

Viking Eggeling: *Diagonalsymphonie* 1924

German Abstract Film in the Twenties

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The earliest period of film history saw a rapid movement from technical novelty to popular entertainment and, in its first 20 years, the foundations of an industry which continues to dominate the mainstream history of film. The technological inventiveness of the 19th century which gave rise to photography and cinema also saw the emergence of radical changes in the classical principles of all forms of art. However, in the first two decades of this century, a number of visual artists began to see a potential for cinema which was not being realized by the film entertainment industry.

Given the difficult technology of film, the scarcity of equipment, and its high costs it is not surprising that few independent experiments were realized by artists who visualized this potential. Those works which were produced before 1925 are few and far between and even fewer of them survive in any reliable form from that period. Consequently any history of the development of the ideas must be made on the basis of very scant evidence. Though the developments in painting are well known, well documented and have been subject to much historical discussion, it is still necessary to put those few early film experiments in the context of the other art of the period. It is generally and in my view rightly recognized that the most significant and influential development in painting after the impressionist period came in the work of Paul Cézanne. In his work can be seen the basis for the dissolution of pictorial representation leading on the one hand to Futurist painting and on the other to Cubism, both of which in their turn are the primary precursors of an increasingly non-representational concept of abstraction.

It is possible to identify in the developing concept of pictorial form a dynamic aspect threatening the basic limits of the static, timeless picture. Time and flux enters art in two distinct ways characterized in a distinction between Futurism and Cubism. In Cubism, following directly on the late Cézanne, the dynamic principle is that of the flux in experience deriving from the changing stance and spatial perception of the painter. Cézanne's work and Cubism led to an awareness that the act of representation takes place in time and changes both with the time and in relationship to the previously recorded moments of perception within the painting itself. Instead of suppressing this flux in favour of a conventionally unified perspective, a language is developed to allow the flux itself to remain recorded or expressed in the resultant picture — a perceptual dynamic. Except in some aspects of Viking Eggeling's film *Diagonal Symphony*, the dynamics of perception

in the act of representation only has its parallel in film at a much later period, in those films which explore various strategies and systems for the camera (as in some works by Kurt Kren, Michael Snow or William Raban).

On the other hand in Futurism, similar formal devices the representation, instead of focussing on the changing state of the perception of the painter, utilize these devices to represent movement in the subject whilst basically maintaining the status of the observer: a kinetic dynamic. The two dynamics have much in common but their relative polarity continues into the development of more thoroughly non-representational art through work which on one hand maintains a kinetic potential and on the other a more architectural abstraction; Kandinsky on one side, for example, and Mondrian on the other. It is curious that, whilst the dynamic tendency in painting (related to the impetus which gave rise to the cinematic technology: a fascination with recording experience of motion of time) was accompanied by a vehement rejection of the literary, no corresponding rejection took place in the cinema of the period. When artists involved in the new concepts of the visual arts began to take an interest in cinema, it was already necessary for them to react against the mainstream dominance of theatre and literature within the medium.

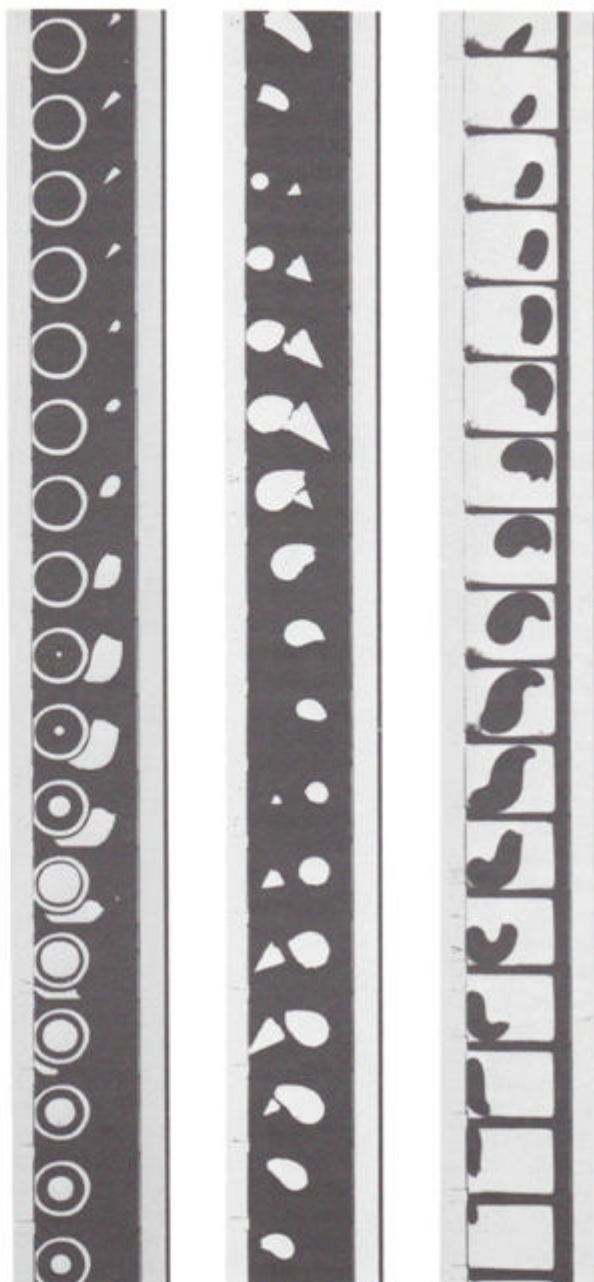
Whilst the earliest realized works of film as a self-consciously plastic art were almost certainly those of the Corra brothers, Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna (works which survive only in the form of written documentation), the first group of works which can in any way be understood to represent a consistent direction were those abstract films produced in Germany in the early twenties. Even though it is tempting, with so little material produced in this field, to seize on this as a movement, this is a little inaccurate. Although the artists concerned were aware of each other and collaborated to some extent, their products display some significant differences in attitude. Dispute continues on the question of primacy, which does not concern the ideas which can be discerned from the work. Four artists should be included in this grouping: Walter Ruttmann, Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger (it is possible that further research on Werner Graeff and Kurt Kranz will show that they should also be considered). Of the four, only Fischinger had not already worked as a painter before he made films, though he was a draughtsman and in his later years turned increasingly to painting. Ruttmann, Eggeling and Richter were already involved deeply in abstract art when they came to consider film. Certainly in the cases of Richter

and Eggeling, at the time engaged in a close artistic collaboration, their movement to film was the result of a logical progression from the concerns which they had been developing in painting.

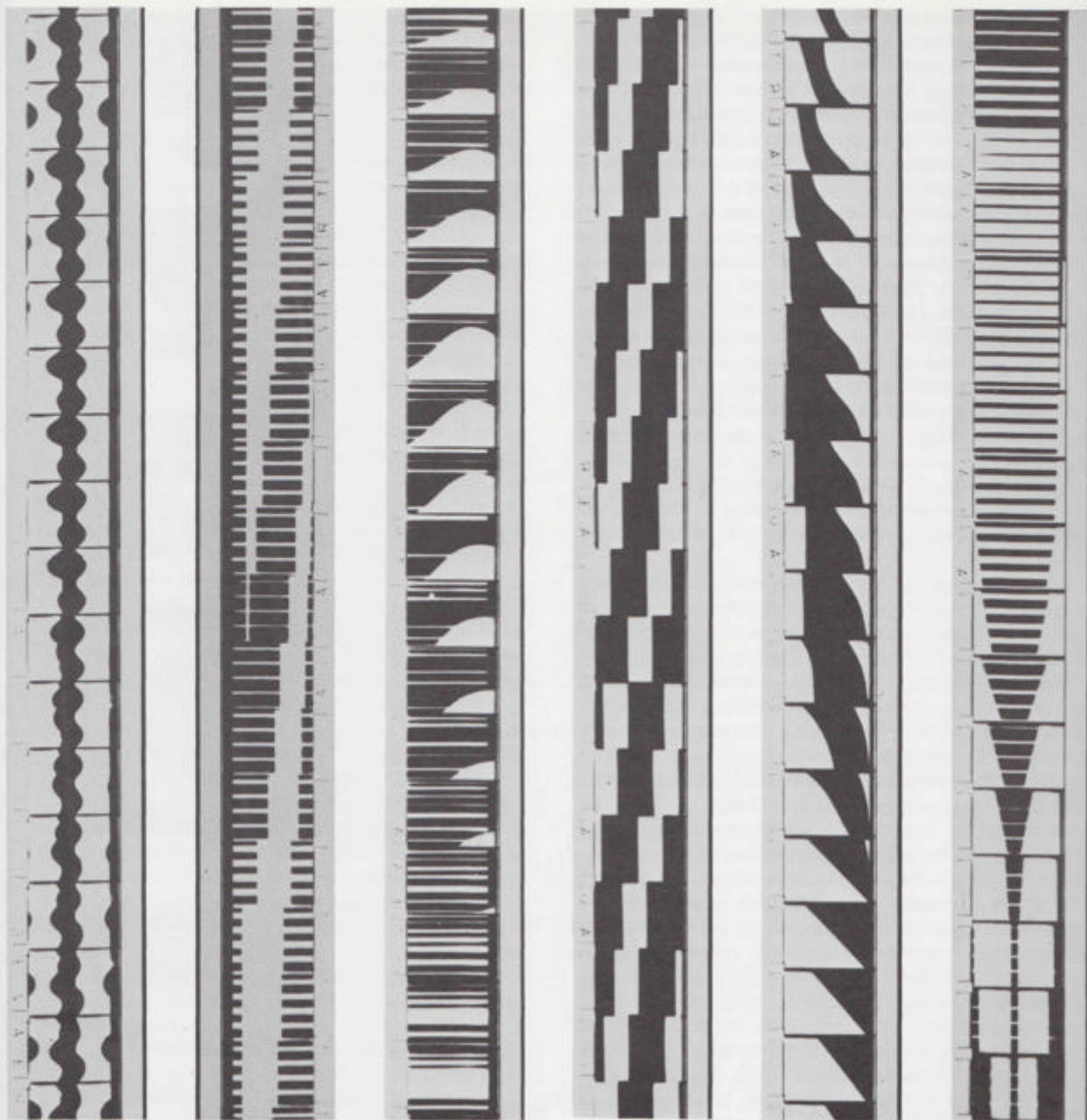
In tracing the major basis for dynamism in painting and its continuation into abstract art, I have stressed Cubism and Futurism. However, there is an influence from the forms of Cubism on German Expressionism seen in Marc and Macke for example. In this 'cubistic expressionism' and its later, more thorough abstraction, whilst there is no direct attempt to portray objects in motion as there is in Boccioni for example it makes use of similar devices like rhythmic repetition of lines or shapes so that they are read as movements. In this respect it is closer to the kinetic dynamic of Futurism than to Cubism. Kandinsky in particular can be used to demonstrate the development of this kinetic potential to a non-figurative form and his paintings provide the best point of reference for the visual forms which appear predominantly in Ruttmann's abstract films. Similarly Kandinsky is of major importance for the development of Fischinger's aesthetic not just at the level of the pictorial concepts, but also at the level of the theory for the mode of expression in abstraction.

Ruttmann made four complete abstract films in a series he called *Lichtspiel* numbering them *Opus I* to *IV*, though only *II* to *IV* have been available for study. If not in entirely reliable form, they are convincingly complete enough and consistent enough to recognize some clear development within the series. From the three films it is possible to see an aesthetic development which can be considered a microcosm paralleling development of abstract art in general. *Opus II* is dominated by forms and movements which relate to those of the dramatic landscapes of Kandinsky's interim period between figuration and abstraction. These forms are clearly anthropomorphic and organic and their action represents an allegorical conflict between sharp, wedge-like forms which probe aggressively and rounder forms which are the subject of the rhythmic probing. This anthropomorphism recurs in the whole series to some extent and is also in evidence throughout all of Fischinger's films. However, in the *Lichtspiel* series, the third *Opus* sees the emergence of a more geometric form of abstraction and a more mathematical or mechanical rhythm in the movement. The concentration on more rectilinear forms and simple diagonals suggests an attempt to relate more directly to the predominant geometry of the screen and the mechanical analogies of the film medium. The fourth *Opus* takes this geometric tendency further and evolves from it some sections which, rather than establishing geometric shape, divide the screen so boldly or transform it so rapidly that it is the optical effect which predominates. The effect becomes divorced from the shapes or forms which cause it. The enterprise of abstract art has tended to follow these developmental stages in its progressive reduction of representational imagery culminating in the physical and optical experience of the object following a period in which 'neutral' geometric forms had replaced the organic and anthropomorphic.

Fischinger, who was much younger than the others, only produced fragmentary works in this period, but having continued as a film-maker into the fifties is dealt with at length in a separate essay. His commitment to abstract



Walter Ruttmann: strips from *Opus II, III, IV* 1920-24



cinema provides an extensive and complex basis for study, but his work has most in common with that of Ruttmann. Both afford an interesting consideration of the relationship of musical concepts to the time structure of abstract film. In the same way in which painterly concepts informed the visual imagery of this period, the notion of film as a form of visual music held a considerable currency in considering the problem of film's temporal composition. This concept can be traced back to the development of the light organ, played a significant part in the early film experiments of the Corra brothers and continues to have a place in the formal concepts of the experimental film. For Ruttmann and Fischinger, some of the articulation of this notion came directly from the critic Bernhard Diebold in his *Frankfurter Zeitung* articles endorsing and supporting the new concept of abstract film. Ruttmann collaborated directly with composer Max Butting on special music to be played in the presentation of his *Lichtspiel* series and Fischinger in many works designed the visual development around a music track. The formal concepts of music are thus evident in the rhythm of movement and the reprises of the action in both artists' work.

Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter whilst coming from a similar set of visual influences, through the predominance of the mature Eggeling, tended towards the more architectural direction of Cézanne and Cubism and were more influenced by a concept of the logic of musical form rather than the particular phasing of composition. Neither at this period attempted to make a work which integrated image and music. Certainly, at the conceptual level, Eggeling provides a more rewarding basis for study, though Richter in his films up to and including *Film Studie* of 1926 continues to present, in a primitive and haphazard way, many stimulating insights into the potentialities of the medium. Under Eggeling's influence (acknowledged by Richter) their initial movement into film came as a result of a theoretical endeavour to define a logic for the forms of abstract art, a non-representational graphic language which Eggeling called a '*Generalbass der Malerei*', similar to Kandinsky's theoretical project contained in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Whatever its overall validity, Eggeling's theory in effect led to works which explored a form of graphic transformational logic. Increasingly he developed them as linear scrolls, and, in retrospect, its logic has much in common with the mathematical concepts of topology. (Forms with simple, definable linear characteristics combining in additive and subtractive structures with basic mirror and rotational transformations.) There remains the possibility that the film *Horizontal Vertical Orchestra* was completed by Eggeling in 1921, but the surviving film, *Diagonal Symphony*, completed in 1924, adequately represents his cinematic concepts.

Richter, like Fischinger, continued to make films until recently. His period as an abstract film-maker ended after *Film Studie*, and following his own filmography, consisted of three films with the titles *Rhythmus 21*, *23* and *25* and *Film Studie* which combines abstract and representational material. Versions (of disputed authenticity) of *Rhythmus 21* and *23* are in circulation. They are both a 'mixed bag' of animation experiments which seem to derive their images from spontaneous manipulations under the ani-



Hans Richter: *Filmstudie* 1926

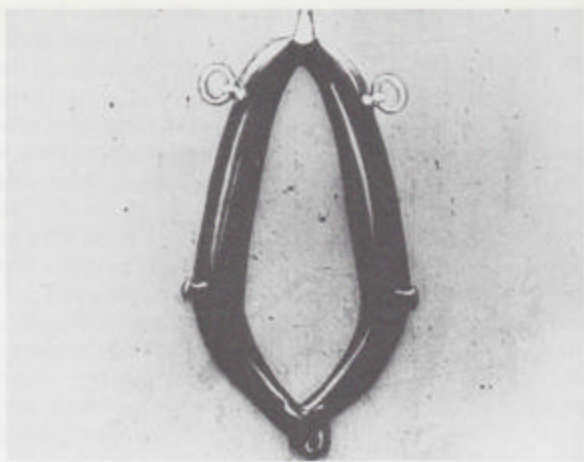
mation camera edited together later without a pre-considered composition for the whole work. Despite Richter's rejection of Ruttmann's films as 'impressionism', the best aspects of Richter's abstract work shared some of the optical and rhythmic dynamic of the last *Opus* film with bold and sweeping divisions of the screen surface. Even if the initial work by Richter was spontaneous, in later years he adequately expressed this separation of the rhythm from its 'carrier', writing of *Rhythm 2*: 'I mean that by taking the whole movie screen, pressing it together and opening it up, top, bottom, sides, right, left, you don't perceive form any more, you perceive movement.' Richter's most interesting film for me is *Film Studie* which combines the strongest of his abstract animation with live action images often presented in negative, a device which abstracts the visual effect of movement and shape, integrating it with the abstract material.

This move to live action cinematography by Richter may have been motivated by a sense that the abstract concept which had been applied in film was somehow 'uncinematic', a transposition of painterly concerns to film. Whether he felt this or not, the most productive developments in the experimental film to follow this early abstract work, the films of Man Ray, Fernand Léger and Henri Chomette, working in France, all related directly to film as a photographic medium. This basis of film in an apparatus designed for photo recording in time is only incidental to the non-representational (painterly) abstraction of the German group — any other method of getting the image onto the celluloid or screen would do just as well if not better. The key French experimental films of this period, Man Ray's *Retour à la Raison* and *Emak Bakia*, Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* and Chomette's *Cinque Minutes de Cinéma Pur* all sought an equivalent to abstraction somehow compatible with the inevitable representation within the process of cine-photography.

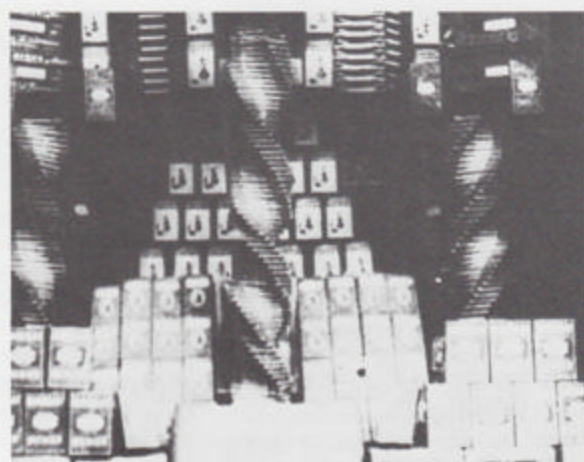
A similar impetus can be seen in another artist working in Germany at the time of Ruttmann and co., Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, closely involved in the Bauhaus. Though Moholy-Nagy did not produce any films until later, mainly in a documentary form, the ideas and directions for cinema he envisaged in his writing and the experiments he made in photography became an increasingly substantial point of reference for the development of an art of cinema. Like Man Ray, one of his major contributions came from his experiments with photography, and like Man Ray, he discovered (or rediscovered a pioneer photographic technique of Fox-Talbot) a system of camera-less photography, the photogram, or rayogram, where the image is produced by direct contact of an object on a photo-plate, recording the trace of its shadow. Whilst Man Ray transposed this technique to cinema, making direct cine-raygrams in his first two films, for Moholy-Nagy, it remained a photographic device. However, Moholy clearly related the practice of photography and film closely, publishing through the Bauhaus in 1925, the book *Painting, Photography, Film*. In his photographic work, we do not just see an equivalent to Man Ray's rayogram technique but many more parallels to the experimental directions which were being initiated at the time. In particular his photocollages, combining photographic images with abstract elements and abstract rather than representational placement echo a similar con-

junction in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*, as do explorations of extreme close-up photography. Not the least of his achievements were proposals for a 'Poly kino', a precursor of 'Expanded Cinema', and proposals for a form of cinemontage, via a graphic script 'Dynamic of a Great City' pre-figuring Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*.

In general Moholy-Nagy should be considered in conjunction with the French rather than the German film experiments, in seeking an autonomous base for film-art not simply replacing the literary and theatrical dominance of its forms by those imported from painting or music.



**ON A VOLÉ
UN COLLIER DE PERLES
DE 5 MILLIONS**



Frames from Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924): modernist 'photogénie'.

**Film
AS
Film**

**formal experiment in film
1910-1975**

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