Films by László Moholy-Nagy

László Moholy-Nagy, director

Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiss grau
(A Lightplay black white grey, 1930–32)
Impressionen vom alten marseiller
Hafen (vieux port) (Impressions of the Old Port of Marseille, 1929–32)
Berliner Stilleben (Berlin still life, 1931–32)
Architects’ Congress (1933)
Lobsters (codirector John Mathias, 1935–36)
The New Architecture and the London Zoo (with Hazen Size and Cyril Jenkins, 1936–37)

Gross-Stadt Zigeuner (Big City Gypsies, 1932–33)
Do Not Disturb (1945)


In his 1932 article “Problems of the Modern Film,” László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), Hungarian artist, art theorist, and teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, as well as at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, writes that for “the film architect . . . work in [the] studio will proceed from the basic elements of the medium employed and the development of its inherent potentialities.” Just as he saw “truth to materials” as one of the principal goals of the new architecture, Moholy-Nagy understood “light morphosis” (changing patterns of light) as the preferred content of cinema. He rejected mass commercial entertainment (German Universum Filmaktien Gesellschaft [UFA] or Hollywood-style film production) attained by imitating easel painting (the square format of the screen). When asked in which field he felt that progress in the arts was most noticeable, he put architecture and interior design at the top of the list, despite his own involvement with painting, photography, film, media theory, graphic design, and sculpture.²

Moholy-Nagy’s films had previously been available at only a few institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the Bauhaus-Archiv in Berlin, but thanks to a recent decision by Hattula Moholy-Nagy, his daughter and cofounder, with her sons Dan and Andreas Hug, of the foundation dedicated to propagating his work, most of Moholy-Nagy’s surviving films are now available on DVD. Architecture, architectonic vision, and architectural themes manifest themselves prominently in his films. With their release on DVD, key cinematic documentation of the history of the CIAM, Berlin and Marseille, Chicago’s Institute of Design, and modernist architecture in England has been restored to visibility.

While fellow artists Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter were actually making films in Berlin by the early 1920s, Moholy-Nagy was among the first to write a film script. At least he claimed to have started writing Dynamik der Grosstadt/A nagyváros dinamikája (Dynamics of the metropolis) in 1921, though it only appeared (in Hungarian) in the Viennese émigré journal Ma [Today] in 1924, and (in German) in his first book, Malerei Photographic Film (Painting photography film), in 1925.³ Moholy-Nagy became known among avant-garde artists and filmmakers during the 1920s as a theorist, not a practitioner. Malerei Photographic Film was highly influential in Weimar Germany, as were other articles and his second book, Von Material zu Architektur (From material to architecture, 1929). In these publications, following the prewar ideas of his close friend, the Hungarian theorist and photographer Iván Hevesy, Moholy-Nagy criticized commercial cinema for slavishly following the traditions of theater rather than capitalizing on the innate capabilities of the medium.⁴

Moholy-Nagy did not complete a film until 1932, the banner year of his film practice.⁵ One might speculate why he did not make movies earlier. It may be because he expected that someone else, professional filmmakers at UFA, for example, would realize his film scripts. Moholy-Nagy often subcontracted the production of his artworks, as in the case of the so-called Telephon Pictures (the EM series, conceived in 1922 but realized only the following year in an enamel sign-making shop in a village near Weimar⁶), the Kinmetis konstruktives System, Bau mit Bewegungsbahn für Spiel und Beförderung (Kinetic-constructive system: structure with movement track for play and conveyance, 1922–28), and the Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne (Light prop for an electric stage, 1922–30), the working drawings for which were prepared by his studio assistant István Sebök.

As originally conceived, Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiss grau (A Lightplay black white grey) was to be a documentation of the construction and capability of his difficult-to-categorize artwork, the Light Prop, what became known in the English-speaking world after 1969 as the Light-Space Modulator.⁷ Not being able to make the planned first five parts of this film that were to address the nature of light in general, and the construction of
the apparatus in specific, Moholy-Nagy focused his efforts on realizing the final section (with his Berlin studio assistant György Kepes), in which he employed the Light Prop as a device for the production of light effects. Thus, the circular openings on the sides of the wooden box, which is outfitted with a myriad of light bulbs on its interior, within which this object was originally meant to be placed, are clearly visible. In order to emphasize light modulations, he employed some of the special effects he calls for elsewhere in his theoretical writings, including multiple exposures, negative sequences and doubling, as well as light modulating properties, such as transparency and translucency.

Moholy-Nagy also addressed light and its changeability in other films. In his dissertation on Moholy-Nagy’s films, Filmische Sinneserweiterung (Filmic extension of the senses), Jan Sahli points out that Moholy employs the architectural objects themselves as light modulators: in the Marseille film, the great bridge-crane spanning Marseille’s inner harbor, the Pont Transbordeur, and in the Architects’ Congress documentary, the boat.8

Given that Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiß grau was in effect a document of Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne, with the exception of the now lost Töndes ABC (The Sound ABC, ca. 1931–33)—an experiment in etching figures such as letters directly into the film stock to create sound—and his final film, Do Not Disturb—made with his students at the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1945—almost all of his other movies, including the lost ones, were documentation rather than experiments in filmic abstraction. What might plausibly be considered his trilogy concerning the contradictions of big city life—Impressionen vom alten marceliner Hafen (ciéux port) (1929–32), Berliner Stilleben (1931–32) and Gross-Stadt Zigeuner (1932–33)—are also fascinating if quirky examples of the documentary genre during its earliest period.9

In the metropolitan films Moholy-Nagy intercuts documentary footage with bird’s-eye and worm’s-eye views, shapes on both liquid and hard surfaces, modulated light and shadow effects, patterns formed by overhead wires and structures, extreme close-ups of faces, and footage that reflects his fascination with technology. Architecture plays a significant role in these films: he is as fascinated by the degraded condition of the ancient houses around Marseille’s inner harbor as he is by the sorry sequence of dingy courtyard after airless courtyard of the Meyers Hof, a vast Mietskaserne (mass housing barracks) in the Berlin working-class neighborhood of Wedding. These structures exemplify for him the social inequality that characterized capitalist society. The documentary sequences with people in them also reflect Moholy-Nagy’s strongly leftist sympathies: he seeks out the poorest residents of both Berlin and Marseille, and contrasts their poverty with the relative luxury of middle and upper-middle class residents.

Yet, Moholy-Nagy goes beyond the depiction of human squalor. In the Marseille film, for example, he often focuses on the abject: heaps of garbage festering near shops, putrid gutter streams flowing down the center of dingy lanes. But rather than an illustration of Georges Bataille’s conception of the informe (as articulated in the Parisian journal Documents [1929–30]), the shots are so carefully composed (in a Neue Sachlichkeit kind of way) that one cannot help but realize the effect that Moholy-Nagy’s friend Kurt Schwitters’s aestheticization of urban detritus had on him. Even in a heap of garbage Moholy saw patterns that he thought instructive, indeed revelatory in a visual sense, and he recognized in their close viewing the potential for the development of our sensory capabilities.

Gross-Stadt Zigeuner (Big City Gypsies), arguably Moholy-Nagy’s best film, was made with the assistance of Hellmuth Brandis and his (soon-to-be) second wife Sibylle Pietzsch (later Sibyl Moholy-Nagy), a one-time actress and screenwriter for the German film industry who became a noted American historian and theorist of architecture and urbanism. Without purporting to delve into the causes of Roma and Sinti marginalization, Gross-Stadt Zigeuner functions as a visually compelling document of a community that was soon to be destroyed by the National Socialists’ genocidal and racist policies. Although countenancing a typically romanticized view of Gypsies, it also challenges received European attitudes toward them. By 1928, they were fingerprinted and subjected to police surveillance in Germany, and by the time the film was completed in 1933, they had lost all their civil rights.

The film begins with Roma mothers, in their neat little horse-drawn wagon homes (Moholy-Nagy’s fascination with this efficient, near movable architecture is palpable), washing their children, a sequence that challenges stereotypes concerning the Roma. Its narrative arc extends from their domestic care for children, through both men’s and women’s money-earning activities (including horse trading and street fortune telling—both in decline by this time), to expressions of strong emotion (fighting, displays of affection), leisure activities (card playing), and their love of a good party (dancing, music making).

Moholy-Nagy’s sympathy for his subjects comes to expression in the astonishing hand-held sequences in which children interact with the man behind the camera lens, and particularly during the dancing sequences, in which Moholy-Nagy holds the camera, spinning, in a sense “dancing” along with his subjects, a kinesthetically charged development of the medium facilitated by newly available hand-held cameras that harkens back to Moholy-Nagy’s and Alfred Kemény’s calls for a new art of kinesthetic bodily involvement in their 1922 manifesto “Dynamic-Constructive Energy System.”10 Moholy succeeds in interpolating the “camera eye” into the action and lends the sequence a dynamism that complex montage in the mode of Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov did not attain. While, as Robin Curtis points out, the film does not document their lives in any depth, this must surely be among the earliest documentaries ever made about the Roma in Germany, if not the first.
documentary about them in which the filmmaker positions himself both as their observer (the man behind the camera) and as a participant in their communal activity. Significantly, Moholy-Nagy’s own roots were in rural southern Hungary, in villages (Mohl and Bácbsorsó) of mixed Hungarian and Serbian ethnicity, where prejudices against “Gypsies” were as strong as anywhere.

Moholy-Nagy made two films in which the new architecture played a central role: *Architects’ Congress* (1933) and *The New Architecture and the London Zoo* (with Hazen Size and Cyril Jenkins, 1935–36). It is perhaps not surprising that these films are cinematically among his least interesting. *Architects’ Congress*, made on Sigfried Giedion’s invitation, is ostensibly a documentary about the fourth CIAM Congress, which took place on the S.S. Patria II as it sailed from Marseilles to Athens from 29 July to 13 August 1933. It includes both film footage of major figures of architectural modernism such as Giedion, Le Corbusier, Josep Lluís Sert, and Cornelis van Eesterren lecturing onboard and of Greek International Style buildings in and around Athens (with a cameo appearance by Alvar Aalto), but it is mostly a travelogue, more like a home movie (albeit one with visually arresting, contrasting patterns of darkness and light) than an informative documentary. It has no soundtrack, and only sparse intertitles indicate who is lecturing, what is occurring. The London Zoo film, commissioned by the MoMA in New York and first shown in conjunction with the exhibition *Modern Architecture in England* there in 1937, documents Berthold Lubetkin and his TECTON Group’s new buildings to house elephants, penguins, giraffes, and gorillas. Despite the experimental nature of the buildings, the film is rather anemic. It seems that despite his admiration for modernist architecture, Moholy-Nagy had more to say about architecture as lived in real cities than he did about realized modernist projects.

Some of the films were produced with soundtracks. *Grosz-Stadt Zigame* was originally produced with a soundtrack of narration and specially composed music by an unknown Hungarian composer working in Berlin. This was, however, destroyed due to patent problems shortly after the film’s release. The Moholy-Nagy Foundation has chosen to include a soundtrack of contemporary Hungarian Roma music. Since multisensoriality was often addressed in Moholy-Nagy’s work (and there are scenes of dancing and singing, frequently accompanied by images of gramophones playing in several of these films), this seems an appropriate if initially surprising move. In the case of *Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiss grau*, where there was documentary evidence that Moholy-Nagy had intended gamelan music to accompany showings of the film, this music is provided. The gamelan soundtrack conveys (at least to this reviewer) a hitherto unnoticed aspect of the film’s documentation of the Light Prop: its position within the long European tradition of the clockwork and the automaton.

One can only be pleased that the Moholy-Nagy Foundation has made its cinematic production once more available. The informative DVD covers and disk labels are handsomely designed by the graphic designer Andreas Hug, grandson of the artist. Looking at Moholy-Nagy’s films and reading his thoughts about the film medium, one is continually struck by the prescience of his ideas, be they on his predictions concerning television and advertising or his insistence that cinema was essentially an art of light. At last Moholy-Nagy’s quirky, programmatic, and highly original contributions to cinema and the documentation of modern architecture can finally be given their due.

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Notes


3. It is impossible to tell whether the undated, German-language manuscript page of what seems to be an early draft of the film script at the Getty Research Institute Special Collections and Visual Resources Department (Inv. No. 90027) in fact dates from 1921–22 or not.


5. Moholy-Nagy would have heard Hevesy’s seminar paper on this subject at Budapest University in 1913. Hevesy must be considered one of the unrecognized pioneers of avant-garde film theory.

6. See the thoroughly researched, revised dating of his films in Jeanpaul Goergen, *m-n 100. Geburtstag von László Moholy-Nagy*, program brochure for a showing of Moholy-Nagy’s films at the Arsenal, Berlin, 20 June 1995, organized by the Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. See also Lloyd Engelbrecht’s thorough documentary research on the film dates in his forthcoming monograph on Moholy-Nagy. In 1932 Moholy-Nagy completed *Ein Lichtspiel schwarz weiss grau*, the Melbourne and Berlin films. *Grosz-Stadt Zigeuner* seems to have been finished the following year.


9. Nowhere does Moholy-Nagy refer to the films as a trilogy, but they were completed within a year, 1932–33 (although the Marseille film was shot in 1929), and share many thematic and aesthetic features. Andrea Brodbeck notes their close thematic and stylistic parallels in “László Moholy-Nagy’s Grossstadtfilme” (master’s thesis, Freie Universität, Berlin, 1997).
