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## **PHOTOGRAPHY AND MUSIC<sup>1</sup>**

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When we listen to music all the sounds are given to us in a certain order, at a given time. Notes and their order do not change. The artist may only interpret the score in their own way, however, the listener is not able to change a thing. They have to accept it as is. In the case of images, the situation is completely different when it comes to the order and time of looking at visual elements of an image. Every person sees an image differently. They start looking at a certain area of an image, the one which draws their attention the most, then moves on to other areas, without any anticipated patters. The order of attention areas and the time spent on each of them vary not only for every person focusing on one image but even for the same person and the same image at a different time.

The first scientific experiments which examined the way people look at images were carried out by Professor Guy T. Buswell in Chicago using eye tracking apparatus and were published in 1935. He called the areas of attention on which the viewer pauses “fixations” (areas of fixation) and the points marking the centres of such areas “centres of fixation”. After having examined 200 subjects (1,877 measurements of eye movement paths in total), including students from schools of art and children, he came to the following conclusions: some people move their eyes quickly through the entire image and pause for a short time to focus on its most important aspects. Others, in turn, focus for a long time on small areas. There were no two viewers who would look at an image in the same way. Despite this we may notice some common features of eye movements. At first, many viewers are inclined to move their eyes through an image quickly, pausing for a short time in various places. The paths of eye movements are relatively long. Then, the viewers focus on smaller areas where they pause for a longer time, which they examine by making short eye movements. By juxtaposing all the visual paths registered for the same image placing them one on the other on a list, Buswell noticed dense areas of fixation on which many viewers concentrate. These are places which are rich in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> This article regards classical and traditional music rather than popular music.

meaning. For Buswell, this meant that people do not look at an image randomly because they focus on the same areas. What is different for each person is the order and length of pauses over such areas.<sup>2</sup>

The task of a photographer or a painter is more difficult than that of a musician. An image should move the viewer, regardless of the path his eyes follow, i.e. regardless of the order and length of pauses over individual elements of an image. The painter Paul Klee (1879-1940), who for some time was also a professional violinist, believed that “a piece of music has an advantage over an image: the sounds are listened to in the same order as they were written. However, when you listen to the same piece many times because the same impressions are repeated, you may experience laziness and lack of concentration while listening. This is not the case with an image. A layperson may not know which area should be the focal point. An experienced viewer, though, has an advantage when it comes to the opportunities of image reception: they discover new impressions when they consciously change the visual paths”.<sup>3</sup>

Music is not a series of sounds. There must be certain relations between them so that they form something more than just meaningless sounds. The emotions evoked by a series of sounds depend on such relations. The same happens with images. If they are to have a strong impact on the viewer, certain relations between image elements should exist.

In order to understand the impact of images on man better, we should start by understanding the meaning of certain terms: **appearance, essence and reduction**.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, every object (*noema*) — animate or not — has its **natural appearance**, the one perceived by us. It depends on the light which is shed on it, on the weather conditions (whether the object is located outside), on its colour or level of greyness, its texture and three-dimensional shape. Once an object is photographed and we observe it as an element of an image, its face transforms into a **pictorial appearance** which depends not only on its natural appearance but also on the author's vision and technique, on the communication means (paper, screen, copy, printout etc.) and on the image quality. An **eidetic appearance** occurs between the two appearances, i.e. how the photographer imagines the object will look like on the picture.

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<sup>2</sup> Further experiments related to this were carried out by such people as: Yarbus, François Molnar, Nodine, Locher, Krupinski, Pelz and Lipps.

<sup>3</sup> André Kuenzi *Klee*. Catalogue d'exposition.

<sup>4</sup> Essence and reduction are terms taken from Husserl's phenomenology but their meaning here is slightly different, applied more to the practice of photography and partly inspired by Sergiu Celibidache's phenomenology.

When a photographer looks for motives to be photographed — *noemata*<sup>5</sup>, what attracts him to them at first sight is their *natural appearance* and a flash of their potential content. Then he starts looking deeply: finding the best form of the motive foreseeing its *pictorial appearance* while simultaneously receiving its content. Therefore, the photographer passes from the real to the ideal state of mind. First he senses the real *noema*, and then focuses on *eidetic appearance* of the motive which does not have the genuine existence yet; it exists only in his imagination.

The form, i.e. the composition, consists in ordering image elements establishing spatial relations between them and the links between their shapes and values. The selection of the point of view from which a photograph is taken and the focal length in the camera has a considerable impact on image composition. The form is usually related to the sense of beauty. A person's pleasant reactions to beauty are genetically coded, on the one hand, and learned, on the other.<sup>6</sup> There are certain areas in our brain which are activated by aesthetic stimuli. At the next stage, the systems of neurons transform these impressions into positive emotional experiences. Optimizing the composition from the aesthetics point of view is not sufficient to reflect the entire potential of the motive. Beauty is but a bait to see deeper.

There are no specific rules of composition because a close relation between the photographer and the object is created while looking for the best form of the motive. Every movement of the sensitive photographer in any direction (to the right, to the left, up, down, to the front or to the back) changes the intensity of his emotions which accompany motive reception. The best point of view is the one which stirs up the deepest emotions. Superimposing an intellectual structure on the motive composition by applying any rules would destroy this intense relation between the photographer and the object.

However, there are certain general principles which one should bear in mind when creating a motive composition. Their interpretation is very personal and depends only on the photographer's sensitivity.<sup>7</sup>

The first principle is the search for *equilibrium*, i.e. visual balance. This is an experience of stability: everything has its own place, appropriate proportions, shades or colours. In the past, people talked about searching for harmony in the form. Neurologists, referring to the discoveries of archaeologists, say that the first example of harmony in the works of man was observed around 1.5 million years ago. The sense of symmetry was visible for the first time in stone tools created by Homo

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<sup>5</sup> plural of *noema*.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Changeux *Rules and Constraints of Artistic Creation: the Neurobiologist Viewpoint*.

<sup>7</sup> Such principles, which I worked out many years ago, are confirmed in the work of Henri Matisse entitled *Ecrits et propos sur l'art*.

erectus. This phenomenon was related to evolution: the capacity of the human brain expanded to approx. 800 cm<sup>3</sup>.<sup>8</sup>

Harmony does not necessarily mean symmetry, though, and usually is not equal to symmetry. It is rather related to pleasant reception.

In the 20th century, we feel less harmony in human creations, mostly in classical music. Currently, such terms as *consonance* and *dissonance* are becoming more relevant because they better reflect the nuances between harmony and lack of it.

In music consonance and dissonance are related to pleasant and unpleasant reception of sounds and they have their roots in the laws of physics. They refer to *intervals* (the distance between two sounds or the consonance of two different sounds) and *chords* (simultaneous combination of at least three different sounds). The difference between a consonance (harmony) and a dissonance is not the same as between black and white. Various shades exist between them. Intervals are more or less harmonious and more or less dissonant. For example, an octave<sup>9</sup> and fifth<sup>10</sup> are more harmonious than a third<sup>11</sup> and sixth.<sup>12</sup> And the most dissonant is *tritone*<sup>13</sup> which in the old sacral music was called *diabolus in musica*. An example of tritone is f-h interval. A seventh is less dissonant than tritone.<sup>14</sup>

Dissonance appeared in music a long time ago but it was always moderate. It wasn't until the 20th century when the composers started using it commonly and continuously. This is why the reception of contemporary classical music is more difficult. The question arises whether being accustomed to dense dissonance changes the sensitivity of man and to a large extent decreases his reception of harmony.

Harmony is stable. When we hear it, we are of the impression that we have perceived something complete – there is no need to go further. The dissonant intervals, in turn, are unstable, they create an unpleasant tension and they need to be solved to the next played intervals in order to, once again, restore balance. In pieces of music the return to stability is commonplace, even in contemporary compositions, yet the road paved with dense dissonances to the final goal may be a torment.

Dissonance may occur in an image in two different ways: in the composition or in the content. However, there is also the third way of creating a dissonance: as works

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Changeux *Rules and Constraints of Artistic Creation: the Neurobiologist Viewpoint*.

<sup>9</sup> An interval between eight successive tones of the music scale.

<sup>10</sup> An interval between five successive tones of the music scale.

<sup>11</sup> An interval between three successive tones of the music scale.

<sup>12</sup> An interval between six successive tones of the music scale.

<sup>13</sup> An interval composed of three adjacent whole tones.

<sup>14</sup> An interval between seven successive tones of the music scale.

which stand out from the entire series of images. The last option is visible in the photo editing work in publications, or in curator's work at exhibitions.

In the works of great painters dissonance may be present in the content but hardly ever in composition. A good example is “Lady with an Ermine” by Leonardo da Vinci. I sense that the composition is balanced but the right hand of the young girl is not as delicate and subtle as the entire painting. It is bony and painted with too many “anatomical” details. This dissonant hand is most probably a metaphor indicating that the girl is not innocent.

For a photographer who seeks *equilibrium* in composition the notion of relative harmony is as important as it is for a painter. The composition is to serve the expressive quality of an image and conscious dissonance in the content may play an important role here. There is no clear-cut distinction between harmony (consonance) and dissonance.

The second principle of composition is *purity*: excluding unnecessary elements from the image. If such elements occur due to the author's inattention or unawareness, they undermine the message communicated by the image and may even destroy it completely. When looking at the motive through a viewfinder, focusing screen or any window, the photographer may decide, in accordance with his sensitivity, what elements of the motive and in what proportions are to be allowed in the final composition. Every element of an image is important. Everything needs to be taken into account.

During a concert, when pianists play from memory, many of them make mistakes and sometimes play wrong notes which are not included in the original script<sup>15</sup>. If such notes are not dissonant, very few people from the audience will notice them apart from other musicians who know the piece. When an inexperienced viewer looks at an image for a longer time, it will be easier for him to perceive the general lack of expression than individual elements responsible for this imperfection.

The third principle of composition is seeking a strong *visual relation* between shapes and values of image elements. This search is called **correlative vision**. Repeated lines, curvatures and shapes which occur in various places on an image and in different proportions (inclined, reversed etc.) may form rhythms which reinforce the composition. Every shape or area has its value which depends on its shape, colour, shade of greyness and texture. For Paul Klee “if image composition is precise and solid based on a series of diverse values, then the viewer’s eye starts by absorbing the values which attract him the most. After having “digested” such first impressions, he moves on to the next ones. Strong contrasts between the values cause the eye of the viewer to jump between the areas for a long time, as if it was following

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<sup>15</sup> An exception was pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (1920-1995), who always played all the notes from memory, the way they were written in the script.

an animal it is hunting, or it moves rhythmically from one place to another. But if the composition is based on a loose, careless structure, the eye of the viewer floats like a small boat on rough waters, wherever the current takes it.”<sup>16</sup>

A serious problem for a photographer is the ability to imagine the *pictorial appearance* of the motive, i.e. what we call the *eidetic appearance*, before he decides to photograph it and then reacting to the *eidetic appearance* instead of the *natural appearance* of the motive. This requires both experience and an appropriate imagination. This, however, does not only concern the form because the form is closely related to the content. These two concepts are inseparable. It is not possible to look at the form without sensing the content because the former should serve the latter. In the best images both are powerful and complement each other. In poor images, one may confirm that the form surpasses the content or the other way round. Yet, it is worse if both of them - the form and the content - are too feeble, even absent.

To sum up: **the form should serve the content.**

The most important – maybe the only – content which the creator may convey is **the truth**. This is neither reality nor feasibility, nor scientific statement, nor document, nor objective world. This is an internal truth: the absolute honesty of feelings. An appropriately prepared recipient may be deeply moved only by skilfully shared authentic experiences. In order to have such intense experiences, the creator should recognize the potential of the appropriate motive and reach its *essence*.

Similarly to appearance, every object (animate or not) has its own **essence**, both **natural** and **visual**. It is hard to accurately define *essence*; it is easier to describe how it is experienced. What the schools of philosophy define as *essence* is more appropriate for intellectual discussions rather than for specific applications in visual creation.

The *essence* is not related only to material objects. It is also present in pieces of music. Reaching the essence depends on how we listen to music. There are three ways of listening. The first one is the worst. We switch on the source of sound — a radio or a CD player — at home or at work and we do something else while listening. This means that the sounds are only the background for the listener. The second one consists of focusing on the sounds which we listen to: during live performance or while playing a recording. Then very often, and sometimes constantly, various thoughts come to our mind. Some of them have nothing to do with what we are listening to. They are rather related to our everyday problems. Other coming thoughts are scenes which we imagine, inspired by the sounds we are listening to. Others are still related to our knowledge of music, i.e. comparing the piece to other interpretations of this piece which we heard in the past or to the ideal interpretation in

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<sup>16</sup> André Kuenzi *Klee*. Catalogue d'exposition.

our imagination. We occasionally manage to empty our heads and not think about anything, just react to what we are hearing. The third way of listening is the most difficult and requires extensive practice. It consists of opening our minds completely, letting the sounds reach us smoothly without any intellectual obstacles. This means not thinking about anything while listening. This state of freedom is called **reduction**. During this process, the tone richness of every sound, the relations between the sounds, phrase articulation and piece architecture have a direct impact on our experiences. Thoughts bother us, if we do not have sufficient practice in *reduction* or when parts of the piece are poorer, or, worse still, if the interpretation is incorrect. In order to gain experience in reduction, we start using this method for short sections of the musical work until, gradually, we are able to cope with the entire piece.

A piece of music consists of composition and its interpretation. What counts is not only the acoustics of the room and the place where we listen to the musical work but also our mental attitude while listening. In appropriate conditions we should reach the *essence* of the piece by *reduction*.

*Essence* is an undefined, discernible energy generated by *noemata*: material or immaterial objects. The *noemata* on which we focus may be people, elements of nature, scenes from everyday life, human creations — visual, sound, media etc. The process which allows us to reach the *essence* of a given *noema* is described as *reduction*. This is a manner of reception without knowledge, judgments, comparisons or preconceptions. It enables reception of the vibration emanating from a given *noema*.

Sound reduction is much easier than visual reduction because sounds may have a direct impact on our emotions without being based on any associations.

Visual reception is very complex. When we observe a given object carefully, its natural appearance is a stimulus not only to our senses but also to our intellect. *Noema* stimulates various regions of our brain. One of them is where the automatic process of identification is located. Our memory makes us realise immediately that we see a person, a house, streets, an animal, a car, a tree or a cloud etc. Some motives have the potential of awakening our imagination. For a photographer, this may have both negative and positive results. For example, when we start telling stories to ourselves which most probably no other person will tell looking at the same motive. Such a process has nothing to do with visual language. It is rather associated with “bad literature”. The situation is different when, inspired by a motive we are looking at, we perceive signs, symbols or metaphors, e.g. a rock, a tree or clouds change into other beings and go beyond themselves. Discovering a metaphor may be as exciting as solving a riddle. It is not important whether the author and the viewer both see the same metaphor; what matters is whether the image is able to awaken the viewer’s imagination in an exciting way. Intellectual interpretation of what we see may be a source of certain emotions but it usually restricts our visual reception. When by

looking at a motive, we stimulate the brain regions which are responsible for thinking, other areas react little or do not react at all, and these are much more important in visual reception. An example of this may be aesthetic or subconscious reactions. Transcendental experiences which cannot be achieved without *reduction* are even more important.

In order to better understand where reduction leads us to, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founding father of phenomenology, used the Atlantis metaphor:

*“He who for decades did not speculate about a new Atlantis but instead actually journeyed in the trackless wilderness of a new continent and undertook the virgin cultivation of some of its areas will not allow himself to be deterred in any way by the rejection of geographers who judge his reports according to their habitual ways of experiencing and thinking and thereby excuse themselves from the pain of undertaking travels in the new land”.*<sup>17</sup>

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), creator of humanist psychology and the hierarchy of needs theory, coined the term “peak experiences” to describe transcendental experiences where man feels he is in complete harmony with the world and experiences great internal peace. As in Husserl’s metaphor, Maslow said that “non-peakers” will never understand the “peakers”, i.e. the people who experienced the peak at least once.

Transcendence is associated with the feeling of complete freedom, with the pervasive lightness of flying, with the state of profound peace going beyond emotions and thoughts. A person is filled with positive energy. In such conditions selfless love towards people and the world emerges. According to Maslow every person has the potential for experiencing such profound feelings but not everyone seeks them.

While listening to an appropriate piece of music sound reduction is a pure process which leads the listener to a state of the lack of awareness of anything. For this reason, Sergiu Celibidache<sup>18</sup> (1912-1996) saw reduction as the shortest way to transcendental (peak) experience in Maslow’s needs hierarchy or to Atlantis in Husserl’s metaphor.

Just as we should find appropriate pieces of music to listen to, we should also find appropriate motives to be photographed. Regardless of whether these are people, scenes from everyday life or landscapes: we must reach them. Once we are on the place where we want to take the photograph, we need some time to switch off our everyday thoughts and get rid of burdensome tensions. A potential motive is the one in which we sense certain vibrations, i.e. a part of its essence. With dynamic motives, such as street scenes or when the light escapes, we do not have time to keep sensing and we need to take photos quickly because the motive will disappear. The situation

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<sup>17</sup> Marianne Sawicki, *Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)*.

<sup>18</sup> He was considered one of the greatest conductors of the 20th century.



is different with static motives. Visual reduction leads to a certain communion between the photographer and the motive. When you try out various points of view, the best is the one where motive vibrations are the strongest. And the optimum composition is the one which reveals its essence. *The form of an image, which is not created from the energy taken away from the motive, is dead.*

The problem appears again: is the natural essence of the motive transferred to the essence of the image? In other words: is the energy which the photographer felt with the motive also felt in the photography? This is not always the case. Much depends on the photographer's skills. However, this can never be mastered to perfection. At certain moments visual reduction is accompanied by subconscious experience of the creator. They both work together but not at the same time. It is not always possible to combine them properly.

To sum up: **the essence of the motive establishes its image appearance.**

What is a work of art? It is a human creation which in appropriate conditions may bring about transcendental experience in a person who is adequately prepared (culturally and mentally). A work of art is like a sound. If there is no recipient, there is no art. If there is no recipient, a sound is nothing but air vibration but it is not a sound. What is missing is the sense of hearing which allows us to perceive waves as sounds. For this reason, the relation between the creator and the recipient is of crucial importance. Thanks to Husserl, we have departed from the concept of objectivism and subjectivism to reach *intersubjectivity*, i.e. **I find myself in you and you find yourself in me**. Therefore, the perception of a work depends on the reciprocity between the creator and the viewer. Husserl defined it using the words *intersubjektive Betreffbarkeit*.

The reduction focused on a given object, i.e. the reduction we have been analysing so far, is called *local*. There is a wider concept: *global reduction* which is not focused on anything. It is a process of reaching the essence of the universe, referred to as the source of all energies by Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986)<sup>19</sup>. In such a state there is no consciousness, sub-consciousness, knowledge, past or future; there is only selfless love towards people and the world. The art makes sense when it allows us to be spirited away to "Atlantis" for a little while.

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