

Rooms of our time: László Moholy-Nagy and the stillbirth of multi-media museums¹

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In his 1926 treatise on the philosophy of film, Rudolf Harms declares that the cinema should 'guarantee the highest degree of bodily detachedness and seek to alleviate the shortcomings of the individual's fixed and local bondedness.'² When implemented successfully, cinema is composed of nothing but 'undulating light in spaceless darkness.'³ Spaceless darkness – the neologism appears to be Harms's – is more than the absence of light; quite the contrary, it is completed only by a luminous projection. As a metonym for the entire cinematic apparatus, spaceless darkness has come to mean the extinction of the bodies of spectators, the dematerialisation of their environment, their extraction from real time and real space, and their unwitting ensnarement within an ideological apparatus beyond their control.⁴ Whilst transhistorical accounts – like that of Jean-Louis Baudry – link the cinematic apparatus all the way back to Plato's cave, media archaeologists from Theodor Adorno and Friedrich Kittler to Jonathan Crary and Jörg Brauns have located the consolidation of this *dispositif* in the nineteenth century. This technology and administration of spectatorship, however, was not widely fused with cinematic projection in Europe until the rise of the film palaces of the First World War, that is, just in time for the avant-garde.⁵

Though rarely named as such, spaceless darkness has been the *bête noire* for countless theorists and practitioners of avant-garde art and film, especially since the late 1960s. Where spaceless darkness disembodies, suspends time and space, and subsumes reality within the apparatus, it is often avowed that avant-garde art and film are corporeal, assert real time and space, and expose the working of the apparatus. Where traditional cinema engenders a darkness so immersive as to be spaceless, expanded and avant-garde cinema are understood to activate the space of reception. According to prevailing wisdom, however, this activation is undone by the reconstruction of the 'black box' cinema environment in the contemporary museum. In the new, 'mediatised' museum, it is claimed, individual works are shipwrecked amid the waves of aleatory perception and distraction, lost – as Frederic Jameson

has cogently argued – in an unmappable ‘space assembling and disassembling itself oneirically around you.’ He continues:

This is not a recovery of the body in any active and independent way, but rather its transformation into a passive and mobile field of ‘enregimentment’ in which tangible portions of the world are taken up and dropped again in the permanent inconsistency of a mesmerising sensorium.⁶

According to this account, and many others like it, the cinematic *dispositif* exchanges the discipline of the theatre for the less coercive – but no less controlling – black box museum, producing a new brand of passivity and disembodiment, distraction, and spacelessness.

Without losing sight of the constraining effects of the cinematic *dispositif* and the productive dismantling effected by artists, filmmakers, and theorists, I hope to overturn any simple opposition between passive, ‘cinematic’ immersion and active, avant-garde dismantling. The interwar avant-garde also struggled to activate the space of reception, but rather than see cinema as the problem, they often turned to cinema as the solution. Rather than negate or subvert the cinematic *dispositif*, they worked dialectically to conserve and abolish it at the same time; an intriguing model which I think it is worth retrieving. In service to this aim, I will present a constellation of performances, exhibitions, artworks, and films from roughly the year 1930. The constellation orbits around the ‘Room of Our Time’ (*Raum der Gegenwart*): an unrealised collaboration between ex-Bauhaus master László Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Dorner, the director of the Hanover Provincial Museum.⁷ If it had been brought into effect, this would have been the first permanent museum gallery to exhibit photography, film, and other technological media as the culmination of the history of art. Since it was never realised, the Dorner–Moholy-Nagy collaboration presents us with the opportunity to consider a counterfactual history, which at the same time complicates our understanding of the involvement of the historic avant-gardes with cinema and with the construction of the modern museum. The history of this unrealised collaboration, as I shall reconstruct it here, points not so much towards an archaeology of ‘media art’, but rather to an archaeology of the interwar imagination of time and space; that is, an account of the rise of a certain, ‘mediatised’ conception of time and space, constructed through photography, film, and architecture, as these are presented in the museum. To begin with, then, we must turn to an account of the museum in Hanover for which Dorner proposed this project.

Time and space in the museum

The ‘Room of Our Time’ as a permanent gallery within the Hanover museum was intended to serve as the culmination of Dorner’s sweeping survey of the

history of art from the Middle Ages to the present: a climactic culmination of the 'modern' positioned as the summation of a teleological trajectory, which would also capture the broader artistic 'will' of its epoch. To explain how this could be, I need first to describe briefly Dorner's museum philosophy and his plan for the existing galleries showing earlier historical material.

When he arrived at the Provincial Museum in Hanover, Dorner inherited a collection largely devoid of contemporary art which was organised not chronologically or geographically but according to donor, and was arranged in symmetrical salon style such that similarly sized paintings were hung in identical positions on opposite sides of a wall.⁸ Dorner radically revamped the organisation and presentation of the artworks into a series of so-called 'atmosphere rooms' (*Stimmungsräume*). Quite different from period rooms, the Riegl-inspired 'atmosphere rooms' were meant to provide insight into the artistic will (*Kunstwollen*) of earlier periods. Alois Riegl, a turn-of-the-century Viennese curator and art historian, left a legacy of expansive cultural history. Riegl's hermeneutic, adopted by Dorner and many others of his generation, insisted that 'in every period there is only *one* orientation of the *Kunstwollen*.'⁹ In 1922 Dorner published an essay in which he developed his own adaptation of Riegl's idea, stressing above all that our understanding of *Kunstwollen* is reliant on our sense of our own present time:

Kunstwollen understood theoretically is a formal, timeless conceptual definition pertaining to general aesthetics and devoid of substance.

Kunstwollen as an epiphany in the present is no more than an intuitively grasped inclination.

Kunstwollen understood historically is the series of the artworks themselves grasped with the concepts of the present [*Gegenwart*].¹⁰

This final definition is precisely what Dorner attempted to put into practice in the Hanover Provincial Museum.

In the Medieval galleries, walls were painted purple and the ceiling a deep, dark blue in order to transpose the darkness of medieval churches, which lacked luminous interiors. The Renaissance galleries, by contrast, had cool white and grey walls and ceilings which emphasised the cubic character of the room, and picture frames therein, in order to help draw attention to the rise of linear perspective and the attendant conception of painting as a window onto the world. (Not coincidentally, at the same time that Dorner was reconfiguring the galleries in Hanover, Erwin Panofsky was formulating his own Riegl-inspired theory of perspective as symbolic form, that is, perspective as a historically contingent conception of space (*Raumvorstellung*) that emerged as a conception of the world (*Weltvorstellung*).¹¹) Further along in the museum, red velvet and gold frames adorned the Baroque galleries as space lost its clear definition. Each gallery was to carry the signature – in particular, the spatial

signature – of the art of its time such that the historical vision and the works of art would animate each other in aesthetic reciprocity.

Dorner's faith in the capacity of colour and form to carry the artistic will of an age is arguably a marker of the influence of Riegl on interwar art history. The dubiousness of this programme was identified by Meyer Schapiro already in 1936, as part of his broader critique of the so-called Vienna School. According to Schapiro, the 'broad abstractions and unverifiable subtleties' of Riegl's followers are reminiscent:

of the practices of contemporary art and art criticism, in which the inventive sensibility creates its own formalised objects, delights in its own 'laws', and enjoys its absolutely private fantasy, justifying this activity as an experimental system of artistic deduction or as an intuitive perception of essences and wholes.¹²

Schapiro's rebuke was addressed toward the scholarship of Hans Sedlmayr and other Riegl devotees, but his critique could be levelled against Dorner's museum design as well. What Dorner lacked in scholarly rigour, however, he made up for in his attunedness to contemporary artistic practice. Indeed, Dorner straddled the worlds of art history, museum curating, and contemporary art – spheres that, at that time, were far less intertwined than they are today. Dorner's application of modernist aesthetics to exhibition design proved the bridge between art history and the contemporary art practice and criticism of which he was a signal champion. Parallel to his appointment as curator and, later, director of the Hanover Provincial Museum, Dorner was the director and then chairman of the *Kestnengesellschaft*, a private organisation that supported and exhibited contemporary art and literature. Under Dorner's stewardship, the *Kestnengesellschaft* shifted its focus from figurative Expressionism to abstract Constructivism. Dorner supported artists such as El Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy through commissions and exhibitions at the *Kestnengesellschaft* and became the first museum director to purchase a work by Piet Mondrian. He quickly sought means to extend his atmosphere rooms so that they would not only include works of contemporary art, but would also more fully reveal the contemporary 'artistic will'.

In order to extend the museum's evolutionary history of art to the present, Dorner commissioned El Lissitzky to design a final gallery for contemporary abstract painting and sculpture. In the famous *Abstract Cabinet*, works by Pablo Picasso, Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, and others, were rigged to mobile casings that could be moved up and down by visitors to reveal further paintings behind. More importantly, solid walls were replaced with a variable white-grey-black lath-system that changed in accordance with the position and movement of the viewer. Thus, the ground behind Lissitzky's *Proun 1C* (1919) would change from white to grey to black, as one moved

from left to right before the painting. For Lissitzky, the primary goal was the activation of the viewer.¹³ For critics such as Siegfried Giedion, however, the result was a dematerialisation of the physical environment.¹⁴ Whereas cubic or gold frames in the earlier galleries had summoned perspectival space and its upheaval, Dorner did away with frames altogether in the Abstract Cabinet in order to signal the end of paintings as windows onto the world. In Dorner's estimation, the Abstract Cabinet marked a major step forward in his era's conception of space (*Raumvorstellung*): no longer bound to the laws of perspective or the window on the world delineated by the picture frame, abstract painting and Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet helped inaugurate a space that was multi-perspectival and thus immaterial and transparent, composed of streams of movement and energy.¹⁵ For Dorner, the infinite, dissolving, dematerialising, optical space produced by the Abstract Cabinet corresponded exactly to the works within it, such that – in Maria Gough's penetrating analysis – dematerialisation was the atmosphere of this final atmosphere room.¹⁶

Dorner situated the initial dissolution of traditional perspective in the Romantic period, that is, as part of a continuous history of painting. After the Abstract Cabinet was completed, however, he became progressively more convinced that the triumph over perspective in the twentieth-century unfolded in dialogue with a new medium: film. Because of film and its introduction of the temporal fourth dimension, Dorner argued, 'It has become necessary to replace the fixed vantage point by a relative, moving one' such that painting was now obligated 'to absorb the illusion of generally mobile space' (a task even more difficult than the transposition of a three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional picture).¹⁷ Successful paintings by Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Lyonel Feininger, and others were composed of 'transparent planes ... without massiveness or weight', 'crystal without substance', 'relative vantage point', and 'massless tension'.¹⁸ Dematerialisation was but one facet of a new conception of space tied to the mobility, transparency, weightlessness, immateriality, and multi-perspectivalism of cinematic space, which Dorner hoped to transpose into his museum.

This is where Dorner and Lissitzky parted ways. Like Dorner, Lissitzky praised the 'imaginary space' constructed in abstract films like Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony*. 'However', and this was Lissitzky's primary criticism, 'the cinema depends on dematerialised surface projection using merely a single facet of our visual faculties.'¹⁹ Like so many avant-garde artists engaged with film, Lissitzky wanted to do away with the two-dimensional surface projection. But unlike Dorner – or, for that matter Giedion and Moholy-Nagy – Lissitzky utterly resisted dematerialisation, disembodiment, and pure opticality, and strove instead toward a paradoxical 'amaterial materiality'.²⁰ Lissitzky demanded the destruction of walls in order to disrupt contemplative paintings and activate the body of the viewer. Dorner, to the contrary,

savoured the shimmering walls as part of a new experience of space governed by simultaneity, multiple perspectives, transparency, and immateriality.

Where Lissitzky saw the dematerialisation and opticality of film as its fatal flaws, Dorner was convinced that those very same qualities pointed the way forward. In light of the immateriality and transparency on offer in cinema, Dorner went so far as to question the longevity of painting as a viable form of spatial experimentation. But because film was still dependent on the camera, with its linear perspective, and was presented frontally, like theatre, Dorner acknowledged that, 'for the time being, painting and film – each with its advantages and disadvantages – run side-by-side after the ideal representation of the new experience of reality.'²¹ With Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet*, Dorner felt he had pushed the new conception of space as far as painting would allow; but, in 1930, his museum still lacked the conquests of cinematic space. Upon his visit to the 1930 *Exposition de la société des artistes décorateurs* in the Grand Palais in Paris, Dorner believed he had found a solution.

The Exposition de la société des artistes décorateurs, Paris, 1930

For the first time since the Great War, the German Werkbund sent a delegation, led by Walter Gropius, to the annual French design exhibition. Under the rubric of life in a high-rise, Gropius, Herbert Bayer, Marcel Breuer, and Moholy-Nagy each designed rooms. The room designed by Moholy-Nagy, and seen by Dorner in Paris, set the template for the eventual design of the 'Room of Our Time'. Indeed, many of the exhibits in it were the same as those later included in Dorner's plan. As described by Siegfried Giedion, amongst the highly varied elements in Moholy-Nagy's *salle deux* (room two) (figure 1.1) were examples and photographs of modern German lighting; life-size figurines from Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*; a projection room, replete with rows of chairs and walls of Trolite – a trade name for cellulose acetate – which contained 'Deutschland Reportage', a looped slide-show of German industrial design; models of Gropius's Total Theatre and Moholy-Nagy's 1929 production of *The Tales of Hoffmann*; photographs by Lotte Jacobi of Moholy-Nagy's 1929 production of *The Merchant of Berlin* for Piscator; and, finally, his *Light-Prop for an Electrical Stage*, constructed for the occasion with the help of the architect Stefan Sebök and the AEG theatre department.²² These would be the very images, objects, and installation techniques which Dorner and Moholy-Nagy subsequently planned to include in the 'Room of Our Time'.²³

There can be little doubt that it was Moholy-Nagy's extensive engagement with the new media of photographic reproduction and projection that piqued Dorner's interest. In addition, perhaps more subtly influential was the way that the whole installation was rendered under the sign of cinema – as evidenced by Bayer's film-strip-layout of its content for the exhibition catalogue (figure



László Moholy-Nagy, *salle deux*, in *Section allemande*, Werkbund Exhibition, Paris, 1930.

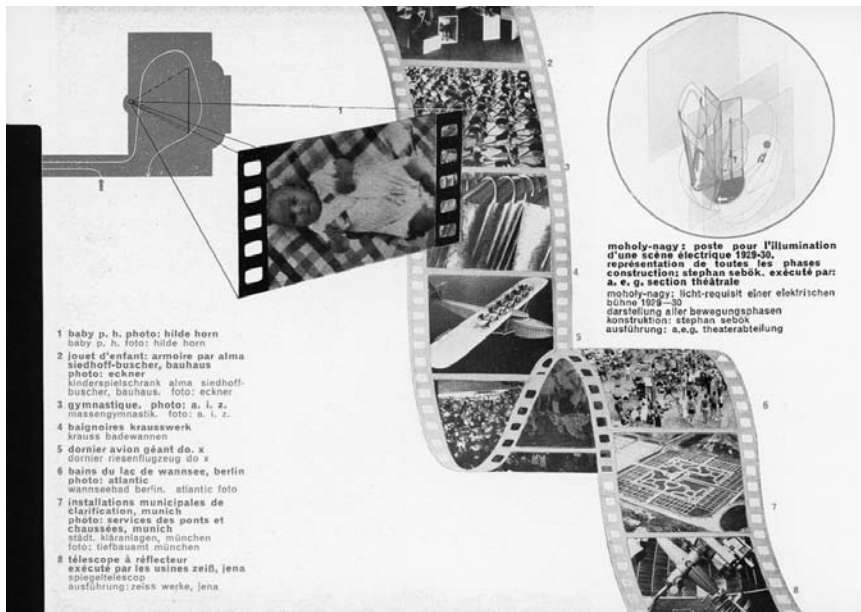
1.1

1.2). What is certain is that Dorner reviewed the exhibition for the *Hannoverscher Anzeiger* and contacted Moholy-Nagy in the hope of obtaining the exhibited objects for the final gallery of his museum. Dorner wanted Moholy-Nagy's *salle deux* to serve as the basis for the integration of photo-murals and theatre designs, light props and film clips, into his museum. He thus entrusted Moholy-Nagy to create the first modern multi-media exhibition space in an art museum. A notable consequence of this is that, even as the Provincial Museum maintained an enviable collection of Old Masters and offered the foremost presentation of recent abstract paintings, its final gallery would have been entirely devoid of unique originals – the logical outcome of Dorner's controversial 1929 Kestnergesellschaft exhibition where he dared amateurs and connoisseurs to distinguish original drawings and watercolours from their technologically fabricated facsimiles.²⁴

Dorner contacted manufacturers, corporations, and businesses in an effort to secure materials, objects, and images lent – but not given – to the Paris exhibition, and an engineer named Luderer drew up axonometric plans for the room's museological transposition (figure 1.3). The 'Room of Our Time' was to measure 5.56 by 8.12 metres, with an approximate height of 4 metres.²⁵ It would probably have been located in a reconfigured gallery 44, such that

a visitor would enter unswervingly from Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet (gallery 45) and would exit directly into the main cupola.²⁶ The first impression of the gallery would have been an undulating, transparent wall – a section of the wall employed in the Paris Werkbund exhibition – which would direct viewers' eyes to the right half of the room as it guided their bodies leftward. Thus separated from the outset, body and vision would have been reunited through a series of interactive displays, where a push of the button set in motion film-clips or an endless band of backlit photographs. (Such displays would indeed have helped the body to emerge as a mobile field of 'enregistrement', to return to Jameson's phrase, though we may doubt its professed passivity.) The curved, transparent wall encountered upon entry would have been echoed in the circular, transparent glass plates suspended with wires and used to display sculptural and design objects. By seemingly freeing the room's sole tangible objects from the constraints of gravity, the suspended plates would have helped to produce an atmosphere of lightness.

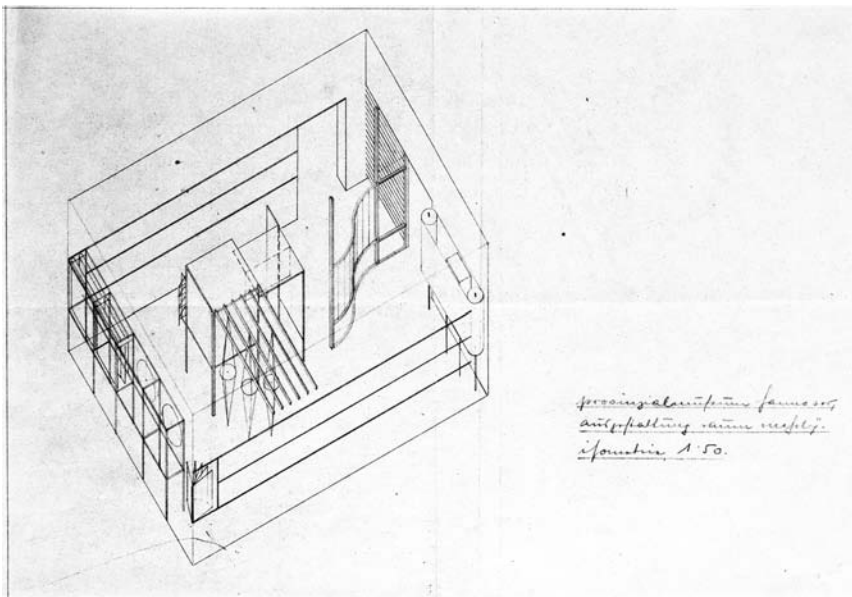
The remaining elements in the room would largely have been constructed around the display of images and would have followed a near-symmetrical layout. Metre-high photo-murals would have traversed both long walls; their content was never fixed but they would probably have been similar to the photographs presented in Paris, which depicted German design and architecture



1.2 Herbert Bayer, *Section allemande* catalogue page depicting the content of Moholy-Nagy's *salle deux*, 1930.

as well as avant-garde theatre. At the near-centre of the room, a black box with two open sides would have housed a central screen on which slides were projected: from the left, showing images of modern transportation and, from the right, snapshots of athletes in action; the two together displaying mechanical and human motion. The corners of the room would have proffered an endless band of backlit photographs; an aluminium poster rack for the display of new typography; vitrines for models, plans, and/or production photographs of theatre; and finally a wall text – written by Dorner and mounted in metal or wood type on nickel wires or wooden laths – would have asked: ‘What does history teach us for the present [*Gegenwart*]?’²⁷ Most important of all, where Moholy-Nagy’s *salle deux* in the Paris exhibition had invoked cinema without exhibiting it, the ‘Room of Our Time’ was to include a pair of black, private viewing consoles at the precise midpoint of the gallery, on the wall opposite the entrance. The literal centrality of cinema in this planned display was essential in focusing and emphasising the centrality of the cinematic theme from amongst the miscellany of objects and images on display.

Although the precise content of the ‘Room of Our Time’ cannot be ascertained definitively, three sets of projects loomed especially large in the Paris Werkbund exhibition and deserve sustained attention here: the Total Theatre designed for Piscator by Gropius; theatrical and opera productions by



László Moholy-Nagy, *Raum der Gegenwart*, 1930 (isometric drawing by Luderer).

1.3

Moholy-Nagy and Piscator; and Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. This constellation of theatre designs – from costumes and lighting to sets and architecture – not only delineates Moholy-Nagy's primary focus in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but hints at the underlying dialectic at play in the 'Room of Our Time'. In order to draw this out I will discuss each of these projects in turn. Above all what they illustrate, as I shall show, is the way in which Moholy-Nagy and other key figures of the interwar avant-garde used film and projected light not only to display images, but also to remake the spatial environment of the theatre.

Like many of his contemporaries, German theatre director Erwin Piscator worked to bridge the gap between stage and auditorium. What set him apart was his attempt to do so through cinematic means. After introducing film into mid-1920s productions like *Trotz alledem!*, Piscator turned to Bauhaus director Walter Gropius to design a total theatre that would place film at the centre of the scenery and the audience in the centre of the film.²⁸ The result would have allowed for the systematic deployment of three distinct stage types: in the round, like a circus; semi-circular, like a Greek or Roman amphitheatre; and the deep stage, which separates itself off from the audience, turns the sets into surface projections, and leaves the spectator, according to Gropius, 'inactive'.²⁹ This final incarnation – the so-called *Guckkastenbühne* so despised by the avant-garde – served as the basis for contemporary cinemas. Nevertheless, Piscator and Gropius turned primarily to film to redeem this nearly irredeemable stage. Gropius expressed particular interest in the use of film, projections, and screens in order to replace real theatre props and *coulisses*: 'for in a neutral, dark stage space', Gropius argued, 'one can build with light using abstract or representational light media'.³⁰ By extending screens between the twelve supporting columns surrounding the audience and synchronising the twelve projectors, so Gropius concluded in a pronouncement quoted across popular and trade presses:

[the total theatre] can set the entire auditorium – walls and ceiling – within the film ... [I]n place of the projection surfaces in use until now, a projection space emerges. The real auditorium, neutralised through the absence of light, becomes, through the power of projected light, a space of illusion, the site of the scenic events themselves.³¹

Gropius envisioned cinema not as a surface projection, but as an illusionistic space 'filled by film'.³² Screens are multiplied into oblivion, surpassed by an immersive cinematic space.

When Piscator failed to find the necessary funds to erect Gropius's Total Theatre, he turned to Moholy-Nagy to realise a similar vision within the constraints of his more modestly outfitted theatre on Nollendorfplatz. Already in 1925, Moholy-Nagy announced a Theatre of Totality (*Theater der Totalität*).³³ Published alongside essays by Oskar Schlemmer and Farkas Molnár,

Moholy-Nagy's text calls for 'mechanical eccentrics' to replace actors, that is, for the optical- or phonetic-mechanical reproduction of thought through films, gramophones, and loudspeakers. To facilitate not only 'surface films' but also 'spatial light displays', the stage in Moholy-Nagy's Theatre of Totality is composed largely of flat surfaces or linear surface demarcations; a full-size screen for rear-projection is enhanced through on-stage walls covered with white canvases or screens that capture and deflect coloured light projections. Moholy-Nagy had no architectural training. His most elaborate sketches for the Theatre of Totality appear more like filmstrips than blueprints. But many of his aspirations anticipate the plans of Gropius, which were elaborated more fully the following year. Moholy-Nagy republished his speculative essay in the *Bauhaus* journal in 1927, as Gropius's more viable Total Theatre came to prominence; and once again in 1929, in the February issue of the German national opera magazine.³⁴ This final publication coincided with Moholy-Nagy's first realisation of a theatre of totality through the integration of light, film, screens, and space in a production of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* for the experimental Kroll Opera in Berlin.

Officially known as the Staatsoper am Platz der Republik, the Kroll Opera – as it was affectionately called by Berliners – existed but four short years: from autumn 1927 until 3 July 1931, the day it was closed due to political, economic, and bureaucratic pressures. During that time, the Kroll Opera assembled some of the most adventurous and stunning opera productions of the interwar period. Under the leadership of conductor Otto Klemperer, the Kroll Opera attracted leading figures from the worlds of music, theatre, art, and criticism: Alexander von Zemlinsky, Gustaf Gründgens, Giorgio de Chirico, Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor Adorno conducted, directed, designed, or wrote about groundbreaking performances of Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and *Glückliche Hand* and Paul Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück* (Klemperer, Curjel, Moholy-Nagy, 1930), as well radical reinterpretations of opera standards by Mozart, Wagner, and Puccini (including Moholy-Nagy's *Madame Butterfly*).

The Tales of Hoffmann proved to be a veritable light laboratory for Moholy-Nagy, providing spaces and resources otherwise unavailable to him, as he often and bitterly complained. Among his great coups, Moholy-Nagy was able to direct short cinematic sequences for the production and exhibit them in any way he saw fit, and these provided him with his best opportunity to experiment with light creation (*Lichtgestaltung*) through cinematic and other means. The effect these experiments had on the audience is difficult to measure. Bernhard Diebold, among the most distinguished Weimar theatre critics and an early supporter of abstract film, seemed unpersuaded. In his extended review, he repeatedly opposes 'Paris', a metonym for Offenbach and the French reception of German Romanticism, to 'Dessau', the site of the Bauhaus, which Moholy-

Nagy had left a year before but with which he was still strongly associated. Where 'Paris' explores the fantastic, 'Dessau', with its love of glass, stands for purity to the point of sterility. Diebold doubts the two can ever merge, even as he acknowledges the audience's tremendous applause and empathises with the artistic desire to find a modern idiom for Romantic fantasy. By the time he arrives at the short film of the evil incarnation of the third act, Dr Miracle, it appears that there can be no synthesis of Romantic music and modernist sets:

The musician Offenbach lost himself to pathos-filled ecstasy in the attic of a Spitzweg idyll. What is Dessau to do now? In the best case scenario, Dessau constructs an atelier with a glass roof; on a white surface, a film of Dr Mabuse (or Miracle): gigantic devil's eyes blinking, his convulsing ghost-hand snatching at the soul of the dying Antonia. Watch out: close-up! ... But the intimacy? The magic is intrusive. There are very beautiful demons in the details. But in the space as a whole, the singing-soul of this Schubert maiden is orphaned and fades away.³⁵

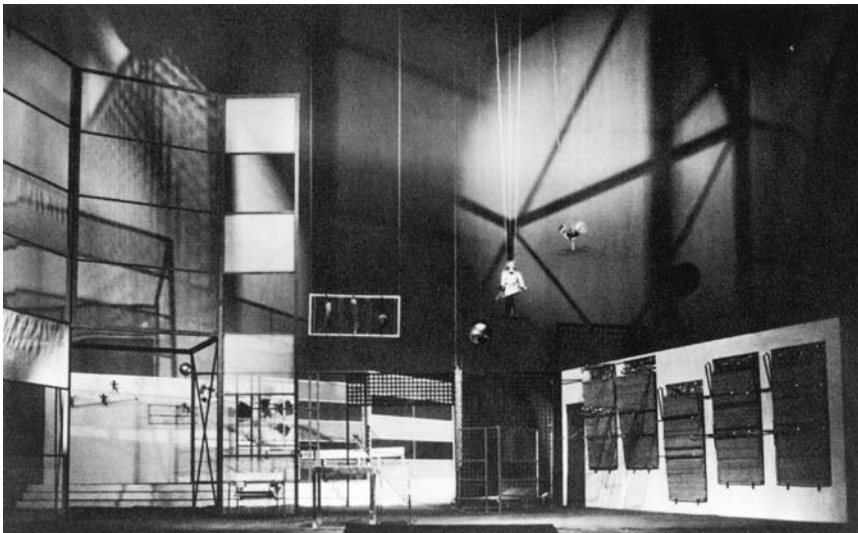
Diebold's sarcasm – 'watch out: close-up!' – belittles the film sequence even as it tries to make sense of it: prismatic exposures become blinking eyes, the hand appears ghostly and trembling. He dismisses the space as mismatched for the Romantic heroine. And yet Diebold is receptive to the otherworldliness of bare space filled with little more than light and shadow. Of the second act he writes that:

The 'decoration' [*Dekoration*, i.e. scenery sets] has nothing to decorate. It need only be 'space.' But a magical space. And rarefied magical air in the stratosphere. Romanticism with its cushioned furniture and drapes was merely a luxurious salon. Here the fairytale cannot be compared to reality. With its immaterial construction-logic, Dessau innocently accommodates the sung irreality of the opera performers. In the no-longer-material [*Nichtmehr-Materiellen*], opera and Dessau meet.³⁶

If Diebold had paid closer attention to the 'white surface' on which the Dr Miracle film was projected, he might have found yet another meeting point. For, as was otherwise clear to him, Moholy-Nagy's conception of light creation through film is rooted less in the image than in the environment. The sets – rather than the film images – were Moholy-Nagy's ultimate concern. The musicologist and critic Adolf Weißmann did not fail to notice that the third act of *Hoffmann* 'gives us something new: a construction illuminated diffusely from above, covered in an angular screen.'³⁷ Weißmann saw more or less the same on-screen images as Diebold – a trembling hand and ghostly face – but realised that the innovation came in the form of a screen. Herein lay Moholy-Nagy's innovation. And yet it was by no means the highpoint of his production.

In the catalogue to the Paris Werkbund exhibition and in the final pages of his 1929 book *From Material to Architecture* – later translated into English as *The New Vision* – Moholy-Nagy reproduces a photograph, taken by Lucia Moholy, of the sets from the first act of *Tales of Hoffmann* (figure 1.4). Visible are subtle steel and canvas modulators of shadow and electric light, which are cast and reflected on the surrounding walls. They are not only screens, but also props for an electrically illuminated stage: a construction whose steel rectangles modulate light and shadows; a form that doubles as a frame through which to see those light and shadow effects. Rather than construct a series of screens for the reception of images – which would function as projection surfaces – Moholy-Nagy identifies this stage set as ‘an attempt to create space out of light and shadow.’³⁸ Even Diebold admits as much: ‘the indubitable highpoint of the evening: the first act ... The Empire-salon of yore has become a laboratory in white. The entire stage space lies naked before the white horizon upon which vague shadows play.’³⁹

Later that year, Piscator entrusted Moholy-Nagy with the costumes, lighting, sets, and films – including several shorts shot for the occasion by Alex Strasser – for his production of Walter Mehring’s *The Merchant of Berlin* (*Der Kaufmann von Berlin*). Piscator must have seen an ally in the ex-Bauhaus master’s effort to create a total theatre. And, at least in this respect, he could not have been disappointed. The highly charged political content provoked vitriolic attacks from the Right and the Left,⁴⁰ but even hostile critics acknowledged that Moholy-Nagy’s production ‘brings Piscator one step closer to the total theatre toward which he strives.’⁴¹



László Moholy-Nagy, *Tales of Hoffmann*, Act I, 1929.

1.4

But what was the Total Theatre toward which Piscator strove, and what role did film play therein? Piscator later described the unrealised Total Theatre as an architecture infused with technology that would confront the fundamental problem of 'abolishing the distance between stage and auditorium so as to obtain the public's active participation.'⁴² In a 1927 article unambiguously titled 'What I want', he declared the need to 'explode the circumscribed space of the proscenium stage and open it to four-dimensional theatre with a living *coulisse*'. 'The living *coulisse*', he continued, is none other than 'film.'⁴³ In Moholy-Nagy's sets for *The Merchant of Berlin*, that living *coulisse* was pushed from the back and wings of the stage to the front: a transparent scrim onto which film was projected. The result, as Diebold observed in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was that 'a wall of shadows that lay at the rear of Plato's cave was forced from the background to the foreground' such that '[t]he fourth wall before the audience – which, until now, was no wall at all – suddenly becomes visible.'⁴⁴ In other words, the proscenium or deep stage is exploded and, with it, the distance between stage and audience collapses.

Although commissioned to design a number of theatre and opera productions, Moholy-Nagy was hardly a man of the theatre. And although sympathetic to Leftist causes, Moholy-Nagy's primary public persona in Germany was never political. In contradistinction to Piscator, political theatre is hardly the rubric that best describes his work. In *Das Politische Theater*, Piscator's 1929 overview of his theatre practice and theory, the director highlights the use of the recent past to revolutionise the present.⁴⁵ When Moholy-Nagy mused on the same joint production, however, it was as an example of new space-light relations.⁴⁶ Moholy-Nagy and Piscator shared primarily an interest in constructing space out of 'steel and screens.'⁴⁷ Moholy-Nagy quickly exhibited photographs of his sets for *The Merchant of Berlin* and he slated them for installation in the 'Room of Our Time' – only not under the aegis of political theatre.

'Light-space'

Moholy-Nagy's phrase 'space-light-relations' (*Raumlicht-Relationen*) – a term he introduced in the months leading up to the Paris exhibition – hints at the underlying organising principle of the 'Room of Our Time'. Given Moholy-Nagy's emphasis on creation in light (*Lichtgestaltung*) in the Paris Werkbund exhibition and Dorner's preoccupation with conceptions of space (*Raumvorstellungen*) in the Hanover Provincial Museum, it follows that the atmosphere of this would-be final atmosphere room was conceived under the rubric of space-light or, to adopt Moholy-Nagy's preferred term in the years before and after his collaboration with Dorner, light-space (*Lichtraum*). But what is the definition of light-space and how might it serve as the atmosphere of a gallery or the artistic will of an age?

Moholy-Nagy's writings from the period provide scant evidence. He probably adopted the term from Hans Richter, who employed it extensively to describe the unique space constructed cinematically out of light and time.⁴⁸ In his epoch-making treatise, *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), Moholy-Nagy invokes light-space in order to describe the next task of optical creation: 'to expand the technological horizon of a light-space construction [*Lichtraumgliederung*] hitherto created only with great difficulty'.⁴⁹ The fact that Moholy-Nagy quickly – if only temporarily – abandoned the term 'light-space' can be attributed to a petty feud with Richter as well as a certain disappointment in the latter's early abstract films.⁵⁰ But he remained committed to practices of light-space – or space-light relations – in his painting, photography, film, sculpture, theatre, and writing. Indeed, the centrality of light-space to the 'Room of Our Time' would find its most striking validation only retrospectively. For the undisputed centrepiece of the gallery was the *Light-Prop for an Electrical Stage*, later and more famously dubbed the *Light-Space Modulator*.

As exhibited in Paris and envisioned for Hanover, the *Light-Prop* bears little resemblance to the kinetic sculpture now exhibited with ever greater frequency. As meticulously enumerated by Moholy-Nagy himself, the *Light-Prop* was to be housed in a 120-centimetre-square box, with a circular opening on one side, flanked by rings of coloured electric light bulbs.⁵¹ The *Light-Prop* was never intended to be viewed as a free-standing kinetic sculpture. Rather, Moholy-Nagy directs the viewer to the light and shadow effects cast on the rear wall of the enclosed box. Should the performance take place in a darkened room, Moholy-Nagy notes parenthetically, the box's rear wall can be removed and the colour and shadow projections can be displayed on a screen of any size.

Even when Moholy-Nagy presented the *Light-Prop* as a kinetic sculpture, it was the light and shadow effects that take precedence. Moholy-Nagy honed this relationship in an extended caption in the 1938 edition of *The New Vision*, the only edition to address and reproduce images of the *Light-Prop*:

This kinetic sculpture was designed for automatic projection of changing chiaroscuro and luminous effects. It produces a great range of shadow interpenetrations and simultaneously intercepting patterns in a sequence of slow flickering rhythm. The reflecting surfaces of the apparatus are discs made of polished metal slotted with regularly spaced perforations, and sheets of glass, celluloid and screens of different media.⁵²

Projection, luminous effects, flickering rhythm, celluloid, screen, media – this is the language of cinema adopted to the realm of sculpture. The overlapping layers, mechanical repetitions, bright reflections, and dark cast shadows of the *Light-Prop* anticipate the use of double exposure, serial repetition, high

contrast, and negative footage in Moholy-Nagy's famous film of the *Light-Prop*, namely, *Cinematic Light Display: Black, White, Grey* (*Lichtspiel: Schwarz, weiss, grau*). Contrary to received wisdom (implanted in the discourse by the artist himself), Moholy-Nagy's nearly abstract film was not completed until 1932 (and probably was not begun in earnest until 1931) and could not have been included in the 'Room of Our Time', as originally conceived.⁵³ But the aesthetic kernel of the film lies embryonically in the *Light-Prop*, for in its multiple layers, repetitions, reflections, and shadows, the *Light-Prop* makes over the pro-filmic – that which lies before the camera – according to the dicta of the filmic, that is, the manipulations available only to the cinematic medium. The editors of the Hungarian journal *Korunk* (Our Age) nearly say as much in an editorial note appended to a published lecture (which accompanied a screening of the *Lichtspiel* film), which Moholy-Nagy presented at venues throughout Germany. They write that 'rather than the apparatus, its effects – shadows, superimpositions, and light effects – play the lead in *Lichtspiel: schwarz, weiss, grau*.'⁵⁴

The *Light-Prop for an Electrical Stage* or *Light-Space Modulator*, in other words, is a film projector without film, a realisation of Moholy-Nagy's 1925 petition for an expanded light-space construction. In this context, one might equate the circular openings of the *Light-Prop's* enclosing box with Moholy-Nagy's mid-1920s circular diagram for poly-cinema (reproduced in *Painting, Photography, Film* in 1925). And there is no question that a vital link exists between these two projects. Yet there is an even more radical proposition that has yet to be considered, namely that the square box functions as a portable movie theatre or expanded cinema. For in the absence of a darkened space, the interior of the box itself must function as the white screens onto which the coloured light-and-shadow play unfold. In this respect, the *Lichtspiel* film proves an instructive model for viewing the *Light-Prop*. Moholy-Nagy films the *Light-Prop* and its shadows from countless angles and uses a wide range of techniques – including double exposure, slow motion, and negative images – but he rarely deviates from the extreme close-up as his preferred shot scale or camera distance. If the film models the proper viewing distance of the *Light-Prop* – if 'the reflection is more beautiful than the original', as Moholy-Nagy ostensibly suggested – then viewers might be interpreted as being encouraged to thrust their heads through the circular aperture and enter the light-space of the *Light-Space Modulator*, to see not the apparatus, but its effects – shadows, superimpositions, and light.⁵⁵ This action, further encouraged by the constricted gallery space in the 'Room of Our Time', would enable viewers to abandon their physical environment and enter the box so as to immerse themselves in a realm of light and shadow, colour and movement.

In the lecture and screening he presented in the early 1930s, Moholy-Nagy subsumed the abstract films of Oskar Fischinger, Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann,

and Richter – not to mention his own – beneath the rubric of ‘spatiality’ (*Räumlichkeit*) or a ‘culture of space’ (*Raumkultur*).⁵⁶ But the nature of this ‘spatiality’ remained as ambiguous as ever. I have argued that ‘light-space’ is the best term with which to understand the ‘spatiality’ toward which Moholy-Nagy and others strove. But in order to grasp the culture of space which gave rise to light-space, a second term is required. That term, as should now be obvious, is latent in the first: light-space is nothing if not the precise dialectical counterpart to ‘spaceless darkness’. What is more, just as this second term is present dialectically in the first, so too is its physical manifestation present within the ‘Room of Our Time’. For immediately opposite the enclosed *Light-Prop* in the design of the ‘Room of Our Time’ were two similarly circular apertures in which avant-garde films were to be projected at the push of a button. Like the *Light-Prop*, the films in the consoles would be best experienced ‘inside’ their enclosing: not viewed from a distance and framed by the circular openings, but rather by immersing one’s head so as to enclose it within the dark interior. Where the *Light-Prop* illuminates all six surrounding surfaces – doing away with the single surface projection in favour of an immersive cinematic space – the film consoles would enclose a single, luminous screen on which the films of Eggeling, Vertov, or Eisenstein would be rear-projected. Where the *Light-Prop* dissolves itself in favour of cinema without film, the immersive darkness of the film consoles would appear to negate space in favour of the projected, filmic image. In short, where the enclosed *Light-Prop* constructs light-space, the diminutively cavernous film consoles would distil spaceless darkness. Neither the peep shows of early cinema nor the multi-screen spaces envisioned elsewhere in the ‘Room of Our Time’, the film consoles were interwar film palaces writ small.

Just as the ‘Room of Our Time’ multiplies the potentialities of light-space – from Piscator’s scrimms and Gropius’s architecture to Moholy-Nagy’s *Light-Prop* – so too was it designed to engage a multiplicity of spaceless darkneses: not only the spaceless darkness variously appropriated and challenged by the selected avant-garde films, but also – to offer a final example – the theatre of Oskar Schlemmer. Due to space restrictions, the life-size figurines from Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet* exhibited at the Werkbund exhibition could not be incorporated into the ‘Room of Our Time’. But archival evidence makes clear that photographs of the production – also included in the *salle deux* in Paris – would have found their way to Hanover. And there can be no doubt that Schlemmer’s ballet would have found particular resonance at the Provincial Museum. For each of the ballet’s three acts had its own mood (*Sinn*), highlighted by a strikingly coloured background: first, ‘cheerful-burlesque’ in lemon-yellow; second, ‘festive-solemn’ in pink; and, finally, ‘mystical-fantastic’ in black.⁵⁷ The synaesthetic correspondence of colour and meaning was a familiar trope in German avant-garde circles at least since Wassily Kandinsky’s

paintings, performances, and writings of the early 1910s. But, given Dorner's insistence on colour as the dominant factor in conceptions of space, the inclusion of figurines or photographs from the *Triadic Ballet* would function as a commentary on Dorner's own exhibition techniques.

Schlemmer's conception of theatre begins with the agon between the human organism and the cubic, abstract space of the stage. When the latter conforms to the laws of the former, the result is naturalistic-illusionistic theatre. The inverse – humans revamped according to the dicta of the cubic stage – results in abstract theatre, Schlemmer's theatre.⁵⁸ The dancer-human (*Tänzer Mensch*), according to Schlemmer, obeys the laws of the body and of space. And none of Schlemmer's figures negotiate the boundary between the human body and abstract space more emphatically than 'the abstract one' (*Abstrakte*). Moholy-Nagy's *salle deux* included three life-size figures, all from the final, black scene of the ballet. Similarly, the two photographs from the *Triadic Ballet* included in the Paris exhibition came from the final scene: the first from the so-called wire dance and the second, positioned directly beside the undulating, transparent wall: the *Abstrakte*. Schlemmer likened the figure to a Boschian creation and considered it to be the 'main attraction' of the ballet. Initially slated for the first dance of the final act, the *Abstrakte* ultimately served as its grand finale. Due to the difficulty of navigating the costume, Schlemmer would often perform the role himself. More than any other, this costume is fully integrated into its background. It is, in many respects, metonymic of Schlemmer's larger project. In black-and-white photographic reproduction, the costume's colourful details are lost completely. What remains are a striking right leg (covered in white felt), half of a 'robotic' head, a cylindrical right hand with a white halo, the linear remains of a right arm, and a pronounced breastplate. The rest of the body is clad in black and disappears against the black backdrop (not unlike a subject in Marey's chronophotographs). The result is a figure that literally dances in and out of the spaceless darkness, a *pas de deux* between the human body and abstract space.

Spaceless darkness and the mediatised museum

Unfortunately, there is not space enough in this essay to examine in detail each of the exhibited works. But neither was there space enough to exhibit them properly in the 'Room of Our Time'. Instead – and this is my central argument – the 'Room of Our Time' or *Raum der Gegenwart*, was to be an exhibition space not of different media *works* but of clashing and dialogic contemporary media *spaces* – what might be described as a *Raum der gegenwärtigen Räume*, a room/space of contemporary rooms/spaces. Each of the other galleries in the museum worked to integrate its artistic content into a

‘cohesive unity’, as a catalogue from the period triumphantly declared.⁵⁹ The vehicle for this cohesive integration was a common conception of space. This spatial common denominator is carried over in the ‘Room of Our Time’. But it is attained through radically different means. In place of a singular conception of space and an amorphous *Kunstwollen*, all the spaces foregrounded in the ‘Room of Our Time’ partook in an avant-garde dialectic of different spaces which rose to prominence alongside the cinematic *dispositif*: spaceless darkness and light-space.

This shift – never adopted or even stated explicitly by Dorner or Moholy-Nagy – must be unpacked, even if only schematically, for the implications are manifold. Dorner’s Hegelian-Rieglian history of art, apparent in his construction of the rest of the galleries in the Hanover Museum, was turned on its head by the model of space which emerged from the planned ‘Room of Our Time’ – in deed, if not in word. In Dorner’s reading of Riegl, conceptions of space (*Raumvorstellungen*) were the product of a conception of the world (*Weltvorstellung*) or artistic will (*Kunstwollen*). Thus, for example, in various unpublished brochures and lectures, Dorner identifies the German Romantic conception of space as a hybrid condition (*Zwitterzustand*), at once bound to – and struggling to free itself from – traditional Renaissance perspective. Early Romanticism attempted to explode the boundaries of perspective through extreme gaps between foreground and background (*überraumlicher Kontakt*) as well as the incorporation of displaced views into a single coherent image. The result – as evidenced not only in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and Erdmann Hummel but also in the panoramas, dioramas, and pleoramas of the period – initiated the breakdown of traditional perspective that would dominate art and visual culture until the end of Expressionism. Similarly, the widespread success of film as a medium can best be explained, according to Dorner, by its ability to satisfy a new conception of space, composed – like abstract art – not through linear perspective so much as immateriality, interpenetration, weightlessness, multi-perspectivalism, and dynamism.⁶⁰

Dorner thus constructed a dialectical history in which art expressed changing rather than timeless ideals, partook in broad conceptions of the world, and advanced along a progressive, evolutionary course. Dorner, like Riegl or Panofsky, preferred not to stipulate that this dialectical change was powered by Hegel’s dialectical spirit or *Geist*, but he left little doubt that, in Hegelian fashion, artistic will preceded the multifarious aesthetic expressions of an age, whether painting, music, pleorama, or film. Dorner’s ‘gigantic novel’ of art history betrayed no fissures between the immateriality and dynamism in Lissitzky’s post-perspectival paintings and demonstration rooms, on the one hand, and Moholy-Nagy’s dematerialised energy, on the other.⁶¹ Had Dorner completed the ‘Room of Our Time’, however, his exhibition design would have told a different story.

In the Provincial Museum, Classicism was housed in a greenish-light-grey-blue room. The walls of the Romantic gallery were painted dark-greish-violet tones. Impressionist paintings were set against a dirty white. In contradistinction to the Medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque rooms, Dorner offers no indication as to how these colours and forms convey the respective conceptions of space.⁶² Panoramas, dioramas, and pleoramas are central to Dorner's history of Romantic art, but they are nowhere to be seen in the Romantic gallery. The Romantic conception of space as presented in the museum is an amorphous projection of modernist colour and form rather than a media archaeology of sites and conditions of reception. And yet the seeds of such an archaeology lay buried in Dorner's (verbal) narrative. Jonathan Crary completes the missing argument:

Forms as seemingly different as Daguerre's Diorama, Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth, the Kaiserpanorama, the Kinetoscope and, of course, cinema as it took shape in the late 1890s are other [in addition to the panorama] key nineteenth-century examples of the image as an autonomous luminous screen of attraction, whose apparitional appeal is an effect of both its uncertain spatial location and its detachment from a broader visual field.⁶³

Updated for the interwar period, this list might also include: Trolite rooms for the projection of slides, backlit endless bands for the exhibition of photographs, black-and-white cubic enclosures with circular openings for the reception of light in motion, a Total Theatre comprised of twelve synchronised projectors and 360 degrees of screens, and a darkened stage which highlights abstract, moving forms against a black backdrop. More than images, the 'Room of Our Time' exhibited and deployed media spaces. (Freed from the constraints of unique originals, Dorner planned to rotate the images regularly in the 'Room of Our Time'.) In this final atmosphere room, historical conceptions of space relayed through landmark paintings and modernist colour and form would have been superseded by technologically constructed spaces and interchangeable images that act on the body of the viewer. Well developed in nineteenth-century sites of attraction, media spaces would finally have arrived in the museum of art.⁶⁴

We begin to see, then, that the embryonic 'Room of Our Time' would have necessitated a conceptual shift, putting pressure on older art-historical models. (And this is, perhaps, one reason why it could not be realised.) The shift from conceptions of space to technologically mediated spaces necessitates a methodological move from *Kunstwollen* to the *dispositif* and from Alois Riegl to Michel Foucault. For Foucault, spatial conceptions and practices are a product of:

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the [*dispositif*]. The [*dispositif*] itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.⁶⁵

Such a shift is already present nascently in certain texts of the time. Thus, for example, Rudolf Harms's *Philosophie des Films*, published in 1926, often reads like a movie theatre operating manual. Harms is incapable of discussing 'spaceless darkness' or 'the cognitive ego' without also addressing comfortable seating and proper ventilation, sound insulation, and audience decorum. For it is the apparatus that constructs Harms's desired 'cognitive ego'. Dorner, too, was not above 'material needs' like comfortable sofas, seasonal heating, and so forth, but his conception of artistic development certainly hovered above the material constraints of a given era.⁶⁶ The heterogeneous ensemble of technologies, laws, architectures, mores, sciences, economies, and geographies that constituted the cinematic *dispositif* in the interwar period proves much firmer ground than an amorphous *Raumvorstellung* in an effort to recover the 'Room of Our Time' as part of a larger network of forces aimed at constructing the subject.

Only in this context does the signal import of spaceless darkness emerge. Spaceless darkness identifies a spectatorial condition in which the subject is disembodied; freed from the constraints of time, space, and gravity; hyper-focused on the luminous, moving image; disengaged from the local environment; isolated in a crowd; in short, immersed in a darkness so pervasive as to annihilate space itself. Thus spaceless darkness captures an essential aspect of modernity and its dominant visual culture. Equally important from the perspective of the interwar avant-garde, the subject position defined by spaceless darkness opens onto a set of formal parameters that can be manipulated, tested, inverted, and untethered from their strict power relations. Thus spaceless darkness – consistent, at least ideally, in each of its instantiations – initiates a seemingly infinite spectrum of light-spaces from glass architecture and theatres of steel and screens to avant-garde films and photographs. These light-spaces partake in the dominant cinematic *dispositif* but deflect its disciplinary forces in what Michel de Certeau, in a different Foucauldian context, has dubbed 'the network of an antidiscipline.'⁶⁷ As the culmination of Dorner's pedagogic history of art, the 'Room of Our Time' would have engaged visitors not (only) as passive and mobile field of 'enregistrement' – to return one final time to Jameson's phrase – but also as active participants in the intellectual and aesthetic realisation of myriad light-spaces. Intimated through documentation and implemented through diverse apparatuses, these light-spaces would have

presented the power of the cinematic *dispositif* in an environment conducive to critical and historical reflection on the present.

In keeping with its strong proclivity toward Hegelian dialectics, the avant-garde's light-spaces offer a model which it is worthwhile to retrieve, of a dialectical sublation – a simultaneous abolishment and conservation – of the cinematic *dispositif* and its spaceless darkness, rather than a subversion or even *détournement*. Disembodiment, immateriality, weightlessness, and illusion were not conditions to be overcome but experiences to be mobilised toward new ends. This is evident not only in the architecture of Gropius and the divergent theatres of Piscator, Moholy-Nagy, and Schlemmer, but in the 'Room of Our Time' as well. The overall effect of the gallery is perhaps best articulated by Dorner in his later analysis of Herbert Bayer, whose wartime MoMA exhibitions were 'done not with heavy architectural elements of volume but with lights, flat and curved planes, transparent screens, suspended objects, anything that gives an atmosphere of lightness, bodilessness, and hence spacelessness.'⁶⁸ Once again: an architecture of steel and screens, disembodied spacelessness, the cinematic *dispositif* – only now not in darkness, but in light. Because light-space, like the 'Room of Our Time', was never fully concretised in the interwar period, it never suffered the fate of other failed avant-garde utopian ambitions. It remains the dialectical counterpart to the cinematic *dispositif*, engaging with – but never succumbing to – its normativising function. Walter Benjamin's discussion of architectural plans reproduced in the first volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschung*, an anthology of essays by Riegl's followers, applies perfectly well to the light-spaces assembled in the 'Room of Our Time': 'one cannot say that they *re*-produce architecture. They *produce* it in the first place, a production that less often benefits the reality of architectural planning than it does dreams.'⁶⁹ And yet the 'Room of Our Time' captured a very material – and, thus, typically modernist – form of dreaming. Neither completed nor utopian, the 'Room of Our Time' marks the stillbirth of the multi-media museum. But in its almost-realised state, it also captures the emergent centrality of mediatised spaces in the avant-garde art, architecture, photography, film, and theatre of the interbellum.

However dynamic, even a dialectic like that of light-space and spaceless darkness ultimately limits the potentialities of alternative aesthetic spaces within or outside the museum. In place of the singular or binary structures of Riegl, Dorner, or even Foucault, I will turn, in conclusion, to Gilles Deleuze, who, in answer to the question 'What is a *dispositif*?', envisions not a monolithic ideological apparatus, but a multi-linear ensemble composed of broken lines always subject to changes in direction. 'Visibility', he writes, 'cannot be traced back to a general source of light which could be said to fall upon pre-existing objects: it is made of lines of light which form variable shapes inseparable from the [*dispositif*] in question.'⁷⁰ Spaceless darkness was

certainly the dominant *dispositif* of normative, interwar cinema; but it was not a black hole. Enough lines of light escaped to form the manifold practices promised – if unrealised – by the ‘Room of Our Time’.

Notes

- 1 This essay is part of a book-length project on avant-garde photographs, film, and media architectures. I would like to thank Oliver Botar and Tamara Trodd for their meticulous edits and thoughtful suggestions to earlier drafts of this text and Ines Katzenhusen for her scholarly generosity. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
- 2 Rudolf Harms, *Philosophie des Films* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1926; reprint, 1970), p. 60.
- 3 Harms, *Philosophie des Films*, p. iii.
- 4 See, most famously, Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘The apparatus: metapsychological approaches to the impression of reality in the cinema’ (1975), reprinted in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
- 5 See especially Jörg Brauns, *Schauplätze: Zur Architektur visueller Medien* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2007). I develop the problem of ‘spaceless darkness’ and cinema architecture at greater length in my forthcoming book.
- 6 Fredric Jameson, ‘Transformations of the image in postmodernity’, in Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 112.
- 7 The ‘Room of Our Time’ has recently been (re)constructed stunningly by Kai-Uwe Hemken and Jakob Gebert, originally as part of the ‘KunstLichtSpiele’ exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Erfurt (March to May 2009), before travelling to the Bauhaus in Dessau (June to October 2009) and the Schirn-Kunsthalle in Frankfurt (October 2009 to February 2010) and settling permanently in the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. See Ulrike Gärtner, Kai-Uwe Hemken, and Kai Uwe Schierz (eds), *KunstLichtSpiele* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2009).
- 8 On the symmetrical salon style hanging, see Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1998), pp. 16–17.
- 9 Alois Riegl, ‘The main characteristics of the late Roman *Kunstwollen*’ (1901), reprinted in Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2003), p. 94.
- 10 Alexander Dorner, ‘Die Erkenntnis des Kunstwollens durch die Kunstgeschichte’, *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 16 (1922), p. 222.
- 11 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 34. See also Christopher Wood’s introduction, p. 15.
- 12 Meyer Schapiro, ‘The new Viennese school’ (1936), reprinted in Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader*, p. 462. See also Wood’s brilliant elaboration of this insight in the introduction to the volume.
- 13 See El Lissitzky, ‘Exhibition rooms’ (c. 1926), in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (ed.), *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968).

- 14 See Siegfried Giedion, 'Lebendiges Museum', *Der Cicerone*, 21:4 (1929).
- 15 See Alexander Dorner, 'Die neue Raumvorstellung in der bildenden Kunst', *Museum der Gegenwart*, 2:1 (1931).
- 16 Maria Gough, 'Constructivism disoriented: El Lissitzky's Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*', in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (eds), *Situating El Lissitzky* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), pp. 108–9. Gough convincingly argues that Dorner's claim to a correspondence of space and works deviates radically from Lissitzky's own conception of the space. I will point to a second, equally pronounced deviation below.
- 17 Alexander Dorner, 'Three newly acquired paintings', *Bulletin of the Rhode Island School of Design*, 26:2 (1938), p. 10.
- 18 Dorner, 'Three newly acquired paintings', pp. 10–11. These phrases describe Lyonel Feininger's painting *The Church of Gelmerode* (1929), acquired by the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, where Dorner was recently installed as director.
- 19 El Lissitzky, 'K. und Pangeometrie', in Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim (eds), *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1925; reprint, 1993), p. 111. In one of the final footnotes to his essay on perspective, Panofsky dismisses Lissitzky's claim to imaginary space achieved through, for example, the traces of a glowing piece of coal in motion, as being no less Euclidean than any other space. Panofsky is not as harsh – or, at least, not as convinced of the error – vis-à-vis Lissitzky's claims on the 'intensive' creation of illusory space through juxtaposed colour surfaces in the works of Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich, i.e. the type of abstract works that would eventually hang in the Abstract Cabinet. See Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, pp. 153–54, n. 73.
- 20 Lissitzky, 'K. und Pangeometrie', p. 113. Dorner, to the contrary, championed unfettered immateriality.
- 21 Dorner, 'Die neue Raumvorstellung in der bildenden Kunst', p. 37. Cf. Alexander Dorner, 'Considérations sur la signification de l'art abstrait', *Cahiers d'art*, 6 (1931), p. 357.
- 22 See Siegfried Giedion, 'Der deutsche Werkbund in Paris', *Der Cicerone*, 22:15/16 (1920), pp. 430–31.
- 23 The precise content of the 'Room of Our Time' cannot be ascertained definitively. In addition to the above-mentioned catalogue, see Monika Flacke-Knoch, *Museumskonzeptionen in der Weimarer Republik. Die Tätigkeit Alexander Dorners im Provinzialmuseum Hannover* (Marburg Jonas Verlag, 1985), pp. 77–99; Sabine Lange, 'Der Raum der Gegenwart von László Moholy-Nagy', in Annette Kruszynski, Dirk Luckow, and Freya Mülhau (eds), *Museum der Gegenwart – Kunst in öffentlichen Sammlungen bis 1937* (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1987); Alexander Dorner and László Moholy-Nagy, 'Briefwechsel zwischen Alexander Dorner und Moholy-Nagy', in *Malewitsch-Mondrian: Konstruktion als Konzept. Alexander Dorner Gewidmet* (Ludwigshafen am Rhein: Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, 1977); Joan Ockman, 'The road not taken: Alexander Dorner's way beyond art', in R. E. Somol (ed.), *Autonomy and Ideology* (New York: The Montaceli Press, 1997).
- 24 The controversy over the exhibition lingered for over a year and led to Dorner's exclusion from the International Museum Association. Erwin Panofsky, among

- others, weighed in on its implications. See Alexander Dorner, 'Das Lebensrecht des Faksimiles', *Beilage zum hannoverschen Kurier*, 264:65 (1929), and Erwin Panofsky, 'Original und Faksimilereproduktion', *Der Kreis*, 7:3 (1930). I develop this issue in my forthcoming book.
- 25 For details on the 'Room of Our Time', see Jakob Gebert and Kai-Uwe Hemken, 'Raum der Gegenwart: die Ordnung von Apparaten und Exponaten', in Gärtner, Hemken, and Schierz (eds), *KunstLichtSpiele*, and Flacke-Knoch, *Museumskonzeptionen in der Weimarer Republik*, pp. 77–99. My descriptions of the 'Room of Our Time' are derived from archival research and my direct impressions of the (re) construction as presented in the Bauhaus in Dessau, summer 2009.
 - 26 This proposal was first made by Kai-Uwe Hemken, to whom I am indebted for sharing this research. The proposed gallery configuration is the first to account properly for the dimensions of the 'Room of Our Time' as well as the desired route through the museum.
 - 27 For an elaboration of this thematic, see Ines Katenhusen, 'Alexander Dorners und László Moholy-Nagys "Raum der Gegenwart" im Provinzialmuseum Hannover', in Gärtner, Hemken, and Schierz (eds), *KunstLichtSpiele*.
 - 28 For details regarding Piscator and Gropius's Total Theatre, see Stefan Woll, *Das Totaltheater: ein Projekt von Walter Gropius und Erwin Piscator* (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte, 1984).
 - 29 Walter Gropius, 'Vom modernen Theaterbaus, unter Berücksichtigung des Piscatortheaterneubaus in Berlin', *Die Scene*, 18 (1928), p. 4.
 - 30 Gropius, 'Vom modernen Theaterbaus', p. 5.
 - 31 Gropius, 'Vom modernen Theaterbaus', p. 6.
 - 32 'Piscator baut ein "Totaltheater"', *Berliner Herold*, 1927. See also 'Das Totaltheater von Gropius', *Filmtechnik*, 3:24 (1927).
 - 33 László Moholy-Nagy, 'Theater, Zirkus, Varieté', in *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1925; reprint, 2003).
 - 34 The original essay was republished with minor typographic changes as László Moholy-Nagy, 'Wie soll das Theater der Totalität verwirklicht werden?', *Bauhaus*, 3 (1927). It was excerpted as 'Theater der Totalität', *Blätter der Staatsoper* (February 1929).
 - 35 Bernhard Diebold, 'Opernzauber 1929' (1929), in Hans Curjel (ed.), *Experiment Krolloper, 1927–1931* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1974), p. 266. Carl Spitzweg was a German Romantic painter; one of his more famous works depicts a poor poet in his derelict attic. Dr Mabuse was the eponymous protagonist of Fritz Lang's 1922 thriller *Dr Mabuse: The Gambler*, from which Moholy-Nagy reproduces a film still in *Painting, Photography, Film*.
 - 36 Diebold, 'Opernzauber 1929'. The music critic Oscar Bie, largely critical of what he considered tyrannical Constructivist formalism, noted that the Venice of Act 2 is 'wholly dematerialised'. Oscar Bie, 'Untitled' (1929), in Curjel (ed.), *Experiment Krolloper, 1927–1931*, p. 262.
 - 37 Adolf Weißmann, 'Ein interessanter Opernabend' (1929), in Curjel (ed.), *Experiment Krolloper, 1927–1931*, p. 260.
 - 38 László Moholy-Nagy, *Von Material zu Architektur* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1929; reprint, 2001), p. 219. Caption to the photograph.

- 39 Diebold, 'Opernzauber 1929', p. 265.
- 40 For criticism from the right, see Johannes W. Harnisch, 'Verhöhntes Volk – gehöhnter Staat', *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (8 September 1929); F. Reuter, 'Walter Mehring: Der Kaufmann von Berlin', *Kölnische Zeitung* (11 September 1929). For criticism of Mehring's anti-Semitism, see Hugo Kubsch, 'Der Kaufmann von Berlin', *Deutsche Tageszeitung* (7 September 1929). Piscator identified two fundamental weaknesses: the absence of the proletariat and the presence of anti-Semitism. See Erwin Piscator, *Das politische Theater* (1929) (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowolt Verlag, 1963), pp. 234–43.
- 41 Manfred Georg, 'Totaltheater der Inflation: Mehrings "Kaufmann von Berlin" bei Piscator', *Tempo* (8 September 1929).
- 42 Erwin Piscator, "'Totaltheater" (theatre of totality) and "totales theater" (total theatre)', *World Theatre*, 15:1 (1966), p. 5.
- 43 Erwin Piscator, 'Was ich will', *Berliner Tageblatt* (6 April, 1927).
- 44 Bernhard Diebold, 'Nie kam die Straße derart aufs Theatre' (1929), *Theatre Heute*, 10 (1979), p. 25. He continues: 'The space is "outside". The Dessau architect [sic] Moholy-Nagy, along with Piscator, invented it this way. It must be invented anew for each new piece. For it is a part of the drama; space has a distinct role: the street belongs to the traffic.'
- 45 Piscator, *Das politische Theater*, esp. p. 238.
- 46 László Moholy-Nagy, 'Das Problem des neuen Films: los von der Malerei!', *Bildwart*, 8:4 (1930), p. 152.
- 47 Piscator, *Das politische Theater*, p. 368.
- 48 Richter's earliest use of the terms appears to be in 1923. I develop Richter's relationship to *Lichtraum* in my forthcoming book.
- 49 László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (München: Albert Langen, 1925), p. 16; my translation.
- 50 Richter and Moholy-Nagy's antagonistic relationship appears to have boiled over after Richter referred to Moholy-Nagy as a failed Constructivist who runs after the most fashionable trends. Hans Richter, 'An den Konstruktivismus', *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, 3 (1924).
- 51 László Moholy-Nagy, 'Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne', *Die Form* 5:11/12 (1930).
- 52 László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1938; reprint, 2005), p. 141. The text, an extended caption, is italicised in the original.
- 53 Based on Moholy-Nagy's later assertions, the film is regularly dated to 1930. But there is no evidence that the film was completed before 1932, the year it was first screened. The film censor report is dated 4 March 1932, the date of the film's première. The most direct evidence that the film was completed that year lies in an editorial comment inserted into Moholy-Nagy's 1932 essay 'Probleme des neuen Films'. Moholy-Nagy describes the *Light-Prop* and writes that '[m]y plan is now to extend this work into film, not as a reproduction of the machinery and of the light effects, but rather to render it [the *Light-Prop*] cinematically'. The editors then introduce a parenthetical remark: '(In the meantime, Moholy-Nagy has completed

- this film with the help of AGFA and AEG. "Lichtspiel schwarz-weiss-grau"). Moholy-Nagy, 'Probleme des neuen Films', *Die Form*, 7:5 (1932), p. 158.
- 54 Parenthetical editorial note appended to a talk published in Hungarian in *Korunk* and translated as László Moholy-Nagy, 'Neue Filmexperimente' (1933), in Krisztina Passuth (ed.), *Moholy-Nagy* (Weingarten: Kunstverlag Weingarten, 1986), p. 336. *Korunk* was edited at this time by Gábor Gaál.
- 55 See Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2nd edition, 1969), pp. 64–66.
- 56 Moholy-Nagy, 'Neue Filmexperimente', pp. 334–35.
- 57 See Oskar Schlemmer, 'Mensch und Kunstfigur', in Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, and Farkas Molnár (eds), *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1925; reprint, 2003), p. 22. See also Dirk Scheper, *Oskar Schlemmer: das triadische Ballett und die Bauhausbühne* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1988), pp. 33–53, and Friederike Zimmermann, 'Mensch und Kunstfigur': *Oskar Schlemmers intermediale Programmatik* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2007), pp. 167–88.
- 58 See Schlemmer, 'Mensch und Kunstfigur'.
- 59 'Aus dem Vorwort für einen Katalog des Provinzial-Museums' (c. early 1930s), in Henning Rischbieter (ed.), *Die zwanziger Jahre in Hannover* (Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 1962). The unsigned entry was either written by Dorner or under his influence; it bears all the traces of his thinking.
- 60 See, for example, Alexander Dorner, 'Die Grundlagen unserer Raumvorstellung', in *Alexander Dorner Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Busch-Reisinger Museum, c. 1933–34).
- 61 Upon arrival in America, one of Dorner's preferred metaphors for a well-told history of art was the 'gigantic novel'. See, for example, Alexander Dorner, 'My experiences in the Hanover Museum: what can art museums do today?', in *Alexander Dorner Papers*.
- 62 See Dorner, 'My experiences in the Hanover Museum', p. 16.
- 63 Jonathan Crary, 'Géricault, the panorama, and sites of reality in the early nineteenth century', *Grey Room*, 9 (2002), p. 19.
- 64 In the larger scheme of the Hanover Provincial Museum, Lissitzky's Abstract Cabinet would have functioned not only as 'the transfer station from painting to architecture' – as he famously described the *Proun* abstract painting which hung in the room – but as the transfer station from painting to *media* architecture, that is, from canvases to screens and screen spaces. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten* (Rolandseck: L. Müller, 1925; reprint, 1990), p. 9.
- 65 Michel Foucault, 'The confessions of the flesh', in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 194. Where Riegl introduced the notion of artistic will largely in order to overthrow the supremacy of mechanistic explanation advanced by Gottfried Semper, Foucault's conception of the *dispositif* provides a material approach without forsaking broader explanatory power or a certain 'objective' or 'anonymous' quality (related, in some respects, to what Heinrich Wölfflin famously dubbed 'an art history without names').
- 66 See, for example, Dorner, 'Was sollen jetzt Kunstmuseen?', in *Alexander Dorner Papers*, p. 9.

- 67 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. xv.
- 68 Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond 'Art' – The Work of Herbert Bayer* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947), p. 215.
- 69 Walter Benjamin, 'Rigorous study of art: on the first volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschung*' (1931/1933), reprinted in Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader*, p. 444.
- 70 Gilles Deleuze, 'What is a *dispositif*?', in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 160.