

EASEL—SCROLL—FILM

Hans Richter

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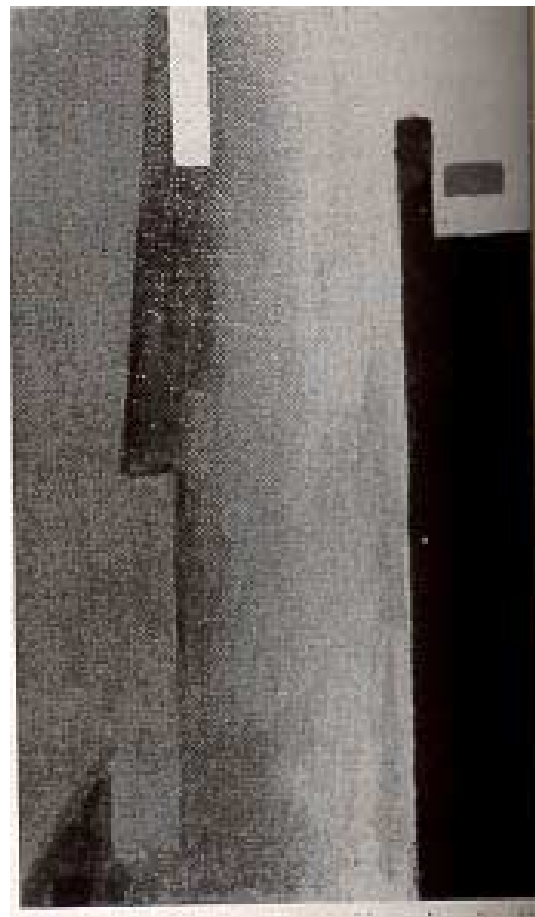
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Hans Richter, *Head*, oil, 1918. Positive and negative relationships.

“The square is the sign of a new humanity. It is something like the cross of the early Christians.” That is what Theo van Doesburg told the Swedish painter, Viking Eggeling, and me on his arrival at our country retreat in Klein Koelzig, Germany, in 1920. We were a little perturbed and skeptical about van Doesburg’s statement, but we understood its spirit. We felt as he did. Through some magic, a new unity of purpose in the arts had developed in Europe during the isolation of the war years. Now that the war was over, there suddenly existed a kind of esthetic brotherhood, secretly developed. Whether or not the square was its symbol seemed to us of no importance in comparison to the fundamental issues upon which we could all agree.

We had seen, after 1910, that representation of the object had declined. We saw it finally vanish as a goal of painting. The self-respect of abstract art was increasing. A new set of problems arose. The overwhelming freedom which the “abstract,” “pure,” “absolute,” “non-objective,” “concrete” and “universal” form offered (which, indeed, was thrust upon us) carried responsibilities. The “heap of fragments” left to us by the cubists did not offer us an over-all principle. Such a principle was needed to save us from the limitless horizons of possible form-combinations, so that we might attain a sovereignty over this new matter and justify this new freedom.

The upheaval of World War I, I am sure, had something to do with this urge for “order.” I myself felt the need to establish an Archimedean standpoint, to penetrate the chaos which threatened from every direction. It appeared a physical necessity to articulate the multicolored darkness with a definite simplicity. But whether it was a desire for “security,” as the psychologists would see it (to find order in chaos), or an overwhelming

general trend towards collective standards, as the sociologists might call it, or the all-penetrating influence of science—the fact remains that a new generation approached this task with the energy of pioneers, the curiosity of explorers and the unperturbed objectivity of scientists.

It was with this aim, in this spirit, and at this time, that Malevitch in Russia decided to start from the very beginning again, from “nihil,” with his *White on White*; that in Holland, fifteen hundred miles to the west, Mondrian, Doesburg and their friends discovered in the “equivalence of opposites” a working principle, a principle of style which they termed “neoplasticism,” based on the opposition of horizontal and vertical (excluding all others); and that six hundred miles to the south again, in Switzerland, the Swedish artist Viking Eggeling and I found another way to tackle the same task: by approaching it with the principle of counterpoint in mind, from the standpoint of polarity. The principle of counterpoint is not limited to music. For us, it was more than a technical device; it was a philosophic way of dealing with the experience of growth.

So strong was this historical impulse to establish “a ‘New Order’ that might restore the balance between heaven and hell” (as Arp put it), that it expressed itself practically simultaneously, though independently, in various places on the globe. It carried Eggeling and me (painters and nothing but painters) eventually, and half against our will, out of the world of easel painting to that of scrolls, and finally into film.

An account of the path we followed, our considerations and doubts, the experiences we went through thirty years ago, may be of some value to the ever-increasing number of artists who prefer the world of non-representational visions to the temptations of the representational object. It may also help to break down the stupid prejudice that plastic problems in the art of our time can be solved only on canvas or in bronze.

Influenced by cubism and its search for structure, but not satisfied with what it offered, I found myself between 1913-1918 increasingly faced with the conflict of suppressing spontaneous expression in order to gain an objective understanding of a fundamental principle with which I could control the “heap of fragments” inherited from the cubists. Thus I gradually lost interest in the subject—in any subject—and focused instead on the positive-negative (white-black) opposition, which at least gave me a working hypothesis whereby I could organize the relationship of one part of a painting to the other. In doing so, “form,” as such, became a handicap and was replaced by straight or curved divisions of the canvas, which in itself became a surface on which opposites were to be organized. Repetition of the same element on different parts of the canvas, and repetitions with minor or major variations, permitted a certain control.

One day at the beginning of 1918 while I was engaged in this struggle, Tristan Tzara knocked at the wall which separated our rooms in a little hotel in Zurich and introduced me to Viking Eggeling. He was supposed to be involved in the same kind of esthetic research. Ten minutes later, Eggeling showed me some of his work. Our complete agreement on esthetic as well as on philosophical matters, a kind of “enthusiastic identity” between us, led spontaneously to an intensive collaboration, and a friendship which lasted until his death in 1925.

Whereas I had only started, Eggeling had already developed a complete theory and functioning system. Like me, he had taken as his point of departure the cubist concept of elementary form, but he had found in Henri Rousseau a technique of “orchestration” (the plants in Rousseau’s “virgin forest” pictures, for example, the trees in his alleys, the little men like musical notes in his long streets), which helped to clarify the way for him. Eggeling’s dynamics of counterpoint, which he called *Generalbass der Malerei*, embraced generously and without discrimination every possible relationship between forms, including that of the

horizontal to the vertical. His approach, methodical to the degree of being scientific, led him to the analytical study of the behavior of elements of form under different conditions. He tried to discover which “expressions” a form would and could take under the various influences of “opposites”: little against big, light against dark, one against many, top against bottom, and so forth. By connecting (“equilibrating”) the strongest contrasts of the most varied order intimately with their opposites through similarities which he termed “analogies,” he could control an unlimited multiplicity of relationships. Contrasting elements were used to dramatize two or more complexes of forms; “analogies” were used within the same complexes of forms to relate them again.

As much as we both loved the early work of Kandinsky, we still thought that such free improvisations as his would have to come “later,” after a general principle had been established. (What made it right in Kandinsky’s work was the still existing impressionistic basis, or at least a definite contact with a definite object.) This principle would be the challenge, a point of resistance, against any anarchistic abuse of freedom and, as such, a psychological stimulus—not a chain.

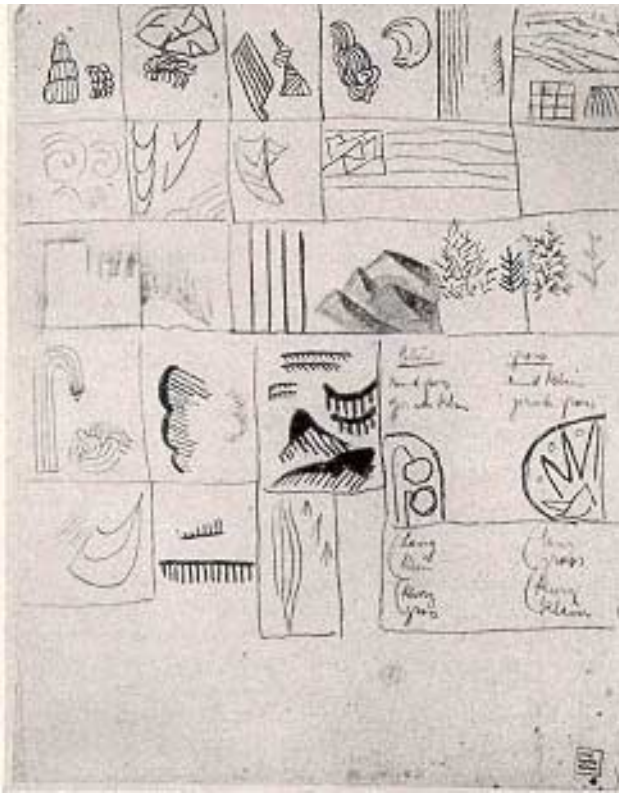
We saw in the completely liberated (abstract) form not only a new medium to be exploited, but the challenge towards a “universal language.” This, as we wrote in a pamphlet called *Universelle Sprache*, which we published in 1920, was to be a means of emotional and intellectual experience for all, one which would restore to the arts its social function.

We sought to achieve a more than purely subjective solution; we felt very definitely prepared to sacrifice whatever had to be sacrificed of individual spontaneous expression, for the time being, in order to clarify and “purify” the material—form and color—until the very principle itself became expressive: “to carry on in the same way as Nature organizes matter, but to use only its principles, not its forms,” in Eggeling’s words.

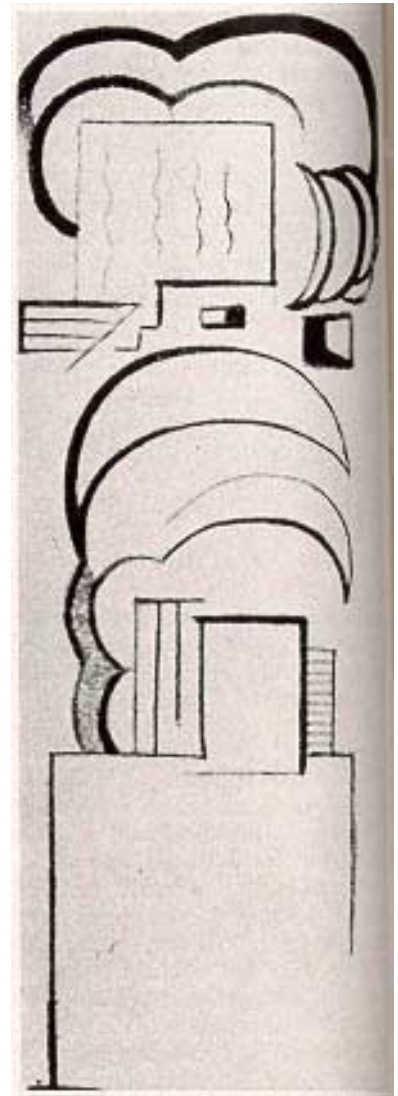
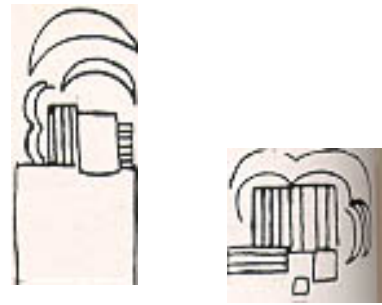
Two years after our first meeting, these ideas were to bring us into association with van Doesburg and later with Mondrian, Malevitch, Gabo, Mies van der Rohe, Lissitzky and others.

The collaboration between Eggeling and myself had a number of consequences:

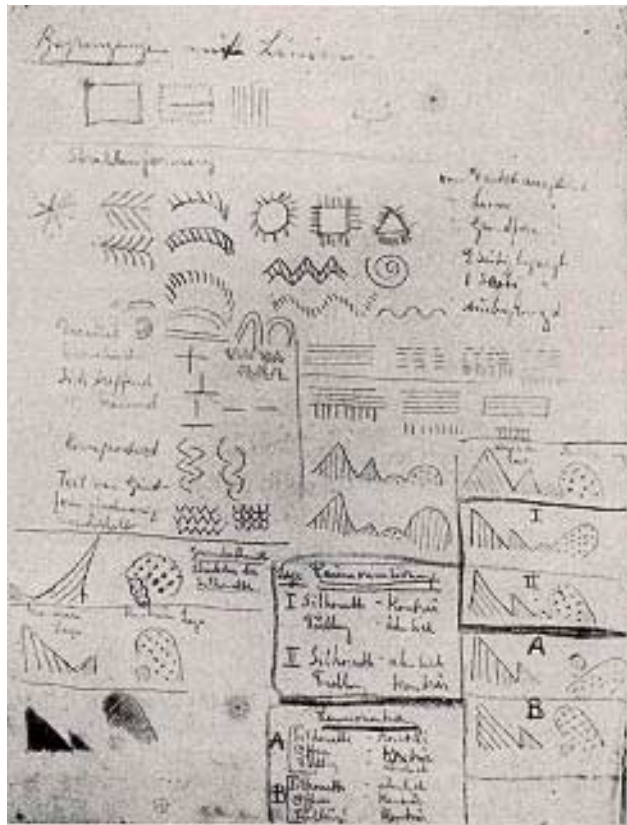
1. Our research led us to make a large number of drawings as transformations of one form element or another. These were our “themes,” or, as we called them, “instruments,” by analogy with music—the art form which inspired us considerably. We felt “the music of the orchestrated form.”
2. This methodical contrast-analogy, “orchestration” of a given “instrument” through different stages, forced upon us the idea of a continuity.
3. When in 1919 we finally established a definite line of continuity on long scrolls, we became aware of a multiple and dynamic kind of relationship which invited the eye to “mediate.”



Viking Eggeling, Worksheets of orchestrations, c. 1915.
 Above: Natural objects; below: Abstractions from natural objects.



Viking Eggeling, Orchestration of the Line, 1917-18.



The contrast-analogy process had created an energy which grew as the relationships multiplied. The beginning set up, as planned, rapports with the end, the first part with the second, the second with the third, left with right, top with bottom, every part with every other. Without intending to, we had arrived at a kind of dynamic expression which produced a sensation rather different from that possible in easel painting. This sensation lies in the stimulus which the remembering eye receives by carrying its attention from one detail, phase or sequence, to another that can be continued indefinitely. This is because the esthetic theme is just that: the relationship between every part and the whole. In so following the creative process, the beholder experiences it as a *process*, not as a single *fact*. In this way, the eye is stimulated to an especially active participation, through the *necessity of memorizing*; and this activity carries with it the kind of satisfaction which one might feel if one were suddenly to discover new or unusual forms of one's imagination.

These seem to me the main characteristics of the scroll, which offers sensations that the easel painting, by its very nature as a static form, cannot offer. Van Doesburg, though, tried to make a different point. "It makes no difference whether one who looks at a Mondrian canvas moves his eyes (from one 'opposite' to the other) or whether a scroll 'moves' before the eyes of the beholder." Well, I think he had a point there but only a polemic one, as the *attitude* of the creator and the spectator is different in each case.

I consider the scroll as a new (dating from 4000 B.C.!) art form which, despite "sociological difficulties" that it might encounter (such as being despised by art dealers as too difficult to sell, or finding no room for its display over a potential purchaser's fireplace) ought to become a modern medium of expression. It must, in fact, as there are sensations to be derived from it which can be experienced in no other way, either in easel painting or in film.

I see in the elongated, horizontal paintings of artists like Tanguy, Klee, Miro and others, the same impulse to express similar sensations. There are "messages" to be told and "messages" felt which make the traditional limits of easel painting inadequate communication.

One may assume that the Egyptians and the Chinese felt the appeal of this particular form of expression, and that they enjoyed arresting time in this way. Otherwise this form would not have evolved nor been preserved, as it still is in China today. The static unity which binds together the dynamic sequences is the form of the whole scroll. The unity of time is the same as in the easel painting, although its expression is fundamentally different. In the scroll painting, the orchestration of all stages of development of form is seen and felt simultaneously—backwards and forwards. This is one of the main distinctions

of this new plastic expression and a source of its real beauty. "Becoming and duration are not in any way a diminution of unchanging eternity; they are its expression. Every form occupies not only space but time. Being and becoming are one...What should be grasped and given form are things in flux" (Eggeling).

The logical step we had taken to the scroll had already thrown us, so to speak, out of the world of easel painting. It precipitated us a step further. After each of us in 1919 had finished his first scroll, we began to understand that we had gotten more than we asked for: the necessity to release this accumulated "energy" into actual movement! Never during our collaboration had we dreamt of that. But there it was. And movement implied film!

Few people have ever come to this medium so unexpectedly and with so much inner resistance. We knew no more about cameras and film than what we had seen in shop windows.

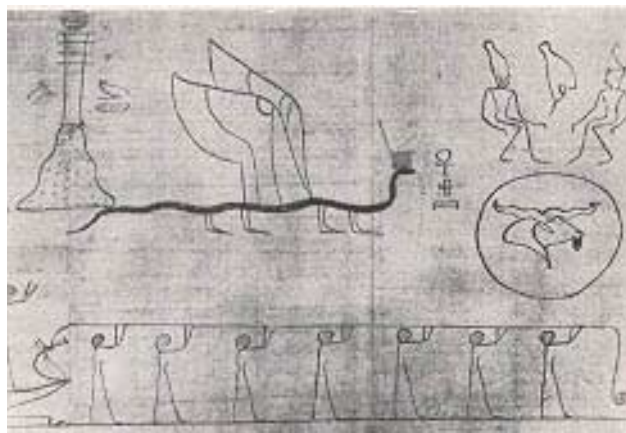
In 1921, Eggeling finished the first version of his *Diagonal Symphony* (after his second set of scrolls) and I completed my film, *Rhythm 21*. We were in a new medium altogether. It was not only the orchestration of form but also of time-relationship that we were facing in film. The single image disappeared in a flow of images, which made sense only if it helped to articulate a new element—*time*.

We realized that the "orchestration" of time was the esthetic basis of this new art form. Eggeling stuck to the graphic elegance of the forms developed in his scrolls. He endowed the different "instruments" with certain well-defined ways of motion. He really used them according to the musical term "instrument." But as they were products of the painter, they put innumerable obstacles in the way of the "filmer." It was then, and especially for him, a non-professional, a Herculean task. His film was remade three times under the most incredible conditions before he was satisfied.

I dissented from the start. It had taken an UFA technician more than a week to animate a single drawing of my scroll, "Prelude." The technician was not very encouraging to begin with, and I felt like a blind man being led by another blind man. I wanted to understand better what I was doing and decided, very much against Eggeling's arguments, to start from scratch again—using the principle of counterpoint to guide me. This time I did not concentrate upon orchestrating *form*—but *time*, and time alone.

The simple square of the movie screen could easily be divided and "orchestrated." These divisions or parts could then be orchestrated in time by accepting the rectangle of the "movie-canvas" as the form element. Thus it became possible to relate (in contrast-analogy) the various movements on this "movie-canvas" to each other—in a formal as well as a temporal sense. In other

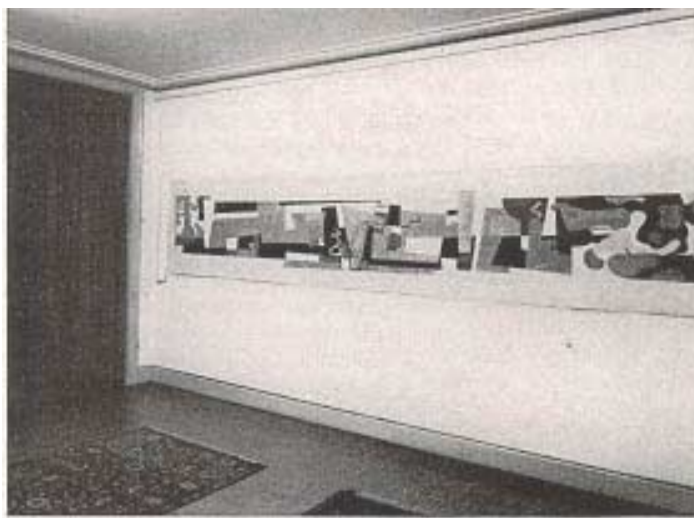
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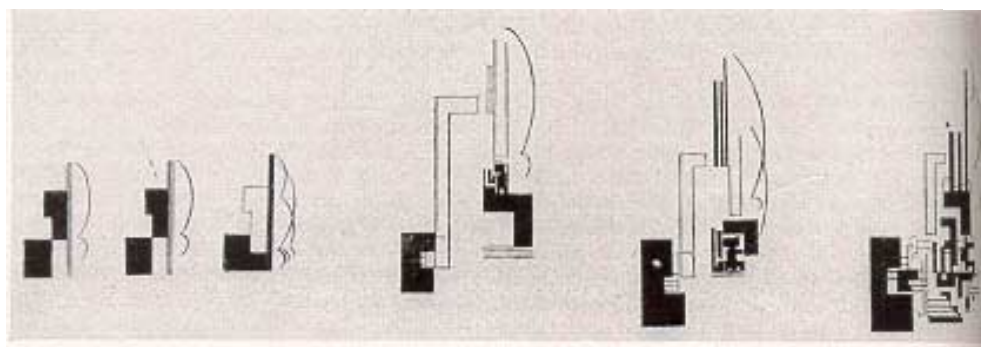
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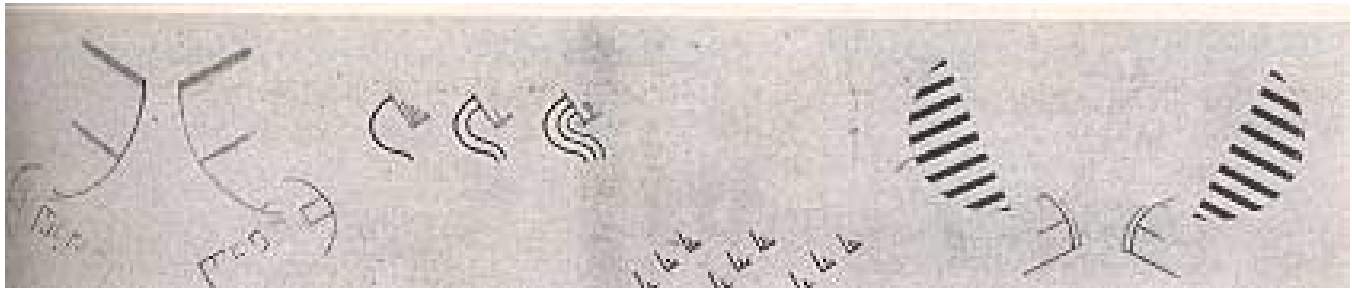
1. Viking Eggeling, Diagonal Symphony, Scroll painting, 1919-20. 2. Egyptian Scroll Painting, from Drioton, Encyclopédie photographique de l'art, photograph André Vigneau (Editions TEL, 1949). 3. Hans Richter, Stalingrad, 1944, scroll, collage and oil, from exhibition "Art of This Century," Basel, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

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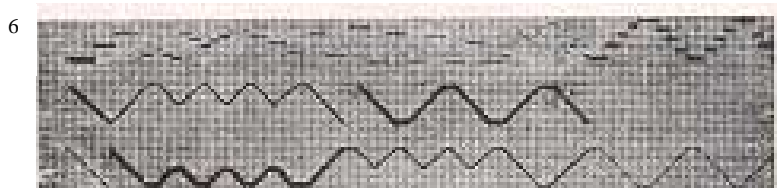


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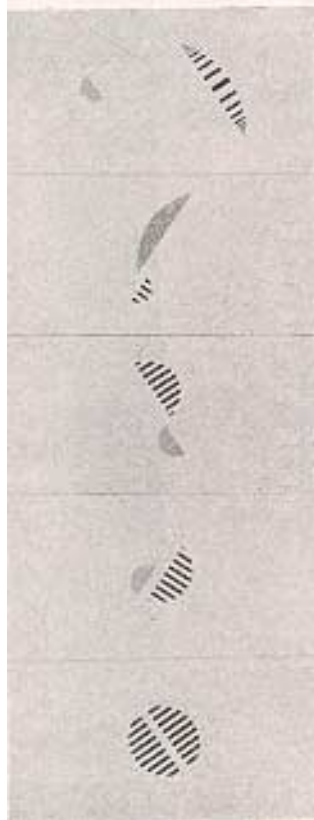




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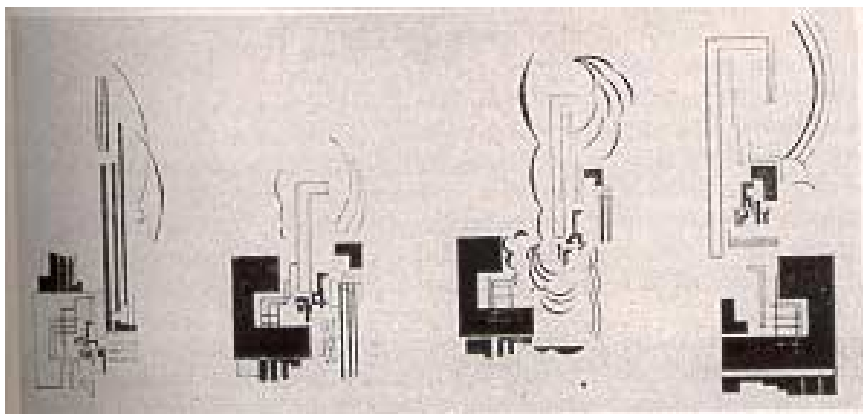


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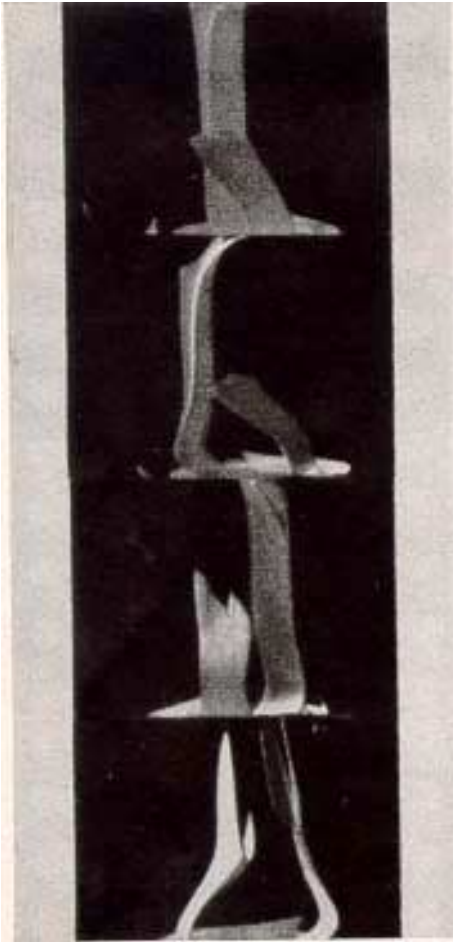


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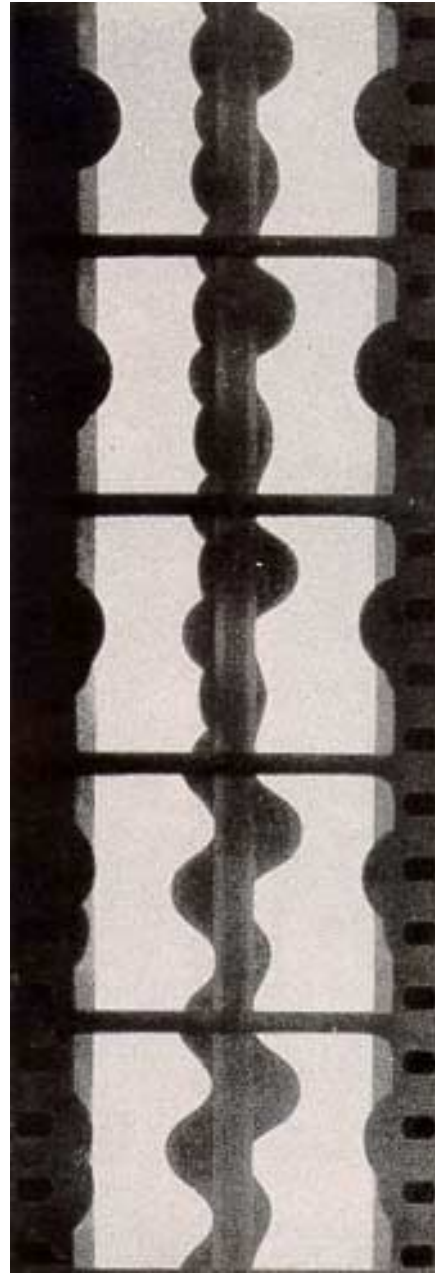
4. Hans Richter, *Prelude*, scroll painting, 1919.
 5. Hans Richter, from *Rhythm 21*, first abstract film, 1921, and 6. Part of score for *Rhythm 21*.
 7. Viking Eggeling, from *Diagonal Symphony*, first abstract film, 1921.



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Man Ray, from *Emak Bakia*, 1926



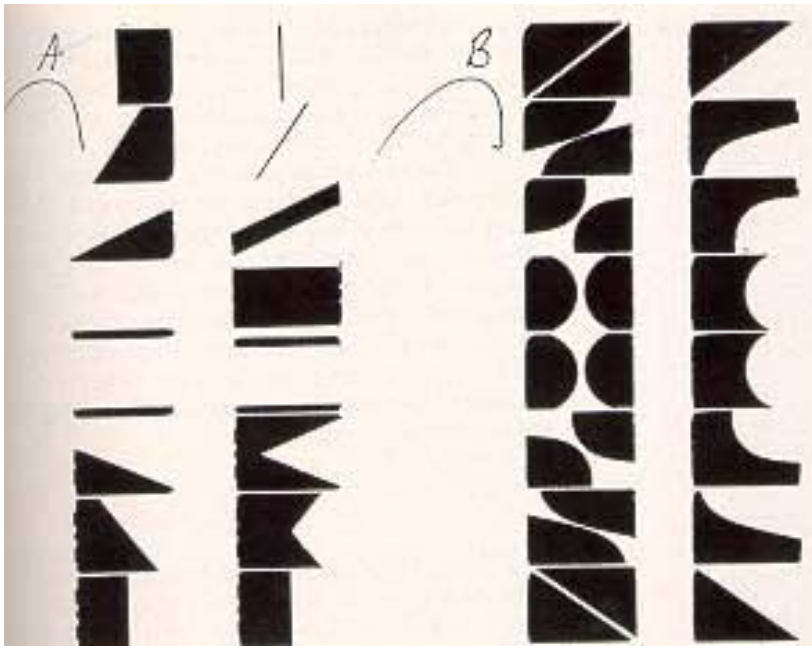
Walter Ruttmann, from *Opus 1* 1924

words. I did again with the screen what I had done years before with the canvas. In doing so I found a new sensation: *rhythm*—which is, I still think, the chief sensation of any expression of movement.

In 1922, Walter Ruttmann, also an abstract painter, but with an exceptional technical ability and not inhibited by any esthetic research, produced abstract films in a series: *Opus 1*, *Opus 2*, etc. His fish-and birdlike form-rhythms were to be taken up eight years later by his gifted pupil, Oscar Fischinger, to accompany musical compositions. In this happy combination the “abstract” film found a new fulfillment and won a kind of general acceptance. From 1924 on the work of the French group paralleled Ruttmann’s efforts and ours. It was this group which introduced and established the term *avant-garde*.

A whole set of new problems now arose; they were a logical extension, if not a fulfillment, of easel painting but could not be realized in the

static medium. The tradition of modern art developed on a wide front, simultaneously with and embracing the film: the plastic expression of an object in motion under varying light conditions; “to create the rhythm of common objects in space and time, to present them in their plastic beauty” (Léger); the distortion and dissection of a movement, an object or a form, and its reconstruction in cinematic terms (just as the cubists dissected and rebuilt in pictorial terms); the denaturalization of the object in any form to re-create it cinemato-

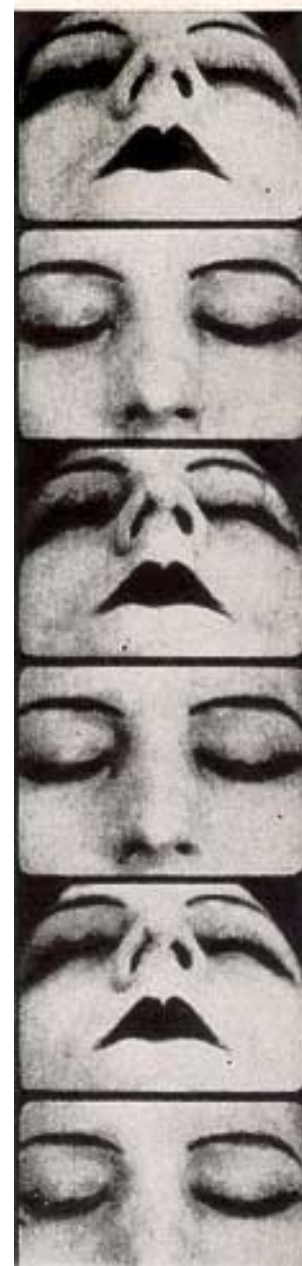


James A. and John Whitney, Worksheet for abstract film, c. 1947.
 Through a mechanism devised by the Whitney brothers, the screen can be articulated into all the possible permutations of a single form (e.g. motive A at left, B at right) or combinations of forms.

graphically with light—light with its transparency and airiness as a poetic, dramatic, constructive material; the use of the magic qualities of the film to create the original state of a dream; the complete liberation from the conventional story and its chronology in dadaist and surrealist developments, in which the object is taken out of its conventional context and is put into new relationships, thus creating an entirely new content. “The external object has broken away from its habitual environment. Its component parts have liberated themselves from the object in such a way that they could set up entirely new relationships with other elements” (André Breton).

Painters who had long ago found their style on canvas felt that the film offered the artist new solutions of the problems posed in their work. Fernand Léger, for example, said: “I sensed a new realism in the detail of the common object; I tried to find the plastic value of these fragments of our modern life. I rediscovered them on the screen in the close-ups of objects which impressed and influenced me. However, I felt that one could make the expression much stronger. I decided to ‘frame’ the beauty of this undiscovered world in film. I worked towards this end as I had heretofore done in painting.”

Besides Léger in *Ballet Mécanique* and Picabia in René Clair's *Entr'acte*, Duchamp, who as early as 1921 had given up painting for chess, nevertheless continued his dynamic problems in film—*Anemic Cinema*, in 1926, and twenty years later in *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. Later, Brugière, Dali, Cocteau, Len Ley, the Whitney brothers and other modern painters of the younger generation have followed the unique lure of the



Fernand Léger, from *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924

film and used it without ceasing to be painters as well. There are identical problems for the painter and the filmer, and indeed, why not? Are not both visual arts?

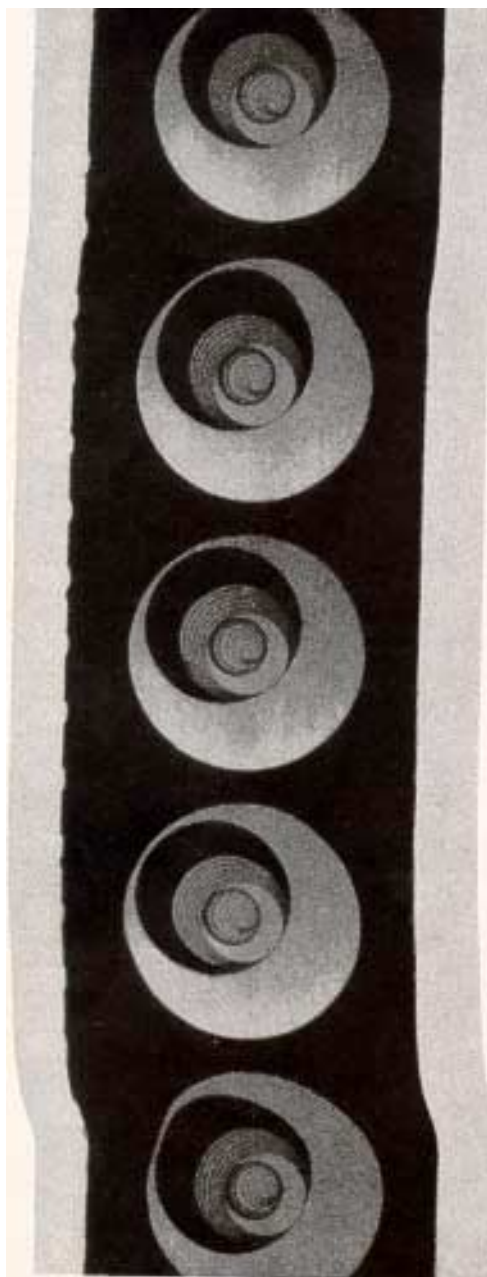
In the meantime, the scope of the experimental film has grown. The principles which we followed with our first abstract film are not limited to the articulation of lines or squares alone. The rhythm of a swing or a clock, the orchestration of hats or legs, the dance of kitchenware or a collar—could become expressions of a new sensa-

tion. The experimental film has at last come into its own. It has created its own realm, which we may term "film poetry" in contradistinction to the "novel" of the entertainment film or the "reportage" of the documentary.

Twenty years ago the documentary was shown and considered exclusively as avant-garde; today it is accepted as a legitimate film species. Twenty years from now, film poetry may well be accepted as a legitimate part of film making and recognized as part of the tradition of modern art, whence it came and to which it belongs.

The artists of the coming generation will seriously consider the camera as well as the brush their medium of expression.

Note: All works illustrated are from the collection of Hans Richter or are reproduced from his book Film-gegner von Heute-Filmfreunde von Morgen, Berlin, 1929.



Marcel Duchamp, from *Anemic Cinema*, 1926

Marcel Duchamp preparing roto-reliefs for *Dreams that Money Can Buy*, 1947, photograph Arnold Eagle

