AN OBSCURE HISTORY OF MODERN ART AND MEDIA

Noam M. Elcott

ARTIFICIAL DARKNESS
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Darkness has a history and a uniquely modern form. Distinct from night, shadows, and artificial light, "artificial darkness" has been overlooked — until now. In fact, controlled darkness was essential to the rise of photography and cinema, science and spectacle, and a century of advanced art and film. Artificial Darkness is the first book to historicize and theorize this phenomenon and map its applications across a range of media and art forms.

In exploring how artificial darkness shaped modern art, film, and media, Noam M. Elcott addresses seminal and obscure works alongside their sites of production — such as photography darkrooms, film studios, and laboratories — and their sites of reception, including theaters, cinemas, and exhibitions. He argues that artists, scientists, and entertainers like Étienne-Jules Marey, Richard Wagner, Georges Méliès, and Oskar Schlemmer revolutionized not only images but also everything surrounding them: the screen, the darkness, and the experience of bodies and space. At the heart of the book is "the black screen," a technology of darkness that spawned today's blue and green screens and has undergirded numerous advanced art and film practices to this day.

Turning familiar art and film narratives on their heads, Artificial Darkness is a revolutionary treatment of an elusive, yet fundamental, aspect of art and media history.
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University of Chicago Press Chicago and London
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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
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Printed in China

25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 12 3 4 5

DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226329024.001.0001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Artificial darkness: an obscure history of modern art and media /
Noam M. Elcott.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
NX650.S55E43 2016
709.04—dc23
2015031842

This publication is made possible in part by the Barr Ferree Foundation Fund for Publications, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

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Prelude in Vienna: Against Enlightenment

Vienna. September 1924. The International Exhibition of New Theater Technology, a curatorial extravaganza organized by painter, designer, architect, and impresario Friedrich Kiesler, presented over six hundred drawings, photographs, maquettes, models, and figurines, as well as performances and screenings that spanned theater, dance, and cinema from nearly every branch of the avant-garde: Italian futurism, German expressionism, Soviet constructivism, French purism, international Dada, and the Bauhaus at Weimar. The exhibition featured at least two self-avowed mechanical ballets. The first was the world premiere of Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy’s Ballet mécanique (1924)—a semiabstract film initiated with Man Ray and Ezra Pound, with a musical score by Georges Antheil—which helped inaugurate the festivities on September 24. Léger, a French painter, and Murphy, an American cinematographer, apposed serially manufactured commodities, thrusting machine parts, a woodblock Charlot (Charlie Chaplin), geometric shapes, urban commotion, and women in motion through a panoply of avant-garde techniques, not least rapid montage, geometric abstraction, extreme close-ups, jarring movement, stop-motion and graphic animation, and one of the first self-conscious media loops in history. Léger delivered a lecture at the gala and contributed an essay to the catalogue. According to Léger, it was incumbent upon theater and cinema to embrace spectacular modernity, animate the beauty of industrial objects, and reduce actors to mechanisms, that is, to “moving scenery.”

In implicit dialogue with Léger and Murphy’s Ballet mécanique was a set of lithographs and mockups for a Mechanisches Ballett conceived by Kurt Schmidt and realized with the help of Georg Teltserch and Friedrich Wilhelm Bogler—all Bauhaus affiliates (or simply “Bauhäusler”) working under Oskar Schlemmer, the recently appointed master of the Bauhaus theater workshop. The Mechanisches Ballett premiered a year prior as part of the Bauhaus Week’s “Mechanical Cabaret” (August 17, 1923), alongside Schlemmer’s Figural Cabinet (1922). Like the Figural Cabinet, the Bauhäu-
lers' Mechanisches Ballett featured brightly colored, two-dimensional humanoid forms, manipulated pseudomechanically by invisible actors clad in black, against a black screen. Contemporaneous photographs bear blunt testimony to the disappearing bodies, which were never even represented in the original maquettes. (See fig. 5.18.) The Mechanisches Ballett paralleled—in theatrical form—Léger's fervor for the plastic possibilities of ordinary objects and the reduction of humans to "moving scenery." Léger's film and Schlemmer's Bauhaus workshop thus presented a unified front in the renewal of theater: abstract, rhythmic, mechanical, and devoid of individualized actors. What is more, they achieved these ends through complementary technologies of the screen: Léger's object-spectacle required a projection screen for its cinematic visibility just as the Bauhaus's invisible human actors relied upon a theatrical black screen for their disappearance.

The mechanical ballets' reliance on screens and flatness dovetails, perhaps, with certain technophilic or modernist teleologies; but it struck an utterly discordant note in the exhibition as conceived by Kiesler. Fresh off the success of his "electro-mechanical" coulisse for the 1923 German and Austrian premieres of Karel Čapek's R.U.R. (1921), Kiesler sought to banish definitively the flatness of the traditional proscenium stage through the introduction of a Space-Stage (Raumbühne). The centrality of the Space-Stage was figured literally in a caricature by Ladislaus Tuszyński, published on the cover of the Illustrirte Kronen-Zeitung on the day after the opening (fig. 5.1). Beginning at the top left and proceeding counterclockwise, Tuszyński depicts expressionist drawings of a mother and lover by Lothar Schreyer, the recently departed master of the Bauhaus theater workshop (Mutter Geliebte); the Bauäuslers' Mechanisches Ballett (Maschine + Mensch); Kiesler's 1923 mechanical sets (Modernes Bühnenbild); a dancer from Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet (Ballett-Kostüm); a costume by the Russian painter and scenographer Georgy Yakulov (Kostüm-Modell); a scene from Meyerhold's 1920 production of The Dawn by Emilie Verhaeren (Bühnen-Dekoration); and George Grosz's figurine for Yvan Goll's Methusalem (1922; Figurine zu "Methusalem"). The center of the storm around which these exhibits swirled—and the subject of scores upon scores of laudatory and withering reviews—was Kiesler's Space-Stage (Die Raum-Bühne im mittl. Konzerth.-Saal). Kiesler removed the orchestra-section seats from the Mozartsaal of the Vienna Concert Hall and installed the Space-Stage in the center of the auditorium. (Spectators were relegated to the balcony; fig. 5.2.) The Space-Stage was the centerpiece of the otherwise largely unrealizable Rollercoaster Theater—or, to use Kiesler's German Americanism, "Railway Theater"—which advanced film projection in place of scenic backdrops, types in lieu of individualized actors, and, most radically, an audience that circled in "electric-motoric" movements around a central, spherical stage. Made up of a ramp, elevator, staircase, and ladders that rose to a series of platforms, Kiesler's Space-Stage was a practicable
FIG. 5.1. Ladislaus Tuszyński, caricature of the Space-Stage and International Exhibition of New Theater Technology, cover illustration of Illustrire Kronen-Zeitung, September 25, 1924.
FIG. 5.2. Friedrich Kiesler, Raumbühne (Space-Stage) under construction, Vienna, 1924. (a) View from the orchestra section. (b) View from the balcony. © 2014 Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna.
variation on Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1919) and László Moholy-Nagy and Alfred Kemeny’s *Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces* (1922), and it anticipated projects like El Lissitzky’s unrealized theater for Vsevolod Meyerhold (1929–30). Lissitzky planned a transparent stage lit from below and augmented by spotlights to produce, as Devin Fore argues, “a hygienic environment of transparency and illumination. […] No shadows could appear here.” Like all these examples and others exhibited at the 1924 exhibition, Lissitzky’s design aimed to inaugurate a new (theatrical) space that fused stage and auditorium in order to activate the formerly passive spectator.

If the stage was to merge with the auditorium and art was to fuse with life, the invisible fourth wall would have to be torn down. Kiesler’s proscriptions of curtains and “darkness as an ersatz curtain” were thus logical prerequisites for an “orchestral” drama—that is, an orchestra that gathers rather than separates actors and audience. In retrospect, Kiesler’s proscription of “darkness as an ersatz curtain” was prescient and tragic in equal measure. Kiesler’s *Space-Stage* premiered with a work destined to ruin it: *Im Dunkel (In the Dark).* Written by the then largely unknown playwright Paul Frischauer, *In the Dark* was a psychologically charged expressionist chamber piece that the press likened to Georg Kaiser’s *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (1917) and dismissed resoundingly as a poor fit for Kiesler’s stage. Contrary to Kiesler’s stated ambitions, *In the Dark* relied on near-complete darkness punctuated by powerful overhead spotlights. The staging and lighting—the work of Viennese director Renato Mordo—reinstated “darkness as an ersatz curtain” with renewed force. “The hall lies in deep darkness. Suddenly a white cone of light ruptures the black obscurity and a giant scaffolding rises in the garish illumination of the spotlights only to disappear again into the darkness. […] This spotlight imperiously directs the attention of the spectator toward the play; it replaces [ersetzt] the trap doors and the curtain.” The double premiere of the Space-Stage and *In the Dark* only reinforced the darkness-as-ersatz-curtain opposed by Kiesler: “The good old theater curtain was an exquisite means by which to avoid interrupting the illusion. The curtain hid a secret: the secret of set changes. The Space-Stage, however, betrays too eagerly the innards of the operation. Although the set changes unfold in the dark, the meagerness and poverty of the theater appear as clear as day.” The Space-Stage thus met its calamitous, ironic end in the dark. Kiesler understood as well as anyone that “black darkness must rule when the screen play [i.e., cinema] is on. The orchestra must be completely obscured.” Nonetheless he would aim to overcome darkness at the Film Guild Cinema in New York (1928–29), where “the entire auditorium became an agent in the projection of light on screens. […] The entire building is a plastic medium dedicated to the Art of Light.” For Kiesler and most of the avant-garde, the liberation of theatrical and cinematic spaces and spectators required the supersession of darkness by light.
Even as darkness subsumed the Space-Stage, it was denigrated remorselessly in Kiesler’s catalogue essay and implicitly in Léger’s, whose translated text was abridged precisely at the point where he had earlier introduced his own polemic on theatrical darkness. The theatrical “axiom” that Kiesler and most avant-gardists attempted to overturn, Léger instead pushed to the extreme: “The state of the stage must be inversely proportional to the state of the auditorium. [...] The auditorium = immobility, darkness, silence. The stage = light, movement, life.” Whether censured through malice or through circumstance, Léger’s essay in fact adhered to the same paradigm as Kiesler’s, even as they arrived at opposite auditorium lighting schema. For both Kiesler and Léger, avant-garde theater came to overturn static, silent darkness in the name of light, movement, and life.

At the International Exhibition of New Theater Technology, the Space-Stage was, at best, a succès de scandale. But as an avant-garde polemic, the term Space-Stage was a triumph that quickly entered the architectural-theatrical lexicon. Earlier in 1924, Kiesler designed mechanical sets and announced his ambition to create a Space-Stage for the German premiere of Eugene O’Neill’s Emperor Jones (1920) at the Lustspielhaus in Vienna. The program provoked an incredulous response by the theater critic Alfred Kerr: “Space-Stage? a spaceless stage [Unraumbühne] is hardly conceivable.” For Kiesler, to the contrary, “spaceless stage” defined precisely everything that avant-garde theater came to upend. In his catalogue essay for the International Exhibition of New Theater Technology, “The Theater’s Debacle: The Laws of the Proscenium Stage,” Kiesler railed against the “picture stage” (Bildbühne) that dominated traditional theater. The very phrase picture stage, according to Kiesler, was a contradiction in terms: the first term connoted surface, whereas the second demanded depth. The new volition of theater was the detonation of the picture stage and its dissolution into space, a “space-stage that is not only a priori space, but also appears as space.” Kiesler successfully synthesized what was rapidly becoming orthodox avant-garde opposition to what he called—appropriating the language of his adversaries—the “classic spaceless stage” (Unraumbühne). Finally, Kiesler drew a stark distinction with cinema, which, remember, was well represented at the International Exhibition of New Theater Technology. Whereas film, according to Kiesler, was a “surface with deceptive spatiality,” the efficacy and force of theater lay in “space-play.” The Space-Stage, according to Kiesler, would usher in space-play, the true domain of theater, and vanquish the spaceless stages and deceptive spatiality that predominated in classical theaters and cinemas.

The Space-Stage that failed in practice in Vienna was a commonplace of avant-garde discourse by the end of the decade. Schlemmer, for one, repeatedly intoned his desire to solve “the difficult problem of the space-stage,” which entailed “the detonation of the old proscenium frame and ramp in order to fuse the auditorium and stage into an interactive unity.” At the center of space-play stood human beings. The drama of space—
played out by real bodies in real space—was ultimately a vehicle for the activation of the spectator (Zuschauer) and its space, the auditorium (Zuschauerrum). Kiesler’s insistence on the drama of space and the activation of the spectator echoed dominant positions across nearly every movement in avant-garde theater. Despite their significant divergences, Adolphe Appia’s living light; the synthetic theater of futurism; constructivist productions for Vsevolod Meyerhold (assisted by Lyubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, the Sternberg brothers, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and others); Schlemmer’s Bauhaus theater; Erwin Piscator’s political theater; Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater; and Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty all located the activation of the spectator and the reality of space as central, perhaps the central, issues facing modern theater.28

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Modern theater—in particular, theatrical lighting—was born of these imperatives. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the father of modern stage lighting, Adolphe Appia, joined the flock of Wagner devotees who made pilgrimage to Bayreuth. He returned from each visit progressively more disheartened by the productions’ stage flats and footlights—specifically, the incongruous coupling of revolutionary music and architecture with outmoded scenery and lighting. Appia sought to consummate the Wagnerian theater revolution, left unfinished by a master mired in outmoded stagecraft, through a unified direction that choreographed bodies and light in an effort to spatialize the musical score.29 In a series of seminal texts, a handful of pivotal performances, and an influential but short-lived institute, Appia freed the modern stage of its unwanted Renaissance legacy and advanced the director as an integral figure in performance practice. Appia’s reform began in opposition to painted flats, whose artificiality was betrayed by living bodies and living light.30 In lieu of a stage crowded with painted flats and stationary actors, separated from the audience by glaring footlights, Appia amalgamated diffuse and focused light to sculpt a bare stage and mobile, solid bodies. Appia’s watchwords became avant-garde truisms: living time, living space, living bodies, living light.31

As part of this reformist aesthetic, Appia developed an ideal relationship between stage and audience. At once a preservation and cancelation of Wagner, Appia’s theater was conceived as a social or religious event, but he rejected “the abyss which separates the stage from the audience,”32 and he rebuked theatrical darkness: “Our modern productions used to force us into such miserable passivity that we veiled our humiliation in the shadowy recesses of the auditorium.”33 If the modern mise-en-scène and theater architecture were born with the original sins of passivity and darkness, they found salvation at Hellerau and through the practice of eurhythmics:
As theater, one means both the auditorium and the stage, the spectator as well as the performer. [...] Up to now, only quiet attention has been required of the audience. To encourage this, comfortable seats have been provided in semi-darkness, to encourage a state of total passivity—evidently the proper attitude for spectators. In other words, here, as elsewhere, we have attempted to separate ourselves from the work of art; we have become eternal spectators! Eurhythmics will overturn this passivity.34

Karl Schmitt, a furniture manufacturer, social reformer, and cofounder of the German Werkbund, established Hellerau, Germany’s first garden city, in 1909. Schmitt invited Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, founder of eurhythmics, a method to learn and experience music through movement, to establish an institute at Hellerau. Jaques-Dalcroze turned to his friend and Swiss compatriot Appia to envision a festival theater. Like Wagner at Bayreuth, Appia served neither as architect nor as lighting engineer—those roles were filled admirably by Heinrich Tessenow and Alexander von Salzmann—but his was the animating vision.35 As a result, the Festspielhaus at Hellerau was a near point-by-point repudiation of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth and, by extension, the emergent cinematic dispositif (fig. 5.3). Appia and his collaborators constructed a large open space devoid of proscenium arch, curtains, footlights, raised stage, or any other separation between stage and auditorium. Unlike the invisible orchestra at Bayreuth, which enhanced the optical hallucination, Hellerau’s covered orchestra pit removed a physical obstacle between actors and spectators. Public performances were rare—the theater primarily served the school—but even when actors and spectators were more strictly differentiated, they shared a single entrance at the center of the theater. The literal pièce de résistance—that is, the ultimate abrogation of Bayreuth—radiated

Fig. 5.3. Festival Theater at Hellerau, interior, c. early 1910s. (a) Stage. (b) Invisible orchestra in the foreground and seating in the background. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
from the walls. Whereas Bayreuth’s walls disappeared in favor of the
onstage spectacle. Hellerau’s walls and ceiling were lined with thou-
sands of electric light bulbs hidden behind a skin of lightweight canvas
infused with cedar oil. Appia cast off the spectator’s shameful passivity
through a luminous collective rhythmic space that pulsed with the music
and forged a corporeal link between the actors and spectators. Appia’s
minimalist light box and Kiesler’s maximalist Space-Stage demarcated a
single avant-garde ambition to illuminate the auditorium and enlighten
the spectator.

This avant-garde imperative to dispel darkness was distilled nearly to
the point of parody by Francesco Cangiullo’s script for a futurist sintesi
titled Lights! (1919), which follows in full:

_Raised curtain._— _Neutral stage._ — _Stage and auditorium completely in darkness for
3 black minutes._

_Voices of the public_

1. — Lights!
2. — Lights!
3. — Lights!
4. — Lights!!
5. — Lights!! Lights!! Lights!!

(Contagious)

_The entire theater

Lights!!!!

(The obsession for light must be provoked — so that it becomes wild, crazy—by various
actors scattered in the auditorium, who excite the spectators and encourage their
shouting.)

The stage and auditorium are illuminated in an exaggerated way.
At the same moment, the curtain slowly falls."

Rarely have the enlightenment pretensions of avant-garde theater been
scripted so synoptically. According to this model, avant-garde theater
arrives at its apex and end when the assembled audience demands the
illumination of the auditorium and carries itself from illusion to reality,
individualism to collectivity, ignorance to knowledge, passivity to action,
and art to life.

Precisely this enlightenment prerogative—which dates back at least
to Jean-Jacques Rousseau—must be interrogated. Jacques Rancière cate-
chizes the set of equivalences and oppositions that undergirds avant-
garde theater from Brecht’s distanced investigation through Artaud’s vital
participation: “equivalences between theatrical audience and community,
gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulacrum;
oppositions between the collective and the individual, the image and living
reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation.” This set
of equivalences and oppositions produce a paradox whereby nothing is
more loathsome than the spectators upon whom theater depends, for they
from the walls. Whereas Bayreuth’s walls disappeared in favor of the onstagespectacle,36 Hellerau’s walls and ceiling were lined with thousands of electric light bulbs hidden behind a skin of lightweight canvas infused with cedar oil. Appia cast off the spectator’s shameful passivity through a luminous collective rhythmic space that pulsed with the music and forged a corporeal link between the actors and spectators.37 Appia’s minimalist light box and Kiesler’s maximalist Space-Stage demarcated a single avant-garde ambition to illuminate the auditorium and enlighten the spectator.

This avant-garde imperative to dispel darkness was distilled nearly to the point of parody by Francesco Cangiullo’s script for a futurist sintesi titled Lights! (1919), which follows in full:

Raised curtain. — Neutral stage. — Stage and auditorium completely in darkness for 3 black minutes.
Voices of the public
1.38 — Lights!
2. — Lights!
4. — Lights!
20. — Lights!! Lights!!
50. — Lights!! Lights!! Lights!! Lights!!
(Contagious)

THE ENTIRE THEATER

LIGHTS !!!!!!
(The obsession for light must be provoked — so that it becomes wild, crazy — by various actors scattered in the auditorium, who excite the spectators and encourage their shouting.)
The stage and auditorium are illuminated in an exaggerated way.
At the same moment, the curtain slowly falls.39

Rarely have the enlightenment pretensions of avant-garde theater been scripted so synoptically. According to this model, avant-garde theater arrives at its apex and end when the assembled audience demands the illumination of the auditorium and carries itself from illusion to reality, individualism to collectivity, ignorance to knowledge, passivity to action, and art to life.

Precisely this enlightenment prerogative—which dates back at least to Jean-Jacques Rousseau—must be interrogated.40 Jacques Rancière cat-echizes the set of equivalences and oppositions that undergirds avant-garde theater from Brecht’s distanced investigation through Artaud’s vital participation: “equivalences between theatrical audience and community, gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation.”41 This set of equivalences and oppositions produce a paradox whereby nothing is more loathsome than the spectators upon whom theater depends, for they
embody the very ignorance and passivity that avant-garde theater comes to overturn. Theater—that of Appia, Cangiullo, Kiesler, and countless others—could strive for nothing but its own supersession. For Rancière, self-vanishing mediation encapsulates the logic of the pedagogic relationship, which aims to overcome the separation it itself constantly creates. It also bolstered the cinematic dispositif that rose to prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the same time Kiesler introduced his pedagogic Space-Stage, Rudolf Harms likened the cinema interior to the educator, as posited by Nietzsche: its highest task resided in rendering itself superfluous. In the eyes of the avant-garde, the bad education tendered by theatrical darkness—the sensation of immediacy effected through absolute separation—was a product of its infantilizing, stultifying success, not its incompetent failure. Whereas the cinema successfully choreographed its disappearance in darkness, the avant-garde struggled to marshal light in the name of enlightenment.

Yet the emancipation of the spectator, according to Rancière, cannot begin with enlightenment. Emancipation begins at the moment we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, recognize the knowledge at work in the ignoramus, and appreciate the activity peculiar to the spectator. Enlighteners, Rancière argues, are misguided from the start: “How could they understand the mission of the luminous is not to enlighten those who dwell in obscurity?” The mission, then, is not to illuminate the auditorium but rather to recognize darkness as the seat of the spectator’s activity and intelligence. Where Appia, Kiesler, Léger, and others saw only immobility and silence, passivity and shame, Oskar Schlemmer distinguished a darkness teeming with life. He understood that the animated darkness and the bodies therein offered choreographic possibilities unavailable in the light. Where others diagnosed a malady to overcome, Schlemmer recognized a condition to explore.

Schlemmer’s great recognition remained latent throughout his lifetime—evident in his art but unspoken in his words—and has gone entirely unrecognized by scholars. His signature achievement, The Triadic Ballet, evolved into nothing less than a ballet of darkness. In retrospect, the transformation of the ballet was palpable already at Kiesler’s International Exhibition of New Theater Technology. Schlemmer was represented by two life-size costumed figures, four figure studies, six figure watercolors, and two figure drawings, all culled from the “black series” of the Triadic Ballet. In order to understand how the black series overtook the entire ballet—indeed, consumed much of his oeuvre—we must rehearse the long history of Schlemmer’s dance and its cross-fertilization with the media that constituted the remainder of his practice: painting and drawing. For the case of Schlemmer indicates an ironic yet necessary historical paradox whereby only a painter, untrained in dance and unschooled in theater, could successfully explore, through dance, the theatrical technologies of darkness.
A Ballet of Darkness

The spark for a modern ballet was ignited through Schlemmer's 1912 encounter with Albert Burger and Elsa Hötzel, dance soloists at the Royal Court Theater in Stuttgart. The pair had spent the summer at Jaques-Dalcroze's Hellerau festival, participated in the landmark production of Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*—with choreography by Jaques-Dalcroze and sets and lighting by Appia—and returned convinced that they had finally unshackled themselves from the strictures of classical ballet. Schlemmer, Burger, and Hötzel embarked on the joint creation of a modern theater that would unite dance, stage, and music. They reached out to pioneers like Arnold Schönberg, Jaques-Dalcroze, and Appia, all of whom offered encouragement but little else. Progress was halting through the First World War. Beginning in 1919 and extending through Schlemmer's arrival at the Bauhaus at the end of 1920, the three began in earnest to plot the ballet, choreograph dances, and sew costumes, assisted mightily by Carl Schlemmer, Oskar's brother.

_The Triadic Ballet_ premiered on September 30, 1922, on the small stage of the Württemberg Landestheater in Stuttgart. Burger, Hötzel, and "Schoppe" (Schlemmer's dancer pseudonym) performed twelve dances in eighteen costumes to critical and popular acclaim. Despite the initial success, _The Triadic Ballet_ would receive only six further performances during Schlemmer's lifetime: two performances in 1923 (a rousing success during the Bauhaus Week in Weimar and a fiasco at the annual exhibition for German Work in Dresden, after which Schlemmer broke definitively with Burger and Hötzel); three performances in 1926 in a new configuration under Schlemmer's sole direction (at various German theater and music festivals); and a doomed performance at the 1932 international dance competition in Paris. _The Triadic Ballet_ had a parallel life in drawings, costumes, photographs, paintings, posters, and essays that circulated in hosts of exhibitions, journals, newspapers, and books. Indeed, Schlemmer repeatedly summoned photography and other media to amplify, not merely document, the performance. An appraisal of _The Triadic Ballet_ necessitates analyses across wide-ranging media and venues.

The structure of _The Triadic Ballet_ was hardly as simple as its name suggests. For Schlemmer, _triadic_ bore a range of connotations. Most immediately, the musical triad and the threefold qualities of form, color, and space. Primary forms: circle, square, triangle; primary colors: red, blue, yellow; and primary spatial dimensions: height, depth, width. Additionally, three marked the moment when "the monomaniacal ego and the dualistic opposition are surmounted and the collective begins." Finally, _triadic_ and _trinity_ carried the religious suggestiveness of unity in multiplicity—specifically that of dance, costumes, and music—though Schlemmer avoided explicit Christian allusions. The number three structured many aspects of the ballet. Twelve dances in eighteen costumes (multiples of three) were per-
formed alternately by three dancers (solos, duets, and trios). For all the
textual and visual documentation surrounding The Triadic Ballet, however,
its dances remain a mystery as the choreography has been lost, save for
the trio finale, and the ballet languished for a generation after Schlem-
mer’s death. In the most patent triadic invocation, Schlemmer divided
the ballet into three movements or series, each with its own color and at-
mosphere (fig. 5.4). As Schlemmer elaborated: “The first is a gay burlesque
with lemon-yellow curtains. The second, ceremonious and solemn, is on a
rose-colored stage. And the third is a mystical fantasy on a black stage.”

What distinguished the costumed figures in Schlemmer’s ballet from the
animated cutouts in the mechanical ballets of Léger or the Bauhäuslers
was the most fundamental “third” in the Triadic: the third dimension.
Visions of mechanization ultimately yielded to questions of bodies and
space. But whereas most of the avant-garde aspired to real space and light,
Schlemmer’s preoccupation with three-dimensional space propelled him
toward darkness.

The ballet launched as a trinity evolved into a singular exploration
of dematerialized bodies in artificial darkness. After he broke with the

**FIG. 5.4. Oskar Schlemmer, overview of The Triadic Ballet, 1924/26. Pen, ink, and
watercolor. 17 1/2 x 23 1/4 in (44 x 60 cm). Theatermuseum der Universität zu Köln.**

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Burger-Hötzl pair, Schlemmer reconstituted The Triadic Ballet as an extended version of the third series; he abandoned the yellow and pink sets and embraced the black stage as the exclusive backdrop against which his costumes came to life. Perceptive viewers anticipated, if not precipitated, the shift. As one critic noted soon after the premiere: "The actual ideas particular to Schlemmer were first manifest in the third series." With its black costumes and black sets, the third series, more than any other, realized Schlemmer’s aspiration to “dematerialize the body.” A 1926 prompt book assembled by Schlemmer for the conductor Hermann Scherchen spelled out in images, even as it repressed in words, the centrality of black-on-black effects (fig. 5.5). Indeed, the centrality of artificial darkness is evident even in the most rudimentary descriptions of the ballet. In its first incarnation, the black series comprised four dances. The series was initiated with a solo, accompanied by a Haydn piano sonata, danced by a figure called the Abstract One (Abstrakte). (See fig. 5.2a.) At the premiere and in many subsequent performances, the Abstrakte was danced by Schlemmer. (Much more on the Abstrakte below.) The second dance in the series—inspired in part by Loïe Fuller’s serpentine dance—was choreographed for the Spiral, whose eponymous costume combined blue-green-silver overlay with a coiled spiral of transparent celluloid and black leather above a black unitard (fig. 5.5a). Unmasked, the Spiral traced a corkscrew path to a toccata by the eighteenth-century Italian composer Domenico Paradisi. Next was a duet for two Disks (Scheiben; fig. 5.5b). Costumed identically except for the colors of their disks, they wore black unitards and robotlike masks (later likened to that worn by the robot in Fritz Lang’s 1927 film Metropolis) and were armed with lance tips for hands. Viewed frontally, they were reduced to vacant masks, weaponized hands, and invisible bodies bifurcated by metallic lines that ran from their pelvises up the center of their masks and extended well over their helmed heads; a swivel in either direction revealed the flamboyant disks and an absence where one might expect their bodies (occluded by the black-on-black effect). They took energetic, heroic steps; marched in straight lines; crossed each other dramatically; revealed and concealed their extravagant disks—all in pace with a composition by Baldassare Galuppi, another eighteenth-century Italian. The ballet concluded, after a short pause for costume changes, with a trio danced by a wire-costumed dancer (black unitard, coiled wire midsection and headdress, white gloves and white buttons along the sides of her arms) and two Gold Spheres (identical costumes and helmed masks; upper bodies and arms encased in gold spheres; lemon-yellow skirts with honey-yellow trim; legs largely dematerialized through white twine that ran over black-stockinged legs from the feet upward and outward toward the skirts; fig. 5.5c). Detailed notes and drawings by Schlemmer allow the trio finale, uniquely among all the dances, to be reconstructed accurately. Accompanied by a Handel passacaglia, the two Gold Spheres moved in unison—forward and back,
small circles, standing still—as the Wire Costume female dancer traced small and large pirouetted curves and circles, eventually encompassing the entire stage. On a black stage, the black-clad bodies of the dancers disappeared ("dematerialized") and left only the gold sphere and nickel wire costumes shimmering in the dark expanse—an effect hinted at by the double- and triple-exposed photographs in the Scherchen prompt book.

Verbal description and photographic illustration are blatantly insufficient to convey the significance, qualities, and impact of The Triadic Ballet. Nevertheless, the four facets of Schlemmer's engagement with darkness to be explored in this chapter should already be evident, albeit in nuance. First, Schlemmer attempted to tackle the abstract laws of space and bodies in order to arrive at the dematerialization of the body. Second, this effort demanded an evacuation of metaphor and narrative from the ballet. Third, Schlemmer mobilized nonmetaphorical darkness to link the dematerialized bodies and abstract space. Finally, once Schlemmer's black screen is understood as a technology of darkness, his ballet stages an imbrication of bodies with the apparatus like few other works in the interwar period. Schlemmer explicitly and repeatedly announced the first element in this program: the abstract laws of space and bodies. The opposition to metaphor and narrative followed from the emphasis on abstraction. But the centrality of darkness remained wholly unspoken by Schlemmer and, subsequently, by the criticism and scholarship that has surrounded him. Even as artificial darkness anchored his most important and innovative dances, Schlemmer never verbally identified its salience for his own practice. His practice, however, forced him into ever greater intimacy with a technologized darkness he could not name.

* * *

From its developmental phase in the late 1910s through its final performance in the 1930s, The Triadic Ballet remained the keystone of Schlemmer's aesthetic production and thought. Signature costumes, drawings, and photographs dotted Kiesler's 1924 exhibition and catalogue, and many others besides. Though developed and performed outside the Bauhaus, The Triadic Ballet came to define the contours of the Bauhaus Theater. With few correlates or acolytes, however, Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet resisted categorization. It was the lone harbinger of a theater that never arrived. On August 26, 1932, Schlemmer reported to his confidant Otto Meyer the litany of misfortunes that befell the recent performance of The Triadic Ballet in Paris. More substantially, he also related the opinion of Léger, who served on the jury that awarded Schlemmer and his troupe sixth place, interspersed with his own commentary: "[Léger] felt that all the optical resources should be used much more fully—lighting, projection, transparencies—to concentrate one's attention on the optical marvels rather than on the quality of the dancing. True, but neither in Berlin nor in Paris did I have the opportunity
to do much with lighting; that would almost have resulted in a second ballet—a ballet of light!” As it was, Schlemmer had created a ballet of darkness, a quality neither he nor Léger could see in a positive light, and thus could not see at all.

The Triadic Ballet was altered almost as often as it was performed. The number, configuration, and order of the dances changed repeatedly. Music of Bossi, Debussy, Haydn, Mozart, Handel, and others was exchanged for a single composition for mechanical organ by Paul Hindemith, which was replaced in turn by contemporary compositions by Viennese composer Alois Pachernegg based on baroque dances by Pachelbel, Handel, Telemann, and others. Many of the costumes were substantially reworked in the mid-1920s, after Schlemmer and his initial collaborators split. Amidst these superficial and profound changes, the choreography of abstract bodies in artificial darkness not only remained a constant but subsumed ever greater portions of Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet and of the Bauhaus theater workshop. As light and enlightenment hardened into avant-garde orthodoxy, Schlemmer immersed himself ever more deeply in the choreography of darkness. For Schlemmer, darkness was not a deficiency or impediment to overcome, nor was it a metaphor to exploit. Instead, darkness was a medium through which choreographer, dancer, and spectator could jointly explore the spatial and bodily conditions of modern, technologized theater. In Schlemmer’s dance, darkness was not what separated spectators from actors, auditorium from stage, but rather the very condition that they shared.

Against Metaphors

No recuperation of artificial darkness was possible without its disassociation from metaphor, above all, death. The mainstream avant-garde championed real bodies and real light in real space—all in the name of real life. To explore the changed reality of bodies and space in artificially dark environments, symbolic darkness and metaphoric death would not suffice. Two images from the 1930s bring this claim into starker relief. The first, well known, shows the suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich dead, beneath his Black Square (1915), the image that inaugurated abstract or “nonobjective” painting in Russia (fig. 5.6). Malevich’s cubo-futurist backdrops for Victory over the Sun (1913) had set the stage for his suprematist breakthrough. Black Square—the emblem of suprematism—returned as the central backdrop as he lay in repose. An initial association might follow Wassily Kandinsky’s formulation, issued just before Malevich first embarked on his Black Square: “Black is something burnt out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death. Outwardly black is the most toneless color of all, a kind of neutral background against which the minutest shades of other colors stand forth clearly.” Here, the simple equivalence—“the silence of
black is the silence of death”—misses the mark. Tilted forward, the painting appeared like a mystical mirror that captured the whiteness of the funerary robes, bedding, and lilies, and reflected back the radical alterity of blackness. The collision of opposites was not merely the product of posthumous staging. Rather, as T. J. Clark argues, Malevich’s suprematist canvases deployed “extraordinary physicality and concreteness” in order to show that “the truth of the world is the Nothingness lurking behind it.” Clark’s catachresis—physicality-Nothingness—captures the materialism often occluded by Malevich’s own theoretical writings, but it remains metaphorical, in particular his recourse to capitalization. When Schlemmer addressed form and color and asserted that “only nothingness [das Nichts] is without color,” the capitalization adhered to German grammar and the colorless nothingness denoted a technical condition. Technique stripped of metaphor may lie beneath the purview of lofty modernist art histories. But it remained the crucible of avant-gardes committed to the reality of bodies and space.

The death of Otto Müller, a professor at the Breslau art academy where Schlemmer had recently accepted an appointment, thus only appears to parallel Malevich’s last rites: “Otto Müller is dead. […] We have laid him out in his studio and draped it with the black Triadic curtains.” These
very same curtains, which formed the backdrop to the most important series in Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet, failed to arrive in Paris, two years later, when Schlemmer and his troupe prepared to perform in an international dance competition. In a desperate attempt to produce the artificial darkness integral to the ballet, Schlemmer procured black curtains and carpets from a Parisian burial institute. Triadic curtains could be repurposed as funerary drapes, but, more important for Schlemmer, burial decorations could be stripped of their mortuary connotations and adapted for a black stage. (Their failure was purely technical: they were too slippery for the dancers; fig. 5.7.) The Black Square and the black Triadic curtains were similarly available (or abused) for mise-en-scène of death. But a purely technical application of black was no more palatable to Malevich than was a darkened auditorium to Appia, Cangiullo, or Kiesler. Avant-garde champions of black embraced it as metaphor; avant-garde materialists were advocates of light. Schlemmer fell into neither camp.

In the 1920s Schlemmer broadcast a clear disdain for the metaphors prevalent in mainstream, symbolist, and expressionist theater and art.

We do not want to imitate sunlight and moonlight, morning, noon, evening, and night with our lighting. Rather we let the light function by itself, for what it is: yellow, blue, green, violet, and so on. Why would we embellish these simple phenomena with such preconceived equations as: red stands for madness, violet for the mystical, orange for evening, and so on? Let us rather open our eyes and expose our minds to the pure power of color and light.

By 1936, as Schlemmer’s artistic and professional opportunities atrophied, he adulterated The Triadic Ballet to conform with the metaphoric frameworks he had previously rejected. Suddenly his script was peppered with references to warm sunlight and the blue-violet light of the moon. As he succumbed to cheap metaphors, Schlemmer recognized the importance of darkness and gave it a name: night. Figures previously named for their costumes and assigned places in the series patently labeled “black”—figures like Wire Costume, Spiral, and Gold Sphere—were now described as “figures of the night” (Nachgestalten), as opposed to “figures of the light” (Gestalten [. . .] des Lichtes)—light rather than day. Forty years after Appia penned his criticism of Wagnerian lighting and stagecraft, the reality of light was thoroughly established as a pillar of avant-garde mise-en-scène. But its counterpart—the positive reality of darkness rather than diatribes against dark auditoriums or metaphors of black and night—already began to fade. Indeed, even a cursory overview of early twentieth-century scenography demonstrates that nonmetaphoric darkness never attained a positive foothold at all.

A decisive moment arrived in the 1907–8 season when Konstantin Stanislavsky, the preeminent Russian director of his time, chanced upon the principles of Black Art and fancied himself the Columbus of a new theatrical world. Stanislavsky seemed oblivious to Marey, trick photography,
and Méliès, but he recognized the technique from variété theater enough to ask in retrospect: "How did it ever happen that such a practical and comfortable principle had not been used on the stage until that time?" As Stanislavsky appreciated, the potential applications of black velvet costumes or props within a black velvet set were manifold: appearances and disappearances; painless amputations and decapitations; the fabrication of thin actors from fat ones; fantastic effects unavailable or too difficult through mechanical means—in short, precisely the litany of Black Art techniques that had become staples of magic theaters worldwide. Stan-
islavsky deployed the “new” technique to great acclaim in a production of
Leonid Andreyev’s The Life of Man (1906). But he abandoned the technique
thereafter, and it had no significant reception in avant-garde theater.66
Accordingly, Stanislavsky’s trenchant question must be modified: how did
it ever happen that such a practical and comfortable principle was not used
on the stage after that time? The answer is threefold.

First, techniques that came from variety theater could not easily be el-
evated into “serious” theater, for they were “too effective in the theatrical
sense.”67 If arts explore the senses and media overwhelm them, media
technologies of darkness had no place in “serious” theaters. The avant-
garde—far keener on popular culture than was “serious” theater—likely
was repelled by the theatrical opacity necessitated by black-screen tech-
niques. When executed properly, no theater technology better mystified
the apparatus than Black Art. Skeletal sets of wood, iron, and glass were
the benchmarks of avant-garde transparency; the opacity of Black Art ran
counter to this tendency.

Second and more acute was Stanislavsky’s inability to separate the tech-
nology of darkness from the metaphor of death or a general atmosphere
of gloom. He resolved to mobilize the technical darkness toward fantastic
effects germane to Maurice Maeterlinck’s The Blue Bird (1908). But he and
others found the darkness too despondent for a broad repertoire: “When
we saw the scenery made of black velvet, and the entire portal of the stage
turned into a gloomy, sarcophagal, awful, and airless distance, we seemed
to sense the presence of death and the grave on the stage.”68 For Edward
Gordon Craig, who was in Moscow at the time, even Andreyev’s desolation
did not justify the excessive darkness: “[The Life of Man] began in black,
and it ended in black, but I didn’t stay till the end. I went out in the middle
of the second act, feeling ill”69 (fig. 5.8). Writing in 1924, Stanislavsky and
Craig were responding implicitly to the prevalence of black curtains and
darkness, especially on the German stage. These black curtains were rarely,
if ever, employed as technical black screens and instead were beholden to
atmospherics of despair. The theater critics (and budding producer and
scenographer) Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones dedicated
a chapter of their 1922 survey Continental Stagecraft to the prevalence of
darkened German stage sets. “Warum immer die schwarzen Vorhänge?” we
ask again and again. Perhaps they are only an accident of the attempt to
get a background of emptiness; but they become a yawning gulf of spiri-
tual blackness. […] The German uses black curtains to achieve nothing-
ness. Instead he gets desolation, spiritual negation.”70 The avant-garde’s
enthralment with the physicality, levity, and the directness of popular
theater was matched by an equally fervent renunciation of the ponder-
ous expressionism prevalent on German stages and in German cinemas.
Shortly after The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) made expressionist sets a cen-
tral marketing device for the German film industry and the bête noire of
much avant-garde film criticism, Karlheinz Martin brought Georg Kaiser’s
expressionist melodrama Von morgens bis mitternachts (1912/1917, film version 1920) from the stage to the screen, with the aid of two-dimensional theatrical facades set in undifferentiated darkness (fig. 5.8). Insasmuch as Kaiser, Caligari, and Martin laid claim to existential darkness, the interwar avant-gardes were likely to steer clear.

The mystification of black-screen theater technology and its saturnine associations made Black Art a poor candidate for widespread avant-garde adoption. But the third reason—implied but left unstated by Stanislavsky—may have been the most damning. As Stanislavsky’s lucid account makes clear, the new technology of darkness, when evacuated of all metaphors, simply reduced three dimensions to two: “We had found a background, which, like a piece of black paper, could give the stage the appearance of having only two dimensions, width and height, for with the presence of the black velvet, which would cover the whole stage, its sides, its ceilings and its floor, the third dimension would disappear entirely, and the velvet would pour itself into one plane.” As we have seen, Kiesler construed avant-garde spatial polemics as a rejection of the cinema screen’s “surface with deceptive spatiality.” What Stanislavsky called the “great black plane”—inverted Kiesler’s dictum precisely: it was “space with deceptive flatness,” that is, an impenetrably dark cavity that created the appearance of a two-dimensional black screen. The negation of space made Black
Art a natural enemy of avant-garde scenography. In light of these seemingly insurmountable objections, Stanislavsky’s urgent question must be repurposed one more time: how did it ever happen that such a despised and discordant principle was adopted by Schlemmer and his Bauhäuslers during this time?

**The Master Magician**

With the exception of operational descriptions in letters, diary entries, and performance notes, Schlemmer systematically ignored the question of darkness in his theoretical and pedagogic writings. The material assembled from his notes for his 1928 Bauhaus course “Human” betray not a word on darkness. What is more, his decisive theoretical statement, “Human and Art Figure,” fell silent wherever basic elucidation would require explications of controlled darkness. Instead, Schlemmer resorted to avant-garde commonplacesthe “confrontation of passive spectator and animate actor” and fantasized about the “the construction of the new theater of glass, metal, and the inventions of tomorrow.” Juxtaposed to
overwhelming visual evidence of his applications of black-screen techniques, Schlemmer’s silence vis-à-vis darkness was symptomatic of the reigning taboo on darkness as a positive term. Schlemmer operated in an aesthetic system where darkness was subsumed by morbid metaphors, as we have seen, or dismissed as “too effective in the theatrical sense,” as we will see presently.

Schlemmer’s intense exploration of darkness manifested itself as soon as the Bauhaus theater workshop established quarters in Dessau in the second half of the 1920s. Here Schlemmer collaborated with student and professional dancers, particularly Manda von Kreibig and Werner Siedhoff. Kreibig boasted the exemplary interwar dance résumé. She trained with the foremost choreographers of the era: Isadora Duncan (beginning at age five), Rudolf von Laban, and those at the Wigman school. From 1925 through the end of the decade, the years she spent her free time at the Bauhaus, she successively served as ballet master at the Hessische Landestheater Darmstadt, the Stadttheater Nürnberg, and the Landestheater Braunschweig, before an onstage accident ended her dance career in 1929.

Siedhoff’s more modest profile did not impede an intense and important exchange with Schlemmer. Siedhoff came to the Bauhaus in 1925, having worked with the Holtorf-Truppe, an amateur ensemble, and left in 1929 to pursue a successful career in theater. Independently and together, Kreibig and Siedhoff arrived at their Bauhaus zeniths through Schlemmer’s choreography of darkness.

At the Bauhaus Carnival Festival of February 21, 1928, Kreibig performed the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance, which, according to Schlemmer, “demonstrated the illusionistic effect on artificial and natural body forms” (fig. 5.10). In a letter to his wife, Schlemmer articulated cogently the requisite techniques behind these illusionistic effects: “white-stockinged feet, rose-colored hand holding a silver head (and black head cap so that her face disappeared completely). Then movements using these three things, illusionistic, against a black backdrop.” (Apparently Schlemmer thought it gratuitous to note that she also wore a black unitard.) Hand and head were oversized and contributed to the artificiality of the bodily forms. Schlemmer’s metallic heads were likened to the infamous female robot in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, an analogy Schlemmer came to reject vehemently. The Metropolis automaton, with her mechanical clockwork hidden beneath a lifelike skin, was a cipher for technology broadly and cinema in particular; her erotic dance as the Whore of Babylon staged one of cinema’s most extravagant figurations of the male gaze as a field of lusty, disembodied eyes. Schlemmer distanced himself from mechanical inspirations and instead claimed the constructivist mantle of elementarism, specifically “the elementary science of geometry and stereometry” and “the elementary science of the human body.” The elementary sciences of space and body were part and parcel of a history of cinema encapsulated by the black screen, one which substituted technologies of darkness and
bodies for mechanization and eyes. Contemporaneous critics and students intuited these connections as well.

Kreibig reprised the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance several times, including an April 23, 1928, performance at the Hessen Landestheater in Darmstadt, where it met with great success and was reviewed at length. The dance contained five movements. In the first section, Kreibig, invisible except for the white stocking, rolled the silver head from one side of the stage to the other, pausing at the center to perform a dance with the head and her stockinged leg. Several variations on this theme followed until the final sequence brought together the head, hand, and leg such that their movements exceeded those of an integral human being. In the words of one reviewer: "Here the dancer as such disappears entirely; limbs, heads, and masks alone stir to primitive music after eccentric gags with occult impact." The division of the dance into five parts was less an aesthetic prerogative than a technical necessity: during the short "light pauses," the audience was blinded by bright light "to allow the subsequent image to appear with renewed vigor like a ghostly visitation." Where Auzinger, Méliès, and other magicians employed dazzlers throughout their perfor-
nances to intensify the onstage darkness, Schlemmer and Kreibig resorted to intermittent bursts of light to contract the pupils of spectators. Deep black, as the physiologist Ewald Hering understood, was "but an illusion produced by contrast effects"; whether that contrast was spatial or temporal was immaterial. Decapitations, dismemberments, spectral visitations, black curtains, extreme contrasts of artificial light and artificial darkness—the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance manifested all the characteristics of nineteenth-century black-screen attractions. With uncanny precision, Gropius later described Schlemmer as a "Master Magician."

It has become commonplace to associate Schlemmer with the venerable scientific legacy of Marey, the study of motion, and inscriptions of the human body. As a former member of the Bauhaus Theater recalled decades later, The Poles Dance, one of the material dances performed by Kreibig, linked Schlemmer directly to early motion scientists like Marey and (less accurately) Muybridge: "All that remains visible of a black body on a black ground are the ten [sic] poles attached to it. [...] The results are super-illustrations of the research on movement by Marey and Muybridge [sic], who earlier had the idea of representing the limbs of a living body through white lines" (fig. 5.11). Astute or simply uninhibited critics in the 1920s, however, homed in on a more bathetic lineage. From the group of material dances pioneered by Schlemmer and Kreibig and performed by the Bauhaus Theater at the Württemberg Landestheater—including the Pole, Metal, Glass, Hoop, Space, Form, and Gesture Dances—one reviewer drew the following conclusions: "The Bauhaus offerings have this in common: the human body is forced into the background through masks, concealing cloaks, and matting that obscure personal mannerisms. They also frequently employ that old imitó trick in which the body disappears through the layering of black unitards on black backgrounds such that only the handled objects are visible." Schlemmer, plainly, was a practitioner of Black Art.

Schlemmer's (willful?) ignorance of Black Art, however, resulted in an embarrassing exchange the following year. In 1930 he accused theater and film director Ernst Matray of plagiarizing his own Black-White-Trio in the latter's Night Ghosts in Variété (fig. 5.12; compare fig. 5.13). Matray's reproach was at once jovial and acerbic. "You are surely aware of the good old magic routine that Bellachini performed before us. [...] He performed it in every corner of the world when we were still children and his son continues to perform it today as 'Black Art.' Or is it possible that you really do not know the good old Bellachini? Is it possible that Schlemmer did not know the good old Bellachini or his son? Auzinger or Mélès? or the Black Art experiments of Stanislavsky? or Marey's black screen? In any event, neither before nor after Schlemmer received this letter did he ever acknowledge any debt to or kinship with black-screen techniques.

Yet even as he stayed resolutely silent on the question of darkness, Schlemmer, like many avant-gardists, welcomed popular associations. He
identified theater as the realm between “religious cult and naïve popular entertainment.”\textsuperscript{91} In his schematic overview of theater, the fairground, circus, vaudeville, cabaret, and variété all had their places alongside ancient tragedy, Shakespeare, ballet, and Wagner.\textsuperscript{92} Schlemmer had already integrated the props and effects later (in)visible in Limbs- or Illusion-Dance into studies for his revised Figural Cabinet (c. 1923), which was indebted in equal measure to Kleist, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Craig, on the one hand, and fairground attractions, on the other. In Schlemmer’s words: “Half shooting gallery—half metaphysicum abstractum, […] Meta is physically complete: head and body disappear alternately.”\textsuperscript{93} Schlemmer similarly dubbed The Triadic Ballet as a “metaphysical revue”\textsuperscript{94} and shortly thereafter led revue performances in Frankfurt (Bühnenrevue, August 1926) and Berlin (Metropol-Theater, September 1926).

Just as Schlemmer had a thorny relationship with variety theater, so too did he keep trick photography at a certain distance even as he embraced its techniques. Despite Schlemmer’s aversion to photography,\textsuperscript{95} he demonstrated an indubitable grasp of its potency when coupled with the black screen. Because of the black screen, photographs of Schlemmer’s dances evince none of the superimpositions, transparency, or montage qualities that were the hallmarks of Bauhaus multiple-exposure photography.\textsuperscript{96} Instead, the photographs of Kreibig and Siedhoff—including images reproduced in a special 1927 issue of the Bauhaus journal dedicated to theater—exhibit many of the same techniques and motifs familiar from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trick photography and film against a black background. The most striking photograph of the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance, for example, is a triple exposure against a black background (see fig. 5.10). The central figure appears compressed, with the silver head lowered to meet a raised stocking leg. The naturalistically rendered compression is flanked by two bodily ensembles elongated to superhuman proportions. (One imagines Kreibig with the pink hand and silver head raised well above her enshrouded body.) Aided by the complementary technologies of the black screen and the photographic camera,
Kreighb's highly disciplined body is dismembered and multiplied across a neutral dark field.

Schlemmer achieved similar effects without the aid of photographic media in the Black-White-Trio, a dance that premiered at the end of the summer semester on July 7, 1928 (fig. 5.13). The Black-White-Trio extended the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance to include three dancers: Kreighb, Siedhoff, and the Bauhäusler Albert Mentzel. All three were clad head to toe in black, above which they wore either white leggings, a long-sleeved white shirt, or a white hat and white gloves. When "properly" assembled, the three dancers formed a single, integral human being. Schlemmer's choreography, however, dissolved bodily integrity in favor of playful dismemberment, multiplication, and freedom from gravity aided by stacks of invisible black blocks.

Schlemmer's dances are notable not only for their adherence to certain black-screen norms but also for their deviations from them. In Schlem-
mer’s exploitation of Black Art we witness a transvaluation of the values that had underwritten nearly all black-screen attractions. What was previously representational theater—one that employed bodies in space toward the dramatic ends of decapitations, multiplications, and disappearances—became, in Schlemmer’s hands, abstract dance, one that borrowed Black Art props and tropes in order to explore bodies in space. We will return to Schlemmer’s theorization of bodies and space momentarily. One major implication of Schlemmer’s move from representational theater to abstract dance is evident already in the Black-White-Trio and Limbs- or Illusion-Dance: the reconfiguration of gender. The first forays into black-screen attractions featured men duplicating and dismembering themselves: Pepper, Dr. Lynn, Marey and Demený, Auzinger, Méliès, and amateur photographers turned the dispositif of artificial darkness on themselves and their male colleagues. As black screens were normalized in theater, magic, photography, and film, traditional gender roles quickly reestablished themselves. In the process, women were subjected to a host of black-screen mutilations by media entertainers and avant-garde artists.

Man Ray was exemplary in this regard. As an accomplished studio photographer and expansive experimenter in photographic technique, Man Ray was long familiar with trick photography against a black backdrop. He employed it hesitantly in an important early photograph, Coat Stand (1920), in which one of the model’s lower legs was pruned by darkness. He revived the technique in earnest with Blanc et noir (White and Black, c. 1929), a series of photographs that employed roughly the same black-screen techniques and title as Oskar Schlemmer’s Black-White-Trio, but to strikingly different effect (fig. 5.14). Schlemmer swathed bodies in black and selectively clad limbs in white in order to fuse three bodies into one and release this new entity from the constraints of corporeality, gravity, and sex. Man Ray’s Blanc et noir exploited black-screen techniques to paint the body as a photographer might burn a print in the darkroom. The model’s hands and feet vanish entirely, but her profile, neck, breasts, and other curves are accentuated by the dark interludes. Schlemmer and Man Ray were both in dialogue with variété: the Bauhaus master inadvertently arrived at magic theater; the Surrealist actively embraced erotic burlesque. Like Musidora’s Vampire costume, the black-clad women in Le perle (1929), and Man Ray’s photo series Érotique voilée (Veiled Erotic, 1933), where Méret Oppenheim’s flesh was inked like a printing press, the bands of darkness in Blanc et noir veiled the body only to eroticize it. Unlike the first adopters of black-screen techniques—the scientists, entertainers, amateurs, and artists who turned artificial darkness on their own male bodies—Man Ray exploited the black screen to manufacture salacious and fragmented images of women.

In the role of the Abstrakte, Schlemmer assumed the Black Art mantle of male self-dismemberment. But as the name suggests, Schlemmer shifted the emphasis from gender to abstract forms, abstract bodies, and
abstract spaces. In the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance, Pole Dance, and nearly every other dance Schlemmer choreographed at the Bauhaus, bodies vanished in favor of nongendered masks, hands, poles, hoops, or other materials. In the Black-White-Trio, a single elastic unsexed body was assembled from the visible limbs of two men and one woman. Famously, Schlemmer’s dancers—such as those in the Space-, Form-, or Gesture Dance (1926)—wore padded costumes in primary colors to unsex the performers. The Women Dance (1929), performed by three masked men in drag, and Gesture Dance (1926–29), in which masculinity was telegraphed through bespectacled and mustached masks, marshaled floating signifiers of gender for comic effect. In his pursuit of essential human and spatial qualities, Schlemmer jettisoned gender. The bodies he coveted were unsexed in the dark.

**Living Bodies in Abstract Space**

In his seminal 1925 essay “Human and Art Figure,” Schlemmer theorized and illustrated the relationship between the abstract stage and the human organism (fig. 5.15). Here Schlemmer posed the question that undergirded his entire practice:
The human organism stands in the cubical, abstract space of the stage. Each has different laws of order. Whose shall prevail?

Either abstract space is adapted in deference to the natural human and transformed back into nature or the imitation of nature. This happens in the theater of illusionistic realism.

Or the natural human, in deference to abstract space, is recast to fit its mold. This happens on the abstract stage.\textsuperscript{103}

Schlemmer unabashedly championed the abstract stage and its cubical space, whose laws are “the invisible linear network of planimetric and stereometric relationships.”\textsuperscript{103} But he was equally adamant that modern theater must observe the laws of the organic human, which “reside in the invisible functions of his inner self: heartbeat, circulation, respiration, the activities of the brain and nervous system.”\textsuperscript{104} Human movements and emanations create an imaginary space, an “auratic flow” or Fluidum,\textsuperscript{105} of which cubical-abstract space delineates only the horizontal and vertical framework. Schlemmer sought to fuse the laws of abstract space and those of the human organism: “\textit{Invisibly interwoven with all these laws is}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig5_15.png}
\caption{Oskar Schlemmer, illustrations from "Mensch und Kunstfigur" (Human and Art Figure) in \textit{Die Bühne im Bauhaus}, 1935.}
\end{figure}
the Human Dancer (Tänzermensch). He obeys the law of the body as well as the law of space. [...]—he is the conduit into the great theatrical event.”

Schlemmer’s choreography aimed to make visible these invisible networks, functions, and laws.

Two years later, on March 16, 1927, Schlemmer staged a series of demonstrations for the Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus. In an effort to transpose abstract space and human Fluidum from verbal concepts and graphic illustrations (1925 essay) to embodied performance (1927 demonstration), Schlemmer turned to artificial darkness. The black screen served as the literal, technical, and (implicit) philosophical backdrop against which Schlemmer demonstrated his techniques to the Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus. The lecture and demonstration—augmented by multiple-exposure photographs against a black background—were subsequently published as the centerpiece of the third issue of the Bauhaus journal (fig. 5.16). The physiologist Marey had successfully turned human movement into graphic notations with the aid of a black screen and a chronophotographic camera. Schlemmer attempted the same transposition in reverse: graphic drawings would be realized as real bodily movement in real space and then captured by a photographic camera—so long as the bodies and space conformed to the rules of artificial darkness. More than a tableau vivant, Schlemmer’s performance strove to demonstrate the essence of abstract space and human flow before live and mediated Bauhaus audiences.

The central series of demonstrations revolved around the empty stage, its floor geometry, volumetric stereometry, and the elementary facts of its space when traversed by a figure. Unlike the many fanciful projects that peppered the avant-garde theatrical landscape—Kiesler’s Railway Theater, the theaters of Farkas Molnár or Moholy-Nagy illustrated in The Theater of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius and Erwin Piscator’s unrealized Total Theater (1926–27), or even Schlemmer’s own endorsements of an “unchained stage” of glass, iron, and concrete—the actual stage in the Bauhaus was utterly traditional, save for its location between a canteen (at the rear) and modern auditorium (in front). Schlemmer initially expressed enthusiasm for the double openings of the Bauhaus stage and its potential to “overcome the proscenium stage” in favor of the “space-stage.”

His performances, however, remained frontal, and he closed off the rear of the stage with black curtains. Schlemmer appeared comfortable with the familiar disposition of audience opposite a recessed stage—he considered the “situation” that gave rise to this Guckkasten, or peep show, to be “instinctive,” even the “origin of all theatricks.” Rather than supplant the “spaceless stage” with a Space-Stage—to recall Kiesler’s antagonistic terminology—Schlemmer quietly sought to explore the dominant conditions of spacelessness. Kiesler’s polemic against the traditional stage captures perfectly—albeit negatively—Schlemmer’s ambitions: “The stage is not a box, with a curtain for a lid, into which panoramic views are nested. [...] Any construction of space [Raumgestaltung] on such a stage becomes
a sordid compromise between the surface and the cube. Performance and public." Schlemmer, whose oeuvre Nancy Troy has aptly described as "the art of reconciliation," accepted the dominant conditions of theater and pursued the resolution of its inherent oppositions.

The central image to emerge from Schlemmer's Bauhaus demonstrations was a "spatial delineation with figure," which reconciled abstract space and human Fludum. Siedhoff, dressed in a white body suit, stood at the center of a black field whose spatial coordinates were plotted through a network of planimetric and stereometric white lines. As photographed by Bauhäusler Lux Feininger, and reproduced in the Bauhaus journal, Siedhoff first appeared like a spider suspended at the center of its web, cast
against a dark expanse: three exposures facilitated the multiplied limbs; a (nearly) invisible black column suspended Siedhoff in the darkness; and controlled lighting illuminated only the figure and the network of lines. For informed audiences like the Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus, “spatial delineation with figure” synthesized Schlemmer’s famous illustrations of abstract space, on the one hand, and human Fluidum, on the other, previously published in his essay “Human and Art Figure.” (Compare fig. 5.15 and fig. 5.16b.) Schlemmer’s Bauhaus demonstrations were illustrations and elaborations of graphic drawings using real bodies and abstract space. As with Marey, Schlemmer’s “graphic method” became photographic by way of real bodies before a black screen.

Schlemmer’s break with Kiesler and other avant-garde artists was even more evident in the first of the Bauhaus demonstrations. Schlemmer demonstrated the curtain, which, together with the ramp, “separates the two worlds of auditorium and stage into two hostile-friendly camps.” Rather than banish the curtain, as did Appia, Kiesler, and so many members of the avant-garde, Schlemmer invited his audience to “imagine a curtain-play which would evolve literally from its own ‘material’ and reveal in an entertaining way the curtain’s own secret nature.” A triple-exposure photograph by Bauhäusler Erich Consemüller, reproduced in the Bauhaus journal, depicted Siedhoff as he simultaneously peered through the gap in the curtain (center), drew back the curtain with an unseen left arm and dramatically extended his right one (right), and wrapped himself, toga-like, in the curtain (left; fig. 5.16a). The dark “toga” at the left betrayed a modicum of transparency; but the black curtains and white bodysuit otherwise met the technical threshold for seamless multiple-exposure photography against a black ground. What made the demonstration all the more intriguing was the fact that, as Mentzel reminisced, “the stage of the Bauhaus [in Dessau . . ] had two curtains: the first, which served as a background [fund], separated the stage from the canteen; the second [separated it] from the auditorium.” At the Bauhaus—and wherever the Bauhaus Theater traveled—the black background was secured through black screens. Rear dark curtains doubled or even preceded the infamous curtain of separation on Schlemmer’s stage. In Schlemmer’s demonstration for the Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus, the curtain’s “own secret nature” was its contiguity with artificial darkness: “The figure [Siedhoff] rolls himself in the left-hand portion of the curtain and quickly unrolls himself into the darkness of the stage [Bühnendunkel].” In a watershed moment in the history of performance and its documentation, Schlemmer demonstrated to the live audience the same truth transmitted to a mediated audience through multiple-exposure photography: namely, the technical difference between black curtains and stage darkness was none at all. With a simple movement, Schlemmer demonstrated that the inverse of Kiesler’s disparaging dictum was no less true. Curtains could serve as ersatz darkness whose material reality could initiate an orchestral drama
in the dark. As Schlemmer wrote: “It was astonishing how suddenly a white hand advanced, an arm, a leg, how the actor handled the [curtain] as drapery or as a cloak, entangled himself within it, and played with it.” No longer did curtains and darkness constitute an invisible technology for bodily dismemberment and duplication or for the separation of active actors and passive spectators. Black curtains and artificial darkness were put in play.

Initially a technical requirement for the dematerialization of bodies, artificial darkness became the unspoken centerpiece of Schlemmer’s exploration of bodies in abstract space. Abstract space, in other words, was slowly cleaved from the cubic parameters of the stage and concretized instead around the material conditions and historical conventions of darkness as a technical support. If Schlemmer never choreographed a Dance of Darkness—as he did for Poles, Metal, Glass, and Hoops—it is only because darkness was the condition of possibility for all his material dances. The material dances and Bauhaus demonstrations confirm that Schlemmer intuited and acted upon the vital connection between, on the one hand, the abstract space and bodily configurations he championed and, on the other hand, the technical possibilities of artificial darkness. What is more, the recourse to black curtains, as an active element in theater, and to white lines, in order to delineate three-dimensional space, belied a desire neither to obfuscate the artificial darkness at the Bauhaus nor to elucidate it, but rather to braid the darkness into the dance, to harness it toward new experiences of body, image, and space.

Flat Darkness and Black Flatness across Media

Let us return to Stanislavsky’s question: “How did it ever happen that such a practical and comfortable principle had not been used on the stage until that time?” Schlemmer clearly embraced the “theatricality”—that is, the variété qualities—of black-screen entertainment. He also successfully skirted its metaphoric lugubriousness. Among the avant-garde objections to the black screen, this leaves only flatness and spacelessness. Avant-garde theatrical circles established a pejorative equivalence between painting and flatness. (Kiesler: “No painting on the stage!”) Real life unfolded in real space, they claimed, opposed to the artificiality of painted flats. But modernist painting, at its most critical, recognized a spectacularized modernity whose superficiality could be reflected and challenged on the surfaces of its deliberately flat canvases. Édouard Manet, in Clark’s incisive reading, captured Haussmann’s Paris as so many painted flats and helped inaugurate modernist painting in 1860s France. The millions of spectators who poured into Paris for the 1867 Exposition Universelle were replaced in the interwar period by millions of spectators who poured into cinemas daily. Accordingly, Schlemmer moved from the streets to the theaters and redirected modernist flatness toward the abstracting, space-annihilating
darkness prevalent therein. What Manet, Schlemmer, and modernist painting shared was a belief that “real life” and “real space” were no longer sturdy grounds from which to launch a critique of spectacularized modernity. Rather than oppose real space to painted flatness—or assert flatness as the ontological-cum-metaphysical condition of painting—artists would have to confront the real flatnesses produced by modern media dispositifs. Modern, mediated reality played out not only in space but also—and with equal urgency—in spacelessness.

Trained as an abstract painter by Adolf Höbel and others, Schlemmer eagerly appropriated the flatness of artificial darkness into the precisely calibrated blacks of his multifarious mixed-media works on paper and their print dissemination. Perhaps the most famous study—and advertisement—for The Triadic Ballet was a circa 1924 mixed-media grisaille exhibited by Kiesler in Vienna in 1924, reproduced in The Theater of the Bauhaus (1925), and used for a poster advertising the 1926 Donaueschingen Music Festival (fig. 5.17a). In Figurines in Space: Study for the Triadic Ballet, Schlemmer presents three figures from the black series in an irregular orthogonal space of black, white, and gray quadrilaterals. The central foreground is occupied by the Abstract One (Abstrakte), painted in gouache, behind which are retouched photo-collaged representations of Gold Sphere (Burger) and Wire Figure (Hötzel). The figures’ recessional diminution, wholly disproportionate to the orthogonal recession, renders the relationship between bodies and space even more erratic. Three may have marked the moment where “the monomaniacal ego and the dualistic opposition are surmounted and the collective begins,” but the human collective represented here is under maximum strain and is thoroughly fused with technology. The mixed-media work is representative of Schlemmer’s ambivalent relationship to photography. The Abstrakte is painted head to toe; Hötzel’s Wire Figure is overpainted so heavily as to obscure all but completely the photographic base; Burger’s Gold Sphere, finally, is a photograph, very lightly retouched, and collaged onto the painting. The three figures thus stage a photographic transubstantiation that bespeaks the condition of the mixed-media study. The black, white, and silvery gray palette is more “photographic” than “grisaille”—a choice all the more marked since the costumes were in fact quite colorful. Rather than assert itself as a definitive product, the mixed-media study appears like a transfer station between photographic input (collage elements) and photographic output (photo reproduction in books and posters).

However much the large study for The Triadic Ballet internalizes its photomechanical reproducibility, it also harbors qualities lost in reproduction. Through the choice of medium—gouache and ink—and the texture and direction of brushstrokes, Schlemmer allows the play of light on the surface of the painting to modulate the quality of the blacks and, by extension, the figure-ground relations. When viewed straight on, the Abstrakte’s left leg (on the viewer’s right), for example, appears slightly darker than the black
squares behind its upper half. But when viewed opposite the light source (for example, from below when lit from above), the black ink leg catches more light and appears middle gray (such that the “black” left leg appears the same color as the gray portion of the right leg) against a darker, more matte gouache background. Throughout the study, Schlemmer was vigilantly attentive to potential confusion of the figure and ground. He added a wisp of white to outline the Abstrakte’s right forearm and its left bicep, where the figure might otherwise vanish into the background. Similarly, the area beneath the Abstrakte’s right armpit is a lighter shade of black than the orthogonal tiles converging on it, thus ensuring a clear differentiation from the arm and torso. Finally, the texture of the paint distinguishes otherwise identical blacks, for example, in the figure’s left arm and torso, right arm and torso, or right forearm and upper arm. Schlemmer lavishes the greatest attention on the modulations of black and the subsequent confusion or delineation of figure and ground.

In the study, the figures often nearly lose their coherence as black costumes mingle with the black ground. The work is a study in the potential dissolution of figures and ground in darkness. The arms, torso, and left leg of the Abstrakte, for example, retain but a precarious hold on bodily integrity, often through the variable play of light on figures and ground of equal blackness. Likewise, Gold Sphere’s legs are demarcated only through the same white lines (photographed twine) that principally serve to “de-materialize” them. (The dissimilar qualities of photographic and gouache black assist mightily in distinguishing the figure and ground.) Schlemmer was well aware that these nuances—in particular, the variable reflectivity of gouache and ink—could not be reproduced photomechanically. Accordingly, he systematically suppressed these black-on-black superimpositions when the image was prepared for The Theater of the Bauhaus (fig. 5.17b). Squares and rectangles that were once black are here rendered in medium gray, with the exception of several plots not contiguous with black body parts. Gold Sphere suddenly dances atop gray squares instead of black ones, and the Abstrakte’s left arm is strongly silhouetted against similarly gray panels. Most egregiously, the black band that ran from the left edge toward the center of the image, beneath the Abstrakte’s bell hand, becomes a medium-gray streak in the Bauhaus book wherever it would otherwise intersect with the black right arm of the Abstrakte. In adapting the original grisaille study for reproduction in the Bauhaus book, Schlemmer methodically repressed the black-on-black dematerialization of the body. In other words, Schlemmer refused to let the body disappear in darkness.

In the Bauhaus book, further images from the Triadic follow contrapuntally from the famous study. Full-page retouched photographs of Gold Sphere (Burger) and the Abstrakte (Schlemmer) depict bodies that have dematerialized into crepuscular gray and absolute black. But Wire Figure (Hötzl) is plainly visible in her black unitard, casting shadows on the light-gray floor. The images in The Theater of the Bauhaus stage a
visual argument parallel to and distinct from the verbal one articulated by Schlemmer in his essay “Human and Art Figure.” Where Schlemmer’s words describe a teleological progression from actor or “human” to marionette or “art figure” in line with Kleist and Hoffmann, Craig and Chaplin, his images project a dynamic struggle to retain bodily integrity in the face of the spatial abstraction of artificial darkness.

Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in Schlemmer’s Figural Cabinet (1922) and Figural Cabinet II (1924), especially when viewed in relation to the Mechanisches Ballett (1923) produced by Bauhäuslers Schmidt, Tectscher, and Bogler. The Mechanisches Ballett and the Figural Cabinet shared a basic theatrical format (mechanical cabaret) and technical configuration (humanoid or abstract forms manipulated by black-clad actors against a strictly delimited black ground). They may have presented similarly in performance. But they differed radically in their graphic, photographic, and painterly presentations. Three images encapsulate the relationship between the Mechanisches Ballett and the human body (fig. 5.18). A 1923 study sets the rectangular building blocks of the humanoid forms against black backdrops and gray floors as it withholds the black-clad human sinews.
FIG. 5.18. Kurt Schmidt, with Georg Teltcher and Friedrich Wilhelm Bogler, *Mechanisches Ballet* (Mechanical Ballet), 1923. (a) Study, 1923. Opaque paint on card, $13\frac{1}{4} \times 19\frac{3}{4}$ in $(33.5 \times 48.5$ cm). Klassik Stiftung Weimar. (b) Photograph, 1923. Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Archiv der Moderne. (c) Retouched photograph, 1923/24, as published in *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, 1925.

that, in performance, set the forms in motion. Humans were not blotted out of the picture so much as excluded in advance (fig. 5.18a). The second is a performance photograph. With the exception of black ballet shoes on the gray floor, presumably a concession to the performance venue, the Bauhäuslers appear to have succeeded in the realization of a mechanical ballet devoid of human presence (fig. 5.18b). But when this photograph was published in the 1925 book *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, even these negligible
human traces were snuffed out through heavy retouching (fig. 5.18c). The Mechanisches Ballett asserted itself and its mechano-humanoid forms through the total negation of the human dancer.

Schlemmer's Figural Cabinet can be viewed rightly as the inspiration for the Bauhäuslers' dehumanized performance. Perhaps for this very reason Schlemmer later recoiled from the prospect of a dance evacuated of human presence. He defended his own two-dimensional figures in the Figural Cabinet by way of the subtle presence of their human puppeteers: "The auralic flow of humans [das Fluidum Mensch] always plays a part."\(^{123}\) Schlemmer's belated recantations are corroborated by the visual record. In a 1922 watercolor study for the Figural Cabinet, he outlined in white pencil the human actor otherwise obscured and dismembered by the darkness (fig. 5.19). But he abandoned the outlined figure when representing the Figural Cabinet in the 1925 Bauhaus book on theater. Instead, the pages of The Theater of the Bauhaus support a far riskier venture. Around 1923, Schlemmer revised his Figural Cabinet and exhibited a new mockup at Kiesler's 1924 Vienna exposition and other venues. The mockup for Figural Cabinet II was executed in gouache, collage, and photomontage on black glossy paper mounted on gray cardboard. A variety of masks, humanoid figures, and marionettes extend across a black ground. At the center is a "dancing demon."\(^{124}\) The metallic head, stockinged leg, and two larger-than-life hands constitute an ensemble familiar to us from the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance later choreographed by Schlemmer and performed by Kreibig. Only here, in the circa 1923 mockup, the metallic head, stockinged leg, and bright hands are held together by a black-clad body clearly delineated against the crepuscular gray.

The photomechanical reproduction of this black-clad demonic dancer on a black ground proved the crux of Schlemmer's mass-media dissemination
of darkness (fig. 5.20a). Unlike Figurines in Space: Study for the Triadic, where Schlemmer replaced the black sections with middle-gray for photomechanical reproduction, here Schlemmer resorted to a far less assured technique. A note on Schlemmer’s original mockup, scribbled on the gray stock, expounds the obfuscation: “Uniform painting and black ground / Surfaces / blacken again [nachschwärzen].”125 In most copies of The Theater of the Bauhaus (1925), the dancing demon at the center of Figural Cabinet II is imperceptible, or, at best, perceptible only in strong raking light. Microscopic analysis reveals the technical basis for the accidental invisibility (figs. 5.20b–c). The image was printed from a single photomechanical relief plate composed of two densities: solid (line block) and perforation (halftone). The body of the black-clad demon—including its lower torso and thigh, that is, the solid black area immediately surrounding the stockingited leg—was printed in line block.126 The rest of the image was printed in halftone. In the microscopic details, the halftone matrix is clearly visible in the white-stockinged leg and, less clearly, in the dark background at the far right. The printing of the black background determined the visibility of the figure. In the few properly printed copies, tiny white halftone dots render the background a dark gray against which the black-clad demon
is clearly visible. (Compare the far right and center of fig. 5.20b. See also figure 5.21b.) In the vast majority of copies, however, ink was pressed into these white holes, which created a black background virtually indistinguishable from the black-clad figure. (See the corresponding sections in fig. 5.20c.) Schlemmer, in other words, pushed bodies in darkness to the very limits of technological reproducibility and physiological visibility. As reproduced in most copies of the Bauhaus book, the mixed-media mockup of *Figural Cabinet II* evinces a nearly uniform black background all but devoid of human presence. Nevertheless, readers-cum-viewers can sense the presence of a body in the dark, for Schlemmer prepares them through the book’s sequence of images.

On the page preceding *Figural Cabinet II* we find a full-page detail of the black-clad demon all but lost in the complete image (fig. 5.21a). In many copies of the book, this figure is no more visible than the one that follows\(^\text{127}\) (fig. 5.21b). But the mere fact of its detailed enlargement draws our attention—at which point even a hint of a figure more than suffices. Broad shoulders, sinuous torso, the left leg swung behind the right. Here is a biomorphic black mass on a black ground; an invisible dancer in a modified fourth position, on tiptoes but not en pointe; an auralic human flow; *das Fluidum Mensch*. The detail, which counterintuitively precedes the image from which it was taken, adumbrates the nearly invisible figure on the verso and initiates readers and viewers into the art of darkness: that which may appear like an impenetrable black screen is, in fact, a dark space teeming with human life. In keeping with Schlemmer’s inability or unwillingness to address darkness, he passed over this image in silence—uniquely so among the series of images reproduced in the book. But the succession of images provided its own commentary, one that Schlemmer echoed repeatedly across his vast pictorial output.

The failure of this experiment in black-on-black printing—at least some human presence is lost from nearly every copy and edition of the book—testifies to the subtlety and extremity of Schlemmer’s struggle with artificial darkness as well as to the precariousness and ephemerality of the undertaking. For Schlemmer, the integration of human bodies and artificial darkness necessitated the precise calibration of watercolor and pencil, gouache and ink, heavily retouched photographs and photomechanical reproduction, line block and halftone printing, and a slew of other artistic techniques and media technologies—after all, the two were not so different in Schlemmer’s able hands. Indeed, most of Schlemmer’s output attests to his capacity to control the relationship between bodies and artificial darkness across various media. Schlemmer’s contemporaries noted his modulation of human forms across the illusionistic pictorial spaces and the real two-dimensional surfaces of his paintings.\(^\text{128}\) Less remarked upon—but much more remarkable—was Schlemmer’s effort to modulate living human bodies in real spacelessness, that is, his ability to merge body-space and image-space through techniques of artificial darkness.

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Body- and Image-Space

Schlemmer's insistence on an aural human flow in artificial darkness must not be mistaken for a return to a body freed from technology. The black screen was nothing if not a technology of darkness activated through body techniques. Instead, the pertinent question for Schlemmer's practice was whether an aural human flow could be reconstituted under the abstracting conditions of technologized modernity without a reversion to nostalgic recuperations of the human form or illusionistic theater. Understood not only as a representation of living marionettes or human machines but also and primarily as a fundamental interpenetration of the body with media technologies, Schlemmer's venture and its animating stakes are framed most forcefully by the writings of Walter Benjamin. Miriam Hansen, in a magisterial study, enumerated the questions that undergirded Benjamin's gamble with a modernity constituted by technological media: "the crucial question therefore is whether there can be an imbrication of technology and the human senses that is not swallowed in this [fascist, Stalinist, or capitalist] vortex of decline; [...] and whether and how the new mimetic technologies of film and photography, in their imbrication of 'body- and image-space' could be imagined as enabling the 'collective innervation' of technology he discerned in the project of the surrealists." Benjamin's project — too often reduced to a lament for or embrace of the decline of aura, communicable experience, and involuntary memory in the face of technological reproducibility and technologized war — was at the very least antinomic and at its best highly dialectical. As Hansen demonstrates, Benjamin's thought belies at least two significant antinomic positions. The first position champions the liquidation of aura, humanist culture, and bourgeois subjectivity in favor of "a positive concept of barbarism" manifest in the paintings of Paul Klee, the writings of Bertolt Brecht and Karl Kraus, and the "culture of glass" fantasized in the fiction of Paul Scheerbart and realized in the buildings of Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, and the Bauhaus. Schlemmer, in accordance with his Bauhaus colleagues but incongruously within his own oeuvre, endorsed a stage of glass that would sweep away illusionistic theater, bourgeois interiority, personal traces, symbolism, and tradition. The second position, most palpable in Benjamin's writings on Nikolai Leskov, Marcel Proust, and Charles Baudelaire, laments the decline of deep experience (Erfahrung), involuntary memory (mémoire involontaire), and aura, engendered by the unremitting shocks meted out by technologized media, Taylorized labor, industrialized warfare, and metropolitan bustle. But Benjamin's most important writings on the renewal of the human sensorium in technologized modernity — One Way Street (1928) and his essays on Surrealism (1929), photography (1931), "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (particularly the second, only recently recovered version, 1936) — borrowed and complicated elements from the liquidationist and lamentation posi-
tions and advanced a set of critical terms—innervation, mimetic faculty, optical unconscious, and Spielraum (leeway, “room for play,” or, literally, play-space)—that attempted to salvage modernity on the very field of its potential destruction: technology. Again, Hansen: “The alienation of the senses that abets the deadly violence of imperialist warfare and fascism can be undone only on the terrain of technology itself, by means of new media of reproduction that allow for a collective and playful (that is, non-fatal) innervation of the technologically transformed physis.”

Mobilized toward nondestructive ends, technological innervation—the neuro- and physiological mediation between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers—lies at the heart of Benjamin’s most ambitious—and ultimately failed—project. He sought it out in Surrealism, Mickey Mouse, and an experience of cinema that never came to pass. Benjamin’s discussions of innervation, Spielraum, and Mickey Mouse were excised from the final, canonical version of his Artwork essay and, until recently, largely languished in obscure Benjaminiana. Nevertheless, Benjamin’s failed project—above all, his pursuit of a playful imbrication of “body- and image-space” (Surrealism essay) or an “interpenetration of reality with the apparatus” (Artwork essay), that is, a cinematic Spielraum that enabled a nondestructive innervation of technology—provides the framework in which to grasp Schlemmer’s reconfiguration of the body, image, and space in productive tension with technologized modernity.

Schlemmer is most readily assimilated into Benjamin’s theorization of a “new positive concept of barbarism” that, negatively, liquidated bourgeois culture and, positively, populated the human imagination with nonhuman beings who modeled a mode of being outside or beyond bourgeois humanism, its technologized wars and anesthetizing technological media. In name, appearance, and affect (or lack thereof), Schlemmer’s Triadic figures—especially the Abstrakte, which he likened to a Martian or a creature by Hieronymus Bosch—could mingle comfortably among Scheerbart’s Peka, Sofanti, or Lesabéndio and the inhabitants of the asteroid Pallas. The costumed performers in Schlemmer’s Bauhaus dances and ballet were none too distant from Benjamin’s most famous and problematic dream figure, Mickey Mouse: “His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them.”

The most legible and visible figuration of technology’s imbrication in the human body—for Benjamin, Schlemmer, and the entire avant-garde—was Charlie Chaplin. Charlot, as he was known in France, was not only the sentimental Chaplin recovered by the star system but also and especially the earlier, nastier tramp whose scatological, mechanical body often slipped between the human and nonhuman. As we have already seen, Léger and Murphy’s Ballet mécanique was “presented by” Charlot and the film opened and closed with Chaplin’s mechanized body in pieces. Alongside Schlemmer in The Theater of the Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy promoted the
tradition of the eccentric, not least the clownery of Chaplin. Representative from Dada, Surrealism, Soviet constructivism, the Bauhaus, and virtually every arm of the film avant-garde embraced Chaplin for reasons as diverse as the movements from which they hailed. Schlemmer’s adoption was early and emphatic.

In the program distributed and read aloud before the 1922 premiere of The Triadic Ballet (and republished repeatedly thereafter), Schlemmer announced a lineage that spanned Kleist’s marionette theater, Hoffmann’s Olympia, Craig’s Uber-Marionette, and Chaplin’s tramp. Such a genealogy, according to Schlemmer, attended not only to the mechanization of life, the human-machine, and the mechanical body but also to their essential artificiality, an artificiality that he opposed to the “world of appearances [Welt des Scheins]” of the illusionistic theater. As Schlemmer elaborated in a contemporaneous and complementary diary entry: “The medium [Mittel] of every art [Kunst] is artificiality [künstliche], and every art gains from recognition and acceptance of its medium. Heinrich Kleist’s essay Über das Marionettentheater offers a convincing reminder of this artificiality, as do E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Phantasiestücke (the perfect machinist, the automata). Chaplin performs wonders when he equates complete inhumanity [Unnatur] with artistic perfection [künstlerischer Vollendung].”

Like Kleist, Craig, and others, Schlemmer associated the Kunstfigur (“art figure” or marionette) and its Künstlichkeit (artificiality)—that is, the evacuation of the human and the natural—with the height of artistry. The rejection of the human body, psychological interiority, and nature was all the more pronounced given the dominance of Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, and expressionist dance (Ausdruckstonz) in interwar Germany. Schlemmer thus easily numbered among the ranks of positive barbarians like the Bauhaus, Scheerbart, and Chaplin. He added profoundly to the repertoire of pictures, buildings, and stories through which “humankind is preparing to outlive culture.”

The more difficult question—for Benjamin and in relation to Schlemmer—is whether the Triadic and Bauhaus dance figures and their avowed artificiality channeled new modes for playful technological innervation. Schlemmer’s claims on play were pronounced. In Joyce Tsi’s astute formulation: “For Schlemmer, the stage is a locus for aesthetic education in the Schillerian sense, an experimental space for play in which the individual might glimpse at and work toward the conditions of human freedom.”

The link between this space for play and technological innervation was a more obscure affair. Benjamin culled the technologically aided interpenetration of body- and image-space from within Surrealism and theorized the interpenetration of reality with the apparatus in relation to two avant-gardes whose command of film Benjamin deemed insufficient:

Film proves useful in illuminating Cubism and Futurism [...]. Both appear as deficient attempts on the part of art to take into account the pervasive inter-
penetration of reality with the apparatus [Durchdringung der Wirklichkeit mit der Apparatur]. Unlike film, these schools did not try to use the apparatus as such for the artistic representation of reality, but aimed at a sort of alloy of represented reality and represented apparatus. In Cubism, a premonition of the structure of this apparatus, which is based on optics, plays a dominant part; in Futurism, it is the premonition of the effects of the apparatus—effects which are brought out by the rapid coursing of the band of film.¹⁴⁶

The most ambitious readings of Schlemmer have largely followed Benjamin in the identification of only allied, metaphorical resonances, rather than direct uses of the apparatus. Moreover, they similarly adopt a pessimistic stance whereby Schlemmer’s figures assume, like Chaplin, an allegorical and critical distance vis-à-vis technology. There is great truth in these readings. And yet Schlemmer’s direct—and unspoken—struggle with the black screen betrayed an unswerving engagement with the dispositif of artificial darkness. If The Triadic Ballet and Bauhaus dances were an art of bodies and darkness, then their medium borrowed artificial bodies from Kleist, Hoffmann, and Chaplin, just as it borrowed artificial darkness—albeit unawares—from Marey, Auzinger, Bellachini, Méliès, Matray, Stanislavsky, and other practitioners and subjects of the black screen.

And it was here, in and before the black screen, that new imbrications of body-space and image-space were technically feasible and aesthetically actualized. As we have seen, the black screen readily transformed bodies into images (Marey’s chronophotography) and facilitated the transposition of images into real bodies (Schlemmer’s Bauhaus demonstrations). It was here, in and before the black screen, that the pervasive interpenetration of reality with the apparatus as such could be exhibited and acted upon. Only the Apparatur in question was no longer film, montage, editing, and the camera (Aufnahmeapparatur) but rather the circumscribed and controlled darkness that dislocated, disciplined, disembodied, and doubled the human subject. Benjamin’s attempt to theorize the interpenetration of reality with the camera apparatus failed. But it can be mobilized to uncover the interpenetration of reality with the dispositif of artificial darkness, the imbrication of body- and image-space, and their availability to nondestructive technological innervation. The prized terrain that Benjamin forfeited in the final version of the Artwork essay—"The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus"¹⁴⁷—can be reclaimed so long as “film” is replaced by the black screen and the camera “apparatus” yields to the dispositif of artificial darkness.

At stake here was not a representation or reflection of the conditions that predominated within the dispositif of artificial darkness. Unlike Méliès’s dislocated, disciplined, disembodied, and duplicated self, Schlemmer never mobilized the black screen to mirror his public back to itself. Schlemmer’s theater was not, as he emphatically declared, a “world of appearances [Welt des Scheins].” And yet his work incited a palpable degree of
mimetic recognition. Not on the order of Charlie Chaplin, whose imbrication with technology was plain to see long before he literalized it in Modern Times (1936), but rather a mimetic faculty more famously evinced in relation to Mickey Mouse. Benjamin’s own reservations on filmic violence—echoed and amplified by Adorno—led to the excision of Mickey Mouse from the final draft of the Artwork essay. But the animating impulse behind the inclusion of Mickey Mouse remained. “In these films, human-kind makes preparations to survive civilization. Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being.” Mickey Mouse, like the fantastical characters of Scheerbart and Schlemmer, numbers among the positive barbarians. Crucially, Mickey Mouse also engages the viewer’s mimetic faculty and invites an unexpected level of self-recognition. “So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.” If this claim appears strange vis-à-vis an animated mouse, it is no less curious in regard to Schlemmer’s otherworldly figures. And yet the German American critic Herman Scheffauer concluded a 1926 review titled “Newest Ballets Scorn the Merely Human Form” on a pointedly mimetic note: “Supreme over all the mummeries of mechanical puppets, we may venture to believe, still stands the human figure; the living, breathing, acting, suffering and enjoying human creature—image of ourselves, set in the world we may love or hate, but with which we must reckon. This is the world we know.” Given the abstract costumes, erasure of human form, geometric dances, patently descriptive names, and Scheffauer’s explicit refusal of mechanization, it is difficult to fathom the world recognized by the critic. But it is, indeed, a world we know.

From Space-Play to Spaceless-Play

Lao-tse says: “He who spies his light and yet chooses to remain in the dark is a model for all men.”

Schlemmer, diary entry, 1915

Schlemmer’s rejection of semblance was unequivocal. In the arena of stage lighting, he railed against “sunshine and moonlight and the illusion of day, night, and seasons,” and championed, like so many avant-gardists before him, “light as such.” Even as he failed to recognize darkness as such, he wove the human body into a technology of darkness, which he then opened up to play. What Schlemmer lost in the abandonment of illusion and semblance (Schein) he recovered in an expanded space for play. At a decisive juncture in the second version of his Artwork essay, Benjamin theorized the shift from semblance to play as the crux of modern aesthetics: “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 space for play [Spiel-Raum].” Benjamin
located this “space for play” in film and pursued a filmic Spiel—play, game, performance, and gamble—that would have enabled a nondestructive, mimetic innervation of technology. Although Benjamin did not take up the question of space per se—the hyphenation of Spiel-Raum (play-space) was likely meant to rhyme with Licht-spiel (light-play, an early German term for film)—it was in the cinematic, rather than filmic, reconfiguration of space where his pursuit came closest to fulfillment; that is, in the controlled darkness of modern theaters and black screens rather than through the montage, close-ups, and slow motion of modern cinematography and editing. For if film was to open up huge gains in play-space, it would necessarily, if ironically, unfold in the spaceless darkness of modern theaters and black screens.

Dominant avant-garde models opposed technological play-space and spacelessness. Kiesler, remember, instigated the term Space-Stage—quickly adopted across the avant-garde, including, ironically and nonsensically, by Schlemmer—in opposition to what he perceived as the classic spaceless stage (Unraumbühne). Kiesler and others aligned the spaceless stage with the film screen and opposed its “surface with deceptive spatiality” to “space-play” (Raumspiel), the proper domain of theater. Kiesler’s polemic was a call to arms “in the war that is now waged continuously between theater and cinema [Kino],” that is, between space and flatness, life and images, body-space and image-space. Benjamin’s theory and Schlemmer’s practice recognized that these domains could not succeed in their elementarist or medium-specific purity but only in their interpenetration. The aesthetic actualization of Benjamin’s play-space (Spielraum) would unfold not in Kiesler’s space-play (Raumspiel) but rather in Schlemmer’s play with spacelessness—an abstract dance with technologized darkness.

If the eccentric was “the first to inhabit the new fields of action [Spielräume] opened up by film,” fields in which Chaplin would take on historical significance, Méliès was the first to occupy the spaceless darkness opened up by the dispositif of artificial darkness, where Schlemmer would assume aesthetic significance. Yet an insuperable gap separated Schlemmer’s ballet of darkness from the stage and screen magic proffered by Méliès. Schlemmer, in the final analysis, was not a magician. Schlemmer ventured few illusions. He rarely aspired to the precision of a Méliès, Auzinger, Bellachini, Matray, Velle, Chomón, Whale, or others of their ilk. Schlemmer was not in the business of mystification, but neither was he engaged in the avant-garde polemic of demystification. Kiesler’s diatribes held little truck with Schlemmer’s practice, however frequently the Bauhaus master felt obliged to parrot them. Instead, Schlemmer turned Kiesler’s anticinematic space-play into a spaceless play where body and image, reality and apparatus were so interpenetrated that they opened a field for nondestructive technological innervation. The vehicles for this spaceless play were Schlemmer’s corpus-defining costumes, above all the figure known as the Abstract One. Costumed bodies were the marrow of The Triadic Ballet as conceived by Schlemmer. At the Bauhaus demonstrations, by way of comparison,
Werner Siedhoff occupied an abstract space realized technically through artificial darkness, but he lacked a costume that could dematerialize his body, bind him to this abstract space, and transform a demonstration of elements into a dance. Toward this end, Schlemmer identified four decisive “possibilities of the Tänzermensch, transformed through costume and moving in space.” The final transformation followed the “metaphysical forms of expression symbolizing various members of the human body” such as the infinity sign folded into crossed arms or the cross formed by spine and shoulders, with the result of “dematerialization.” This final type gained particular urgency in light of Schlemmer’s stated ambitions, issued in the program notes for the 1922 premiere and reissued repeatedly throughout the decade: “The Triadic Ballet flirts coquettishly with the humorous, without falling into grotesquerie; it brushes the conventional without sinking to its dismal depths. Finally, it strives for dematerialization, yet without seeking salvation in the occult.”

The figures from the third, black series most potently dematerialized the dancers. Descriptively named Spiral, Disc, Gold Sphere, Wire Hoop, and, more obscurely, Abstract One (Abstrakte), the figures from the black series were always disproportionately well represented in Schlemmer’s drawings, paintings, and essays. In Schlemmer’s revised Triadic Ballet, only the third series was carried over intact from the original, so that its figures gained further in prominence. First and foremost, it was the figure mysteriously dubbed Abstrakte that stood metonymically for Schlemmer’s larger project (fig. 5.22). In the prompt book he prepared for the composer Hermann Scherchen, Schlemmer presented the dance of the Abstrakte in unequivocal terms: “The dance can and should be the main attraction.” The Abstrakte was the figure dearest to Schlemmer and most central to the project. It always assumed a prominent position in the arrangement of dances, often opening the third series or the entire ballet. Schlemmer danced the Abstrakte at the premiere and continued to dance the role even as he relinquished all others to more able bodies. The Abstrakte and its variants figured most prominently in the drawings, retouched photographs, and mixed-media paintings executed and disseminated by Schlemmer in the course of the 1920s and ’30s. The Abstrakte, finally, emphatically fulfilled the ambitions of The Triadic Ballet, which “ultimately strives for the dematerialization of the body.”

The dematerialization was effected through now familiar means. As Eberhard Schenk zu Schweinsberg reported after the 1923 Bauhaus Week performance, the dance was “indivisible from the costume, which used the body, negated it, and reconstructed it.” All the figures from the black series—the Spiral, Discs, Gold Spheres, Wire Hoop, and the Abstrakte—shared precisely that quality exploited in later Bauhaus dances like the Limbs- or Illusion-Dance and Black-White-Trio: bodily disappearance and multiplication through controlled darkness. But the Triadic figures did not exploit artificial darkness in the same way or to the same degree evinced in
the Bauhaus dances. The costume of the Abstrakte was exemplary in this regard. With the Abstrakte, parts of the left leg and arms, all cloaked in black, virtually disappeared against the black stage. In their partial absence, a new series of bodily forms emerged: an oversized right leg, padded with white felt and secured with red cockscomb tucking; a silver breastplate; a bronze club, held by an invisible left hand; a bell-like ensemble whose clapper was grasped by an invisible right hand; a red ballet shoe on the right foot and a blue one on the left; a mask that divided the face into asymmetrical red and white halves. When set in motion against a black backdrop, however, the results bore little resemblance to variété magic. Nor did the Abstrakte present as a disconnected tangle of abstract forms. Rather, the main attraction of The Triadic Ballet was an abstract body that modulated its relationship to darkness. Just as Schlemmer introduced the black screen as an active element within the dance—most immediately in his curtain demonstration—so too did he retain the enshrouded body even as he dematerialized it. The goal was not the disappearance of the body—as was the case for so many black-screen techniques—but a reconstitution of its relationship to a technology of darkness.

The power to modulate one's body in artificial darkness must be distinguished from the skill or discipline exhibited by professional dancers. In the case of The Triadic Ballet, modulation was more a product of costumes—and their representation—than choreographic or dance prowess. Thoroughly trained in the visual arts, Schlemmer designed the costumes to maximize their dynamic modulation of darkness. Harder to reconstruct is how he incarnated the role of the Abstrakte, given his complete lack of ballet training. Reviews, letters, and diary entries make clear that Schlemmer never mastered his role as the Abstrakte even as he still believed himself best suited to dance the part. An analysis of Schlemmer-the-Tänzermensch has largely been deemed unfeasible: even a thorough examination of textual sources, photographs, and paintings provides but the barest indications of his movement or the modulation of bodies in the dark. As Schlemmer himself recognized, film alone could capture the movement central to the dance.\(^{166}\)

A little-known film from 1926 proves decisive. To celebrate the Bauhaus's White Festival (March 20, 1926), Schlemmer and the Bahauslerin Lis Beyer danced a duet to the music of contemporary French composer Francis Poulenc. Beyer wore a variation on the Triadic Ballet costume for the Dancer in White, and Schlemmer wore the Turkish costume, originally from the rose-colored series.\(^{167}\) Shortly thereafter, Schlemmer had a short film shot of himself, Beyer, and Joost Schmidt. He recounted the event to his wife Tut in a letter dated March 22, 1926: "Today we filmed. I in Hart's costume, along with Lis Beyer, and Schmidtchen as a clown. I am curious to see how it comes out; certainly a good study."\(^{167}\) Schlemmer's curiosity did not wane, for he contacted René Clair six years later in a futile attempt to have The Triadic Ballet filmed in Paris. But he made no further mention of the 1926 film, which has garnered virtually no attention. The short
film survives, however, in a pristine 35mm print, and it secures the only motion-picture record of Schlemmer-the-Tänzermensch. An oblique snapshot taken of the set reveals the edge of a black curtain-cum-black-screen hung for the occasion (fig. 5.23). The film consists of three short sequences. The setting is a dark gray floor backed by black curtains. The music is likely in three-quarters time; the dancers are largely untrained. In the first sequence, Beyer, dressed in white, performs little bunny hops, simplified balancés, and a beginner's arabesque and pirouette, then scampers out of the frame (fig. 5.24a). Enter Schlemmer. His movements are no more sophisticated—simple step-hops—but they command attention, not least because of the costume he wears: metallic helmet; oversized speckled leg, a club in one hand and a weaponized bell in the other; bright dance shoes; and, otherwise, a black unitard (fig. 5.24b–c). Schlemmer's costume is a variation on the Abstrakte. Schlemmer step-hops his way across the stage, approaches the camera, and retreats to the rear curtain. His steps are alternately open and crossed, but never truly balletic. Large steps. Small hops. He brandishes his club and swings his bell. Where Beyer remains entirely frontal, Schlemmer turns his body to reveal its asymmetrical sides. Where Beyer is a damsel in white, Schlemmer plays the dark knight. As he approaches the camera, his black undercostume
FIG. 5.24. Untitled film featuring Schlemmer, Lis Beyer, and Joost Schmidt dancing at the Bauhaus, 1926. (a–d) Frame enlargements from 35mm print. Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv, Berlin. Inventory number M 1484/K 40179.
**FIG. 5.25.** Untitled film featuring Schlemmer et al., 1926. Frame enlargement.

**FIG. 5.26.** Untitled film featuring Schlemmer et. al., 1926. (a) Frame enlargement. (b) Detail.
comes into focus. He repeatedly assumes the pose we know from “Human and Art Figure” and from the study for the Triadic Ballet: bell in one hand; club in the other; a colossal white leg extended off to the side (fig. 5.25; compare figs. 5.17, 5.22). Just as in the study, Schlemmer’s black legs are offset clearly against the gray floor, but his torso, hip, and arms wrestle with the encroaching darkness. Toward the end of the short sequence Schlemmer retreats to the rear and assumes a modified fourth position, on tiptoes but not en pointe. Here Schlemmer’s black body melds with the black background. A metallic helmet, an oversized speckled leg, a bell, and two bright shoes are suspended in the darkness (fig. 5.26). We recognize this fusion
of body and space from the central figure in the study for Figural Cabinet II and its anticipatory detail. (Compare fig. 5.26b and fig. 5.21.) Critical here is not the repertoire of poses held in common by Schlemmer’s painting, drawing, and dance (as captured on film) but the shared articulation of a body modulating and modulated in spaceless darkness.

The short film indicates better than any extant artwork or document the nature of the Abstrakte’s dance with darkness. Like the play of light on the ink and gouache Abstrakte in Figurines in Space: Study for the Triadic Ballet from two years prior, the play of light in the film variously reveals and conceals the black body in darkness. At times Schlemmer’s torso, arms, and leg vanish in favor of an otherworldly mask, a club and bell, and a polka-dotted, hypertrophic leg. As his body becomes one with the black curtain, Schlemmer’s abstract body parts float freely in abstract space. But even these moments are mere moments. The invisible black leg crosses over the white felt and renders itself visible; that visible blackness does not disappear from sensual memory when the leg is swung back before the black curtain (fig. 5.27). In this darkness visible, Schlemmer’s abstract dance differs absolutely from Marey’s partial photography, where an arm and leg are irrevocably exiled into the blackness. (Compare fig. 1.7.) Similarly, one intuits a dark mass as Schlemmer’s bell disappears behind his (invisible) black torso, which is then silhouetted, along with a sinuous arm and leg, against the bell, speckled leg, and metallic mask (fig. 5.28). Even when camouflaged in the darkness, Schlemmer’s body remains the connective tissue between a white leg, a mask, a club, a bell, and two bright feet. Schlemmer’s is a potent body or its potentiality. Schlemmer’s Tänzermensch emerges not in spite of its imbrication in technologies of darkness, but because of it. He is hardly a ballet master; but he has mastered the modulation of his body in the dark.

In the final sequence, Beyer sidesteps back to center stage, resumes her amateurish balancés, and is joined by Schlemmer and Schmidt, who alternate cartoonish courtship dances with her. The trio concludes with a quick succession of animated poses (fig. 5.24c–d). Schmidt persists in his courtship as Schlemmer hovers menacingly from behind. The characters, gestures, and vignettes—that is, all the elements in the foreground—belong to variété theater. Only the Abstrakte, ensconced in darkness at the rear, addresses the core terms of Schlemmer’s larger project. Rather than expurgate the darkness in the name of living space, the Abstrakte dances in and out of the darkness and impregnates the deceptive flatness with life. Schlemmer’s gesture is thus a quintessentially modernist one: he foregrounds that which once was background, and he confuses, literally, figure and ground. More than a game of hide-and-seek, the power of the Abstrakte is to modulate its body in the dark—to accept neither technological darkness nor the human body as absolutes, as ontological or ideological givens, but rather to manipulate each with respect to the other. Schlemmer, who strove to a fault toward the resolution of opposites, built a ballet atop the
FIG. 5.27. Untitled film featuring Schlemmer et al., 1926. Frame enlargements.

FIG. 5.28. Untitled film featuring Schlemmer et al., 1926. Frame enlargements.
most fundamental contradiction of the body in artificial darkness. He developed a ballet which ultimately strives for the dematerialization of the body into technologized darkness and in which the aural flow of humans always plays a part. This contradiction, which beggars resolution, lies at the heart of Schlemmer’s project. Here is the interpenetration of reality with the apparatus and the imbrication of body- and image-space. Here is the playful innervation of technology that eluded Benjamin in practice and Schlemmer in word. Here, amidst the abstract space and dematerialized bodies, is a world we know. Here, in sum, is the spaceless play, the dance with darkness that Schlemmer could not voice but whose vision he embodied.

Schlemmer danced the Abstrakte, an anonymous figure, visibly deprived of formal balletic training, whose movements comprised large steps and small hops, half-turns and broad gesticulations. His greatest strength—like that of the balletmaster Kreibig, the aspiring professional Siedhoff, and the untrained student Mentzel—was to modulate his body in technologized darkness. It was a strength evident on stage and through mediation: captured in photographs and on film and attested to in Schlemmer’s paintings, drawings, and retouched photographs. Against metaphors of death and technologies of disembodiment, Schlemmer insisted upon a technologized darkness that seemed with life. It was a message voiced too softly, infrequently, and fleetingly to inflect the aesthetic, theatrical, or political discourse of interbellum Europe. But the message was not lost entirely. Decades later, to cite just one example, the avant-garde director Peter Brook would describe his own theater in Paris as “black velvet in a superior version—a nothingness which is full of life.” No modern theater instantiated this vision more acutely than Schlemmer’s Bauhaus Theater. And no work crystallized Schlemmer’s vision better than his ballet of darkness.

Revolutionizing the dark mass of spectators was a task the painfully apolitical Schlemmer would leave to others. Rather than illuminate the darkness or enlighten the spectator, Schlemmer modeled a new relationship to the technologized darkness that presided over modern theaters and cinemas. He flatly refused the choices between illusion and enlightenment, between bodies and images, or between the human and the apparatus—binaries which he replaced with modulation and play. He choreographed a dance of abstract bodies able to modulate their relationships to artificial darkness. At the 1922 premiere of The Triadic Ballet, Schlemmer danced the Abstrakte to commence the third, black series. At the ill-fated 1932 performance in Paris, the last of Schlemmer’s lifetime, the dance of the Abstrakte initiated the entire ballet. Rather than build toward the activation of the audience or the illumination of the auditorium in an effort to merge art and life, Schlemmer met the spectators where they were—in the dark. In its final iteration, The Triadic Ballet began with an abstract body playing in spaceless darkness.