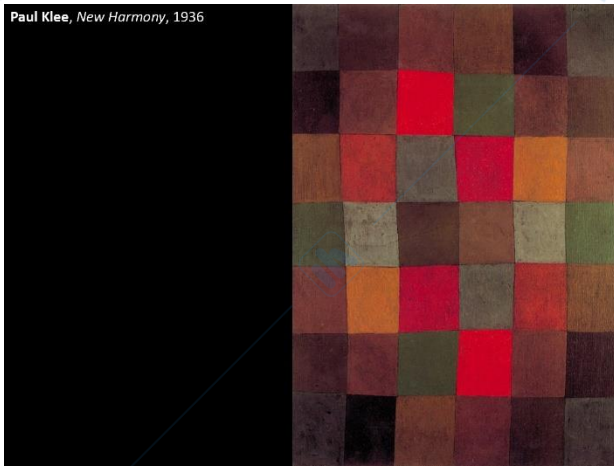


Not only Vasilij Kandinskij, but also Klee wrote a reading book for Bauhaus students named Theory of Form and Figuration. The book was published in the same year of Point and Line to Surface (Kandinskij's): 1926. Also in this case Paul Klee tries to explain his methodology to his students. On the left you have this concept of a continuous line that produces a complex form (from line to space). On the right you have a description of a fact due to an overlapping of different elementary surfaces: squares

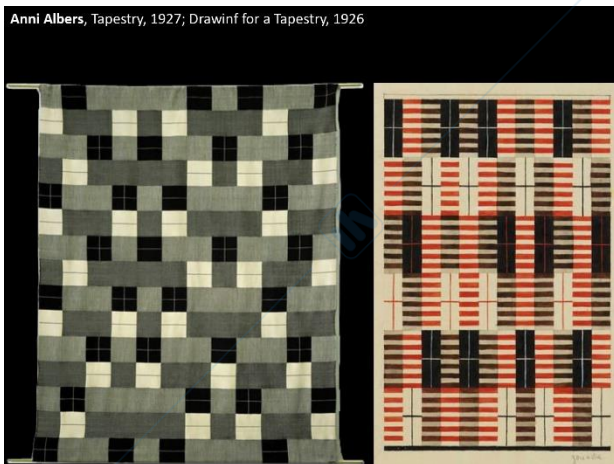
The result could be this very famous Polyphonic Setting for White. Overlapping different surfaces with a very bright white centre, you have the effect of a surface that is protruding out of the surface of the canvas and it is coming in your direction. If it was black, the effect would have been that of a hole, of a surface that is sinking inside the canvas.



The other sketch corresponds to this very beautiful Fig Tree. You can see the line moving on the surface of the paper produces the shape of the Fig Tree. Because we are following the line it is a process that we are seeing; we are in a certain sense involved in the process of producing the form (not only lines, space but also time). It is something that is happening in a span of time. This is what we know by looking at this painting. (The process of producing a form)



From this very centre there are paths spread on the surface of the canvas; you can walk in a direction and always find a sequence of colours, go back and see the same sequence in another path. All the colours correspond in the two directions. Similarly, if you step on the right or on the left. There are connections between the elements and there is a complete correspondence of this sequence of colours. It is a complex geometry although the grid is very simple. That is why we can talk about harmony.



Paul Klee was very influential; not only inside the Bauhaus, in the examples we have seen of Mart Stam and Marcel Breuer, but also in the school of Tapestry. Here you have two examples by Anni Albers, who is Joseph Albers's wife and teacher in the Laboratory of Tapestry. You see these sequences are somehow related to the same time of experiments with geometrical forms that Paul Klee was developing in the same years.



Another example is with theatre. Oskar Schlemmer was also a master inside the Bauhaus. He is a very famous playwright and here you have some examples of plays he had written in the 1920s, especially the Triadic Ballet. All these actors are dressed up in a way that is a kind of interpretation of the body that is totally abstract with respect to our own idea of what our body is. You can see the lesson of Paul Klee and his paintings and drawings in this scenographies; it is a style that has been developed together by all

the masters of the Bauhaus.

To conclude this part, professor wanted to show another picture that is inspired by Schlemmer (the one in the right low part of the slide) in which there are these mechanical bodies acting. We are always finding correspondences between what happens in the age of the avantgardes and what happened in the second part of the century. Professor found this example:



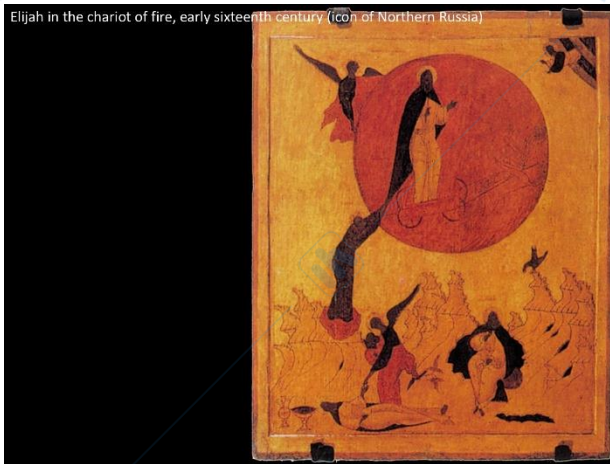
It is a very famous concept. Live in London by Queen. You can see Freddie Mercury dressed up with a costume that is more or less copied from Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet and we are in 1977. So, the culture of the avantgardes has moved from the very cultivated theatres in the 1920s and has arrived in stadiums, and it is used for concerts of rock music.

Abstract art has at least three fathers: Vasilij Kandinskij, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. All of them are pure artists; they are developing a language that is inside of the arts. Although Kandinskij, Klee and Malevich become teachers in design schools, they are not designers. Their work can be inspiring for designers, but they are not interested in developing a language outside the field of the arts.



In Suprematist Painting you can see the fundamental difference between Malevich and Kandinskij: not fluid forms, not a battlefield rather a very rational exhibition of simple geometrical forms and a very reduced number of colours. Still you see, precisely according to psychological laws of supervision we can recognise here at least three different layers: the background (pale grey), the black rectangular shape overlapped by a blue triangle. Precisely the way in which the triangle has been painted on top of

the rectangular shape, we could also think about a kind of movement of the triangle crossing the surface of the canvas. This are the fundamental elements of Kazimir Malevich's research: very simple geometrical forms that represent a spam of time. There is the space, the movement and therefore, there is time. Time & space. It is an interpretation of reality. Anytime you find a painter who adopts this kind of very simple geometrical language, you find yourself in a kind of neoplatonic atmosphere. It is Plato (the Greek philosopher) who says that reality (what we see) is not the real world. The real world is somehow hidden behind and the real world is made of pure mathematics and geometry. So, Malevich is somehow acknowledging this kind of philosophy. To him, this painting is not an abstract painting, it is a representation of true reality.

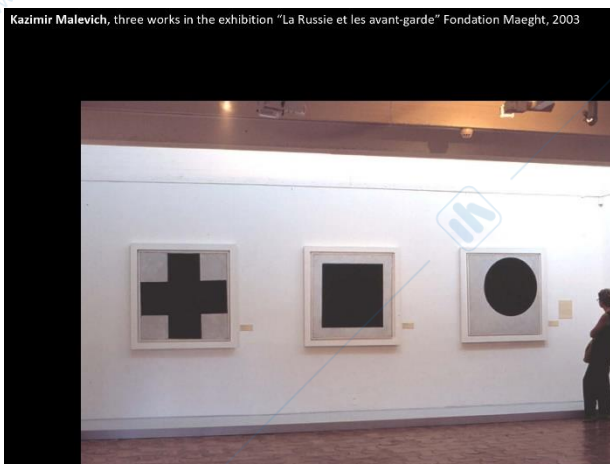


Similarly to Kandinskij, there is a linkage between the traditional Russian art and particularly religious art, and the language Malevich develops. Here you have an example of the typical byzantine icon painted in the 16th century. The background is gold and represents the sky. There is this big red round shape that is the sun; a big geometrical form that organizes all the composition inside the painting similarly, Malevich works in his paintings.



Here you have a more complex composition developed in 1916 which is related to the idea of flight. There are many writings by Malevich in which he says that because technology let us use new machines that can fly, we have found a new way of looking at the world. A way in which, he says, we have lost the horizon because in fact, a pilot flying over the earth doesn't have the horizon as a single goal (?). Anytime you read sentences related to the horizon you always have to think about the theory of perspective.

Perspective needs and horizon. It is the starting line of any drawing in perspective. If you refuse using this idea of horizon you find yourself in a new way of representing reality, which is not following the law of perspective. In this case you see all these elements can be seen as moving/flying/floating in this grey or white space. In a certain sense, Malevich changes the colour of the sky. If he thinks of these forms floating and flying, they are similar to aeroplanes, but it is an abstract sky in which these forms are flying and that is why they become white. He started developing his language using different colours (yellow, red, blue, green) but what he wanted to reach was a very elementary basic language. At a certain moment, he stopped using colours.

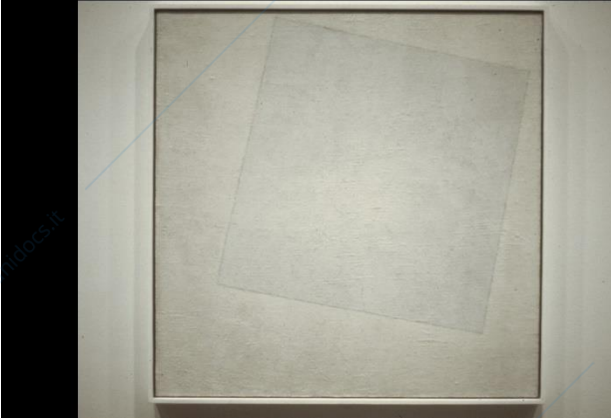


These are the typical Malevich masterpieces. He only uses black and white, square canvas and big simple shapes like a cross, square and a circle. There is nothing related to religion in the cross, simply the connection of two fundamental lines (vertical and horizontal) that produce this shape. By the way, this is a picture professor took in a museum in the Fondation Maeght in France. The lady was looking at the three paintings is his wife. He likes very much this picture because of her kindness. She

helps us understand how big the paintings are. If it is big, means that the painter wants to say something important. If it is small rather it is a sketch, fixing an idea. These are really big paintings, so Malevich is trying to produce masterpieces. The most famous of the three, the

central one, is black square on white and describes the relationship between the black square and the white canvas. What kind of relationship can you establish between the two and what kind of space you can build using simply white and black? Black is the absence of colours and white is the summing up of all the colours. That is why you do not need to paint single colours, because inside this painting you have at the same time all the colours and no colour. Still in this kind of experiment, because a shape of a canvas and the shape of the black square follow the same construction, there is no movement in a certain sense.

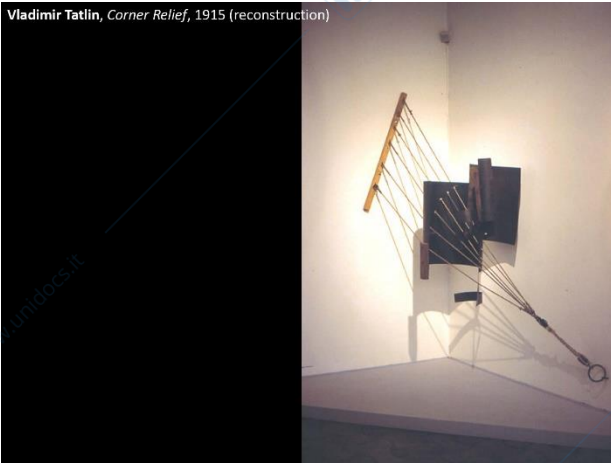
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White On White*, 1918?



Malevich wanted to make a step forward and finally arrives at painting these compositions: white on white. As you see, the small square form inside is slightly bent. For this reason, we can imagine that it is moving somehow. You can talk about space, movement and time. In a certain sense this is the last painting Malevich painted. In fact, it is, from 1918 on he went on developing a completely different language not using brushes and colours but using three dimensional shapes. He became somehow a sculptor

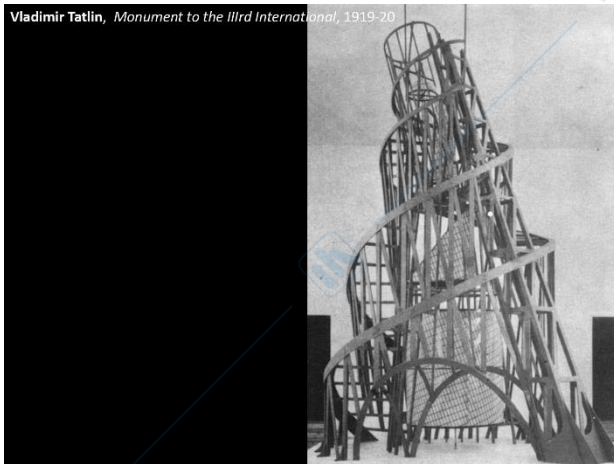
investigating the three-dimensional space with objects (canvases and 2D surfaces). There is also another characteristic story of this painting related to the idea of white as the origin of everything. At the very beginning, at the origin of a language, we can imagine there is no sound. It is one second before you start talking. This painting is also the representation of a sound, a sound that is silence. You not only have shapes, space, movement and time but also have sound.

Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Relief*, 1915 (reconstruction)



Together with Malevich we also have another big master called Vladimir Tatlin. He is the leader of a group of artists called Constructivists. They are working more or less in the same time (around 1915), they are all Russians and find themselves involved in the social revolution. When socialists come to power in Russia and built the Soviet Union, they want to take part into the building of this completely new society. Their program, similarly to Futurists in Italy, is that of rebuilding completely the world using the tools of

art. This new world is the world that came up from the revolution. Tatlin and his colleagues don't think of themselves as artists but as operators of this new society, actively working for the transformation of the country. That is why professor is showing this work called Corner Relief. It is a sculpture, an object, something that really occupies a physical space, and this space is the corner of a room. This is precisely the program: producing artistic products that could help the construction of this new society.



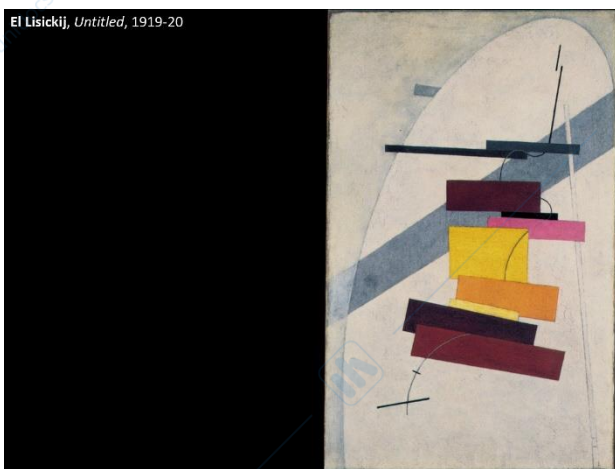
Tatlin is very famous also because of this big project called the Monument to the IIIrd International. The International is the congress of all the socialist parties spread around the world. The very centre of this agency was in Moscow, in the 1920s. If he designs the building in which this agency should take place and this is more or less 1:10 scale model, it is a big metal tower strongly inspired by the tour Eiffel. Tatlin was in Paris in the 1910 so he had a possibility of having a look at the tour Eiffel. When he moved back to the USSR, he wanted to make an interpretation of that kind of engineering structure. There is also a spiral movement as you see, so there is the idea of the spinning around of something. The spinning around of something is underlined by the single elements that are inside the metal structure. There is a cylinder at the bottom, a rectangular element on top and a kind of pyramid in the centre. All these three volumes are supposed to spin around at different speed. The lower one takes one year to make his move, the second one month and the third, one day. This is a way of measuring time related to the world. Also, the diagonal line is inspired by the Earth because the inclination is the same of the revolution of the earth: 23.5° . The height of the tower (440m) is directly connected to the equator that is 44000 km long. So, the measures of the building are related to the measures of the Earth, because the III International Agency of the Socialist Parties should spread its power all around the surface of the world. This was never built; it remained a model and is still exhibited in museums.



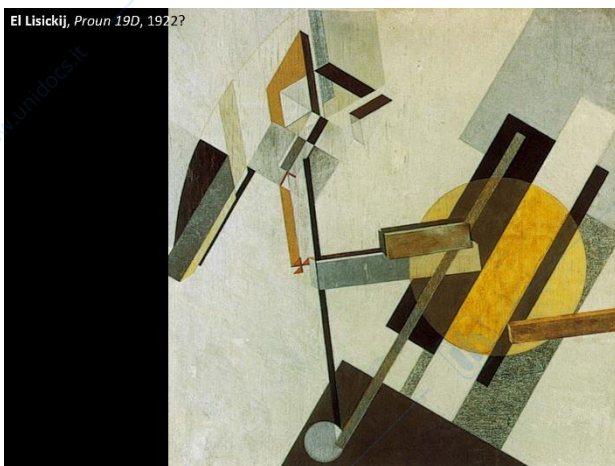
Here you have another kind of tower, completely different one by Naum Gabo called Column. Column means that we are trying to make a comparison between classic art and new art. A new kind of column. In this particular case, this column is made of methacrylate; a completely new material that is also transparent. Some critics had read this sculpture as a kind of description of the tower of technology. If you understand the meaning of technology (if you know the laws of technology), technology becomes transparent. Because it is transparent, it can become the foundation; can provide solid foundations for the new society.



Other experiments related with this new language, you have the sculptures made by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Georgij and Vladimir Stenberg, who are part of the Constructivist group. The name of this group was Constructivists. It was exhibited in 1921 in Moscow. You can see how light and simple these shapes are; simply wooden elements and metal wires. They are directly inspired by aeroplane technologies (obviously aeroplanes of the 1920s). It is an attempt of using the language of new aeroplane technology for making new sculptures. There is a link between the column by Naum Gabo and these kind of beautiful very light sculptures and structures.



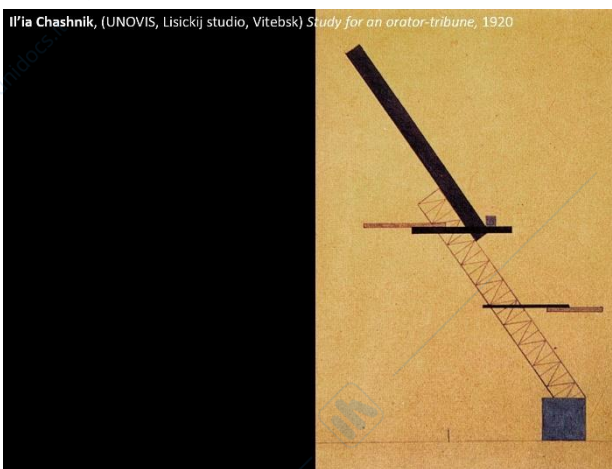
El Lisickij is another father of the group. Here you see he is trying to develop his own language from expanding Malevich's research, although he is trying to make himself a step forward. What it is interesting in this case is that the description of the space (in fact, it is a space) is also reinforced by this line that crosses the elements and goes from one single surface to another. You can imagine this floating line in the surface moving from the surface of the canvas, inside the painting itself but also protruding (going out) of the surface of the canvas into reality. This is precisely the philosophy of the painting. It is a step in a path that is going from the inside (which is the world of the arts) to the outside (the real world). It wants to provide this new language suitable for the new society.



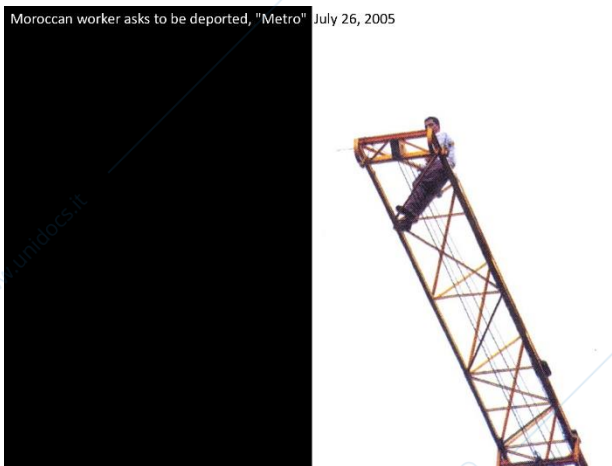
This constant is even more clear in paintings like this. El Lisickij started painting these works at the beginning of the 1920s. This is called Proun 19D and Lisickij describes these works as a kind of step between the visual art and architecture. It is between a world that you can describe only with a surface and a world which is a physical, real one. When you look at these you exactly understand whether they are simply paintings or layouts of a new city. If these lines are representing lines and geometric shapes or they are just a single moment before they may become buildings, streets and squares of the new city/new world. It is evident that the abstract language is strongly related to modernism in architecture, you see that if this is the description of a new city/the new space for the human beings, this space is totally artificial since there is no room for nature. This is a fundamental aspect of this research. No nature.



This is the Design for a Lenin-tribune. El Lisickij is part of this Constructivist group. This is the sketch made by El Lisickij in 1920. At that period, El Lisickij was also a teacher in a school, developing his own ideas with students. While he was painting this Lenin-tribune, one of his students was developing the following project (next slide).



They are very similar. This means that really El Lisickij was developing his own project together with his students in the school. They are really similar and probably developed at the same time.



This is a strange picture professor took. It was on a paper called "Metro", in the underground in Milan. More than 10 years ago, there was this picture. It is the story of a migrant coming from Algeria who climbed up this metal element because he wanted to draw attention on his case: he wanted to go back to Algeria but because he didn't have money, he decided to do this kind of performance. Many people took pictures of him. Professor was surprised by this particular picture because he thinks the

photographer when he was handling the camera and deciding in what way to take the pictures probably he was inspired by El Lisickij. The relationship between the picture and the metal structure is more or less the same that you find in the drawing by El Lisickij. The fundamental difference is the way in which the body of the person is standing on the structure that is showing an opposite line. It is not like Lenin that is directed in the same direction of the structure, but it is opposite. In a certain sense it works because he is trying to do something against the situation in which he is, against his condition of vagrant. It means that these are things that are part of our own culture and sometimes we work without being aware that a language has become part of our own language.



This is another very famous drawing, it is a printing matter. It is a poster designed by El Lisickij called Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge. Many of us don't know that in the Soviet Union the civil war went on until 1924. There were people fighting one against each other in those years, so the government had to fight against an army called the White Army. Finally, they won this civil war. This poster was made in the school by El Lisickij together with the students.



This is another very famous poster by Aleksandr Rodchenko. This is against to underline the effect that these artists are not simply artists, they want to do something that is useful for society. This is a campaign educating people to reading, helping people how to read books. In fact, the title is Books! and the young lady who is shouting is shouting a word meaning precisely books. This is a very famous poster that has made the history of contention video communication and still very successful and related to this kind of

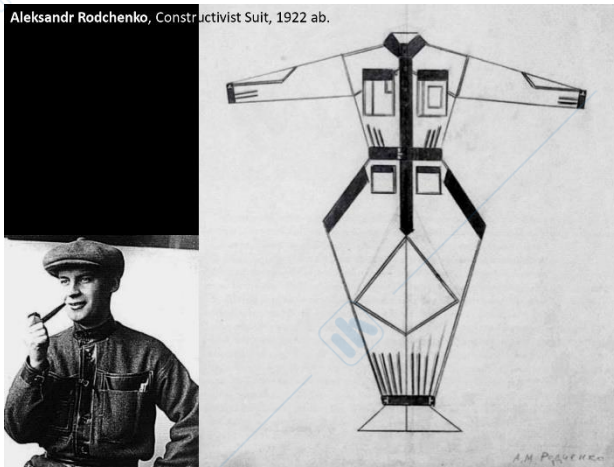
socialist message. It is also somehow inspired by comics in a certain sense. This idea of shouting, the sound of a voice that is represented by a kind of triangular shape expanding in the air. There are several examples even nowadays of this idea.



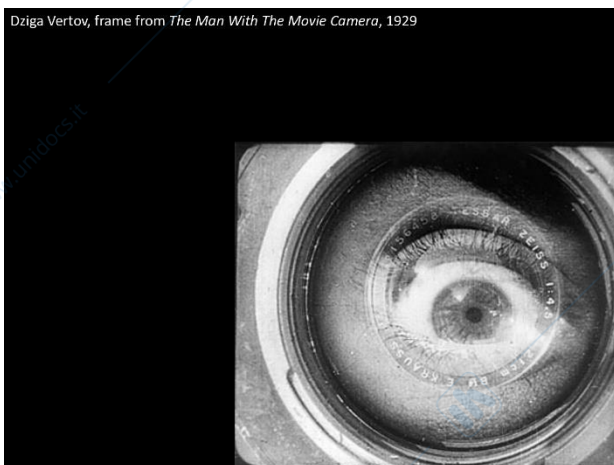
In fact, professor found one example on The Economist. It is again an attempt to help you find connections between the art of the avantgarde in the first part of the century and what happens on the cover of magazines nowadays.



As you remember, futurists were experimenting different languages, and this is another example. Aleksandr Rodchenko worked a lot with photography and he developed his own style that is probably one of the most interesting legacy of constructivism. The using of a camera in a completely different way that is strongly inspired by diagonal compositions or unexpected perspectives like the one we see below in which the girl is talking at the phone and the photographer is taking the picture from above. It is a completely different perspective from the one we usually think a photographer should take the picture. Also using significantly the effect of light and shadow as in the other example you see on the right.

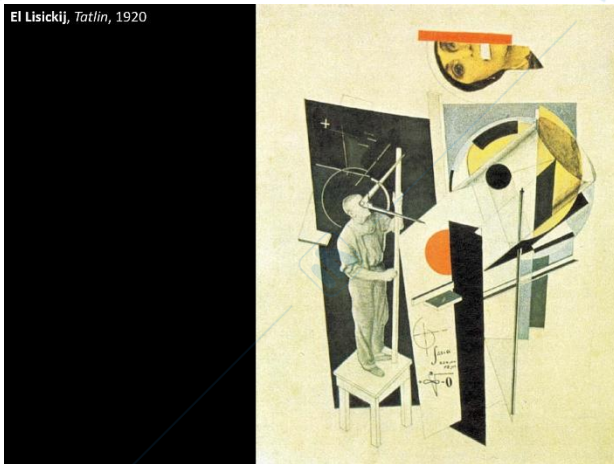


Rodchenko, exactly as Marinetti, Balla and Depero, tried to sketch the features of a new futurist fashion. He also made new garment for artists in the new society. This is in fact the constructivist suit for man inspired by the typical garment workers use in factories.

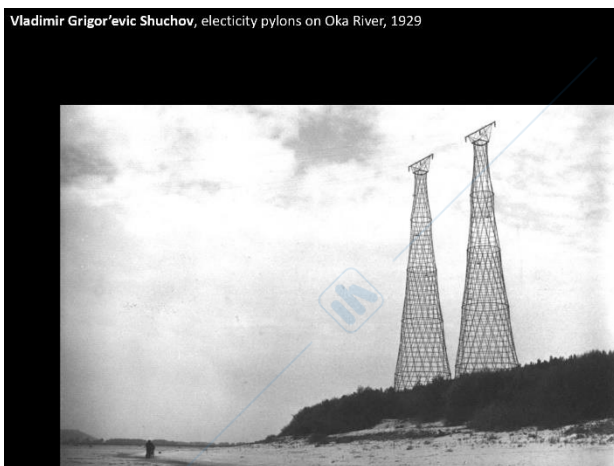


Here we are in the field of cinema. Dziga Vertov is probably one of the most interesting directors of those years in the Soviet Union. This is a single frame from a very beautiful film called The Man With The Movie Camera and you can see this frame several times throughout the film (lasts 1 hour). It is the description of a day in Moscow from dome (?) to night, describing all the things that happen in the city. There are some sequences in which you see Dziga Vertov standing on top of a car filming directly what happens

in the city standing on top of a car. There is also this frame of the slide; the eye of the director that looks at reality through the camera A human that is looking at the world with the help or through the machine (the technology). It is a more powerful man because he has the power of using the new technology. More or less it becomes a kind of cyborg; no more a natural man but rather a man that has been transformed by the use of technology. This is a very strong aspect of constructivism: the faith in technology.



This is the portrait of Tatlin made by El Lissitzky. It was in the very first lesson, but professor didn't describe it. Tatlin is standing on a stool and he is controlling the module of the monument of the 3rd International. As you see he has a compass replacing his eye so the concept is very similar to the one of Dziga Vertov. Dziga Vertov is directing a film and has a movie camera inside the eye because he is looking at reality through technology. Tatlin is similarly looking at reality through an object that can help him producing perfect technological objects, like a compass is. While he is doing this, also with the help of mathematics as you can see from the diagrams that are designed in the sheet of paper, he is inspired by the woman on top of the painting that is similar to a kind of ancient icon of recent tradition.



This is the last picture of constructivists. These big electric towers have been built by Vladimir Grigor'evic Shuchov. He is an engineer and has developed this completely new concept of metal towers for electricity simply using the method of mathematics and geometry and calculations. This is an effective way of using technology through the language of engineering. This is really light, easy to construct, easy to put into place, nothing to compare with the monument of the III International that was in fact inspired by a kind of engineering language that belong to the 19th century. When Tatlin was using that language, the language was old. The new language of engineering in fact is this one. This is to say that although all these artists were fundamentally inspired by technology, there were not technological enough to become engineers. There is always a kind of contradiction inside the world of the avantgardes with this. The way of approaching technology, both of constructivists and futurists is a static way. They are inspired by the shape of technology; they do not really know how to be technicians, and this is precisely the limit of this research.

Moving from Russia to the Netherlands, we found the third father of abstract art: Piet Mondrian.



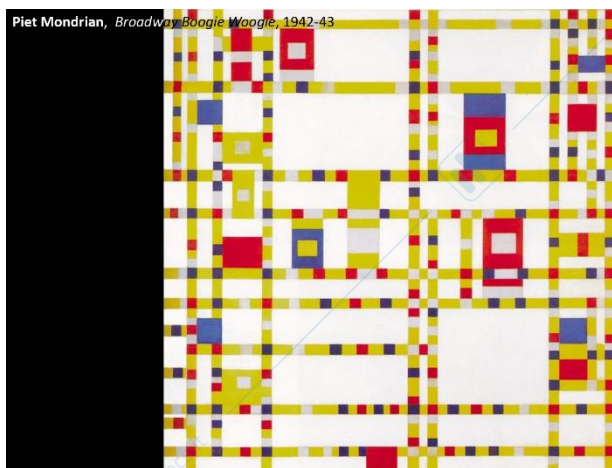
This is Composition No 2 and we are in 1922. These are the typical elements of his style: there is a squared black grid, there is a pale grey-white background and there are very small bits of rectangular shaped colours. These colours can only be red, yellow or blue. This is the vocabulary. We are again talking about a language, that is slightly different from the one developed by Malevich and fundamentally different from the one developed by Vasilij Kandinskij, but we are still in the same environment. We are still

in a research that tries to represent reality using geometry and mathematics. Again, thinking that what we see is not the real world; the real world is behind this world we see with our eyes and it is made of rational thinking. It is the language of engineers, of technology, the language of mathematics and geometry. The grid is shaping the canvas in the same way in which we can imagine it can shape the whole world. The white background represents the space and also what we call "the empty part of the space". Colours, instead, represent matter, volumes, forms. In any Mondrian's painting you see the colour always occupies a very small part of the painting. This means that there is an attempt to dematerialise the space represented in the painting.



Here you have another example. Again, you see the white background, two colours and the grid is shaped as a cross. As in the case of Malevich, there is nothing dealing with religion. It is the connection between two main directions you can have (horizontal and vertical). We can also find out another meaning in this crossing of lines. Mondrian in fact talks about it. The vertical represents the masculine and the horizontal the feminine. There is also a kind of attempt of connecting genders in this crossing of lines. Professor wonders

why the feminine is the horizontal and the masculine the vertical. We are in the 1930s and the world has changed greatly from that time with respect to gender issues.



In the very last part of his life, Piet Mondrian, who lived fundamentally in Paris (in the Netherlands when he was young) he moved to New York. His style completely changed when he arrived in New York. As you can see, the black grid totally disappeared replaced by a yellow grid that is not a real grid in itself but is made of small square colours. You absolutely feel the rhythm as a kind of music. In fact, it is called Broadway Boogie Woogie so it is inspired by music in the style of NY. We can say that all the

paintings that Piet Mondrian painted before tried to represent human world. Human world was the city and again the city was the place of the artificial. But only when Mondrian arrived in NY

and found himself in the really new city (New York was the city of the modern style), he adopted a completely new representation of the urban environment.



The last work he did was called Victory Boogie Woogie. He worked on this canvas until he died and in fact it is unfinished. These small coloured square elements are not painted. These are small pieces of painted paper and he used to adjust them on the canvas trying to find out the right balance between all these colours and shapes. At a certain moment, he wrote down a thought meaning in this painting you can't recognise the difference between the background and the foreground. You can't really see that all

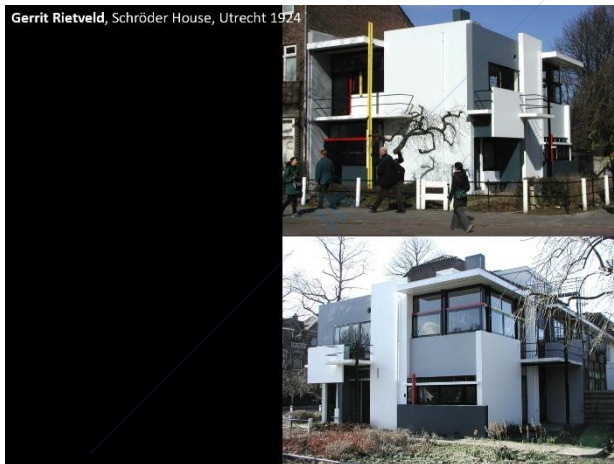
the elements are at the same level. There is no hierarchy. Even when you see a large squared white form, this is not the background. All the elements contribute to the same composition and they are all emerged in the same space. There is no hierarchy, there is no space. In a certain sense, we could say this is the description of democracy. No matter what your shape is, you can be the yellow, red, big, small... but each one of us stands at the same level and we are part of the same project. Professor thinks it is a beautiful representation of society and freedom.



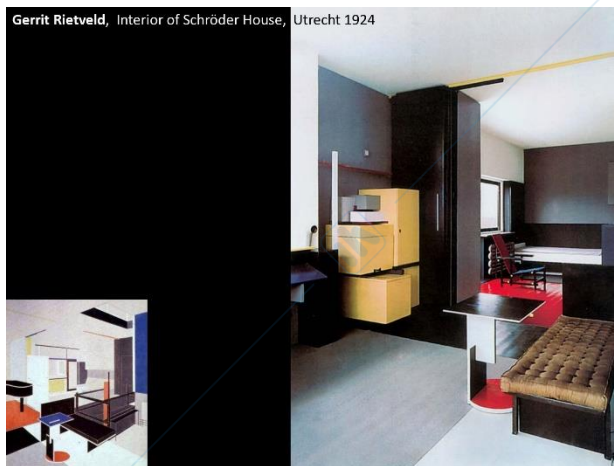
Piet Mondrian used to live in this small apartment in Paris. This is a picture of a model. It is interesting to understand what his lifestyle was. He used to live alone, never had a girlfriend/wife. It is a single room apartment. He was not interested in money. He spent his own life carrying out his own research in this particular place. For professor it is interesting the fact that, obviously yet to put this furniture inside this small place where he used to work, the protagonist of this room is in a certain sense the story

inside: at the centre, the technology of eating. All the other elements have been painted in a colour. Strokes have become white, wood of the floor has become black. The decoration of the walls is part of Mondrian's research and show a degree of grey and white. Some paintings are hanged on the wall, obviously. There is a delivered attempt of destroying/concealing the natural colour of matter. In any way, you can recognise the natural materials, especially wood. Again, because the idea Mondrian has of the new lifestyle (urban style) in modern age is the idea of humans living in a totally artificial environment with no connections with nature.

Piet Mondrian is the third father of abstract art, but he is also member of another group of artists. Another avant-garde group established in the Netherlands with a name meaning "The Style" in English. All these artists, designers and architects give up their own research using a magazine. The magazine was called The Style and the director of it is the leader of the group, Theo van Doesburg. They themselves were avant-gardes and tried to redesign/reshape all the aspects of life, but they specifically focused on painting, design and architecture. There are not many examples of The Style architecture. The most famous one probably is the following one:



This is the Schröder House by Gerrit Rietveld in 1924. This is a single-family semi-detached house, and if you arrive to the place walking along the street there is a typical Dutch street in which you have all these buildings made of bricks with white windows. You typically find yourself in an environment of any Dutch city, and right at the bottom of the street you find yourself in front of this small house. It really looks like a spaceship. It is completely the opposite of anything you can see around. It is made of white and grey slabs and has no real windows; the glasses are surfaces themselves and the balconies are not really described as volumes. All the construction is made by slabs (two dimensional elements). As you see, it has no colours apart from yellow and red. If you go inside, it is also an exercise of The Style.



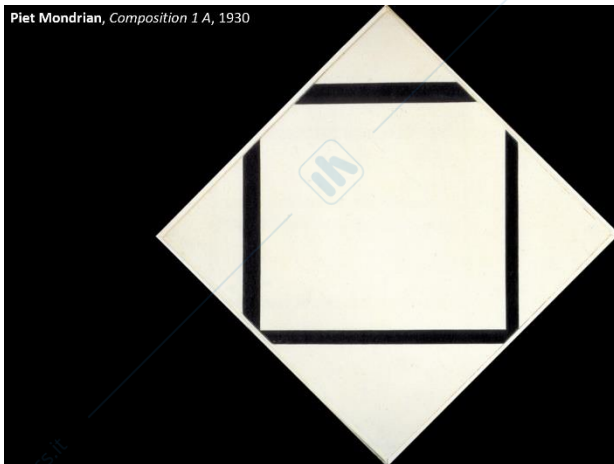
This is the interior. The luckily is still the same as it was at that time in which Rietveld designed it. You can see the sketch on the left and the real interior on the right. Again, the language is still the same; very simple geometrical forms and a very short list of colours (blue, yellow, red) with many parts in grey and white. You see Rietveld had the possibility to design the interior as an interior designer but also to design many pieces of furniture. Probably the most famous among these is the Red and Blue Chair.



This was designed not for the house but then become part of the furnishing inside the house. This represents the theory that Piet Mondrian developed in his paintings. It is a chair painted in black that stays for the black grid in the paintings, the other surfaces that are the seat and back of the armchair have a similar role to that of the colours in the painting. The yellow you see in the frame represents the fact that the grid is part of a larger grid that has been cut in the shape of an armchair but belongs to a wider grid that we can

imagine covering the surface of the world. It is a very beautiful object. Professor says it is absolutely impossible to seat in this armchair. It doesn't work at all because it has not been studied according to ergonomics (doesn't work with our body). It is not a work of design; it is a sculpture or a work of art. This precisely happens because the general idea is that human beings have to life in a totally artificial world. Unfortunately, this pure geometry that is made from pure geometry and mathematics doesn't work with out body. We are much more complex. Professor

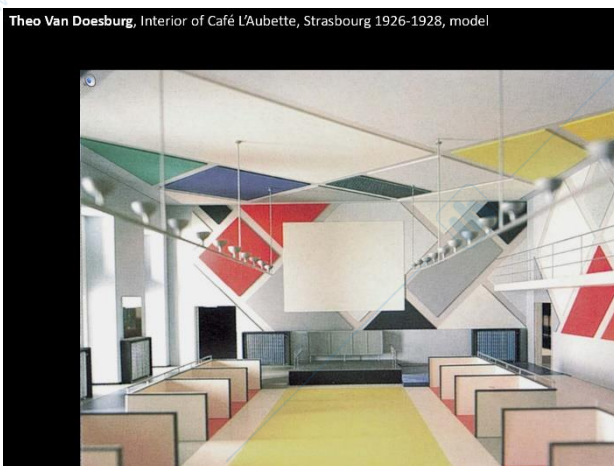
thinks the season of the avant-gardes is fundamental for developing a new way of looking at the world but also to see the limits of this research.



protagonists (following slides).



his ideas that Mondrian resigned from the movement. This people were really committed and really wanted to change the world so they couldn't admit things like using a diagonal in a painting as Theo Van Doesburg was doing. For them it was a matter of life or death. Van Doesburg would develop anyway this new language and not only in paintings but also in interiors.



because of the pattern that has been painted in the surfaces of the room. At the very centre of the picture, you see the yellow rectangular shape of the place where people can dance. At the same time, you can watch a movie on the screen that is at the bottom of the room. There is also

This is a kind of new paragraph, about the using of diagonal lines in painting and reality. Piet Mondrian accepted an only possibility in terms of diagonal lines: that of rotating the canvas 45° and painting canvases according to this shape that he defined as a diamond shape. But the lines inside the composition/painting should remain horizontal and vertical. There was no chance of using other directions. He developed this style during the 1930s as an attempt of integrating movement inside his research. Here comes the other

More or less in the same years, Theo Van Doesburg is developing another research inside The Style group. He uses diagonal lines and shapes, so the language is made of the same elements: grid, white background and colour squares. But there are many different directions in this new research. Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg discussed hardly about this. According to Piet Mondrian, this was not admitted in the new language. It was not part of the new world. He said diagonal lines were frivolous and he was so strict in

This is a very famous work of interior design made by Van Doesburg in the years 1926-28. It is extremely interesting because it is at the same time a café and a place for dancing. It really represents the lifestyle of the period. The original one was built in Strasbourg (France). This is a model of it. You can see all these diagonal elements reshaped the walls and the ceiling and you feel really that it is a completely new space, much more dynamic and you don't find the hierarchy between vertical and horizontal anymore

a stage for an orchestra. It is a completely new experience of a space in which all the elements have been put into a relationship. The kind of music it will be listened or danced in this place is Charleston. We are right at the centre of a kind of revolution when we look at this interior of Café L'Aubette.

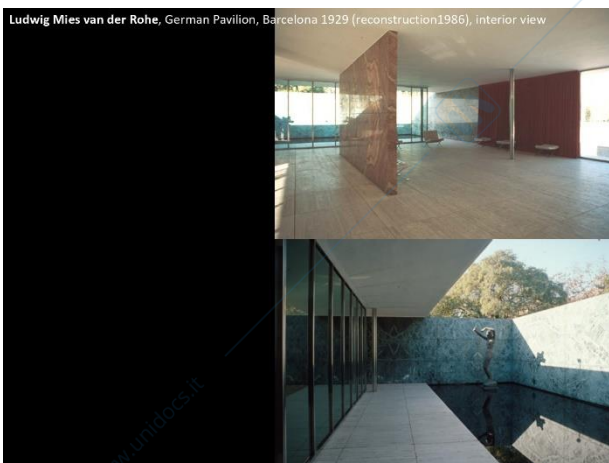


This is another interior called the Proun Room, developed according to El Lissitzky's idea of Proun that professor says they are like a kind of treasure between painting and architecture. This has been designed for an exhibition held in Berlin in 1923. It is not really much more than a development of a painting spread on the surfaces of the three walls in an interior. The elements are very similar to the ones you can find in the Proun painting by El Lissitzky. Here we are at a very basic level of the experimentation. If we want to make a step forward, we have to go in another direction and meet Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.



Mies van der Rohe is probably the most famous German architect in the 1920s and 30s until he had to escape from Germany because of the Nazis and he arrived in the United States. He was very famous in Germany and in fact, in 1928 the government asked him to design the German Pavilion for the international exhibition in Barcelona that supposed to take place in 1929. This is the result, the German pavilion known worldwide. The building was destroyed in 1930 and then Ignasi and Manuel de Sola-Morales (two

Spanish architects) rebuilt the pavilion in 1986. These pictures are the ones of the reconstructed pavilion. The pavilion is an exercise of style. All the elements are kept from The Style movement but translated in a language that acknowledges the tradition of architecture. So, it is not really artificial; there is an extraordinary mastery in using natural materials (specially marbles). Professor wants to underline one particular aspect of this extraordinary space and it is that it is made only with surfaces, exactly as it was supposed by The Style rules.



Here you have two pictures of the interior. Specially if you look at the picture at the bottom of the slide you see there is a strange effect. When you take the picture, you find that there is a perfect horizontal symmetry between the floor and the ceiling. This symmetry can be recognised in any part of the building. It means that the upper and lower part are mirroring one to each other. This effect was discovered by a professional photographer. It happened because he went there, took pictures and found out

this extraordinary effect. The meaning of this is similar to the meaning of the last Mondrian's painting Victory Boogie Woogie, when he was trying to destroy the space. In this case, the person that stands inside the pavilion, precisely because there is a completely symmetry between the upper and lower part of the environment, the only thing that he can do is to look straight in front of his eyes. It means new mankind (humans) don't have to look up in the sky for hope, and at the same time don't have to bow their heads and look at the ground because of the power. We are in the end of society of free people. This is the fundamental meaning of this pavilion which professor thinks it is an extraordinary result.