

## Performing Agitation. László Moholy-Nagy and the 1924 Special Issue of *MA (Today)* on Music and Theater

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**Abstract:** *MA* [Today] reflects the heterogeneity of theater after World War I and its 1924 special issue is a comprehensive document of the avant-garde ambition to renew *mise-en-scène*. Although *MA* was not a theater journal, it regularly published dramatic texts, performance reviews and manifesto-like essays on recent forms of staging. László Moholy-Nagy supported *MA* and its editor Lajos Kassák from Berlin, where he got involved in staging contemporary plays and operas. This paper addresses the question why the performing arts were especially important for Kassák's circle and examines the relationship of *MA* to avant-garde theater movements. It also gives a brief survey of the *Musik und Theater*nummer with its introduction by Kassák before engaging with the theory and practice of experimental theater in Moholy-Nagy's oeuvre.

When we take a closer look at European theater between the world wars we face the heterogeneity of aspirations. Forces of division had become active in the last two decades of the 19th century and resulted in a divergence by the 1920s which had been mostly unknown before. Several new forms of performance had been experimented with and theater had become irreversibly plural. These forms differed not only in their methods of staging but in their artistic conception and worldview as well. Some were realized and some remained striking ideas but almost all had a considerably effective history.

The periodical *MA* [Today] reflected this heterogeneity and its 1924 special issue was a comprehensive document of the avant-garde ambition to renew theater. Although

*MA* was not a theater journal, it regularly published dramatic texts, performance reviews and manifesto-like essays on recent forms of *mise-en-scène*. Its existence was crucial because Hungarian experiments in staging were preceded by the evolution of avant-garde performance theories. (Translations of avant-garde dramatic texts by Jean Cocteau, Tristan Tzara, etc. had also been published in *MA* well before their staging in Hungary.) Renewal had grown into an imperative outside of the institutional system of Hungarian theater and could be fully accomplished only in periodicals. *MA* was documenting this imperative by forming its principles mostly from abroad. Emigration caused serious hardship for some editors and contributors but also helped them obtain up-to-date information and get acquainted with new tendencies of theater from all over Europe.

*MA* had developed the radical modernism of similar periodicals (chiefly *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*) into a program of social agitation since its editors saw the possibility of recreating "homogeneous social spirit and public faith"<sup>1</sup> in communist society. Theater seemed to be an ideal terrain of forming community since Richard Wagner had chosen it as an ancient prototype of "public art"<sup>2</sup> and combined art and revolution some sixty years be-

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<sup>1</sup> HEVESY Iván, „Tömegkultúra – tömegművészet”, *MA* 4, 4. sz. (1919): 70–71, 70.

<sup>2</sup> Richard WAGNER, „Art and Revolution”, trans. William Ashton ELLIS, in Richard WAGNER, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works: Vol. 1.: The Art-Work of the Future, &c*, 30–65 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1892), 48.

fore. So theater was the most appropriate art form for the purposes of activism and functioned as a substitution for political action, too, i.e. as an artistic tool of agitation, transformation and challenge to the status quo.

However, articles in *MA* did not offer an action plan and authors did not have the opportunity to put their ideas into practice when the political climate became favorable and the Communist Party in Hungary came to power for a short period in 1919. Most authors did not have experience in making theater either, but tried to make up for the lack of practice with an impassioned call for reforms. No wonder the articles of *MA* were Delphian writings full of manifesto-like statements and differed from the essays of theater people (like Erwin Piscator or Vsevolod Meyerhold) that gave the quintessence of things already tested on stage. Hungarian notions of avant-garde theater were full of idealism and mostly arose in an abstract theoretical context instead of in some concrete space of practice.

First and foremost Dadaism had a huge impact on the editors of *MA*, who gave an activist impulse to the initiatives of their fellow artists in Zurich. But by the time Dadaist *mise-en-scène* found its own stage in Budapest in 1925, the Kassák Circle had already turned to Constructivism whose followers were not satisfied with avant-garde antecedents. Preaching the necessity of a mechanical stage, Farkas Molnár complained that "the reign of optics and acoustics was replaced by empty decorations of awkward symbols and lunatic yammering of futurist poets".<sup>3</sup> Kassák's interest in Constructivism resulted in a break with his former colleagues (Iván Hevesy and Sándor Bortnyik) and the last issue of *MA* in 1925 condemned Dadaist experiments of the so-called Zöld Szamár Színház (Green Donkey Theater) as

<sup>3</sup> MOLNÁR Farkas, „A mechanikus színpad”, *MA* 8, 9–10. sz. (1923): 6.

mere "bluff" and "an imitation of art under modern catchwords".<sup>4</sup>

Constructivism became widely known in Europe at the beginning of the 1920s and *MA* picked it up immediately to create its activist ideology. Kassák derived Constructivism from the necessary recreation of the social self. He saw the original sin in the lack of integration that could only be reestablished by "art striving towards collectivity", finding an expression in "a strict construction and synthetic architecture".<sup>5</sup> So for Kassák only Constructivism, i.e., "the present itself that represented man as an individual and a member of a collective at the same time" could lead art back to objectivity obscured by naturalism while trying to create an illusion of reality.<sup>6</sup> The 1924 special issue of *MA* combined the predilection for theater and this preference for constructivism explicitly.

The so-called *Musik und Theaternummer* (See Fig. 1. on Plate XXIX.) tried to demonstrate "objective reality" with more than 20 illustrations showing various theater designs by Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, George Grosz and Fernand Léger, among others (See Fig. 2. on Plate XXIX.), all compatible with Kassák's conception of "picture-architecture". The special issue was published a year before *The Theater of the Bauhaus* and almost at the same time as the catalogue of Friedrich Kiesler's Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik held in Vienna in September 1924. *MA* also aimed at internationalism since articles of the special issue appeared in four languages (in German, French and Italian as well as Hungarian) and its photos showed the most innovative examples of Russian, French and German scenic design. The articles and the illustrations seem extraordinary compared to those of Hungarian

<sup>4</sup> K-k L-s, „Bortnyik Sándor és Hevesy Iván vagy az elővezetett Zöld Szamár”, *MA* 10, 3–4. sz. (1925): 19.

<sup>5</sup> KASSÁK Lajos, „Konstrukciótól a kompozícióig”, *MA* 8, 9–10. sz. (1923): 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

theater magazines of the 1920s. *MA* had nothing in common with *Színházi élet* (Life in the Theater, a popular weekly) and did not intend to invigorate Hungarian theater with uncommon theories and practices. Taking its place among outstanding avant-garde periodicals, *MA* took sight of the great world instead of the homeland to display the context of the theories that had been evolving in its columns for years without a field of practice.

Kassák's opening essay<sup>7</sup> gave a logic to the whole issue by stressing that among all the arts, theater was the most apt to surmount the chaos of life and create order. Since Kassák defined space as the core element of theater and theater space as an artistic reality he found the Russian reforms of scenography (experimenting with stage constructions instead of painted flat scenery) the most successful. But he saw beyond scenic innovation and called for the undermining of the whole hierarchy of theater, i.e., the subversion of its logocentric structure. Poet, actress/actor, painter and director as well as light, sound, color and movement should occur in a sequence instead of a "theological order"<sup>8</sup> under the rule of an author as creator. Kassák seemed to fall back into logocentrism when he stated that only an "organizer" (Organisator) who created a new visual and collective order could realize a new theater. But he also stressed that he did not think of the director of contemporary theater. The "organizer" had more in common with the inventor-engineer and his creation could only be compared to a well-designed machine or a modern city. Kassák found the theater of construction fit for the age of architecture: as literature, music and the fine arts had been the means of expres-

sion for people of former ages, modern people could only be expressed by synthetic theater. So for Kassák the "organizer" was not the individual originator of a new theater but the conductor of a collective form of art.

Similarly to other writers of the *Musik und Theaternummer*, Kassák reformulated conceptual leitmotifs of renowned theater visionaries of his time but mostly left them in prophetic obscurity. Filippo Marinetti likewise argued for an abstract performance devoid of psychology, just as Kurt Schwitters emphasized the inner logic of his Merz stage free from the reign of rationality. Or Enrico Prampolini who preferred actor-gases created by vibrations and luminous forms, or Günter Hirschel-Prottsch who praised the theater of completely mechanical movement. Some more concrete ideas came from the Russian director, Alexander Tairov, who described a stage that helped actresses/actors embody all the necessary forms; and from László Moholy-Nagy who published a sketch for a film *Dynamic of the Metropolis* without the intention to teach, moralize or tell a story. (See Fig. 3. on Plate XXX.)

Moholy-Nagy supported Kassák and *MA* from Berlin and got involved in editing the 1924 special issue as well. As far as theater is concerned, his ideal can be reconstructed from two essays and some photos of performances for which he designed scenery. His essay "Theater, Circus, Variety" appeared with Oskar Schlemmer's and Farkas Molnár's writings in *The Theater of the Bauhaus* only one year after the publication of the special issue of *MA*. While Schlemmer described the transformation of man/woman into a *Kunstfigur* so his/her movement could define the architecture of a performance, Molnár called for the transformation of the stage and the auditorium alike. Moholy-Nagy went beyond the relationship of space, actress/actor and movement (Schlemmer) as well as the theater building itself (Molnár) in order to outline a performance in which man did not occupy the center but became equal with all other elements—in which "light,

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig KASSÁK, „Über neue Theaterkunst“, *MA* 9, 8–9. sz. (1924): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques DERRIDA, "The theater of cruelty and the closure of representation", in Jacques DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan BASS, 232–250 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 235.

space, plane, form, motion, sound [and] man" had developed into an organism.<sup>9</sup> As we cannot ask a man/woman (an organism) what he or she means or represents, we cannot ask a performance or specifically a set design (organisms as well) what they mean or represent. Moholy-Nagy wanted to involve man/woman in the stage concentration of action without falling into the trap of reproducing nature i.e. with his/her physical and spiritual abilities and without his/her subjectivity. He proposed special mirrors to enlarge faces and gestures, megaphones to intensify voices and even the application of some techniques of the circus, the operetta and burlesque movies. (See Fig. 4. on Plate XXX.) He recommended choruses (nearly the same way Ödön Palasovszky and his friends used them in Budapest years later), i.e., the repetition of thoughts with the same words but with different intonation by a group of people. He called for a total theater determined by the tension of "concentrated activation"<sup>10</sup> and governed by the trinity of dynamism, rhythm and spectacle.

When we examine his ideas separately we might associate them with notions of other theater people. But it was not Moholy-Nagy's ideas that were unique, but rather his intention to join them in a Theater of Totality. He could not realize this theater, but he practically managed to extend the stage by various planes and areas as well as by their movement in all ways. His set designs were based on stage machines and lighting equipment that revealed intricate visual dramaturgy, similar to his sketch for a so-called "Mechanized Eccentric", published and described in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*. (See

<sup>9</sup> Laszlo MOHOLY-NAGY, "Theater, Circus, Variety", trans. Arthur S. WENSINGER, in Oscar SCHLEMMER, Laszlo MOHOLY-NAGY and Farkas MOLNÁR, *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Walter GROPIUS and Arthur S. WENSINGER, 49–70 (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Fig. 5. on Plate XXXI.) Suggesting that his experiments with film and theater were closely related to each other, this sketch was called a score like his scenario for *Dynamic of the Metropolis*. (See Fig. 6. on Plate XXXI.) Scenes were composed in vertical lines or movements in both sketches as in the stage machinery applied in *The Merchant of Berlin* (Moholy-Nagy's set design for Erwin Piscator's *mise-en-scène*) and light played as crucial a role in them as in *Madame Butterfly* (his set design for the Krolloper in Berlin). Although his ideal theater as a whole remained on paper, some of its elements were incorporated in stage practice as far as the given circumstances let them.

Moholy-Nagy designed sets in two short periods before and after his teaching in the Bauhaus between 1923 and 1928. First he designed *Prince Hagen* based on Upton Sinclair's novel for Erwin Piscator's Proletarian Theater in Berlin in 1920. (He also designed the book cover of the German director's *Das politische Theater* that was published in Berlin in 1929. See Fig. 7. on Plate XXXI.) Unfortunately, we do not have much information about this production but Moholy-Nagy presumably tried to use a "dynamic-constructive system of forces" he was fascinated by at that time. Since he found that "constructivity as an organizing principle of human efforts" had generally resulted in "static form-invested procedure" (like in Russian theater) he aimed at the activation of space by "vital construction and force relations".<sup>11</sup> He thought there was a close correlation between this and "the problem of freely floating sculpture as well as of film as projected spatial motion",<sup>12</sup> all appearing in his next three theatre jobs, too.

Moholy-Nagy designed such kinetic sets again nine years later for *The Tales of Hoffmann*

<sup>11</sup> MOHOLY-NAGY L[ászló] and KEMÉNY Alfréd, "Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces" [1922], in Krisztina PASSUTH, *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 290.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

produced at the Krolloper in Berlin. Photos show us screens and frameworks made of steel in a workroom-like space with sharp outlines of a special construction and formed by light as well. (See Fig. 8. on Plate XXXII.) There was also a backdrop for shadows of geometrical patterns and some forms hanging in the air: a head, an arm, a leg in the center and three more shapes with a human figure (or rather a *Kunstfigur*) among them. These emblems and some fantastic costumes helped the stage context of industrial design change into a witches' kitchen from time to time. When we compare still photos and imagine stage transformations, i.e., parts of the steel construction and shafts of light in movement it will become obvious that (unlike creations of Russian artists) this scenery was not static or installation-like but dynamic. For Moholy-Nagy – as for Robert Wilson, one of his most remarkable successors in contemporary theater – scenery was not really an arrangement but a process involving the spell-binding play of light as well.

For *Madame Butterfly* produced at the Krolloper two years later (in 1931) Moholy-Nagy also designed mobile elements that could be moved to the wings. (See Fig. 9. on Plate XXXII.) The backdrop with a huge photomontage of a bay in Japan became the surface of subtle lighting effects and suggested various times of day from sunrise to sunset. The network of lines and areas implied an organic interplay of light and movement, dark and illuminated parts of the stage. (See Fig. 10. on Plate XXXIII.) Mirrors and glass screens hanging high above the stage helped spotlights create a monumental construction of shadows with astonishing changes of atmosphere and transform Puccini's opera into a haunting vision. (See Fig. 11. on Plate XXXIII.) The elegant structures of *Madame Butterfly* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* were as refined as the Light-Space Modulator (Lichtrequisit) constructed by Moholy-Nagy at that time as a prop for an electric stage. (See Fig. 12. on Plate XXXIV.) Although this prop was not used in these opera productions, the scenog-

raphy was functioning as a kind of Lichtrequisit in them since Moholy-Nagy was experimenting with the modulation of light not only on the canvas (as in his paintings) and in space but on stage as well. According to Krisztina Passuth, the inner beauty and the intensity of Moholy-Nagy's photograms matched the beauty of movement and constant change in his Light-Space Modulator.<sup>13</sup> But we must also put his sophisticated shaping of space in *Madame Butterfly* next to his photograms and Light-Space Modulator in order to connect his experiments with picture, sculpture and stage scenery. (See Fig. 13. on Plate XXXIV.)

Between these opera productions, Moholy-Nagy worked with Erwin Piscator again on *The Merchant of Berlin* at the Volksbühne in 1929. Walter Mehring's exuberant play is set in the German capital during the 1923 inflation and confronts us with all layers of society. The content of the play was represented by Moholy-Nagy in a constructivist way and social hierarchy was spectacularly indicated by stage hierarchy. Members of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie and the upper crust occupied three different platforms moving vertically and smaller areas (parts of a street, a flat, a bakery etc.) extended these stage places of social strata. (See Fig. 14. and Fig. 15. on Plate XXXIV.) Spotlights highlighted people and areas and stunning shadows multiplied stage forms and figures while the platforms i.e. levels of the tragic, the tragic-comical and the grotesque were continuously moving closer and farther away. (See Fig. 16. on Plate XXXV.) Screens were also important parts of the scenography as the hectic life of Berlin appeared on motion pictures and film was adjusted to the stage action in a unique way. (See Fig. 17. on Plate XXXV.) So constant movement became the soul of visual dramaturgy in *The Merchant of Berlin*, too, and transformed social critique into an exquisite mode of perception. Although the whole space of theater i.e. the building was

<sup>13</sup> PASSUTH, *Moholy-Nagy*, 58.

not remodeled and the ideal of the Theater of Totality could not be achieved, all these productions were significant results of Moholy-Nagy's lifelong aspiration to "translate Utopia into action".<sup>14</sup>

As regards Constructivism, experiments in Hungary remained much more sporadic, though *MA* could reach more theater people than a local production would ever have been able to. The spirit of the Bauhaus turned up in Sándor Bortnyik's mechanical *Green Donkey Pantomime* in 1929 when kinetics was determined by the shift of forms and colors through floating screens. (See Fig. 18. on Plate XXXVI.) Similarly, Ágnes Kövesházi's *Dance of the Machines* produced at a 1928 Cikk-Cakk Evening and Ödön Palasovszky's oratory choirs (e.g. *Oedipus's Hands* in 1926) used a larger group of people as a moving element actively forming space. (See Fig. 19. on Plate XXXVI.) Although Kassák criticized Palasovszky's theater, its programs were as immersed in agitation and activism as issues and events of *MA* had been some years before. Neither Kassák's nor Palasovszky's efforts could influence *mise-en-scène* in the 1920s, but their search for new forms had obvious results in neo-avant-garde and postmodern experiments some fifty years later. The relentless nature of their search is as attractive now as it was a century before when Herwarth Walden rejected the dominant forms of contemporary theater in the special issue of *MA*.

"Theater as a work of art is an organism created by artistically logical relationships of sensuous movements. Anything else is just a pastime of the artist and the bourgeois captivated by culture."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Laszlo MOHOLY-NAGY, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1947), 361.

<sup>15</sup> Herwarth WALDEN, "Das Theater als künstlerisches Phänomen", *MA* 9, Nos. 8–9. (1924): 4.

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## PLATE XXIX



Fig. 1. Cover of the 1924 Musik und Theater number of MA

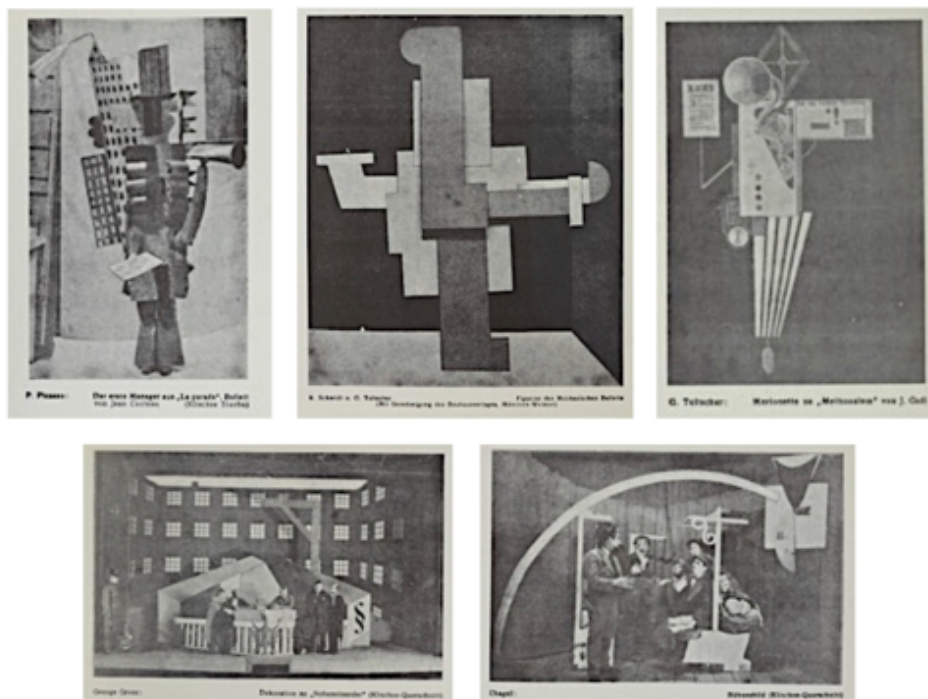


Fig. 2. Illustrations in the 1924 special issue of MA



PLATE XXX

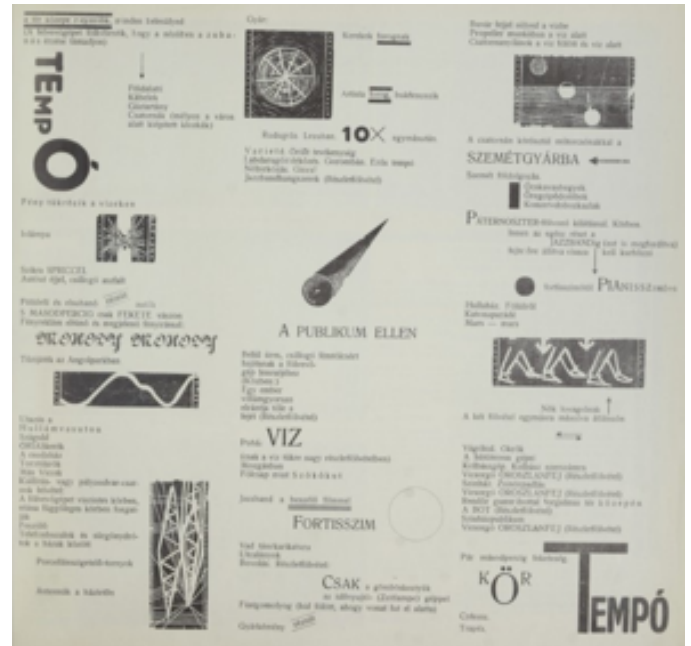


Fig. 3. László Moholy-Nagy's *Dynamic of the Metropolis* in the 1924 special issue of *MA*

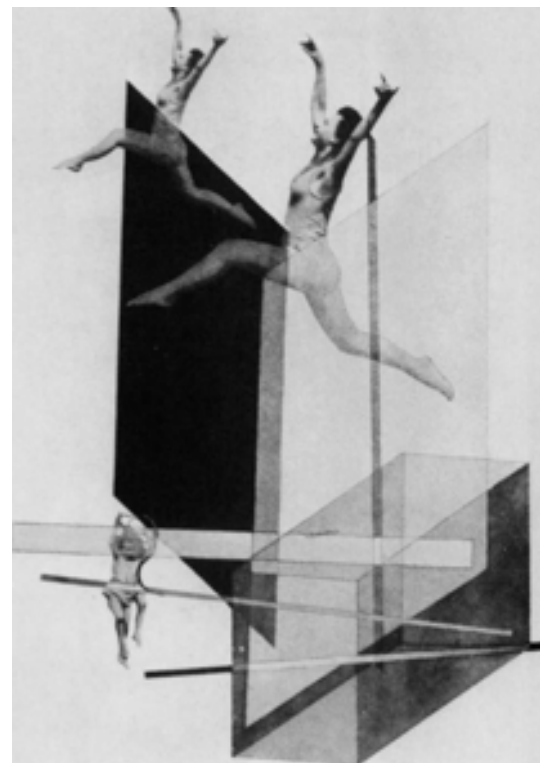


Fig. 4. *Stage Scene Loud-speaker and Human Mechanics (Variety)*. Illustrations of László Moholy-Nagy's essay "Theater, Circus, Variety" in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*

PLATE XXXI

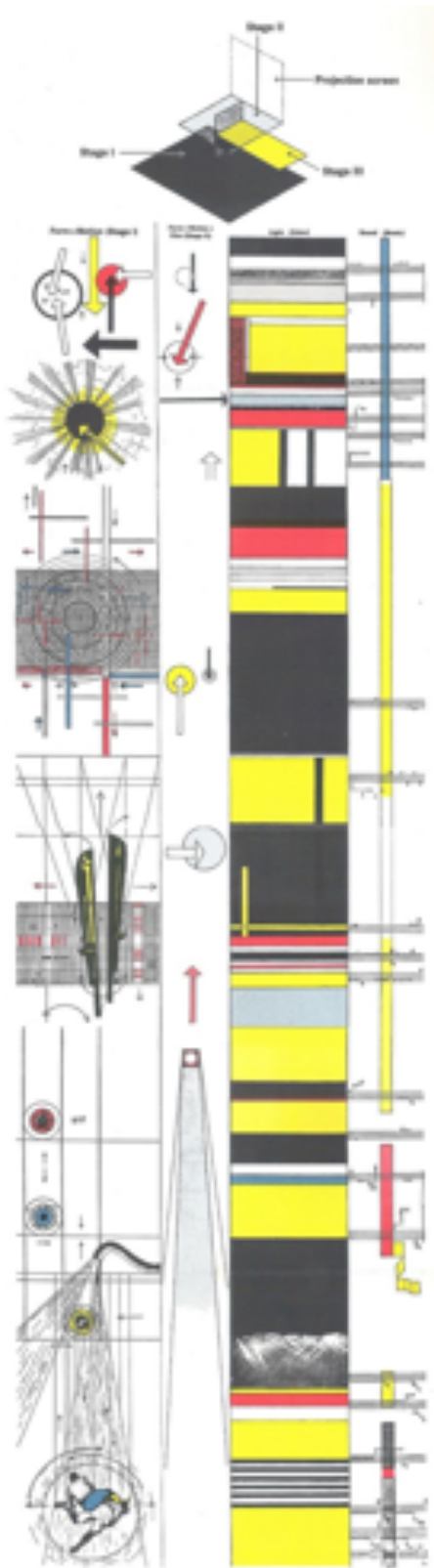


Fig. 5. Moholy-Nagy's sketch for a score for *A Mechanized Eccentric*

Close-up.  
The movement continues with a car dashing towards the left. A house, always the same one, is seen opposite the car in the centre of the picture (the house is continually being brought back to the centre from the right; this produces a stiff jerky motion). Another car appears. This one travels simultaneously in the opposite direction, towards the right.

This passage as a brutal introduction to the town's near, the hubbub of the city.  
The rhythm, which is strong now, gradually slackens during the course of the film.

Row of houses on one side of the street, translucent, races right towards the first house. Row of houses runs off right and reappears from right to left. Rows of houses facing one another, translucent, rushing in opposite directions, and the cars moving ever more swiftly, soon giving rise to FLICKERING

TEMPO TEMPO TEMPO

Quite clear – up at the top – signals:  
(Close-up.)

All automatic, au-to-ma-tic in movement

|      |      |        |      |        |
|------|------|--------|------|--------|
| ↑ up | ↑ up | ↓ down | ↑ up | ↓ down |
| UP ↑ | ↑    | DOWN ↓ | ↓    | ↓      |

Shunting yard Sidings

1 2 3 4 5  
↑ ↓ ↑ ↓

1 2 3 4 5  
↑ ↓ ↑ ↓

1 2 3 4 5  
↑ ↓ ↑ ↓

The tiger:  
Contrast between the open unimpeded rushing and the oppression, constriction. So as to accustom the public from the outset to surprises and lack of logic.

TEMPO  
TEMPO  
TEMPO  
TEMPO

Fig. 6. *Dynamic of the Metropolis*  
Moholy Nagy's sketch of a manuscript for a film



Fig. 7. Cover of Erwin Piscator's book *Das Politische Theater* (Berlin, 1929), designed by László Moholy-Nagy

## PLATE XXXII



Fig. 8. Offenbach: *The Tales of Hoffmann*, directed by Otto Klemperer and designed by László Moholy-Nagy. Berlin, Krolloper, 1929.



Fig. 9. Puccini: *Madame Butterfly*, directed by Otto Klemperer and designed by László Moholy-Nagy. Berlin, Krolloper, 1931.

## PLATE XXXIII



Fig. 10. Puccini: *Madame Butterfly*, directed by Otto Klemperer and designed by László Moholy-Nagy. Berlin, Krolloper, 1931.



Fig. 11. Puccini: *Madame Butterfly*, directed by Otto Klemperer and designed by László Moholy-Nagy. Berlin, Krolloper, 1931.

## PLATE XXXIV



Fig. 12. Moholy-Nagy's  
Light-Space Modulator, 1930.

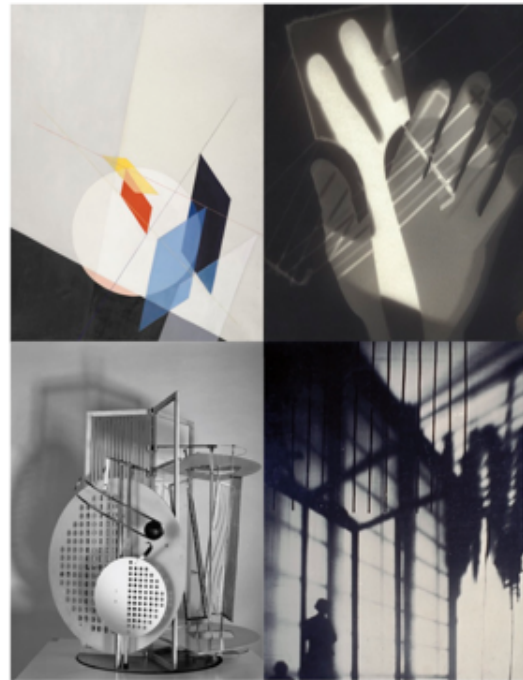


Fig. 13. Moholy-Nagy's experimenting  
with the modulation of light in various forms

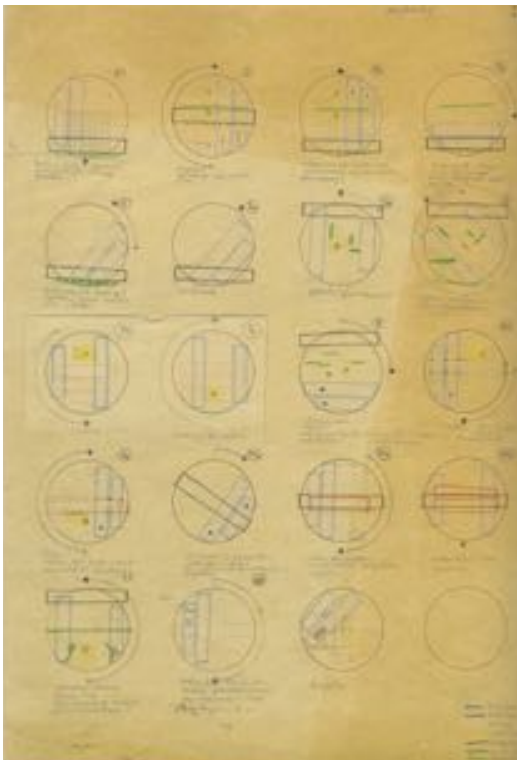


Fig. 14. Walter Mehring:  
*The Merchant of Berlin*  
directed by Erwin Piscator and  
designed by László Moholy-Nagy.  
Berlin, Volksbühne, 1929.



Fig. 15. Walter Mehring:  
*The Merchant of Berlin*  
directed by Erwin Piscator and  
designed by László Moholy-Nagy.  
Berlin, Volksbühne, 1929.

## PLATE XXXV



Fig. 16. Walter Mehring:  
*The Merchant of Berlin*  
directed by Erwin Piscator and  
designed by László Moholy-Nagy.  
Berlin, Volksbühne, 1929.



Fig. 17. Projected backdrop by László Moholy-Nagy  
for *The Merchant of Berlin* (1929)

## PLATE XXXVI

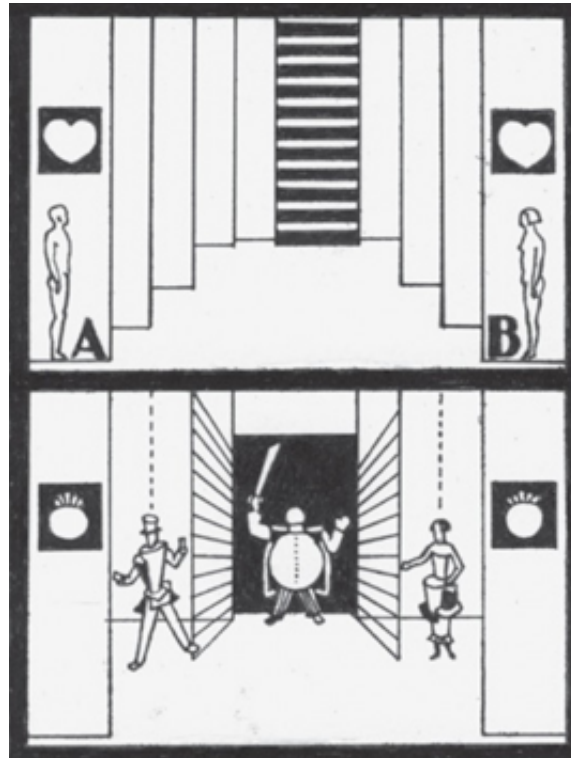


Fig. 18. Sándor Bortnyik's designs for *Green Donkey Pantomime*, Budapest, 1929.



Fig. 19. *Dance of the Machines*. Music by József Kozma, choreographed by Ágnes Kövesházi, Budapest, 1928.