

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Ways of Thinking (ADDA4022/C)

Essay: Applying a range of critical theories, identify
and discuss an artwork of your own choosing.

Word count: 1400 + References

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Applying a range of critical theories, identify and discuss an artwork of your own choosing.

The essay will explore Kandinsky's exploration of critical theories and their influences on the production of his artwork. To understand these influences, we need to understand critical theory. Critical theory is a way of thinking about and examining culture and literature by considering the social, historical and ideology of that era that affect how we think and produce art.

I will also be exploring the theories of Semiotics and Postmodernism. The theory of semiotics constitutes a theory of meaning, featuring three interrelated parts a sign, an object and an interpretant. (Lomas, T. 2019) This means where in a painting an item is, what the object is, what it represents and its deeper meaning.

Postmodernism refers to a reaction against modernism. It is less a cohesive movement than an approach and attitude toward art, culture, and society. Its main characteristics include anti-authoritarianism, or refusal to recognise the authority of any single style or definition of what art should be, and the collapsing of the distinction between high culture and mass or popular culture, and between art and everyday life. Postmodern art and architecture can also be characterised by a deliberate use of earlier styles and conventions, and an eclectic mixing of different artistic and popular styles and mediums. (Moma no date)



(fig.1)

Composition VI (Fig.1) is an Oil painting on canvas which measures 195 x 300cm painted in 1913 and is number 6 in the series. The concept of the painting was based on the Myth of the Great Deluge contained in the Bible's Book of Genesis and is an example of Kandinsky exploring and refining the subject matter to achieve an artistic goal that satisfied his development and goals. "For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground." (Genesis 7:4).

On First inspection to an untrained eye, there is nothing in the painting that represents anything that can be identified to its viewer. The painting is simply a mass of wild colour and inexplicable forms. The title does not even hint at the subject matter of the painting or how it should be interpreted. So where do we start? The first clue is in its title, Composition VI, which is a sign indicating that this painting is part of a painter's journey to resolving some great artistic dilemma that he is facing dealing with the subject matter.

As we further explore the artist and the painting, we will unlock the signs and symbols hidden within the composition and discover their true meaning. This painting is not just randomly thrown onto the canvas by the artist and does not pull a piece of work out of thin air. It is a mediation of ideas "nudes, the ark, animals, palm trees, lighting and rain" (Jelena Hanl-Koch, 1993) These ideas came from the original version of the Deluge which he considered had not fulfilled his objective. In this version of the painting, the images are far more recognisable. Not satisfied with the depiction in this image, his goal was to leave the painting and rethink the painting in a far more abstract form.

He was aiming to push the boundaries of avant-garde art. This is an abstract painting which has a wide range of colour palettes and fantastic tones. Abstraction Art is a 20th-century visual art style characterised using abstract, symbolic images (rather than direct, realistic ones) conveying moods, feelings and impressions. (DANESI, M. 2000).

The painting is Kandinsky's simulation of the "Deluge" as seen through his eyes. It refers to the artist's spirituality and upbringing in Russia at the turn of the century and his experience with the Russian church and its culture.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky (1912) wrote a considered and complex genealogy for what he thought was of as the return of spirituality in art. He shows how modern society has lost its understanding of the 'inner' by absorption with the 'outer' or materialism (in the sense of capitalism as well as the outer surface of things, i.e., representational art) (Benton, Tim, Benton, Charlotte., & Sharp, Dennis, 1975)

In this painting he creates the illusion that the canvas is lit from the back, giving a vibrance to the bright warm colours and creating depth within the painting. This was a traditional Russian painting technique of using a black background to make the foreground colours brighter. it was often employed in the painting of Russian Icons displayed in churches.

On top of this background, he begins by placing small, splintered and interlocking forms on the canvas; he then calms the unrest these produced with long "solemn" lines. To mitigate the effect of the lines, he creates "a whole figure out of flecks of different shades of pink, which plays itself out of the canvas. Thus, the greatest disturbance becomes clothed in the greatest tranquillity, the whole action becomes objectified. This solemn, tranquil charter is on the other hand, interrupted by the various patches of blue, which produce an internal warm effect. (Uklrike Becks Malory, 1993)

Kandinsky also uses colour as a sign to denote different things and developed a whole theory on the use of colour and their meaning. Examples of this theory are that blue hues are cool, evoking something deep, innermost, or supernatural. Associated with flutes for bright blues, and cellos and musical organs for darker blues. Yellow hues are warm, exciting, or even representative of madness or rage. Associated with trumpets. White evokes a silence rich with possibilities. Black is a silence devoid of possibility. Red hues are alive, actively striving towards aspirations. Also associated with trumpets. Brown hues represent something dull, hard, or somehow inhibited. Orange hues are

radiant, giving a connotation of healthiness. Associated with alto voices and mid-range church bells. (study.com No date)



(Fig.2)

In the bottom left-hand corner of the painting (Fig.2) are several black marks which signify that the object is simplistic for a boat with oars. This may be interpreted as a representation of Noah's Ark. To the right overwhelming the size of the Ark are the bright and dark clashing colours. These colours represent the sea, skies, lightening and rain which represent the separate aspects of the ferocious storm and Gods greatness compared to man's Ark.

The move to a more modern style and abstraction coincides with the increasing popularity of photography. The photograph could capture an image, event, or location at that time quickly and was not dependent on an artist's interpretation of the event. These events led to artists having to rethink and explore different forms of expression, producing a wide range of avant-garde movements to stay relevant and push the boundaries of art.

This painting is Kandinsky developing his theories on the representation and associated meaning that can be attached to different uses of colour, form and music in the abstraction to push these boundaries of creativity. Similar themes that also appear in his earlier works are that of a rider, Russian castles and a rowing boat with ores, the latter being remarkably comparable to the image in figure 2 and all in the abstract.

Seeing Monet's Haystacks helped him abandon his constraint of literal images and switch to imagery that allowed him to portray an image in the abstract but also to add an expressive element to his work to express his feelings at the time.

Composition VI contains several different signs and symbols within the colour and form, these can only be created from a mediation or gathering of Kandinsky's life experiences. He grew up at the turn of the 19th Century in Russia, politically when Russia was ruled by the Tsars, heading towards Revolution and conflict in Europe with the Great War. He was well-educated and had a Bourgeois life living between Russia and Germany. He is a product of his cultural experiences that shape his view of the world around him, his thinking and how he portrays his art on canvas.

Kandinsky built his mediation of art on his nineteenth century ideas and transformed them with 20th century thinking. He believed that relationships between words, sounds, colours and forms were fixed and that the emotional reactions which they cause in the mind can be analysed and precisely identified.

Kandinsky's early life in Russia, its traditions, religion, music, politics and along with his extensive travelling are built into the DNA of his art and are unique to him, he was a product of his times and experiences which cannot be repeated.

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