



“This last leads to the possibility of ‘light-composition’, whereby light would be controlled as a new plastic medium, just as color in painting and tone in music.”  
László Moholy-Nagy

## IMAGE OF A COMPOSITION

A composition is a medium. A medium organises. It organises the transmission of information and the circulation of signs, images, and sounds. But the main significance of the medium lies in its inherent capacity to transmit the organisation itself – as both medium and process, effect and image, as well as function, form, and structure. It is at this demarcation, where musical composition is both defined and becoming enigmatic by its own status as one among many media, that I begin – thereby focusing on a small fragment of the tangled assemblage that I call the compositional complex.

As a medium, a musical composition transcribes, transmits, and transposes compositional concepts. This realm of transposing is what I name the compositional complex. It consists of three elements: firstly, the compositional sujet, which only exists in reality when it is performed by musicians or played by a record, CD, or any other soundscrip; secondly, the notation and organisation of compositional signs on paper; and thirdly, the paper itself, supplying the material support of notation. Traditionally, this complex is interpreted as being unproblematic in terms of musical production. Understood in such manner, the complex acts as an organiser of signs, thereby determining musical performances. To act as a musician under such circumstances is called “reading music”. While “reading music”, the musicians interpret signs in order to play “right”. In other words: to be able to read means to know exactly what to do when seeing a sign that is related to executing a musical piece. However, what this procedure puts forward is a hierarchical constellation. Through it, the compositional complex finalises the production and organisation of musical space. It is exactly the questioning of this notion of composition – and the teleological understanding of representation underlying it – that constitutes the main theme of my work “lichtspiel” (2018). This composition for ensemble was commissioned by the Deutscher Musikrat on behalf of the 100th birthday of the world-renowned Bauhaus. “lichtspiel” relates to, and is inspired by, the famous movie by the same name, realised in 1930 by the well-known artist, photographer, conceptualist, and media innovator László Moholy-Nagy.

## **LICHTSPIEL (1930)**

von László Moholy-Nagy

Musik: Christopher Dell

In 1929, Moholy-Nagy's experiments reached a peak in the invention and construction of the so-called Lichtrequisit (Light-Space Modulator). A modernistic assemblage consisting of matte, semi-matte, shine, perforated, bent, turned, or otherwise machined metal and of transparent and semi-transparent glass, the multiple elements of the Lichtrequisit were mounted and organised on three distended platforms. These platforms, as well as the entire assemblage, rotated. They did so at different speeds in relation to each other, which meant that their relational positioning to each other changed permanently without ever being repeated. Framing the inside of its two openings in order to create a mobile light show, the Lichtrequisit was illuminated by small yellow, green, blue, and red lamps and five small spotlights operated via a circuit diagram.

The assemblage can be regarded as both a work of art in its own right and as a machine to display the theory of the multidimensional, multilevel projection screen that receives light signals and re-projects them in a transformed manner. What it conveys is the basic vectorial idea of a medial work: to transform forces that act upon it. One year after its invention, the mobile assemblage was to be transposed by Moholy-Nagy into the driving mechanism of the film *Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiß-Grau* (Lightplay Black-Grey-White). Capturing the capacities of the Lichtrequisit as a kinetic assemblage, this film paradigmatically promotes the non-representational. It set the ground for, and still resonates in, numerous works on aesthetics and media theory throughout the twentieth century until the present day.

What is most significant about the film for the rethinking of vision is the way in which the Lichtrequisit is situated and instrumentalised. The strategic use of techniques of kinetic montage and collage demonstrated a process-based production of superimposed images: each added layer provoked a visual surplus that is undefinable and unpredictable. Filming the Lichtrequisit served as an intrinsic conceptual score of many variations of kinetic juxtaposition, by which the capacity of light was tested. The work thereby constituted an outstanding example of a laboratory for inaugurating a vision in motion, a new concept of perception and Weltaneignung that was later to be termed "New Vision".

### Promotion of Research and Critique of the Abbild: Non-Representationality

With the notion of "New Vision", Moholy-Nagy not only contributed one of the most important theoretical concepts on art and visuality; he also formulated important questions of space-time, light, and rhythm from a cross-disciplinary perspective. The preoccupation with light as a phenomenon and medium, as well as a vehicle of translating from one medium to another, was central to this formulation. Moholy-Nagy's work not only led to an expansion of the notion and the techniques of the new media, but also to a critique of their function as representational instruments in today's society. Moholy-Nagy interpreted film, photography, and the photogram as nothing less than machineries for composing with light. For him, photography and film provided the technical instruments along with material support to investigate the phenomena of light.

In that context, the slogan “New Vision” was popularised by Moholy-Nagy as promoting an anti-representational concept. Rather than being reduced in its function to merely representing the existing, photography was now to aim at the production of new images. Deconstructing the conventional belief in representation, Moholy-Nagy’s media experiments and the revaluation of the possibilities inherent to the medium thus had their decisive move in the venture from a mere descriptive to a productive logic of the image. In this move, the photographic ideal was dissociated from the psychologising manner of naive pictorialism and reorientated towards the experimental principle of scientific photography. The new images did so by negating representation, compelling the viewers to go back to the medium’s qualities and the formal principles of how it functions sensually.

Through exploration of the properties of the medium, the attention shifted towards the capacity of visual techniques, such as reflections, variations of perspective, multiple exposure, long exposure, textures, and details. One can claim that this shift promoted and refined the deliberate use of non-representational visual strategies, such as focusing, abstracting, fragmenting, or re-composing. The functional usage of the image turned towards an abstraction which confidently called into question and obscured the image object’s relationship to its material support as well as to its sujet. Fuelled by a conceptual reallocation from a figurative representation to a presentation of structures, materials, and surfaces, the images simultaneously were supposed to expand the viewer’s perception and to stimulate new relations once again confronted with content and representation. Any form of image production consequently had to be turned into research and experimentation applied in relation to the material of the medium and how it is used.

### Image of a Composition

In taking up the theme of the conditions related to the production of images, I am inspired by Moholy-Nagy’s work mainly in respect to the compositional questions of media that it introduces. Pointing out aspects such as assembly, display, object distribution, organisation of space, and experiments with material, Moholy-Nagy’s work has made me understand how a composition as medium appears as an author’s work and how heavily the image of a composition depends on its framing conditions. As a result, my focus became the image of the composition, the role of its players, and their relation towards it. In my reference to the movie *Lichtspiel* specifically, I worked with the concept of montage. Such montage for me functions as a meta-collage, where music and moving images are combined in different juxtaposing time-frame rhythms. I argue that in this meeting one can point out and articulate each respective medium artistically. Moholy-Nagy’s non-representational ideology informs how I understand the structure of musical organisation. One mode of doing this is by mediatizing musical ideas through a computer program. My program at times translates a musical idea in the “wrong” way. The result is an image of a composition that contains errors. Implementing open organisation through the usage of iterative metrum-independent structures, or additive lead sheets that are extending the score, constitutes yet another mode to reach my aim. Along the lines of the dysfunctional, non-representational moments of the resulting image, I intend to invite the players to make up their own ways of approaching the music and to embrace indeterminacy constructively. However, the most important

aspect is that the players – while playing blurrily or non-representationally – do not lose their intentionality and drive. In contrast, the players are asked to embody the incorporation of the visual process to synergise their own visual experience of the music.

Concept and making interrelate. For example, the fragmentation and isolation procedures of montage inevitably lead to the general strategy of non-representationality as instigator of form. Rather than reducing the distinct symbolisation procedures of the two different media to the level of representation as similarity, “lichtspiel” lets them interact at the deepest structural level – juxtaposing and exchanging properties and techniques – and in the process generates new “intermedia” meanings and ways of acquiring and producing knowledge. To be performed in densely layered spatiotemporal narratives, “lichtspiel” sheds light on the complex and dynamic phenomenon of composition through the critical lens of non-representationality.

While the frame of representation in “lichtspiel” animates the players to play a composition signified by paper, the relationship between the sign and its spatial organisation on a material support works in a more abstract way against an unproblematic manner of using representation. Instigating new relationships between the known and the unknown, the medial phenomena of disorder are instrumentalised for the experimental enrichment of the capacity of perception, extending the reproduction to production. Yet the purpose of my composition lies in the transposition of the medial process into a productive outcome through a structural approach. The players become the most important factor as a productive source. Oriented by a rather loosely conducted frame, they distort the image of the composition as it were by their movement of playing, reading, transposing the image into movement on the instrument, while at the same time penetrating it with their gaze.

The theme of the composition is explored through intermedia visual narratives that unfold in place and time. Projected into silence, the dynamic, immersive, and media-rich narrative of the composition challenges the listeners’ as well as the players’ encounter with, and understanding of, the composition as medium. The stories it tells are profoundly open to interpretation, elaboration, and the interactive construction of meaning with listeners and players of the composition.

Thus, the composition consists of two different representational levels that operate on three differently transparent media: the written composition, its non-representational distortions, and the distorted transpositions on the instruments and the relational constellation of the transpositions in the ensemble as a tone-space modulation and meta-representational space. I advise the players to study the composition as a medial exercise that is not oriented towards existing objects but rather ventures into the imagining of the potential ingrained in specific circumstances or constellations. What comes into focus here is the mode of production of the music and its materiality: the development of the composition in performance. Its fixation is transposed into the flattened sound that bears witness to the forces that acted upon it prior to the performance. The strategic interplay of “lichtspiel” with the movie of the same name reiterates the structures in the space of the Lichtrequisit, their moving modulation creating ever-transforming relational constellations as images of a composition.

My composition “lichtspiel” is a meta-collage, a hybrid of two personalities. Seen through my conceptual lens, the work of Moholy-Nagy becomes the driver to rewrite my

personal interpretational relation to, and conceptualisation of, the image of a composition. As characteristic of Moholy-Nagy, my work also signifies research that works on the epistemology of indeterminacy and error. By transposing his installative procedures to music, I take on his project, thereby reframing what composition or improvisation could signify. Inspired by Moholy-Nagy, the work "lichtspiel" wants to be an experiment that evokes and provokes new modes of improvisation. It asks: What is a representation? What is a medium? What is a composition? Relating to the work of Moholy-Nagy has allowed me to step out of the usual format of composition, redefining it as an assemblage that is put together from different materials as a construction of open form. As in the case of the assemblage Lichtrequisit and the movie Lichtspiel, the composition "lichtspiel" is not about the fixed nor the beautiful, but about the understanding of an art form and the experiences of transformation that it enables.

Christopher Dell