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"Everyone is Talented"

LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY'S SYNTHESIS OF REFORM PEDAGOGY AND UTOPIAN MODERNISM

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László Moholy-Nagy's famous statement that "everyone is talented" is rooted as much in modern reform pedagogy as in the utopian spirit of the avant-garde of the early 1920s. The dual inspiration of this view refers to the dual roots of the utopias of the 1920s that, as this paper will argue, had ties to the past as much as to the future. "Every human being is open to sense impressions, to tone, color, touch, space experience, etc. The structure of a life is predetermined in these sensibilities … But only art—creation through the senses—can develop these dormant, native faculties toward creative action …"[1] wrote Moholy-Nagy, explaining what he meant by "talented." Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Goethe, Rudolf Steiner, and others had based their pedagogical attitudes and methods on the concept that humans have great creative potential, they are good by nature, and education should help rather than block the development of their natural gifts and talents.

Reform pedagogy, which began in the 18th century, had as its goal the protection of children from the untimely deterioration of their creative talents by what the reform pedagogues saw as the corruption and opportunism of society. Raising better human beings was their way of improving the society of the future. Reform pedagogues operated

outside the religious spheres of society and imagined a secular future for education. They wanted to keep children happy and turn the process of learning from hard and gruesome work into joyful activity, convinced that pleasure fosters creativity and ensures better results than pressure. They avoided censuring and humiliating students and emphasized encouragement, motivation, and freedom in education.

Although reform pedagogues received good marks from posterity, their educational methods remained marginalized, and the mainstream school system kept on firmly grounding education in discipline. Concepts like 'joy' and 'happiness' connoted sin or frivolousness rather than the desirable free atmosphere in schooling.

The fact that Moholy-Nagy followed, actually replaced, the Bauhaus's reform-pedagogue Johannes Itten, who dominated the early Bauhaus, has somewhat blurred the fact that Moholy-Nagy himself was aware of, and deeply interested in, the philosophy and methodology of education. Later in life, he wrote about the individuals and institutions of reform pedagogy:

> Our educators have the task of coordinating the requirements of a normal development of human powers, laying the foundation for a balanced life even in the elementary school.
>
> From Pestalozzi to Froebel up to the present time this problem has been in the foreground. This program extends from the kindergarten up to the university, from the single assignment up to the formation of the adult. We have sought to free the child's capacities in drawing and manual training, in language, in the plan of teaching as a whole. Czizek [sic], Montessori, the Lichtwark school, Wendekreis, Worpswede, Lietz in Ilsenburg, Wyneken in Wickersdorf, Heinrich Jacoby in Hellerau-Berlin, the Dalton system–country educational homes, work schools, experimental schools, etc., have in the last decade striven toward an organic structure of education for the child.
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> Nevertheless, the oncoming generation is even today turned over, for the most part, to the traditional branches of study, which supply information without clarifying its position in the environment and in society.[2]

The program to raise free and creative citizens and thereby shape the future of society was the point where reform pedagogy and

the social utopias of the post-World War I avant-garde crossed paths. While we have consistently contrasted the early Expressionist Bauhaus to the post-1922 pragmatic and increasingly Constructivist Bauhaus, their commonalties and similarities are also worthy of attention. Moholy-Nagy, committed to new media and a future-bound spirit both as a teacher and as a progressive artist, in fact combined the two. When he took over the preliminary course from Itten in 1923, he proved to be pragmatic and rational, in contrast to Itten, as Gropius had expected. While his teaching differed from Itten's in putting the social commitment of art before self-expression, he also drew upon the innovative concepts of reform pedagogy and harnessed them in freeing the creative potential of his students. Moholy-Nagy was, according to many of his colleagues, an intuitively natural teacher,[3] who encouraged the students' unusual ideas, supported their radical views, and provided a student-friendly atmosphere in class without Itten's quasi-religious ideology.

Having studied in Stuttgart with the painter and outstanding teacher, Adolf Hölzel, Itten also brought into the Bauhaus the teachings of the dualist quasi-religion, Mazdaznan, of which he was a priest, along with the principles and methods of reform pedagogy. The teaching of Mazdaznan aimed at freeing creative energies in order to help the "powers of light" to win victory over the "powers of darkness." In that respect, it differed from the disciplining and oppressive tendencies of mainstream religious education. Representing this teaching along with the methods of reform pedagogy, Itten united spiritual exaltation and the modern attitude toward students in his personality; thus he was the incarnation of modernity-in-the-appearance-of-medievalism in post-World War I Germany.

Medievalism was a major intellectual current in the wake of World War I.[4] It swept through Germany from 1918 until 1921-1922. Postwar agony and disillusionment propelled most people's thinking into the past to settle on the nearest solid philosophy unaffected by the nihilism of the present: that of the Middle Ages. The very name of the Bauhaus reflects Gropius's nod to this, as the neologism "Bauhaus" plays on the word "Bauhütte" or "building huts" of the Middle Ages, meaning the lodgings of the medieval cathedral builders. Rediscovery of medieval thinkers such as Meister Eckhardt and Jakob Böhme had an impact on the religious symbolism of the early Expressionist Bauhaus stage led by Lothar Schreyer. Schreyer himself remembered the ambivalence of the Bauhaus population toward the ideas of the remote past in which they also recognized ties to concepts of the future:

> We plunged ourselves into the spiritual adventures of those hard times. The Bauhaus was the 'fortress' of Expressionism that was generally seen to signal the end of the world. In our artistic work we were hardly influenced by the various world views that stirred up the Bauhaus: Häuser, the wandering prophet with his vagabond life, the Mazdaznan teaching brought in by Itten…anthroposophy, theosophy, Catholicism, spiritualism—all driven by the hope of a new world.[5]

The various currents of postwar mysticism and irrationalism had a lot in common with the avant-garde's hopes for a new world. Medievalist ideas and stylistic citations were part of the modern discourse on many occasions. Even utopian architecture had mystical connotations, as the February 1919 exhibition of utopian architects showed; the catalogue essay was the first draft of Gropius's Bauhaus Manifesto.[6] The architectural designs of Gropius's colleagues in the Gläserne Kette [Glass Chain] society[7] were also associated with vaguely medieval references, as was the 1921 hand-painted album edited by Itten titled, *"Utopia—Dokumente der Wirklichkeit"* [Utopia—Documents of Reality]. The ideas expressed in talks, discussions, and correspondence that constituted discourse in the early Bauhaus were also part of mysticism-clad thinking and artistic expression for about three or four years into the Bauhaus' existence. "Medievalist modernity," the "dark matter" of the avant-garde, was the underside of the rationalism and pragmatism that were clearly the dominant driving forces of Modernist thinking and design from 1921–1922 on.

With very few exceptions, the student body, which had enrolled in the Bauhaus with the hope of building a future and of a new society, fell for Johannes Itten's Mazdaznan teaching from day one. Walter Gropius also had to switch from pragmatism and dreams of high technology design concepts to a program that reckoned with both the reality of postwar poverty and the general philosophical disorientation. Gropius found a middle ground in the image of the Socialist Cathedral, which illustrated his Bauhaus Manifesto of April 1919. Lyonel Feininger's woodcut visualized the emblematic embodiment of both a collective engineering effort and a time-tested, Gothic-style symbol of a collective faith. (fig. 34)

The avant-garde of the 1920s reinterpreted the concepts of community, artist, and artistic talent. One of the key phrases of Gropius's

1919 Bauhaus Manifesto was that "art cannot be taught." Instead he suggested "the world of the pattern designer and the applied artist must become a world that builds again." Right from the beginning, Gropius made it clear that the Bauhaus was not going to be a hothouse of geniuses. The very idea of the genius belonged to Expressionism and Romanticism. Gropius, and later Moholy-Nagy, replaced the concept of the artist who expresses individual creativity with a new type of creative man who was more an engineer and designer of the world than what used to be called the artist or artistic genius. Moholy-Nagy's phrase "Everyone is talented" was also rooted in this post-romantic and post-expressionist concept.

Nineteen twenty-three, when Gropius hired Moholy-Nagy as a professor at the Bauhaus, was a year of crisis in the school. Gropius had to announce the end of the subjectivist, Expressionist era and bring the Bauhaus community together for an exhibition and the building of a model house of the future. The Bauhaus that Moholy-Nagy joined was a school that restored the value of design, and put emphasis on those fields of creativity that were accessible to everyone who commanded imaginative pragmatism and common sense.

In his first book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* [Painting, Photography, Film] Moholy-Nagy argued that photography was superior to painting because it was objective.[8] (fig. 20) Suggesting that artistic creation was an option for virtually everyone, he wrote "that painterly methods of representation suggestive merely of past times and past ideologies shall disappear and their place will be taken by mechanical means of representation and their as yet unpredictable possibilities of extension."[9] Everyone, he believed, can be taught to take a reasonably well-composed photo and develop it in a darkroom.

Moholy-Nagy, however, made use of light in painting, too. Transparency, that is, dematerialization by light, appeared in his paintings, indicating a new concept of space. He pursued a synthesis of science, technology, and art for a happy, balanced future. It had to be possible, because "everyone is talented"; "any healthy man can become a musician, painter, sculptor or architect, just as when he speaks he is 'a speaker.'"[10]

Postwar poverty and medievalism notwithstanding, the scientific and technological progress of the prewar years had so profoundly changed the world and the worldview of the progressive intelligentsia, that it was impossible not to consider, or be inspired by, its results. Scientific and technological progress had been out of view in the immediate postwar turmoil, but made a triumphant comeback by 1921–1922.

Moholy-Nagy's tenure at the Bauhaus started in 1923, when the school was finished with irrationalism and religious fervours both Christian and Mazdaznan, but the formative experience of Itten and the spiritual leanings of the artists on the faculty—particularly Kandinsky, Feininger, Klee, and Schlemmer—were far from being history. However, Moholy-Nagy belonged to that younger generation that associated social progress with the new developments of the sciences and technology, because these had taken center stage by the time he came of age.

The year of his birth, 1895, was the midpoint of two and a half decades of the most radical developments in science and technology prior to personal computers and the Internet, which significantly changed everyday life in the Western hemisphere. Not a single field of human knowledge remained without having been challenged, rewritten or revaluated during that period.

Let us look at a few examples. In 1877, eighteen years before Moholy-Nagy was born, Edison demonstrated the first phonograph. Two years later, in 1879, the first light bulb lit up. In 1884 the first synthetic fibre was made. In 1885 emulsion-coated photography paper appeared in the shops, followed in 1888 by Kodak's first portable box camera. The electric engine was also invented in 1888. In the year 1893, Ford built the first successful gasoline-powered engine. The first radio broadcast aired in the year of Moholy-Nagy's birth. This was the year of the first telegram, movie camera, magnetic sound recording, and the invention of the X-ray. A year later in 1896, Becquerel and the Curies discovered radioactivity. Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. Moholy-Nagy was ten years old when Einstein created the Special Theory of Relativity.

The more distance we have from this historical period, the more we see how radical and transformative these changes were. Pure vision and optical observation, the most important instruments and methods of the visual arts from Leonardo to the Impressionists, became increasingly irrelevant. For the first time in history, mere human eyesight proved to be inferior to magnifiers, microscopes, optical lenses, and the X-ray. The eye could not but scan the surface, whereas the instruments were able to penetrate material and reveal the inner structure and its processes.

Hardly any significant artist was unaffected by these radical changes, which paved the way to an entirely new perception. In the wake of World War I, in spite of temporarily arrested industrial development, the rewritten map of Central Europe and the deep restructuring of

societies from Russia to Germany amplified the impact of scientific progress and fostered Modernist visions of a new, technically advanced age, where the machine would replace labour and warrant for social equality. Everything technical, including such new media as photography, film, radio, and the telephone, projected that new vision.

Soon after László Moholy-Nagy arrived in Berlin in 1920,[11] he experienced the tangible results of how technological development had transformed everyday life as well as artistic expression. Photography, film, Dada photo-collages, and phonographs were all around, and the use of the telephone had become part of everyday life. The first official radio broadcasts in Germany were made from the attic of the Vox building in Berlin on October 30, 1923,[12] the year Moholy-Nagy joined the Bauhaus faculty. As though anticipating Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message," Moholy-Nagy understood that new media, the use of new technologies and materials, provide just as accurate information on a historic era and carry as much symbolism, as the artworks created through them. Photography, photograms, film, and everything that could be set into motion mechanically or electrically, entailed the future world for Moholy-Nagy that he, like his fellow avant-garde artists, saw as imminent.

Everything mechanical and rationally organized was, for the avant-garde, the appropriate expression of modern times. Moholy-Nagy's early Berlin pictures feature the imagery of railway systems that he admired in Germany; the immense pre-planned and engineered networks that spread out over whole continents worldwide as proof of the power of rational thinking and the constructive potential of humankind. (fig. 13) Moholy-Nagy saw an anticipation of the technological future in the encoded character of the system that operated with coordinated signs, semaphores that signalled instructions, and that kept a large system in harmonized movement. He admired the perfection of the closed mechanical system, which functioned according to man-invented, man-made and mechanically transmitted rules.

In 1921 in a short article, the first interpreter of Moholy-Nagy's art, the critic Ernő (Ernst) Kállai, underlined the role of these motifs and the concepts they entailed in Moholy-Nagy's paintings and drawings (fig. 35):

> In his use of the landscape motifs of the railway tracks … [forces] are gathered into a compact architecture of form. Details of bridges and architectural structures, having lost all their utilitarian references and

> practical functions, freely elevate themselves into a self-willed order … Semaphores of joys, forms and colors are standing on all points of space. … Anarchy is getting perceptibly arranged into a system of unified law. … Here, the mechanism of the modern machine and its kinetic system has been converted into art …[13]

Like many of his fellow avant-garde artists, Moholy-Nagy had a vision of the future that not only spelled turning the page on previous art, but also celebrated the end of the tragic dimension of life. "Everyone is talented" also entailed a new, shared joy of life in creativity. Anticipating the new man of the new era, Moholy-Nagy took science and technology as the tokens of social equality and a happy life. Just like the students of the reform pedagogues, the new man of the utopian future had to be free of pressure and hard work, the latter to be done by machines, and revel in the pleasures of new, liberated life.

The ideas of scientific progress and the transcendence of the boundaries of the material come across in a short programmatic piece of writing that Moholy-Nagy co-authored in Berlin with the Hungarian art critic, Alfréd Kemény. Intending to supersede even the latest development in progressive art, Russian Constructivism, the authors of *Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces*[14] contend that "the material is employed only as *the carrier of forces*." Kemény was probably the first Westerner who had first-hand knowledge of Russian Constructivism, because he visited Moscow in December 1921 and gave a talk at INKhUK, the Institute of Artistic Culture, where he criticized the Constructivists for what he called their "technical naturalism."[15] *Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces* raises the sights higher than the creation of objects to "freely moving (free from mechanical and technical movement) works of art," emphasizing the exploration and harnessing of the forces, as opposed to the material, of the universe.

Underpinning the pedagogical and philosophical view that "Everyone is talented" was the anonymous functionalism, beauty, and myth of the machine. From Raoul Hausmann's 1920 collage *Tatlin at Home*, representing a fictitious Tatlin with a machine in his head, to the great number of Constructivist images evocative of machines and Ernő Kállai's series of essays on contemporary art, the motif of the machine dominated the imagination of progressive artists throughout most of the 1920s.

When Kállai, probably the first art critic to turn against this

mechanical vision of the new world, criticized it in 1923, as if returning to Moholy-Nagy's early railway pictures, he once again invoked railway motifs:

> This new-fangled *pre-stabilized harmony* would run human lives as smoothly as the carriages of toy electric railway systems, without collisions and catastrophes. And without community …. Without the dimensions of the past and the tragic, human relations cannot be but mechanical and superficial.[16]

Moholy-Nagy did not change his mind, however. In the midst of all his enthusiasm for the new perspectives opened up by the machine, he always believed what he put into words shortly before he died: that "it is industry that follows vision, and not vision that follows industry."[17]

NOTES

[1] László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision. Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938), 15. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 44.

[2] László Moholy-Nagy, "Education and the Bauhaus", 1938, in *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 167–168.

[3] E.g., "Ein geborene Pädagoge," in *Bauhaus Pädagogik*, ed. Rainer Wick (Cologne: DuMont, 1982), 112, quoted from Alexander Dorner's statement "The overflowing will to act, to convey, to cooperate and to learn from new and younger experiences made Moholy a born educator." In: Dorner, "In Memoriam Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946)", a talk at the Art Institute, Chicago, September 17, 1947. Typescript, 5, Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin, cited in Wick, 146, fn. 2.

[4] See among many works on this subject Ulrich Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten* [Barefoot Prophets] (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1983).

[5] Lothar Schreyer, "Hoffnung auf eine neue Welt" [Hope of a New World], in *Bauhaus und Bauhäusler* [Bauhaus and Bauhaus People] ed. Eckhard Neumann (Bern: Hallwag, 1971), 53. My translation.

[6] Walter Gropius, "Unbekannte Architekten" in: *Ausstellung für unbekannte Architekten*, [Exhibition for Unknown Architects] (Berlin and Weimar, 1919).

[7] The Glass Chain Society founded by Bruno Taut was active in 1919–1920, and counted Max Taut, Walter Gropius, Hermann Finsterlin, and others among its members. Paul Scheerbart's essays on utopian glass architecture greatly inspired them.

[8] László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film* (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), 13.

[9] Ibid., 15.

[10] Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, p5.

[11] On Moholy-Nagy's Berlin debut and first experiences, see Oliver A. I. Botar: *Technical Detours: The Early Work of Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered* (New York: The Art Gallery of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and The Salgo Trust for Education, 2006), in particular "Moholy-Nagy's Encounter with the Radical German Youth Movement in 1920," 86–92, and "Not Yet Standing in *Der Sturm*: Moholy-Nagy Enters the Berlin Art World," 93–95.

[12] http://www.hermanboel.eu/radiohistory/countries-germany.htm; Bärbel Schrader and Jürgen Schebera: *The Golden Twenties: Art and Literature in the Weimar Republic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 119, give Oct. 29, 1923 as the date. On the gramophone, see their chapter "At Home I Have a Gramophone," 116–119.

[13] Ernő Kállai (under the pen name Péter Mátyás), "Moholy-Nagy", *MA*, vol. 9 (Sept. 15 1921). English transl. Judy Szőllőssy, in Timothy O. Benson, Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930* (Cambridge, MA, and Los Angeles: The MIT Press and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002), 424–425.

[14] László Moholy-Nagy and Alfréd Kemény: "Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraft System," *Der Sturm*, no. 12, 1922. English transl. Judy Szőllőssy, in: *ibid*., 471.

[15] Alfréd Kemény, Vorträge und Diskussion am „Institut für Künstlerische Kultur", Moscow, 1921, based on the minutes edited by Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, in Hubertus Gassner, ed., *Wechselwirkungen. Ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1986), 227. See also: Oliver Botar, "Constructivism, International Constructivism, and the Hungarian Emigration," in *The Hungarian Avant-Garde* 1914–1933 (Storrs, Connecticut: The University of Connecticut, 1987), 90–98.

[16] Ernő Kállai, "Korrektúrát! A De Stijl figyelmébe," MA, vol. 8, no. 9–10 (Jan. 7, 1923), English transl. John Bátki, in: Benson and Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds*, 442. Slightly altered by the author.

[17] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, 241.