Interfaces and Proxies

Placing László Moholy-Nagy’s Prints

ANNE BOURNEUF

Although the making of relief prints hardly seems to fit with László Moholy-Nagy’s reputation as an innovator working with new media and industrialized production, Moholy-Nagy did in fact make a few dozen woodcuts and linocuts in the 1920s. In this article, the author seeks to understand Moholy-Nagy’s engagement with these techniques by focusing on the manual prints of the 1924 version of his “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” the text of which is devoted to photographic media. Examining the roles of photomechanical and manual prints in avant-garde magazines, the author argues that relief prints played a key role in the circulation of Moholy-Nagy’s work and served as a substitute for media that posed difficulties for small-scale production.

I.

In László Moholy-Nagy’s book Painting, Photography, Film (1925), the artist aims to convey the speed of contemporary big-city life in 12 pages that he calls “Dynamic of the Metropolis” (Fig. 1). He presents these pages as at once a “sketch for a film” that might be realized in the future and as a new form that he terms “typophoto”—in Brigid Doherty’s words, a “model for a ‘new visual literature’ based on the integration of photomechanical printing techniques and modernist typographical experiments” [1]. Photomechanical halftones of motifs of urban modernity (electric lights, a soccer game, a smokestack) combine with text, including specifications for camera shots and graphic elements such as arrows and thick rules. These pages can be seen as a climax of attempts to make the photographic book a site for recreating the distracted vision attributed to consumers of the 1920s explosion of the photographically illustrated press [2]. Whether conceived as film scenario or “typophoto,” all depends on the photographic, in line with the book’s argument for photography’s pivotal place in contemporary “optical forming (Gestaltung)” [3].

The avant-garde journal MA (“Ma” is Hungarian for “Today”) published a version of Moholy-Nagy’s “Dynamic of the Metropolis” the year before, around the same time, it seems, that Moholy-Nagy was putting his book together [4]. This shorter and less-elaborate version has received far less attention than the one in Painting, Photography, Film. Moholy-Nagy’s text in MA, as in his book, hinges on photography, in the camera movements specified by the scenario and in the commentary at the end, in which Moholy-Nagy speaks of the film as exploring the camera’s ability to exceed the limits of human perception: “On the roller-coaster almost all passengers close their eyes at the great downward drop. But the camera does not close its eye” [5].

But not a single photomechanical image is included in the 1924 MA version (Fig. 2). Halftones illustrate many items in this issue, but not this one. Instead, Moholy-Nagy’s own lino-cuts or woodcuts—often with irregular hand-gouged dots on either side to represent sprocket holes—illustrate, often schematically, visual motifs of his scenario.

This curious mimicry of the new reproductive medium of sound film by the old and conspicuously manual medium of relief printing sits awkwardly with Moholy-Nagy’s excitement about camera vision in his own commentary, as well as his book’s argument for “working on the forming of our own time with means appropriate to it” [6]. Perhaps because Moholy-Nagy’s work is often taken on his own terms, which don’t seem to work here, his use here of relief prints as film’s proxy has scarcely been remarked [7].

II.

Moholy-Nagy made a few dozen prints in the first half of the 1920s, mostly relief prints—woodcuts and linocuts. Apart from prints published in books and journals, he did not create regular limited editions of his prints aimed at the collectors’ market, with a couple of exceptions—the lithographs of Konstruktionen, published by the Kestnergesellschaft in 1933, and the lithograph Moholy-Nagy contributed to Meistermappe des Staatlichen Bauhauses, published that same year. Most of his prints were either published in journals or exist only as proofs.
These relief prints hardly fit with the artist’s reputation as an innovator of new forms in relation to new media and industrialized production more broadly; in the 1920s, Jan Tschichold condemned linocuts as “an anachronism . . . like medieval woodcuts” [8]. Moholy-Nagy himself did not give these techniques the sustained attention he devoted to painting, photography, film, typography or new means of manipulating light. Whereas Moholy-Nagy’s famous “abandonment of painting” lasted only a couple of years, his abandonment of printmaking after the mid-1920s appears to have been permanent [9]. It is therefore unsurprising that little has been written about Moholy-Nagy’s prints.

As awkwardly as Moholy-Nagy’s prints fit into the usual ways of discussing his work, if we think broadly in terms of the context of the Central European avant-garde movement of the 1920s, it is also unsurprising that he made these prints. Many Expressionist artists were drawn to the woodcut’s direct, raw quality and archaizing associations after it fell out of use for popular prints. In the first decade of the 20th century, the artists of Die Brücke cut linoleum as well, an alternative to wood first disseminated by art education reformer Franz Cižek as easier for children to work with [10]. During and after World War I, many artists who defined themselves in opposition to Expressionism—from Vilmos Huszár to Gerd Arntz to a number of artists associated with MA, including Lajos Kassák and László Péri—made wood- and linocuts and circulated them in the small magazines so crucial to the avant-garde movement. Rather than playing up the grain of the wood or the action of carving it as the Expressionists had, these artists, including Moholy-Nagy, usually made tidy and sober pieces of handwork. The relief print as a medium for popular images, its particular capacity for play between positive and negative, and its ease of combination with letterpress printing (the way most small magazines were made) were used to advantage by the avant-garde.

III.

Consider Der Sturm, the avant-garde periodical that was the primary venue for Moholy-Nagy’s prints. In a 1920 letter, Moholy-Nagy endorsed the Dadaists’ rejection of Herwarth Walden, the impresario behind both the magazine and the Berlin gallery of the same name, declaring the Expressionism Walden promoted “bankrupt” [11]. But in 1922, Walden hosted an extensive exhibition of Moholy-Nagy’s prints, followed by major shows in 1923, 1924 and 1925. However Moholy-Nagy felt about Walden, Walden’s enterprises were key platforms for Moholy-Nagy’s work, and Moholy-Nagy’s prints played a key role in Walden’s periodical Der Sturm. In 1924 Der Sturm published three of Moholy-Nagy’s linocuts and three of his woodcuts—more images than for any other artist that year.

More specifically, consider the December 1924 issue of Der Sturm. The cover is a Moholy-Nagy white-line woodcut. Formally, it resembles some of his photograms of the same period, especially in the dark ground basic to both processes. In fact, there are striking morphological similarities between the back cover of Moholy-Nagy’s Painting, Photography, Film—which seems to have been based on one of his photograms—and the woodcut on the cover of Der Sturm. But despite these similarities of appearance and position, these two Moholy-Nagy covers have functional differences that have everything to do with the role of relief prints, in particular in Der Sturm.

The woodcut is captioned in the usual way for prints published in Der Sturm: “Moholy-Nagy / Woodcut / Printed from the block” (Fig. 3). Another impression of the same woodcut is included on an interior page, without the cover’s distractions: Except for the caption and page number, the image stands alone, and the caption, otherwise identical to that on the cover, keeps a more decorous distance from the image’s edge (Fig. 4). Two other woodcuts by Moholy-Nagy, as well as linocuts by other artists, are treated similarly in the interior pages.

The repetition of the cover image inside the journal—
the usual practice of *Der Sturm* at the time—makes it clear that the print serves two slightly different functions: The cover image is, of course, there to be seen, while the interior image is also potentially there to be collected (hence the greater distance between caption and image, to ease its recontextualization). The second function in particular was enhanced when the image was an impression of the wood or linoleum cut by the artist—a caption drawing attention to this (“Printed from the block”) accompanied every relief print in the issue. This was common practice and not always favored by artists. In a 1919 postcard addressed to the editor of the magazine *Das Kunstblatt*, Lyonel Feininger argues for reproducing one of his woodcuts photomechanically: “Does the woodcut have to be printed from the block? . . . If so, I must sacrifice a suitable block to you; my finer blocks can only be printed by hand, and even then in a limited edition. It would be much better to print a halftone of a good print . . . no one knows the difference” [12]. Both magazines used photomechanical halftones as well: After Moholy-Nagy’s prints, the second largest share of illustrations in *Der Sturm* in 1924 went to halftone photographs of Nikolaus Braun’s reliefs incorporating electric light [13]. For Walden, this in no way altered the fact that publishing relief prints directly “from the block” by artists such as Moholy-Nagy allowed the incorporation of the new constructivist aesthetic with a tried and tested way of adding value to the images in his magazine. In short, relief printmaking was an important interface with the vital circulation of images in *Der Sturm* and similar publications.

IV.

One of the main dynamics Moholy-Nagy sets forth in *Painting, Photography, Film* is one of splitting, separation. Photography, Moholy-Nagy asserts, had split the previously unified realm of “optical forming” into two parts: on the one hand, the “forming of color,” based “on biologically rooted regularities,” which is the purpose of painting and kinetic lightplay; and on the other hand, the “forming of representation,” for which photography and film are far better suited than any “manual process” [14].

Moholy-Nagy makes no explicit mention of nonphotomechanical printmaking in the book. Implicitly, however, the book divides up the functions of the relief print as circulated in such journals as *Der Sturm*, splitting its roles of “being seen” and “being collected” by the use of two separate technologies: photomechanical reproduction and the manufacturing of mass-produced art.

Moholy-Nagy celebrates photomechanical reproduction in the text and with plentiful halftone illustrations. The section on the integration of typography and photography in the “typophoto” is perhaps the most techno-utopian in the entire book. A paragraph recounts the technological history making this integration possible, looks ahead to the potential of a still-newer invention, television, and ends with the following interpretation of the success of mass-produced, photomechanically illustrated publications: “The unambiguous clarity of the real . . . is there for all classes. Slowly the hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible, is seeping through” [15]. According to the book’s logic, photomechanical reproduction

---

Fig. 3. Cover of *Der Sturm* 15, No. 4 (December 1924), Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Fig. 4. *Der Sturm* 15, No. 4, 181 (December 1924), Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.
would seem to supplant any need for manual print processes to disseminate images to be seen.

In the 1927 edition of *Painting, Photography, Film*, Moholy-Nagy proposes new forms of images for collecting [16]. After speaking of current possibilities for individual acquisition of color reproductions of “created color harmonies,” he proposes that contemporary technology would also allow the mass production of what he terms, in his own scare quotes, “originals”: panels of nontraditional materials (aluminum, plastics) airbrushed, enameled and stenciled to create pictures to be collected in the “Home Pinacotheca.” Moholy-Nagy positions these multiples against the easel painting, the “manually made one-off and its market value,” but his comparison of the set-up and use of the “Home Pinacotheca” to “[g]raphic art collections” suggests that they might also supplant the then-dominant form of collectible pictures at once multiple and “original”—nonphotomechanical prints.

If we connect this proposal to the *Constructions in Enamel* (1923) and Moholy-Nagy’s writing about them, it seems that one of the purposes of this move from artists’ prints to manufactured pictures may have been to depart from the former’s emphasis on contact (the contact, indeed pressure, of hand with tool with block, of block with paper)—perhaps that is one of the thrusts of Moholy-Nagy’s suggestion that such manufactured pictures might be ordered “by telephone” [17].

V.

Certain challenges inherent to the process of creating photomechanical black-and-white halftones would be more problematic for small-scale art publications than for the booming illustrated mass-circulation magazines. For a mass-circulation magazine, it was cheaper to have a photomechanical rather than a handmade block produced; for a small magazine, it was usually the other way around [18]. Avant-garde publications therefore often borrowed halftone blocks from others (dealers, publishers, periodicals), requiring connections. Also, black-and-white halftones of paintings were not always impressive. One could make high-quality, full-color photomechanical reproductions of paintings—indeed, in 1924, *Der Sturm* published one of Moholy-Nagy’s *Black-Orange-Yellow*. But these were expensive and would have been the exception in avant-garde publishing in the 1920s.

The *Book of New Artists* (1922)—an anthology edited by Moholy-Nagy and Kassák, consisting mostly of black-and-white halftones of recent art, using blocks from various avant-garde journals—illustrates both points. While discussions of Moholy-Nagy’s role as picture editor have emphasized his selection and ordering of the illustrations, Kassák stressed instead the work of gathering: since Moholy-Nagy “had access to a larger circle of personal acquaintances, had more opportunity to correspond with people . . . he took over the task of collecting pictures for the book” [19]. In the anthology, Moholy-Nagy himself is represented by two halftones—of the painting *19* (1921) and of *Nickel Sculpture with Spiral* (1921)—and an untitled, undated woodcut (Fig. 5). For narrating Moholy-Nagy’s artistic development, the painting and welded sculpture are more useful—unlike the woodcut, they are reproduced frequently in the Moholy-Nagy literature. But in the *Book of New Artists*, the woodcut arguably makes a stronger impact: Without color or three-dimensionality to lose, the white of the incised lines against the rich black of the inked wood against the white of the surrounding paper is striking. Close visual examination reveals it to have been in fact “printed from the block.” The image’s infrastructure, the visible grain of the wood, parallels and reinforces Moholy-Nagy’s vertical cuts. But whereas Walden verbally emphasizes the distinction between photomechanical reproduction and woodcut, Kassák and Moholy-Nagy elide it entirely: They identify all of Moholy-Nagy’s images as having been printed from *Klischees* (a term often used at the time for halftone blocks in particular, but sometimes for any block used in letterpress printing) from MA.

Moholy-Nagy looked forward to a future in which the production of halftones would be more easily integrated into the printing process: “In the future every print shop will be able to make its own blocks” [20]. But in his mid-1920s present, a publication richly illustrated with halftones usually required some collaboration and coordination: Separate firms did the printing and the halftones for *Painting, Photography, Film*, for instance, and a note explains that, while the book was put together in the summer of 1924, unspecified “technical difficulties delayed its publication” [21]. Conversely, for Moholy-Nagy’s first published version of “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” it was likely cheaper and simpler to make prints by hand than it would have been to gather halftones.

Fig. 5. *Buch neuer Künstler*, Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy, eds. (Vienna: Buch- und Steindruckerei “Elbemühl” IX, 1922), n.p. Public domain.
or to have them made. As in the Book of New Artists, nowhere does Moholy-Nagy's text draw attention to the relief prints.

Joyce Tsai writes eloquently of Moholy-Nagy's return to painting when it seemed, in his words, "out of date and insufficient for the new requirements of art at a time when new technical media were still waiting to be explored" [22]. His turn to the modest materials of painting after the frustrations of Light Prop (1922/30), whose realization required money and expertise from the electrical behemoth AEG [23], should not be seen as a lapse or even a reversal: Tsai argues that "Moholy remained committed to the continued exploration of new media by proxy, by returning to brush and paint" [24], and shows how his paintings of the 1930s and 1940s allowed him to investigate the effects of such "new media" as color photography and kinetic light display [25]. The much earlier relief prints of "Dynamic of the Metropolis" share this logic of "new media by proxy": standing in for halftones, the modest prints imagine themselves as sound film.

VI.

After the mid-1920s, no more occasions necessitated the handmade relief print either as interface or proxy, it seems. Moholy-Nagy's last exhibition at Walden's gallery was held in 1925; later issues of Walden's monthly featured not his prints but rather advertisements for four-color photomechanical reproductions of Moholy-Nagy's paintings and for the book Painting, Photography, Film. Perhaps the last object that Moholy-Nagy made that could be called a relief print is the literal handprint that he made as a birthday present for Gropius in 1926 [26].

In his later paintings on surfaces such as aluminum and Plexiglas, as Tsai points out, Moholy-Nagy used printmaking tools and techniques, separated from the task of creating images to be multiplied [27]. As it turned out, in Moholy-Nagy’s work in the 1930s and 1940s, components of the hand print were parceled out between photomechanical print and painting—not the mass-produced multiple picture, as the logic of Painting, Photography, Film would suggest.

Why pay attention to how Moholy-Nagy worked with this stopgap, with the processes he used when they were not what he might have wished? Moholy-Nagy’s relief prints can, I think, at times open up our understanding of his work. Take, once more, “Dynamic of the Metropolis”: Although most of the 1924 version’s text speaks only of the photographic camera, the very beginning of the scenario hinges on differences between handmade and photographic images. Here Moholy-Nagy describes a transition from the former to the latter: “Building construction with an iron crane (Use of special trick effects—line drawings—melting slowly into the filming of nature)” [28]. Eight handmade “film frames” above these words read as a condensed animated sequence of scratched lines multiplying and crossing to create such a construction, ending with what looks like a complex web of girders. Like the beginning of the first animated cartoon film—Emile Cohl’s Fantasmagorie (1908)—the sequence begins with a single white-on-black line that then proliferates, so that the action across these frames presents itself self-reflexively as the elaboration of a drawing [29]. The 1925 version similarly begins with drawn animation dissolving into an entirely photographic sequence: “animation shot of moving dots and lines, which together change into the construction of a zeppelin (shot from nature)” [30].

Avant-garde filmmakers in the early 1920s often used the cunning combinations of film technology and manual image-making that go by the name of animation (drawing, painting, manipulating cut paper or wax on an animation stand). Painting, Photography, Film describes the animated abstract films of Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter [31] and reproduces a sequence by Lotte Reiniger [32]. Carl Koch, with whom Moholy-Nagy says he had wanted to film “Dynamic of the Metropolis” in 1921–1922, was Reiniger’s husband and collaborator and was heavily involved in making animated films at the Berlin Institut für Kulturforschung [33]. However, Moholy-Nagy insists in his book that “laborious animation-stand drawings” would never result in “absolute light-plays” [34]. Both the 1924 and 1925 versions of “Dynamic of the Metropolis” seem to seek to underline another path away from “animation-stand drawings”. Moholy-Nagy’s commentary in his book speaks of the “thesis of the FILMIC” and of the film sketched as aiming at the “exploitation of the apparatus” [35].

The animated opening sequence described in both versions suggests a smooth transition from the early-1920s experiments in using animation to create “absolute film” to relying primarily on montaged live-action footage—as if the opening of the film was to recapitulate a streamlined and teleological history of avant-garde filmmaking. But the textual descriptions of animation dissolving into the “filming of nature” (specifically, of construction) read differently alongside different kinds of images. In the 1925 version, the halftone of a zeppelin next to the text describing animated dots and lines deemphasizes the latter. But in the 1924 version, the cuts illustrating it suggest that, contrary to what the text says, handmade images are part of the film throughout, allowing the envisioning of an animated and diagrammatic city symphony, an avant-garde genre that never was [36]. In the 1925 version, the description of a tiger pacing in his cage is accompanied by a halftone of a tiger in a cage (Fig. 1); in the 1924 version, by white-on-black arrows and dots diagramming his pacing (Fig. 2).

Moholy-Nagy likely used relief prints for the 1924 version to interface expeditiously with small-scale publishing, as a surrogate for absent film frames. Using readily accessible materials and processes (such as those commonly used by artists) to imagine those more convenient for larger media concerns was of course eminently practical. But if, for instance, using an arrangement of typography and relief prints as a “sketch for a film” seems a makeshift, it could also be said that, in the endless loop of reciprocal expansion and intensification that Moholy-Nagy saw connecting art and the “insatiable” human sensorium, any medium would be a makeshift [37]. Some—such as the 1924 “Dynamic of the Metropolis” relief prints, with their hand-carved sprocket holes—are only more obviously so.
Acknowledgments
My thanks to Joyce Suechun Cheng, Maria Kokkori, Pepper Stetler and Joyce Tsai for valuable criticism and to Oliver A. I. Botar for sharing his expertise.

References and Notes
1 László Moholy-Nagy, Malerei, Photographie, Film (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925) pp. 30–32, 114–129. Referred to in this article as Painting, Photography, Film. Unless otherwise noted, references to this book are to this first edition and not to the second, revised edition of 1927. Translations of the text are my own unless otherwise noted.


11 László Moholy-Nagy, Malerei, Photographie, Film, 2nd Ed. (Munich: Albert Langen, 1927) pp. 33–34. The 1925 edition also contains a section on the “Haus-Pinakothek,” but there the items Moholy-Nagy proposes would be collected therein are envisioned more as a further development of the Tafelbild than as an alternative to it (Moholy-Nagy [1] pp. 19–20).


16 László Moholy-Nagy, Malerei, Fotografie, Film, 2nd Ed. (Munich: Albert Langen, 1927) pp. 23–24. The 1925 edition also contains a section on the “Haus-Pinakothek,” but there the items Moholy-Nagy proposes would be collected therein are envisioned more as a further development of the Tafelbild than as an alternative to it (Moholy-Nagy [1] pp. 19–20).


18 The prices for different processes for commercial publications are specified in “Is Half-Tone Reproduction Equal to Wood Engraving?” in Wilson’s Photographic Magazine 31, No. 454, 441 (1894). The relative cheapness of half-tones would increase as the process became more widespread. For evidence of the relative expensiveness of half-tones for short-run publications in the 1920s, see Jan Tschichold [8] pp. 185–186, 235.


Manuscript received 1 September 2016.

ANNIE BOURNEUF is an assistant professor of art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her book Paul Klee: The Visible and the Legible (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) was awarded the Robert Motherwell Book Award and the Jean Goldman Book Prize.