

MIES: A FIGHTER FOR FILM

[Second Part]

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4. Eggeling and Mies

Certain basic features of Henri Bergson's philosophy of life, which was of central importance for Eggeling in particular, become clearly visible in *G*. As a matter of fact, although he himself was not involved in the magazine, the Swedish painter and pioneer of abstract film can be regarded as the leading intellectual figure of the *G* project. The emphasis on the organic wholeness of lived experience, the significance of the rhythmic body, the central role of the *durée* and the criticism of a positivist concept of knowledge formed the basis for Eggeling's experiments with serial role models. He described his film *Symphonie Diagonale* (1924) as "Eidodynamik," a term he adopted from Bergson.¹ In *L'évolution créatrice*, Bergson defined the term *eidōs* as "la vue stable prise sur l'instabilité des choses," thus adding a temporal dimension to the Aristotelian understanding of *eidōs* in the sense of "form" (as a counter-concept to matter).² For Bergson, *eidōs* stood in contrast to the "cinematographic mechanism" of modern thought and knowledge that he criticized, which transforms the continuous movement of life into quantifiable sequences of "snapshots." In contrast to other artists who used Bergson's criticism of cinema as a justification for their own rejection of the new medium,³ Eggeling saw film as a way of overcoming the Cartesian limitations of modern design, thought and representation. Eggeling (just like Deleuze more than sixty years later in his *Kino* books) discovered in Bergson a new conception of time: in contrast to positivist-Cartesian thought, which understands time as a spatialized sequence of quantifiable individual shots and thus subordinates time to the representation of a certain kind of movement, Bergson understood it as a heterogeneous duration of temporal differences. According to Deleuze in his interpretation of Bergson, metric time is nothing other than "disguised" space. Consequently, both for Eggeling and for Deleuze, the concept of *durée* opened up the possibility of a new understanding of space.⁴ Little is known about the relationship between Eggeling and Mies. However, it can be assumed that there was a personal relationship between the two: on the occasion of the first Eggeling



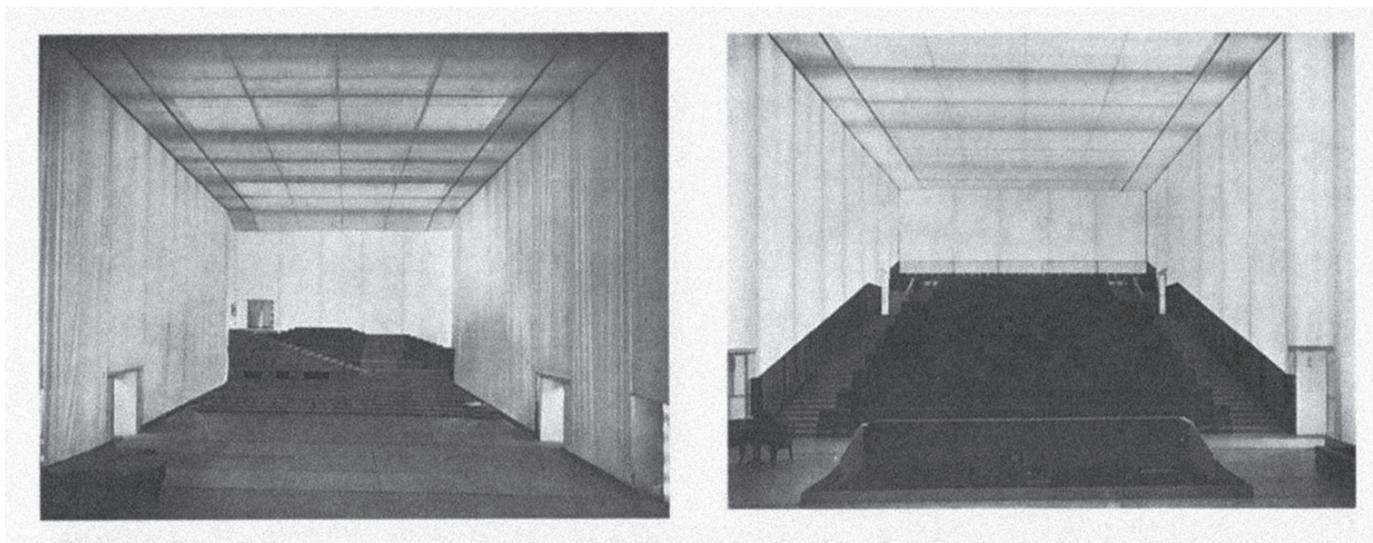
exhibition after the Second World War, Mies wrote a short catalogue article.⁵ In Mies's archive, there is an exchange of letters from the year 1924, which shows that Mies had lent money to Eggeling, who was living in poverty at that time, which he now asked to be repaid. Eggeling replied in writing: "My situation is downright desperate; for the yield of my papers was not enough to free me from Neu-Babelsberg. After all, I still own the cinematographic trick table - my only work opportunity - selling it would be a complete lockdown of my work."⁶ It is not exactly clear what Eggeling meant by "papers" and "Neu-Babelsberg." Possibly he meant the UFA Studios, where he and Richter conducted their film experiments. Nevertheless, this correspondence shows that Mies supported Eggeling financially, possibly to enable the completion of *Symphonie Diagonale*, which was performed on November 5, 1924 and was part of a screening of abstract films organized by the November Group on May 3, 1925. Moreover, it was Mies who, after Eggeling's demise, demanded that the Ministry of Science, Art and Education leave Eggeling's studio to his assistant Erna Niemeyer.⁷

What they also had in common was their interest in Bergson. For Eggeling, Bergson's thinking seemed to have been of central importance, probably ever since his stay in Paris from 1911 to 1915. His notebook is filled with quotations from *L'évolution créatrice*.⁸ Mies also owned the 1921 German edition and two underlines prove that he had at least partially read the book.

Interestingly, the underlines are in the passage in which Bergson described a vortex of dust that is perceived by the human eye as the "persistence of [its] form," thus appearing more like a "thing" than as "progress."⁹ In fact, every form is nothing more than "the outline of a movement," a fleeting phenomenon that has less to do with the material reality of the object than with the invisible forces that make it appear as a solid object. As his underlines prove, Mies seemed to have been taken with the idea that "the living being is above all thoroughfare" and that "the essence of life is in the movement by which life is transmitted."¹⁰ The fact that his book collection includes writings by Dilthey, Driesch and Klages suggests that Mies's reading of Bergson was accompanied by a general interest in the philosophical critique of abstract rationality and positivist thought.¹¹

5. The Light Room in Hellerau

The central role of film in *G* explains Mies's later engagement as a "fighter for film." However, the question remains as to why he was apparently receptive to the approaches developed by Richter and Eggeling. One possible answer leads back to the period between 1910 and 1912. At that time, Mies, who was employed in Peter Behrens's office, spent a lot of time for personal reasons in Dresden-Hellerau, the reform settlement founded by Wolf Dohrn and Karl Schmidt in 1908, which was modelled after the English Garden City. As we know from the memoirs of the dancer Mary Wigman, Mies regularly went to Hellerau to visit Ada Bruhn, who would later become his wife.¹² Bruhn was among the first group of students enrolled at Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's Educational Institute for Rhythmic Education. It can be assumed that the young, aspiring architect Mies was interested in the architecture of the model settlement, which was planned by Heinrich Tessenow, Richard Riemerschmid and Hermann Muthesius. The fact that Mies went to London in 1910 to attend the International Town Planning Conference (at which parts of the General Urban Planning Exhibition, organized by Werner Hegemann and previously shown in Berlin and Düsseldorf, were exhibited) proves that he had studied the subject in depth.¹³

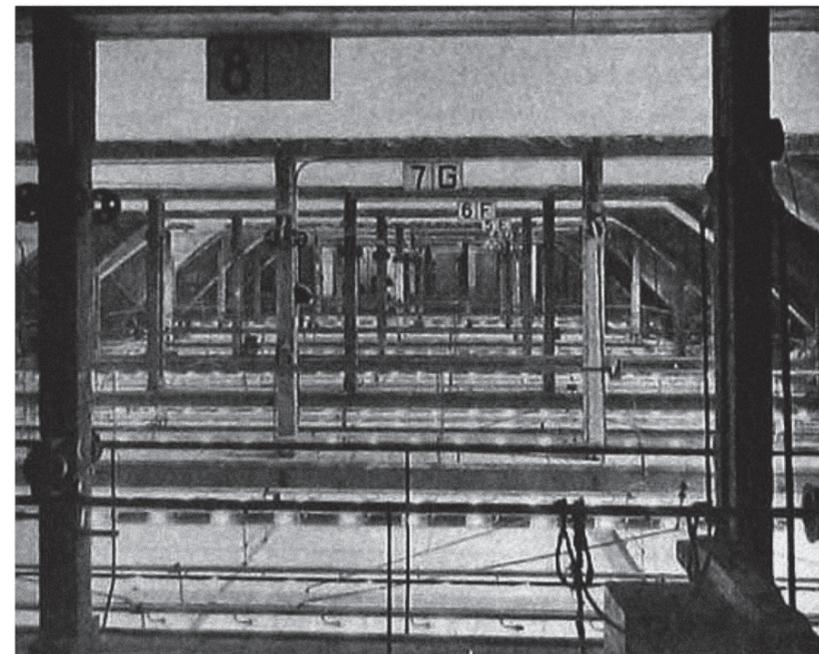


In Hellerau, it was certainly the *Festspielhaus*, the heart of the reform settlement designed by Tessenow, that attracted Mies's attention. In particular, the festival hall, designed in collaboration with the Swiss stage designer Adolphe Appia and the Georgian architect Alexander von Salzmann, should not have escaped Mies's attention. This empty, completely undecorated space, similar to the interior of a white cube, represented a revolutionary break in the history of stage architecture. The auditorium and the stage were no longer separated from each other by a proscenium, but formed "an indivisible whole."¹⁴ Instead of an illusionistic stage set including naturalistic props, abstract, flexible stage elements that limited the rhythmic movements of bodies and light were used.

Of particular importance for the festival hall was its active light, which was produced by a lighting system consisting of 3,000 lamps specially patented by Salzmann and built by Siemens-Schuckert. Behind a translucent fabric cladding impregnated with wax, stretched as a permeable membrane over all four walls and the ceiling, there were hidden light elements whose luminous intensity could be adjusted as required.¹⁵ The importance attached to this technical apparatus is evident from the enormous production costs of 70,000 marks.¹⁶ The lighting system transformed the empty white space into a pulsating body of light that produced "a strangely diffuse, immaterializing, shadowless light."¹⁷ Light no longer appeared in the festival hall as an invisible medium that made visible a world of objects assumed to be lifeless. Rather, the light itself became active, alive and "shaping."¹⁸

As von Salzmann wrote, the "illuminated room" became a "luminous room."¹⁹ Indeed, the hall transformed into an animated light body did not miss its mark. Arthur Seidl, with a certain irony, reported that Tessenow's Festspielhaus was ridiculed as a "cinema festival hall," writing enthusiastically: "Everything was actually new here, and something indescribably unique had risen and come to life before our eyes and ears."²⁰

Appia thus used the means of architecture and modern lighting technology to implement his theoretical demand for moving light, which had already been developed in the late nineteenth century. In contrast to stage painting, this is able "to convey the eternally changing image of the world of appearances fully and vividly, indeed in its most expressive form."²¹ This pulsating light space realized architecturally what Jaques-Dalcroze had proposed to be the general goal of eurhythm education, namely to organize "the relations between space and duration" by means of the body.²² Interestingly, Jaques-Dalcroze's method shows clear parallels with the contrapuntal compositional principles later developed by Eggeling and Richter, which formed the basis of their abstract films: the former was about "balancing or contrasting the movements of light, music and the body in space against each other and, in any case, allowing them to converge to create *one* design."²³



The recurring discursive patterns from G also seem preconfigured in Hellerau's holistic reform project: the combination of life-philosophical concepts with an affirmative stance towards technology, the "education to apperception" to a degree of "automatic precision," the "independent creation of rhythmic and melodic 'counterpoints'" and the awareness that the festival hall did not yet represent a new theater, but was merely intended as preparation for the theater of the future.²⁴

There are some indications that Mies knew the festival hall very well. Not only is it probable that Ada Bruhn took part in the performances of Gluck's opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* in 1912, but in later projects, Mies recurrently used fabric-covered walls or room dividers: for the Café Samt und Seide (1927, with Lilly Reich), fabrics hung from straight and curved steel pipes; in Haus Tugendhat, the gray-silver curtains look like canvases on which there appears a kaleidoscopic play of moving shadows from the weeping willow growing in front of the house. Mies had also completely covered the walls of one of the rooms of his office apartment Am Karlsbad 24 with white silk, at least temporarily. According to his former employee Sergius Ruegenberg, Mies insisted on keeping the room empty at all times.²⁵ It is possible that the walls of his apartment were already clad with fabrics between 1917 and 1919. Friends of the writer Rudolf Borchardt, who was a subtenant of Mies during this time, later reported that "the white and the gathered fabrics were a beautiful background for groups and figures."²⁶

The light wall made of opaque milk glass in the Barcelona Pavilion (1929), which Mies intended to be the only light source, also seems to have had a similar effect on visitors as the rhythmic light space in Hellerau. As with Appia and von Salzmann, light loses its function as a means of making the world of objects visible and rather becomes an "expressive element" that stands in contrast to the visually recognizable.²⁷ The light itself becomes visible as it "spreads out in the room" and helps the visitor to "rediscover their own body."²⁸

This desubjectification effect seemed to have been precisely intended in the Barcelona Pavilion. Ruegenberg later described that the light wall had to be turned off shortly after the opening of the exhibition: the visitors, who perceived themselves as "silhouettes," perceived the light as "psychologically unpleasant."²⁹ It is precisely this unease that points to the critical dimension of Mies's architecture in the late 1920s: unlike the festival hall, which appeared as a "permeable light building"³⁰ but was in fact a monadic space, the radically open, empty Barcelona Pavilion stood in an indissoluble contrast with the surrounding heterotopic spectacle of the World Fair. And while in the festival hall, the hidden



apparatus helps to let the visitor-cum-spectator merge with the rhythm of light, music and dancing bodies, the constant glow of the light wall confronted the visitors not only with the remnants of their own subjectivity, but also its "peculiarly intangible materiality"³¹ along with the possibilities of new forms of life.

The answer to the question of how Mies became a "fighter for film" can thus be found in those attempts to understand cinema as a practice of alternative thinking and creation. His interest in cinema was ultimately an interest in images - and these, according to Deleuze, are less a reflection of the world than the key to understanding subjectivity and our relationship with the world. What Richter and Eggeling's films and the rhythmic light room in Hellerau have in common with Mies's architecture is that they did not aim to record and reproduce an image of reality, but instead to unite the collective's perceptive *physis* with new technology. This is exactly what Walter Benjamin meant when he cited film as an example of pictorial space [*Bildraum*] and body space [*Leibraum*] penetrating each other in such a way that a moment of collective innervation of technology occurs.³² At this moment, a new "space for play" opens up, which is greatest in film.³³ And it was precisely this space for play, I think, that Mies tried to open up for architecture. This presupposes, however, that we say goodbye to both the essentialist and the phenomenological understanding of architecture and rather understand architecture as an animated, active entity that brings together emotions, concepts, spaces and bodies to form meaningful structures. In 1924, Richter wrote in *G* that the magazine was aimed at a contemporary who was "armed with all the modern apparatuses of instinct, reception and dispatching that assure his connection to life."³⁴ Film and architecture are among those mechanisms that are capable of creating these connections and generating new life.

Notas

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- Paul F. Schmidt, "Eggelings Kunstfilm," *Das Kunstblatt* 12 (1924), 381.
- Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Alcan, 1908), 340.
- Jimena Canales, "Movement before Cinematography: The High-Speed Qualities of Sentiment," *Journal of Visual Culture* 3 (2006), 275. DOI: 10.1177/1470412906070518.
- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- "Eggeling was one of the lonely greats, thought Lionardo, as he said 'He does not return to those who are tied to a star,'" Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Viking Eggeling," in Carl Nordenfalk (ed.), *Viking Eggeling 1880-1925* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1950), 11.
- Letter from Eggeling to Mies. February 15, 1924. Box 1, Folder E. The Papers of Mies van der Rohe, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
- Letter from Mies to the Ministry of Arts, Science and Education, August 11, 1925. Mies van der Rohe: Research Papers, Canadian Centre of Architecture.
- Louise O'Konor, *Viking Eggeling 1880-1925: Artist and Film-maker, Life and Work* (Stockholm: Almqvist Wiksell, 1971), 79-80.
- Henri Bergson, *Schöpferische Entwicklung* (Jena: Diedericks, 1912), 152. Mies van der Rohe Collection. Special Collections Room, University of Illinois, Chicago. In the French original, Bergson uses the expression "un lieu de passage" instead of "thoroughfare," thus emphasizing the spatial character of his philosophy of becoming. English version: Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944): 141-142.
- Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 141-142.
- Mies owned editions of Wilhelm Dilthey's *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913 edition), Hans Driesch's *Philosophie des Organischen* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1921) and *Ordnungslehre* (Jena: Diedericks, 1923), as well as *Persönlichkeit* (Zurich: Orell Füssli, 1927) by Ludwig Klages. Mies van der Rohe Collection. Special Collections Room, University of Illinois, Chicago.
- Mary Wigman, Interview with Ludwig Glaeser, tape recording, 13.9.1972, Mies van der Rohe: Research Papers, CCA. The names of Bruhn and Wigman appear on the official student list for 1910/11. See *Der Rhythmus. Ein Jahrbuch*, 1 (Hellerau: Hellerauer Verlag: 1911). The row house Am grünen Zipfel, in which Bruhn and Wigman lived, was the place of regular meetings at which Mies also made the acquaintance of the art historian and later psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn.
- See Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe-A Critical Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 41; Werner Hegeman, *Der Städtebau nach den Ergebnissen der Allgemeinen Städtebau-Ausstellung in Berlin* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1911). As a former colleague of the Dresden architect Bruno Paul, who worked with Hermann Muthesius, Mies was certainly familiar with Garden City discourses.
- Arthur Seidl, *Die Hellerauer Schulfeste und die 'Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze'* (Regensburg: Bosse, 1912), 31-32.
- Seidl indicates 3,000 as the number of lamp elements. Other sources speak of 10,000. Kenneth MacGowan, *The Theatre of Tomorrow* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), 190. Appia had previously considered installing the lighting system patented by Mariano Fortuny. This consisted of a spanned fabric, designed with a wired structure so the colored, moving light could be projected on the spherical dome.
- Thus, approximately one tenth of the total construction costs for the Festspielhaus (800,000 marks) was used for the lighting system.
- Karl Scheffler, "Das Haus," in *Die Schulfeste der Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze* (Jena: Diedericks, 1912), 11.
- Adolphe Appia, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung* (München: Bruckmann, 1899), 84.

- Alexander von Salzmann, "Licht Belichtung und Beleuchtung: Bemerkungen zur Beleuchtungsanlage des Grossen Saales der Dalcroze-Schule," in *Die Schulfeste der Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze*, 70.
- Arthur Seidl, *Die Hellerauer Schulfeste und die 'Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze'*, 13. In 1913, George Bernhard Shaw wrote about the lighting system: "Heute Nachmittag waren wir wieder dort und sahen uns die Beleuchtungsanlage an - die riesigen Flächen weißer Leinwand und die vielen Lichter dahinter und darüber. Man bräuchte nur noch einen durchsichtigen Boden mit Lichtern darunter, dann könnte man alles Himmlische aufführen..." [This afternoon we were there again and looked at the lighting system - the huge surfaces of white canvas and the many lights behind and above it. One would only need a transparent floor with lights underneath, then one could perform everything heavenly], Shaw quoted in Klaus-Peter Arnold, *Vom Sofakissen zum Städtebau: Die Geshichte der Deutschen Werkstätten und der Gartenstadt Hellerau* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1993), 358. Le Corbusier also came to Hellerau to visit his brother Albert Jeanneret, who studied with Jaques-Dalcroze. In his notebooks, Le Corbusier wrote about the Festsaal: "Tatsache ist, daß der Theatersaal, den Tessenow, Jaques [sic] und Salzmann für Hellerau entwerfen einen Meilenstein in der Entwicklung der Epoche darstellen wird." [The fact is that the Theatersaal, the Tessenow Jaques [sic] and Salzmann designed for Hellerau, will represent a milestone in the development of the era], Le Corbusier, quoted in Hartmann Kristiana, "Reformbewegungen", in Durth Werner (ed.), *Entwurf zur Moderne: Hellerau: Stand Ort Bestimmung* (Stuttgart: Wüstenrot Stiftung, 1996), 31.
- Adolphe Appia, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung*, 17.
- "Cette éducation devra régler les rapports de l'espace et de la durée [...]." Jaques-Dalcroze, Émile, "De la foule et du geste au théâtre," *Tribune de Genève* (23 April 1913). In a later essay, Jaques-Dalcroze extended his argument to the cinematograph. This could contribute "superior effects" to the education of the body, the aim of which was to develop relationships between "dynamics and time, dynamics and space." Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, "L'art et le cinématographe," *Tribune de Genève* (5 March 1921), 5.
- Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, "Schularbeit und Schulfest," in *Die Schulfeste der Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze*, 50.
- Arthur Seidl, *Die Hellerauer Schulfeste und die 'Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze'*, 46-48.
- Ruegenberg later remembered that Mies's daughters used the empty room as a playroom and scribbled on its white walls. Interview with Sergius Ruegenberg, tape recording. Mies van der Rohe: Research Papers, CCA.
- Hugo Schaefer, "Stunden mit Borchardt," *Die literarische Welt* 2 (1926), 2. Quoted in Marx Andreas and Paul Weber (eds.), "Von Ludwig Mies zu Mies van der Rohe," in Helmut Reuter and Schulte Birgit (eds.), *Mies und das Neue Wohnen* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 30.
- Adolphe Appia, *La musique et la mis-en-scène* (Bern: Theaterkultur, 1963), 55.
- Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, "Was Rhythmische Gymnastik Ihnen gibt und was sie von ihnen fordert" in *Der Rhythmus* 1, 46.
- "Uns fiel auf, dass nämlich die Menschen, die davor waren, als Silhouetten im Raum standen oder sich bewegten, was sehr unangenehm psychologisch war. [...] Die Spanier, die haben das nicht gewusst und die fanden das nicht günstig und es ist nicht wiederholt worden nachher. Aber interessant war überhaupt, dass er dies Problem so angefasst hat und so radikal auch gemacht hat." [It struck us that the people who were in front of them stood or moved as silhouettes in space, which was very unpleasant psychologically. (...) The Spaniards, they didn't know that and they didn't find it convenient and it wasn't repeated afterwards. But it was interesting that he touched this problem in this way and did it so radically.] Interview with Sergius Ruegenberg, tape recording. Mies van der Rohe: Research Papers, CCA. Interestingly, Siegfried Kracauer used the exact same metaphor of the disembodied

silhouette for his article on the Werkbund exhibition The Apartment as in his description of Mies and Lilly Reich's glass room. Mies himself repeatedly placed black silhouettes in his drawings (see note 27; interview with Ruegenberg, Mies van der Rohe: Research Papers, CCA.

30. Arthur Seidl, *Die Hellerauer Schulfeste und die 'Bildungsanstalt Jaques-Dalcroze*.
31. Justus Bier, "Mies van der Rohes Reichspavillon in Barcelona," *Die Form* 4,16 (1929), 423.
32. Innervation is an incorporation of the world into the body. Benjamin writes about yoga, hashish, etc. Emphasizing the neuro-physiological character and the contrast of innervation with visual perception, Benjamin uses the example of the child playing in the magical world of imagination when dealing with things and mixed materials in a state in which creation and reception are consistent. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (2004). DOI: 10.1162/0162287041886511
33. "...What is lost in the withering of semblance and the decay of the aura in works of art is matched by a huge gain in the scope for play [Spiel-Raum]. This space for play is widest in film. In film, the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play." Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2008): 48-49.
34. Hans Richter "G," *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* 3 (1924).

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