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Stephanie Gibson April 17, 2012

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Painting and Bio-politics

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Abstract

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By Stephanie Gibson

This thesis examines the inherent contradiction between Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's social and political ideology and his visual art and attempts to offer possible solutions to resolve it. Through an examination of his art and claims I show how Moholy-Nagy's paintings do not function according to his biological theory and I discuss ways in which his abstract pictures can function by viewing his art and claims separately. Moholy-Nagy began his artistic career painting "loosely" realist pictures; however in 1919 he felt that representational pictures were compromised in their efforts to visually re-build society. Paradoxically, he decided to move from realist art to abstract painting in hopes of awakening the senses of the viewer and thus alleviating the pain of humanity. It is through abstract art that he felt he could produce what he called "biological happiness" for a suffering society and thus rebuild society. Moholy-Nagy felt that in order to do this, art must appeal to the basic laws of a man's being. Although he attempted to penetrate the inner workings of man and restore balance to man's life through his abstract work, it is hard to believe that this actually occurs. Despite the fact that Moholy-Nagy moved from representational painting to abstract art to support his claims of political revolution, his bio-politics and thus his abstract pictures in fact weaken his argument. Moholy-Nagy's belief about biology undoubtedly carries serious implications. This thesis challenges these implications and offers alternate ways to view Moholy-Nagy's work.

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As a young painter I often had the feeling, when pasting my 'abstract pictures,' that I was throwing a message sealed in a bottle into the sea. It might take decades for someone to find it and read it.

—Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, "Abstract of an Artist" (1944)

I.

If the dominant ideology of artistic practice at the turn of the twentieth century was the pursuit of *l'art pour l'art*, then the First World War ushered in the view that art and politics were irrevocably intertwined.[1] The art and writings of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946)—from here on referred to as Moholy—are key examples of this entwinement. Moholy stressed his ongoing commitment to creating an art with revolutionary purpose. His writings show a deep interest in social change and thus became influential during his time. It is nonetheless my contention here that there is an inherent contradiction between his social and political ideology and his visual art. This thesis attempts to examine this contradiction and offer possible solutions towards its resolution.

Moholy began his artistic career in 1916 producing a wide range of loosely "realist" drawings and paintings. These works display an *ambivalent* attitude towards post-war European culture. He felt both pain and guilt, and he gave this visual expression through a formal structure that simultaneously pushed the viewer out of the picture and pulled him in. He hoped that the structural tension between separation and openness would display a way to overcome the pain of a traumatized society.

In 1919, Moholy felt that representational pictures were compromised in their effort to visually rebuild society. Paradoxically, he decided to move from realistic art to abstract painting,

[1] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 1.

in hopes of awakening the senses of the viewer and thus alleviating the pain of humanity.[2] Moholy argues that abstract art would benefit human beings because it appealed to their biological fundamentals or the "basic laws of life."[3] This belief forms the basis of Moholy's philosophy of the *biological*. From 1919 onwards, his bio-politics served as a foundation for both his art and social ambitions. In the first part of my paper, I will explore how Moholy's representational pictures depict his post-war attitude. Next, I will discuss his move from realistic drawing and painting to abstract art, and how he based this change on a belief in a special form of bio-politics. Finally, I will show that his theory proved to be problematic as a means to justify his visual practice.

II.

World War I was often called the "War to End All Wars." Over thirty-five million soldiers and civilians were either killed or traumatized by the conflict. Following his four-year service with the Hungarian Army, Moholy "was trying to forget it."[4] However, his efforts were in vain, as Moholy's early paintings and drawings express aspects of the trauma he experienced during the war and his anxious outlook on the post-war reconstruction.[5] He used the traditional art historical form of absorption to come to terms with what he experienced. His pictures exhibit a simultaneous drawing in and closing off of the viewer. The subjects face out towards the viewer, blocking the beholder out, exhibiting the guilt that Moholy was trying to overcome. At the same

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[2] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Bauhaus Design, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1938), 37.
[3] Ibid., 13.
[4] Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 14.
[5] Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (London: The MIT Press, 1995), 3.

time, Moholy displays empathy for his subjects by producing a sense of absorption and invitation into the painting.

Moholy was nineteen years old and in the middle of earning his law degree when he was drafted to join the Hungarian Army. He was deployed to the Russian Front and "in four bloody years [he] grew up to be a man."[6] Moholy was the sole survivor after his battery was attacked. He escaped with minor injuries and an infection and was admitted into a military hospital. The horrors of the war prompted Moholy to become a pacifist as he looked on his war experience with "profound disgust."[7] He was humbled by his experience and became more mindful of and sympathetic toward the problems of the human condition. It was during this time that he began to draw. Most of his early pictures were either depictions of soldiers wounded in battle or drawings of poor, injured civilians. Through these drawings, Moholy attempted to show not only the physical pain his fellow citizens were experiencing, but also the emotional strife the war precipitated.

Even before the war Moholy- felt "isolated from his fellow men,"[8] and World War I heightened this feeling. He felt the need to not only record the physical and emotional pain the war caused, but also the guilt he felt. As his wife, Sibyl notes, his representational art became a "psychological process . . . moulded by [an] introspective view."[9] This feeling of ambivalence is exhibited through Moholy's expression of both closure and invitation.

Before the war Moholy turned to poetry to express himself. The war initiated a transformation in Moholy's practice. He moved from writing poetry to drawing and painting. Moholy believed that representational art was the best way to communicate his newly developed

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[6] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 8.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 11.
[9] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, "Retreat from the Model," *College Art Journal* 10, no. 4 (1951): 371.

views. His wife states "He felt compelled to analyze reality by recording its face."[10] Through an examination of his work, one can observe the way Moholy attempted to make sense of what he experienced.

Throughout Moholy's early work there is a sense of blocking or forestalling of the viewer's access. There is an immediate sense of severance throughout his drawings and paintings. It is as if Moholy is skeptical of being able to really know another person's thoughts or pain. Moholy uses the art historical method of "facingness" to block out the viewer. According to art historican Michael Fried, the "negation of absorption" or denial of introspection serves to block the viewer out of the painting or refuse the viewer entrance.[11] However, after a longer look, the viewer notices that he is indeed invited into the picture through Moholy's use of absorption. Fried states that absorption depends on "inwardness and closure" or "a metaphorics of 'depth.'"[12] It is this thoughtfulness that draws the viewer into the picture. Consider, for example, this 1920 drawing, *Portrait of Vorwerk* (fig. 1). The sitter, a well-dressed man in a suit and tie, turns his head away from the viewer making no attempt at eye contact and clasps his hands pulling his arms to the right across his body. The sitter is filled with absorption and detachment. Vorwerk turns his head and looks away in a dissociative manner, ignoring the one who gazes upon him. He folds his left arm across his body forming a type of shield as if to protect himself from the stares of onlookers. As a result of pulling his arm across his body, he twists himself away from the viewer problematizing traditional notions of psychological and physical availability essential to portraiture. His clasped hands seem to pull him outside of the picture as if he is trying to escape from the prying stare of the beholder.

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[10] Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 9.
[11] Michael Fried, "Caillebotte's Impressionism," *Representations*, no. 66 (1999): 10.
[12] Ibid., 18.

Moholy also uses Vorwerk's clothes as a means to produce a barrier between the sitter and the viewer. This barrier is can be seen by the mountains of fabric piled onto the sitter's body and the excessive folds in his jacket. One can almost feel the heaviness of the fabric. This wall of clothing not only detracted from Vorwerk's face, but its density also prompts the viewer to feel as if she is refused entrance into the scene.

Even with such determined attempts at blocking out the viewer, Moholy-Nagy does manage to create moments of connection between sitter and beholder. While Vorwerk twists his arms across his body and turns his head and eyes away, his shoulders still face outward, toward the viewer. Moreover, even with his face turned away, Moholy still captures the emotions displayed on Vorwerk's face. Even though his eyes do not engage with those of the beholder's, they still appear life-like, immersed in deep thought, not glazed and empty. Moholy also captures a sense of intense thought in Vorwerk's slightly furrowed brow and tightly sealed lips.

However, just when the viewer thinks that this portrayal of emotions is a way to allow him access into the painting, Moholy uses these very same emotions to shut him out. Although one can tell that Vorwerk is indeed occupied by thought, he cannot tell exactly what emotions he is feeling.

The pictorial conventions elaborated in this work point to a larger set of artistic concerns that are central to artist's general attitude toward form. For example, in his 1917 *Portrait of the Artist's Brother* (fig. 2), Moholy depicts his brother Jenö lying in a bed in a dark green room covered almost completely by a blanket. He has his eyes closed suggesting sleep.

Moholy employs various aspects the painting to produce a distancing effect between the viewer and sitter. Consider, for instance, the way he renders the blanket. It is tilted slightly upward as if to create a wall between the beholder and the sitter allowing the viewer access only

to the sleeping man's face. In addition to the wall of blanket, Moholy has painted a deep blue, almost black mass next to his brother's head. It is unclear what exactly the mass is. It could be a pillow or even a shadow, but one thing is certain, it continues to separate the viewer from the scene.

Moholy further situates the sitter into the space with deep colours and dark shading. All of the objects in the picture are painted dark brown, grey or a deep blue. Additionally, he uses heavy shading to add shadows to his brother's face, the blanket and the pillow. Moholy leaves little room for the viewer to enter the painting.

Despite the fact that Moholy grants the viewer hardly any access into painting, there are in fact moments in which he grants entrance to the work. Look, for instance, at the attention Moholy pays to the sitter's face. Most of the painting lacks detail, with generic folds in the sheet and one single tuff of hair, but based on the various hash marks on Jenö's face, Moholy placed a great deal of attention on his brother's countenance. Because of the immense detail, one is able to sense Jenö's feelings. Moholy was concerned about portraying the emotions of his sitters.[13] He paints his brother's lips in a slightly pursed position, indicating that although the sitter is sleeping, he is still deep in thought. Moholy draws a frown line around his brother's mouth, adding to the sense of stress and suggesting a burdened mind. The sense of weariness is extended through the dark circles and bags drawn under the sleeping man's eyes as if to show that this moment of rest is well deserved. Moholy-Nagy clearly wants the viewer to sense the weariness of his brother and perhaps encourage the viewer to sympathize with his state of mind. Moholy also draws the sitter in the foreground of the picture in a further effort to make the sitter appear available to the audience. Yet, despite this, the blanket and dark colours ensure that the painting's sense of disengagement prevails.

[13] Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 18.

Moholy was also able to create a sense of detachment between the picture and viewer through his landscapes. Consider, for example, his *Cubist Townscape* (fig. 3) painted between 1920 and 1921. In this picture Moholy-Nagy produces the illusion of looking down on a town through a window. The scene is obscured however, by the window's decorative latticework. The design crosses diagonally through the middle of the town and several times in the bottom right corner. Although Moholy gives the viewer a glimpse onto a quiet town, the latticework disrupts this peaceful vista. The town is made up of fifty-nine identically coloured buildings painted on a dark, purple-blue ground. Each structure has yellow walls and a red roof. Moholy arranges these buildings into seven clusters on a blue background, with the largest cluster being placed to the top left. This group is surrounded by smaller groups of buildings huddling around as if to form a barrier. The barrier seems to be a way to protect each individual building from the intrusion of their neighbours. Although the grouping of buildings seems to serve as protection at first, they could also be viewed as a "showing or merger of individual lifeworlds."[14]Fried notes in his article, "Caillebotte's Impressionism," that cloisters can be seen as not only a way to separate oneself from the world but also as a way to immerse oneself in it.[15]

Blocking the viewer out through the window's design is not the only way Moholy enforces a sense of removal. One cannot help but notice that despite the fact that the painting is a depiction of a town, there is a noticeable lack of animation. None of the houses have windows or doors, prompting one to wonder if human beings in fact inhabit these structures. Additionally, the town is barren and absent of foliage or vegetation. This lack of vitality prompts one to wonder if the town he is looking onto is abandoned, enhancing the feeling of severance from the

[14] Fried, "Caillebotte's Impressionism," 27.
[15] Ibid.

pictorial world. The blue background of the painting, along with the lack of animation seems to suggest other worldliness.

The use of repetition in *Cubist Townscape* unifies the picture and further stresses the separation of the viewer and the painting. By painting all the houses the same colours, and using one colour for the background, Moholy generates unity throughout the picture. This use of one colour of houses and background prevents the viewer from breaking the picture up into separate sections, but must view the picture as a unit. Moholy further unifies the picture by using the window as a sort of frame for the painting. Moholy outlines the entire townscape with the window frame as if to indicate that the painting is a whole onto itself. Moholy seems to suggest: the townscape is its own entity; there is no way for the viewer to penetrate into this world. Through the exclusion of the viewer via the latticework of the window, the desolate town, and the unification of the picture through colours and the window frame, Moholy has ensured that the beholder is denied full access into the painting and the town.

Cubist Townscape is not the only example of the viewer being blocked out of the landscape. His *Landscape with Barbed Wire* (fig. 4) of 1918 is a key example of Moholy producing a separation between viewer and nature. In this drawing, Moholy places a barbed wire fence in front of his landscape. He draws the barbed wire all the way to the top of the canvas leaving just two triangles at either corner making the landscape a little more visible. It looks as if Moholy peeled back the fence just enough to catch the viewers' attention. Once again, Moholy has placed a barricade between the viewer and the scene he expects to see. When one views a landscape picture, one expects to gaze at a scene or at least gain access to a world. Barbed wire is an intimidating material. It orders one to "KEEP OUT." The simple fact that the fence is made

out of this material shows how much Moholy wants to prevent the viewer from entering or at least slow his approach.

The sense of separation continues with the landscape, which is quite foreboding. Moholy-Nagy has set the terrain of the picture into deep space further closing off the drawing. Moholy-Nagy has drawn the countryside with criss-crossing lines making it hard to tell when the landscape begins and the barbed wire ends.

However, like all of the pictures studied so far, Moholy always allows the audience access into the picture. In *Landscape with Barbed Wire*, it is the four, white, hill-like objects in the middle ground of the drawing. These hills are a small reprieve from the dark mass of barbed wire and dreary landscape. They form the shape of a nude woman's body, completely bare and available for the voyeur to take in. The hills function like the opening up of the sitter to the viewer, and seem to invite the viewer to lie on the lush grass. Yet, despite this, the beholder cannot ignore the overwhelming sense of detachment.

Moholy's representational oeuvre contains countless examples of inviting the viewer into the picture. Although *Wounded Solider Writing a Letter* of 1917 (fig. 5) lacks the great detail that he exhibits later on, his urge to draw the viewer into the drawing is still apparent. Although the soldier lays on his bed in a loose fashion with his torso facing directly out towards the viewer, Moholy draws him with his head down and a cap pulled over his eyes obscuring any facial details, which denotes a specific individual. The soldier is drawn in an empty room, demanding all of the viewer's attention. However, he is absorbed in the activity of writing a letter and ignores the one who gazes upon him. Even at such an early stage, Moholy mastered the skill of detachment.

In *Landscape* (fig. 6), Moholy portrays a small, hilly, town in the country, and once again blocks out the viewer with a fence like barrier producing a schism between the beholder and the picture. The town is drawn in the background with the fence right up closer to the viewer in the foreground. The viewer feels as if the town in the distance is completely inaccessible to him.

Man Reading (fig. 7) displays a man in a nondescript location reading a book. He could be perhaps waiting at a train station or a bus stop or even in a café or an office. Wherever he is, he is oblivious to all that is around him and absorbed in what he is reading. Although the man's body opens up to face the beholder, he does not take his eyes off the page to acknowledge the viewer's presence.

Moholy portrays both the separation of viewer from landscape and the absorption of his portraits in his *Dying Soldier* (fig. 8) drawing of 1916. In this drawing, Moholy-Nagy depicts a soldier lying on his back on a pile of barbed wire.[16] The soldier's body is almost indiscernible as he begins to blend in with the landscape. His hair starts to merge with the fencing, as the barbed wire seems to engulf him. It is as if Moholy-Nagy attempted to distance the soldier from the viewer by taking away a bit of his humanity.

Moholy is also able to depict detachment in pictures with multiple figures. For example, in *Round the Table* (fig. 9), a darkly drawn picture, Moholy-Nagy portrays six figures enjoying a meal. However, none of the figures interact with one another. None of the figures acknowledge the viewer's presence out the picture; the two figures at either corner stare blankly out to the sides of the painting, one peers down into his plate, another reads what may be a menu, and one figure even has his back turned to the audience. The centre most figure does indeed face out toward the beholder has his eyes blacked out, generating a false hope of engagement.

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[16] Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 10.

In 1921 Moholy drew a portrait of Dr. Reinhold Schairer (fig. 10), the man who helped him when he first moved to Berlin. The portrait seemed to be a way for him to thank Dr. Schairer. However, unlike most portraits that pay homage to a person, he draws Dr. Schairer in an unflattering manner. Dr. Schairer looks out to the left of the picture with his arms folded across his chest, blocking out the viewer in what has become the typical Moholy fashion. Dr. Schairer seems to be in deep thought, not wanting to be bothered by the viewer. Although Moholy does display the sitter's emotions, they appear restrained.

Moholy also did a few quick, small drawings. In these drawings he continues to display a tension between detachment and engagment. Examine for example, *Man Sitting* (fig. 11). Here, Mohloy depicts a man sitting in a chair facing the viewer. However, simply by turning the man's shoulders slightly to the right, Moholy-Nagy is able to portray the subject as disengaged with the viewer and the process of being drawn.

Landscape with Houses (fig. 12) appears to be an open painting at first. Here, Moholy paints the houses closer to the foreground than he usually does in his landscapes, producing a sense of openness and engagement. However, upon closer observation, the beholder realizes that he is in fact alienated from the painting. Moholy-Nagy paints huge undulating hills in between the onlooker and the houses. Although the houses dominate the hills in quantity and size, a sense of separation sill prevails. As the viewer looks closer at the picture, he begins to notice that the houses in the corners of the painting fold in on one another, like a turtle protecting itself from intruders. The viewer, who at one point felt welcome, becomes the intruder.

Moholy's representational paintings represent his urge to help fix the problems he saw in the human condition. His artwork clearly displays the physical and emotional trauma that the war was causing. He captures the raw emotions of his subjects by creating a sense of disengagement.

It is as if Moholy-Nagy aimed to portray not only the pain the war generated but also the isolation that it produced. Moholy hoped that his portrayal of detachment would draw attention to the sense of isolation that the war had caused. He hoped that this new awareness of the dissociation between people and the separation from nature would help to solve the problems he saw in the human condition. Throughout his career, Moholy-Nagy grappled with trying to find a way to resolve this issue.

III.

Europe after World War I was "a society in desperate need of rebuilding."[17] Moholy noticed this and tried to remedy the situation. After the war he joined several socialist groups such as Occident, the Galileo Circle, and MA in search of an answer to the problems Europe faced.[18] He also produced art to support what he saw as the impending socialist revolution. As Moholy became more involved with the avant-garde circles of Europe, he continued to support the revolution; however, a disconnect between his claims and his practices becomes apparent.

Moholy often claimed he had the interests of the working class at heart.[19] Following his service in the war, he became a pacifist, which led him to join the politically and socially active group *MA*. *MA*, "Today" in Hungarian, was known for its unapologetically socialist and pacifist position.[20] According to *MA*, "ethics and behaviour…stood at the centre of their conception of art."[21] They attempted to combine art and morality in order to generate a political and social revolution. As Krisztina Passuth describes, "revolutionary activity [was] the most complete sort

[17] Joseph Harris Caton, *The Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 17.
[18] Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 14.
[19] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy "The New Bauhaus and Space Relationships" in *Moholy-Nagy: Documentary Monographs in Modern Art* ed. Richard Kostelantz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 104.
[20] Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 14.
[21] Ibid., 12.

of life."[22] It was during this time that Moholy-Nagy became concerned with fighting for the working-class cause. He published several pictures and articles for MA's journal and signed their revolutionary agreement.[23]

With this newfound revolutionary activity, Moholy-Nagy began to grapple with how much responsibility he held toward society. He struggled with finding a method to integrate art and life, and wrestled with defining the exact role the artist was to play in revolutionary movements. Although his representational paintings showed the emotional strife and physical pain his compatriots were experiencing, Moholy did not feel that his work was revolutionary enough. He felt that he could produce art that did more. In a journal excerpt from 1919, Moholy writes:

> During the war, but even more strongly now, I feel my responsibility toward society. My conscience asks incessantly: is it right to become a painter in times of social revolution? May I claim for myself the privilege of art when all men are needed to solve the problems of *sheer survival*?
>
> Art and reality have had nothing in common during the last hundred years. The personal satisfaction of creating art has added nothing to the happiness of the masses.
>
> I have had many talks with men and women on my long train trips. I have seen what is needed beyond food. I have finally learned to grasp what is *biological happiness* in its complete meaning. And I know now that if I unfold my best talents in the way suited best to them – if I try to grasp the meaning of this, my life sincerely and thoroughly—then I'm doing right in becoming a painter. It is my gift to project my vitality, my building power, through light, color, form. I can give *life* as a painter.[24]

It is clear that Moholy was concerned with helping society, and he was not satisfied with the work he had done through his works thus far. In order to remedy this, Moholy thought it was paradoxically necessary to move from representational paintings and drawings to *abstract* art. Unlike his contemporaries, he thought that abstract art based on biological fundamentals would

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[22] Ibid., 13.
[23] Ibid., 14.
[24] Moholy cited in Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 12.

do more to fix what he saw as a broken society than readable art. It was through abstract art he felt he could produce "biological happiness" for a suffering society.

Moholy's journey to finding a way to generate biological happiness, or the whole man, through his art began with his emigration from Hungary. He first moved to Vienna where he quickly became frustrated with the status quo of composing decorative art. He swiftly moved on to Berlin in 1920, where his first wife, Lucia Schultz, introduced him to the concept of the biological and man's organic functioning.[25] Upon immigrating to Berlin, he became a part of both *Jugendbewegung* and *Freideutsche Jugend*, two biocentric youth movements.[26] He then took up a station teaching at the Bauhaus in 1923. While at the Bauhaus, Moholy began to explore the concept of art permeating the basic and common roots of life (NV, 13). His teaching and practice centered on this concept and his theories became increasingly influential. At the Bauhaus, Moholy held the position of Instructor of the Preliminary or Foundation Course. His job was to provide the basis for the holistic teaching that was to follow. The leaders of the Bauhaus believed that their students studied "not for school, but for life" (NV, 19). In 1928, after his tenure at the Bauhaus ended, Moholy published his influential book, *The New Vision*. He used this book to explain how a person, specifically an artist, could achieve biological happiness. According to Moholy, artists must "return to the ABC's of expression" (NV, 8). In other words, works of art must appeal to the basic laws of a man's being (NV, 18). Later on, near the end of his life, Moholy further elaborated on his claims in his book *Vision in Motion*, published posthumously in 1947. According to Moholy, the basic laws of man or the biological is a "man's fundamental qualities, of his intellectual and emotional requirements, of his

[25] Oliver A. I. Botar, "The Origins of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Biocentric Constructivism," *Signs of Life,* ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 320.
[26] Ibid.

psychological and physical health."[27] A man's biological or fundamental requirements are "work, recreation, and leisure" he elaborates (NV, 16).

Moholy contends that the problem with the human condition is that specialized education, a product of capitalist society, has ignored man's biological fundamentals. This kind of education focused on a "specific vocation, leaving other capacities unused" (NV, 14). "Schools lost sight of their best potential quality: universality.… The common denominator was quick specialization, without any consideration of biological fundamentals," he continues (NV, 15). This sort of education results in unbalanced, broken human beings. According to Moholy, the way to fix the human condition is to restore balance to man again or produce the total man. Being balanced or whole, argues Moholy is biological happiness.

Moholy suggests that the best way to achieve total individuals is to appeal to the masses through art that is rooted in life. For Moholy, an artist can achieve this by using basic geometric shapes and colours. According to him, art based on these biological fundamentals of expression gets to the "core" of a person. He argues one's biology dictates the complete functioning of his being. Moholy dismissed what he calls "the old fairy-story"[28] of the human soul in 1921 and argues, "What is known as the soul is nothing but a function of the human body."[29] Therefore, by creating art that appeals to one's primordial senses, Moholy suggests that one is guaranteed to get to the core of a man. He contends that it is through this art that people will truly be able to become whole again. According to Moholy, art "is of biological necessity"[30] and firmly connected to the essence of man. He states "the arts can play an important role in the re-

[27] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Institute of Design, 1947), 7.
[28] Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 127.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 28.

education of people through sensory experiences."[31] According to Moholy, by appealing to the viewer's senses the artist can bring about a re-integration of man. He suggests that this art would "restore the basic unity of all human experience, which would restore balance to our lives."[32] Moholy argues this is because art requires the use of the whole man, rather than a single aspect of him. By producing art based on the biological fundamentals the balance of life can be restored. Through this re-education of a person's sensory and emotional life, Moholy hoped to produce a total man able to integrate art, science, life and industry.[33] This new, balanced man will be able to remake society and become a happy individual.[34] According to Moholy, by creating biologically happy individuals, he would rebuild society.

Moholy contends that artists must rise to the revolutionary occasion and help produce whole men. His writings constantly mention the importance of artists using their art to restore the lives of the working class or to help with the improvement of everyday life. Moholy's writings are filled with references to bringing about social change. Several of those close to him, such as his wife and brother, state that he had a "strong sense of social responsibility."[35] From the period he spent fighting in World War I onward, he felt that "the social and economic chaos of the world [was] appalling."[36] Based on this realization, he made it "his goal to shape future societies both formally and ideologically."[37] He believed that the best way to do this was by producing "new art."[38] He believed that his artwork was this much needed "new art."

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[31] Ibid., 25.
[32] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 154.
[33] Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 357.
[34] Ibid., 10.
[35] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, ix.
[36] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 14.
[37] Caton, *Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy*, xviii.
[38] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 5.

Moholy argues, "Art has the ability to bring about good living or living right."[39] "Art has an ongoing responsibility to address social issues," he further writes.[40] He incessantly stressed the importance of artists being involved in political and social revolution and even went as far as saying that art without an aim at helping society is merely "an exercise in skill."[41] For Moholy, "art has to have a social reality"[42] and should be "socially constructive."[43] He insists that art for art's sake was no longer a viable option for artists. Moholy-Nagy felt that with the huge influence that artists possess, it is wrong not to get involved in the revolution. He urged artists to "take sides and proclaim [their] stand."[44]

His greatest burden was for the proletarian cause. Moholy-Nagy felt that the bourgeoisie exploited the working class and that "artists must fight alongside the proletariat, and must subordinate [their] individual interests to those of the proletariat."[45] According to Moholy-Nagy, capitalism no longer had a place in art; rather art must be accessible and appeal to the masses. By producing mass-market art, he suggests that art will change society, thus fulfilling its purpose. It is clear, based on these statements that Moholy indeed cared about improving society. However, despite his revolutionary arguments, it is difficult to imagine how his work supports his claims.

Moholy-Nagy's *Composition A17* (fig. 13) represents his argument about the biological and the general aesthetic of his abstract paintings. At 74x95cm and constructed out of the basic geometric shapes that he teaches about, *Composition A17* is the typical scale of most of his paintings. Like the majority of his abstract pictures, this painting attempts to appeal to the

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[39] Ibid., 44.
[40] Caton, *Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy*, xvii.
[41] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Abstract of an Artist* (Chicago: Institute of Design, 1944), 4.
[42] Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 70.
[43] Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (London: The MIT Press, 1995), 8.
[44] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Subject Without Art," in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger), 42.
[45] Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, 288

viewer's biological means of expression. In *Composition A17,* Moholy-Nagy does this by highlighting the relationship between motion and stasis. Although horizontals are typically thought of as static and circles dynamic, he switched these connotations and places the initial energy in the horizontal elements of the picture rather than in the circle. The power of the painting lies in the very notion of reversing the connotations of what he calls biological forms. *Composition A17* exhibits his constant attempt to energize the static elements existent in it and revolves around the underlying tension between the horizontal elements and the circle. Moholy attempts to achieve this through the colour, the handling and the composition of the painting.

Composition A17 is constructed on a canvas with a brownish-orange painted ground, which creates the illusion of the canvas being wood. It is as though Moholy-Nagy is trying to draw attention to the organic quality of the canvas. Against this brown ground, at right, is a black circle, which is intersected by four rectangular forms, three of which appear semi-transparent. The black circle and rectangular elements are located off-centre, towards the right of the painting and fill about one third of the canvas leaving the rest of the painting to show the "handmadeness" of the brown surface. The black circle is notably larger than the rectangular forms. The illusion of the textured, brown ground, the semi-transparent rectangles and the flat, solid, black circle produces a tension between stasis and dynamism, inertness and change.

Composition A17 can be approached in stages. First, one must consider the organic quality of the ground, which generates an initial tension between it and the solid, black of the circle. A perceptual problem is produced, as it is not clear at first whether the circle is a hole that is embedded into the canvas allowing for a view into deep space, or whether it is sitting on top of the picture surface.

Upon first looking at this painting, the black circle appears to be the dominant feature as it stands out against the brownish-orange ground. The circle is painted with great care and seems to be painted with the aid of a compass. Moholy Nagy has been careful in eliminating the hand, submitting his personal style to the primordial "ABC's of expression" to resonate through, which also helps establish the circle's dominance. Although the black circle initially seems to be the dominant element of the composition, it soon becomes clear that it is the horizontal elements that are in fact the central feature. These elements are what generate the constant tension between movement and stasis. And it is these elements that propel the movement of the black circle. The painted horizontals also bring into play the horizontal outlines of the canvas itself. The horizontals of the canvas also add to the dynamism of the composition and it soon becomes obvious that the horizontal orientation of the canvas is inherent and important to the meaning of the painting.

The first painted rectangle from the top or "rectangle number one" as I shall call it, is painted white, although it appears semi-transparent. This rectangle juts out from the middle of the right side of the canvas and is tilted slightly upward to the left. With its semi-transparent nature, the rectangle takes on the colour of the circle upon intersecting it becoming a light grey colour.

The second rectangle from the top, or "rectangle number two" is smaller than rectangle number one in both length and width and is also less opaque. It too intersects the black circle and is tilted slightly downward to the left, creating a twenty-degree angle with rectangle number one. This rectangle is almost entirely transparent and thus it takes on the colour of the circle almost completely. It becomes dark grey, almost black but not quite.

This rectangle and the circle sandwich an opaque red form. It is difficult to tell whether this red form is a thin rectangle or a thickly painted line. It juts out from the right side of the picture surface with the tail end reaching out into imaginary space. The red form also tilts downward to the left, but not as much as rectangle number two, which overlaps it. The colours of the red form change slightly depending on the shapes it intersects. As it intersects the black circle it becomes a light yellow. However, once the red form extends out from underneath rectangle number two, it becomes a red-orange colour, which seems slightly detached from the rest of it. The colours of the red form not only change according to other shapes but also dictate the colour of rectangle number two. The yellow of the red form when combined with the black of the circle becomes a burnt yellow and permeates through rectangle number two. Additionally, as rectangle number two extends outside of the black circle it is dominated by the colour of the red form and as a result has a reddish tint.

The bottom most rectangle, or "rectangle number three" is located about one quarter of the way up from the bottom of the painting and covers the bottom eighth of the circle. It slants slightly upward toward the left creating a fifteen-degree angle with rectangle number two. Rectangle number three is the largest of the horizontal forms and projects into the empty space of the left side of the picture connecting the two sides of the painting. Because this rectangle is the most opaque of the horizontal elements, it is not dominated by the colour of the circle but instead results in the bottom of the circle to appearing pink. This is the only moment in which the colour of the circle does not dominate the other forms. Due to this moment, there is a sense of the circle being suspended by the rectangle number three.

Although these shapes are flat and lack any sense of three-dimensionality, they nonetheless have a sense of mass and weightiness. This is due to the fact that this painting is

depicted on a brown-orange ground with visible brushstrokes, which is less flat than a plain white ground. The texture and colour of the canvas cause the forms to stand out against the picture surface, while simultaneously pulling them back on to it. This sense of pushing and pulling combined with the lack of three-dimensionality leads to the shapes appearing suspended and is an example of Moholy attempting to appeal to the viewer's biological fundamentals. This appearance of suspension produces a sense of frozen movement; as if it is a depiction of a snap shot. However, after looking at the painting for a while the shapes indeed begin to appear dynamic. Once again, Moholy exhibits an effort to engage the beholder's senses. For example, rectangle number one and the red form extend outside of the right side of the picture surface, which promotes an appearance of them shooting onto the canvas. Additionally, the semi-transparency of the rectangles also promotes a sense of movement. This generates an illusion of light shining through them. A sense of energy is given to the rectangles and the picture, thanks to this illusion, therefore adding to the movement of the painting. The tilted nature of the rectangle also creates a sense of movement, which would not occur if they were perfectly straight. However, the solid colour of the circle contrasts with the semi-transparency of the rectangles, causing the painting to have a static dimension. This stasis is counteracted with the slight transparent pink at the bottom of the circle giving it too a sense of dynamism. In addition, the intersection between rectangle number one and the circle makes this section of the circle appear as if it is slightly disjointed from the rest of it, creating a sort of reflection. The movement created by the semi-transparent rectangles begins to fill the canvas and the empty space does not seem as bare as before. This tension creates a sense of oscillation between stasis and dynamism. The brown ground with visible brushstrokes also adds to the dynamism of the painting. It produces an illusion of the shapes being pasted onto the canvas. This pasted on effect makes the

shapes appear as if they are suspended and in constant motion. The visible brushstrokes also add to the sense of movement, as they seem to be painted in the direction of the movement.

Composition A17 lends itself to narrative. The black circle could be seen as a giant water balloon being dropped from the top left corner of the canvas while rectangle desperately attempts to keep it from falling to the imaginary ground and balances it in the air as best it can. However, the circle's mass presses down against rectangle number three's effort to suspend it. Rectangle number three receives help from rectangles number one and two along with the red form, which extend out like arms to help balance the black circle. The horizontal outlines of the canvas also work to keep the circle in place and confine it within the canvas. Despite the fervent efforts of the horizontal forms, the black circle seems to continue to slowly roll towards the right side of the picture, in the opposite direction of the horizontal elements' movement.

The various biological aspects of colour and shape in *Composition A17* exhibit Moholy's attempt at producing art that appeals to man primordial senses. His use of form and colour generates constant tension between dynamism and rest. Through the tension between movement and stasis, he encourages the viewer to use his or her senses to help remedy this perceptual problem. Although the painting appears static at first, the movement in the painting is revealed. This sense of dynamism generally prevails while the viewer continues to look at the painting. However, the tension remains, and the viewer must actively use his or her senses to integrate these opposing factors.

Moholy used these and various other tactics throughout his abstract paintings to help him achieve his goal of re-educating the sensory experiences of the beholder. For example, in *A20* (fig. 14), a picture painted in the same year, Moholy seems to use colour to appeal to the audience's primordial means of expression. This painting features a large black circle near the

centre of the canvas, towards the top, which is intersected by three rectangular forms. In contrast to *Composition A17*, all of the rectangular forms are coloured, although they maintain a semi-transparent nature. While *A20* does seem to offer a narrative sense of motion and stasis, it appears to rely more on colour to appeal to the viewer's biology. He paints the large, black circle at the centre of a white canvas, highlighting the drastic difference between the two elements. He then paints three overlapping rectangular forms, each in bright colours. The vibrant colours of the rectangles prompt them to stand out against the white of the canvas and the black of the circle and in an attempt to engage the viewer's senses.

Glass Architecture (fig. 15), painted between 1921 and 1922, shows that from the beginning of his abstract career Moholy desperately wanted to appeal to the essence of man. *Glass Architecture* depicts an abstract architectural environment and is composed of what could be five skyscrapers. The black, thin brown and small yellow structures stand upright, the large brown building lies sideways on the ground while the larger yellow form is balanced in a hula-hoop fashion around the most proximate skyscraper. The painting is also made up of hollow semi-circles, which wrap around the "buildings" producing a web of shapes. This overlapping of forms seems to be one of Moholy's early attempts at appealing to the beholder's sensory functions. He seems to believe that when the viewer uses his sense of sight and depth perception to make sense of the various coloured, overlapping shapes, he will begin to restore balance back to his life.

He also employs this overlapping technique in *Portefeuille des Maîtres du Bauhaus* (fig. 16). This time he uses five rectangles of various sizes and muted colours. Three of the five rectangles are semi-transparent making it difficult to tell where each of the rectangles start and finish. The transparent nature of the forms produces several smaller rectangles as they overlap

one other, generating a sensation of simultaneous expanding and contracting. Adding to this perceptual oscilation, he painted a long, thin, black rectangle in the middle of the canvas, which appears to move up and back. The expanding and contracting of the picture, along with the back and forth of the black rectangle exhibit Moholy's attempt to challenge to the viewer's grasp of the painting. He demands that one use his basic human capabilities to make sense of the picture (NV, 14).

In a 1923 *Untitled* (fig. 17) linocut Moholy-Nagy attempts to combine his use of overlapping shapes with his ability to generate tension between motion and stasis, to appeal to the viewer's primary senses. *Untitled* features a circle overlapped by several rectangles. This time, however, he depicts a circle made up of several white dots. Instead of a solid circle, this circle appears to have just exploded. Moholy also frames the picture in a nonsymmetrical perimeter rather than the conventional rectangular border. The combination of darting rectangles and the white dotted circle construct a cosmic narrative. This dizzying picture seems to be his ultimate challenge to the beholder's stable sense of self.

Although Moholy attempted to penetrate the inner workings of man and restore balance to man's life through his abstract work, it is hard to believe that this actually occurs. Despite the fact that Moholy moved to abstract work to support his claims of the political revolution, his abstract pictures in fact weaken his argument. Moholy claims that man's biological requirements are "work, recreation, and leisure," which support his claim for revolution. These requirements demand economic and social rights for all people. However, once Moholy's bio-politics become involved, these arguments seem to get lost. As his contemporary A. Fyodorov-Davidov argues, by producing paintings solely be hung in galleries or published in art journals, Moholy

contradicts his aim to aid in the revolution.[46] Moholy's abstract art results in being nothing more than "experimentation for experimentation's sake" according to him.[47] He contends that the way Moholy attempts to address his era's social problems "is . . . representative of bourgeois thinking."[48]

Fyodorov-Davidov argues that Moholy "thinks that he discovered . . . a very important factor in the evolution of abstract art . . . in biology"; however, Fyodorov-Davidov argues that this discovery "leads him to erroneous deductions, especially as applied to easel painting."[49] He states that at best "Moholy-Nagy is nothing but a member of the petit-bourgeois radical intelligista."[50] According to him, although Moholy had good intentions, his aim to achieve biological happiness through abstraction, his claims become problematic as they do not address the socio-economic problems of the time.[51] Another one of Moholy's peers was even less understanding. He confronted Moholy in a café stating "it is you and your kind who sold revolutionary art down the river . . . with your decadence." He continues, "you have destroyed the confidence of the masses in artists and writers . . . don't you dare use the word revolution again."[52] His peer seems to assert that Moholy's art did not support the revolution as he claimed. He felt that Moholy's work merely stuck to the bourgeois status quo, rather than challenging it.

Moholy's critics seem to be half right. His call to rebalance the lives of man does problematize his work and social claims. In fact one might say that his abstract work contradicts these claims. However, it is unfair to label Moholy as less than revolutionary. His call for social

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[46] A. Fyodorov-Davidov, "Forward to the Russian edition of 'Painting, Photography, Film,'" in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Kristina Passuth (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 421.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.,420.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 421.
[52] Sybil Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*, 88.

reform does in fact support the proletariat revolution. He also seems to deeply believe that claims about the biological would indeed rebuild society. Yet, it remains difficult for one to combine his biological argument with his abstract oeuvre.

IV.

Moholy's career rests largely on the complex notion of the *biological*. However, his claims regarding the biological create a discrepancy between his art and his politics. As he put the matter, everything man did should "spring from [his] inner urges" (NV, 15). According to Moholy, the proper usage of one's basic sensory functions is the foundation to a balanced life. His *art*, I would nonetheless suggest, does not support his aim to create the whole man. Furthermore, his beliefs about the biological ultimately complicate his revolutionary claims. His beliefs create implications for his paintings and revolutionary claims that cannot be supported.

According to Moholy, a biologically correct life was a life that was in "human equilibrium." This meant that every aspect of a person was engaged and functioning well. Producing a whole man required a proper and full usage of his "human capabilities" (NV, 17). Once one's human capacities are fully used, he guarantees that a person will be able to achieve "organic development"(NV, 16). This process leads to a well-rounded human being. He states that an integrated individual is one who has integrated his physical, "emotional, intellectual, and social" life (NV, 32). Every aspect of man is now involved in every facet of his life.

For him, Leonardo di Vinci was such a person. He was able to achieve a "synthesis of knowledge," and make great accomplishments through the "integration of art, science and technology" (NV, 18). The ability to integrate various schools of thought is the most important ability for Moholy. It demonstrates that one is able to make "new interpretations" (NV, 51).

Moholy saw himself as the New Renaissance man and viewed himself as an example for others. He argues that "only men equipped with clarity of feeling and sobriety of knowledge will be able to adjust to complex requirements, and to master the whole of life" (NV, 15).

He asserts that once man has gained the ability to integrate the various facets of life, he will begin to see all aspects of his being as related (NV, 38). For Moholy, this is the ultimate goal for human beings (NV, 15). Seeing all things as related guarantees that man had reached the ability to fuse the various aspects of his life together and that none of his capacities are left unused (NV, 14). Once this has occurred man will be balanced and in equilibrium.

Moholy's beliefs about biology undoubtedly carry serious implications. He seems to suggest that good living lies in having a balanced life and that class struggle, on these terms, has little meaning. The broken society he saw rested on the fact that man focused his attention on pursuing money rather than on becoming whole. He suggests that the problems of society have nothing to do with economic disparity and are "not only physical" (NV, 15), but rather lie in the fact that "the individual [has] become stunted" (NV, 15). He acknowledges that there is an "ailment of economic inequality and squalor;"[53] however, he suggests the solution lies not in a redistribution of wealth but rather in "recovering the neglected fundamentals."[54]

The implications of his argument is to say that a person can be completely content working long shifts and making minimum wage as long as he is balanced or a whole man. He believes that society's problems ultimately rest on the fact that few men are properly balanced in their attitude toward life (NV, 15). The issue of economic inequality on this score is irrelevant. The problems of society are the same for every person regardless of his socio-economic status. He argues that the pain of a broken society affects all men equally. Moholy even goes as far as

[53] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Analyzing the Situation," in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), 189.
[54] Ibid., 190.

dimissing the problem of poverty, stating "all men are basically as badly off" (NV, 15). "At best the differences [between the rich and poor] are material ones," he writes (NV, 15). He takes this proclamation a step further and states that solving "social, economic and hygienic problem" is not enough (NV, 59). For Moholy, it is "not the occupation" or one's income that determines one's quality of life, "but rather [the] recognition of man's organic function" (NV, 17). Moholy suggests that producing a balanced or biologically happy individual would automatically improve one's life. He argues that being balanced and integrated was the most important thing.

According to Moholy, artists must find a way to help bring about a balanced man. Moholy argues that producing "optically true"[55] or biologically shocking art can do this. Simply put, a formally balanced work results in a balanced viewer.[56] He believed that the way to produce a whole man was to create art that "shake[s] [the viewer] out of a visual lethargy" (NV, 37), along with appealing to tensions rooted in man's basic sensory functions.[57] By shocking the viewer Moholy hopes to show the viewer "far-reaching new relationships"[58] or an alternate reality. Once the viewer has been made aware of this dimension, he will become mindful of his unused sensory functions. According to Moholy, this new realization of unused biological capacities will prompt the viewer to want to use these capabilities and thus become a whole person (NV, 16).

Even if Moholy's claims about biology were functional and resulted in a balanced man, his art is not biologically shocking. Moholy suggests that optically true or biologically shocking art could be created through light. "Light will infuse vitality into the ever-recurring problems of

[55] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1967), 28.
[56] Ibid., 30.
[57] Ibid., 13.
[58] Ibid., 30.

life to which the painter will address himself,"[59] he argues. It is light that brings about a new way of seeing the world according to Moholy and it is "only light, total light that makes [man] complete."[60] As previously stated, the whole man is what Moholy viewed as a balanced or biologically happy individual and this could be achieved through sensory shock. Moholy attempted to create biologically jolting art in his pictures through what he called "light painting."[61] He demonstrates this in his abstract pictures through his use of "transparency."[62] His "concentra[tion] on transparency"[63] can be seen in all of the abstract paintings discussed above. However, despite the fact that Moholy tried to use transparency to paint through light in order to produce sensory shock, this was not enough. As Jeannine Fiedler notes, Moholy's use of transparency in his paintings remained a "veil that would need to be lifted on the journey to the realm of light."[64] At most, his pictures amount to "composition[s] of colour"[65] and shapes but lack any biological shock and do not necessarily result in a whole man.

There have been three major interpretations of Moholy and Suprematism: Joyce Tsai, T.J Clark, and Yve-Alain Bois. I will consider them each in turn. Tsai argues in "Evacuating Surface" and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" that Moholy's abstract paintings are in fact the strongest part of his artistic oeuvre. Tsai contends that it is in his paintings that Moholy was able to be the most experimental. His paintings, she argues, allowed him to explore and achieve more possibilities than were available to him due to financial and technical constraints.[66] She also argues that his paintings become a "surrogate" for projects that he was not able to fulfill, and

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[59] Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Institute of Design, 1947), 166.
[60] Jeannine Fiedler, *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 55* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), np.
[61] Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*,9.
[62] Fiedler, *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 55*, np.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography*, *Film*, 9.
[66] Joyce Tsai, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (PhD. diss, Johns Hopkins University, 2011), 296.

show how they would have worked had he been able to realize them.[67] Tsai contends that it is this mimicry of his film and photography that allows Moholy's pictures to achieve their goal of "retrain[ing] human 'channels of intuition.'"[68]

While Moholy's paintings can be seen as a way to exhibit what he wanted to accomplish, they remain just that. Although they may express the aims of his film or photography, it is indeed doubtful that they indeed achieve the goals of producing a balanced human being. He was also able to paint with light through a projection of light in his photography and film.[69] However, his paintings do not have the same effect. They may be made up of basic geometric shapes and colour, what Moholy calls biological elements,[70] but he found it hard to paint through light in his abstract pictures.[71] Because Moholy saw light as the ultimate source of optical truth, one can assume that Moholy's paintings do not result in a balanced viewer. At most, they amount to shells or skeletons of his other works; they attempt to shock the viewer but realizing a sensory jolt is problematic.

Although it is not wrong to view Moholy's abstract pictures as possible experiments for his other works, it seems that he did not view them as just tests, but in fact saw them as complete works onto themselves. He states "manual pigment painting is not to be denied."[72] He felt that his paintings, just as his other works, should help to bring about the whole man.[73]

Art historian T.J. Clark would disagree with Moholy's formula for revolutionary art. Clark argues that the best kind of art is art that makes a firm political statement. In his chapter

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[67] Joyce Tsai "Evacuating Surface: on the Repair and the Revision of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Z VII" in Bauhaus Construct: Fashioning Identity, Discourse, and Modernism, ed. Jeffery Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei (London: Routledge, 1926) 154.
[68] Tsai, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", 280
[69] Fiedler, *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 55*, n.p.
[70] Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 8.
[71] Fiedler, *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy 55*, n.p.
[72] Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 163.
[73] Ibid., 86.

"God is Not Cast Down," Clark contends that art must make a "dogmatic declaration of 'This is how it is.'"[74] He uses the example of Russian Suprematist artist El Lissitzky and compares his agitprop with his works on canvas. For Clark, El Lissitzky produces his best work when he is "doing propaganda in extremis."[75] He seems to suggest that a foundation of politics produces revolutionary art. Clark argues that this is because the artist's work becomes more assertive and the viewer is not lost in the ineffectualness of art that does not make a firm claim. For Clark, nonpolitical art seems to "buckle" or float rather than remain solid.[76] It is through the assertiveness of politics that art gains "flatness and hardness"[77], or "straightforwardness [which] is essential to the picture's overall effect"[78] Clark argues. This concreteness is what makes his art truly convincing and revolutionary.[79] Clark's model for examining El Lissitzky's art can also be used to understand Moholy's work. Unfortunately, Moholy's art does not fall within Clark's parameters for revolutionary art. Rather than helping to produce art that is insistent, Moholy's biological politics reveal a weaker picture. His politics require his abstract art to shock the viewer's senses through light, which his paintings cannot support.

Another art historian, Yve-Alain Bois similarly examines El Lissitzky's art not based on its politics, but on its ability to prompt the viewer to question reality. According to Bois, revolutionary art is art that challenges the viewer's way of thinking. For Bois, the most effective art is art that encourages the viewer to question "his or her apprehension of reality."[80] For Bois, this is art that is reversible, can be hung in various ways or negates the standard concept of top

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[74] T.J. Clark "God is Not Cast Down," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 281.
[75] T. J. Clark "El Lissitzky in Vitebsk," in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 206.
[76] Ibid., 203.
[77] Clark, "God is Not Cast Down," 285.
[78] Clark, "El Lissitzky in Vitebsk," 201.
[79] Ibid., 203.
[80] Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibiliy," *Art in America* 4, no. 76 (1988): 167.

and bottom left and right.[81] According to Bois, the reversibility of his art is what makes El Lissitky's work so powerful. It is through the inversion of his art that the beholder questions his reality. According to Bois, reversibility presents a puzzle that the viewer must solve. It is through "constantly ask[ing] himself or herself questions" in order to solve this riddle that the viewer begins "to doubt the assurance" of his or her reality.[82] This questioning of reality serves as a catalyst and persuades the viewer to "wake to a political consciousness."[83] The riddle of reversibility of art is what shocks the viewer, as they "jar the spectator out of his or her age-old [visual] lethargy" Bois argues.[84] Moholy's paintings are not reversible like El Lissitzky's. His pictures are only designed to be hung one way. His works lack the impact Bois suggests and the viewer walks away from his paintings without questioning his grasp on reality.

Clark and Bois make a mistake in claiming that there is a formula for producing political art. This is the same mistake that Moholy makes. He suggests that producing biologically jolting art will result in a balanced viewer, and thus rebuild society. My view of Moholy's art is closer to Tsai's but also distinct from hers. While I agree that Moholy's paintings are the strongest part of his oeuvre, I believe they function best apart from his biological theory.

One is now left with the question of what to do with Moholy's painting in terms of his biological politics. His pictures, I have shown, do not function according to his claims of the biological as they do not produce a sensory jolt. Once one attempts to see them as means to achieve balanced human beings, his paintings become problematic. His assertions about the biological also create problems for his socialist claims. As I have shown, he saw the problems of society and wanted to alleviate them. Unfortunately, once he places the emphasis on the

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[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

biological rather than on the political system of the time, a problem arises. He assumes that he can heal a broken society by producing whole men, which causes both his art and his socialist views to crumble. His art cannot support his biological claims and his beliefs about helping the proletariat movement through biology are unsustainable.

It is almost tempting to view Moholy's theories and art separately. Without the heavy claims of the biological, his paintings are able to function as standard powerful works. Because he was never able to achieve truly biological shocking paintings, his claims about producing a whole man lose their credibility. By viewing his art as separate from his claims, his paintings are no longer burdened with the demand of producing a balanced viewer. The viewer looks at them not as a means to produce a healthy society, but as what they are, works of avant-garde art. However, as Eleanor Hight states, "Despite frequent discrepancies between his art and his writings, it is inconceivable to think of them as separate entities."[85] Moholy intended them to be viewed together, which leaves the contradiction intact.

[85] Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995), 43.

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