

This review appeared in *The New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, on page 104:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/06/06/laszlo-moholy-nagy-at-the-guggenheim>

I have sent this letter to the editor at *The New Yorker*, a letter that the magazine did not publish:

June 7, 2016

themail@newyorker.com

Dear Editor:

Peter Schjeldahl's review of the Moholy-Nagy retrospect exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum seems hurried and remains well below the high level of his best work. It is dominated by a description of his "favorite" piece in the exhibition, *The Light Prop for an Electric Stage* (1930), a description that lacks a key detail. What we don't read is that Moholy-Nagy's work on the *Light Prop* culminated in a little gem of a film, *A Lightplay, Black White Gray*, currently available in DVD format.

Schjeldahl also writes of Moholy-Nagy that ". . . his commitment to rational abstraction deflected—or sacrificed even—his softer yearnings." This seems to be a conclusion based on Moholy-Nagy's abstract paintings of the twenties and thirties, paintings that Schjeldahl found to be ". . . monotonous in feeling." But how could Moholy-Nagy have achieved enormous success with his designs for costumes and settings for a 1931 Berlin production of Giacomo Puccini's

deeply emotional *Madame Butterfly* without being in touch with “his softer yearnings?”

The most murky passages concern the fascination that Moholy-Nagy and his close friend Sigfried Giedion had with a picturesque engineering marvel, the 1905 Marseilles Transporter Bridge (no longer extant). It is not entirely clear from Schjeldahl’s text what it was about the Transporter Bridge that impacted the two friends, but he wrote that after encountering it they developed as an aim “. . . a sense of tradition that dismissed museum art and rooted itself in products of everyday necessity.” Be that as it may, is it well documented that during his first visit to the Art Institute of Chicago, soon after he had arrived in the Illinois metropolis in 1937, Moholy-Nagy spent more than three hours studying the works on view!

Finally, Schjeldahl’s brief comment on the experiences of Moholy-Nagy’s students in Chicago is most welcome, but he offers no discussion at all of the experiences of his students in Weimar and Dessau.

Sincerely yours,

Lloyd C. Engelbrecht