

Exploring Relations between Art Pedagogy, Society and Industry during the First Years of the Bauhaus

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to analyze pedagogical experiences and theories of Bauhaus during Weimar's period and the consequential impact on today's art education. The results are presented as a useful tool to understand the different processes of art education. In this sense, the Bauhaus school is a model for further analysis. From Itten's Preliminary Course to Kandinsky's theories, the early years of the school were innovative and retain interesting relationships with experiences of the previous century in relation to industry, craftsmanship and society.

Keywords: art pedagogy, Bauhaus, education, Johannes Itten.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Bauhaus school is still revealed as a source of incentive and an irreplaceable model to contribute to the configuration of a history of artistic education, since it laid the institutional and pedagogical foundations of disciplines that until then were excluded from the Western academic and labour world.

The school had three main phases: in the Weimar Republic 1919–25, in Dessau 1925–32 and in Berlin 1932–33. Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were in charge of the management during these stages. Throughout its historical process, various precepts and regulations were proposed and executed: the experience in Weimar was characterized by decisions of expressionist matrix; from 1923 onwards, ideas of Russian Constructivism and Neoplasticism were introduced through the teachers; the time in the city of Dessau meant the introduction of new forms of teamwork while classes took place in an emblematic construction. Finally, the social and political events that took place in Berlin led to a cessation of activities of the school: the new political administration, the laws that came into force, the lack of contracts with factories in the sector, the economic difficulties, the impossibility of having Jewish teachers or militants with left-wing orientations, gradually produced the definitive closure. We do not seek to present or assimilate the German school as an unprecedented myth, simply to give a historiographical look that can distinguish its chronological significance, since we note that, during the course of the twentieth century, the adoption of its pedagogical methods, by various cultural or artistic centres, was considered as a clear sign that they began to modify the cultural coordinates, modernizing. Despite the acceptance and repercussion that the Bauhaus had in the field, we take into consideration the

other side of the matter: the critical character that has been adjusted over time without losing the condition of constructive analysis.

II. TOWARDS A NEW VISION OF ARTS EDUCATION

In this sense, mass society was characterized by the growing consumption of goods and the dissemination of artistic objects linked to industrial standardization, to respond to large-scale production, art intensified its efforts to boost creativity and not, copying or imitation. Through essays, laboratories or specific classes, artistic pedagogy reaffirmed this trend in a period where art and industry were the main protagonists of a highly heterogeneous cultural scenario.

Thus, the legacy of the Bauhaus becomes a point of conjunction between modern pedagogy, the recent past and current educational trends. On the one hand, the objectives of the school were clear and precise from the first year of existence: to build, through the creative and applied arts, a new society where students can implement the knowledge acquired to refund ideas, paradigms, and perceptions. It should be noted that the cultural panorama of the period provided the tools and wills necessary to develop projects such as the Weimar school, it is enough to think that the German city, after the First World War and in particular the Treaty of Versailles, represented a model for the whole country.

On the other hand, the teachers called by Gropius were able to deepen, analyse and disseminate their ideas and pedagogical methods in a totally new environment, linked to the atmosphere of peace that is felt after the storm and to the will to build the foundations fallen after the war.

The artistic education of the twentieth century, especially in the world of design, was often based on the classical canon:

it was inclined to the excellence of the past, favouring talent over creativity, that is, the ability to be equally talented as the old masters, painters, or sculptors. Faced with this situation, the perpetual confusion between imitation and invention seems to remain. Imitation reproduces, invention produces, imitation privileges continuity, while creativity gives rise to the new. It is true that in the past there was knowledge of the conception of the inventor artist, but this was not an absolutely preponderant characteristic, in fact, invention was not stimulated, on the contrary, imitation was imposed: copy of nature, copy of the ancients or of the master himself.

Walter Gropius, during the direction of the school, convened and worked synergistically with teachers and artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Adolf and Hannes Meyer, Oskar Schlemmer, Johannes Itten, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, Gerhard Marck or Josef Albers.

The frequent use in writings, proposals and works of words such as collaboration, community, interrelation, indicates that the initial project of Gropius had as its main axis a collective spirit, where students and teachers could not only express and develop their creativity, but also build a new type of society based on the plurality of ideas:

Whereas Morris desired craftsman's culture, Gropius not only wished to tear down the barriers between art, craft, architecture, industry, and society, but also the barriers between the arts in art education.

(Macdonald, 1970, p. 317)

III. INDUSTRY AND SOCIETY

From the Second Industrial Revolution and especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, we witnessed the configuration of pedagogy as a science of education, the legacy of the previous century built the foundations to develop theoretical and practical experiences in relation to education as the supreme function of contemporary society.

The theoretical and practical pedagogical experiences that developed between the two world wars were the result of the actions of teachers, artists and intellectuals who continued to develop the man-nature relationship through collective projects and joint efforts to spread education through education.

One of the main axes of these processes was society, where experience and education found fertile ground to interact with a new environment that the progress of industrial revolutions had generated.

It should be noted that the encounter with a new type of social landscape, in this case industrial, had been exposed by those artists who found in the "journey" or "escape" a possible answer to the imminent and sudden arrival of a modern and industrialized world.

The rejection of the industrial landscape in favour of a bucolic one, uncontaminated and devoid of corruption or irreparable wounds to the Earth, are found in groups of artists who radicalized those actions of Neoclassicism that advocated a return to the ancient world. Preferring even more remote models or distant in time, the Primitifs (Primitives), a group that separated from the school of Jacques-Louis David

radicalizing their teachings and theories, the Nazarenes, the Purists and Barbus (Bearded Ones) or the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, had common denominators in the practical dynamics they carried out: to distance themselves from the capitalist and industrial society of the end of the century, perceived as a real threat to the survival of art, build a new structure based on principles and foundations that had to do with the balance between humanity and environment. This "backward advance" tried to recover the purity of artistic results that little wanted or had to do with the otherness of the corrupt modern world, which was moving further and further away from the primitive and innocent matrix that these groups tried to defend and develop.

Although this trend became a concept in vogue in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, we detect some vestiges in a state of gestation and decidedly fragmented in the relationships that were born from the meeting of these two opposite worlds; thus, the first sparks began to be forged from the industrialization of the nineteenth century. The tendencies towards a journey to an uncontaminated, authentic landscape carrying new inspirations were attacked by the hegemonic actions of society, the contempt and disinterest of the reigning bourgeoisie that preferred to foment the industrial scaffolding of the dominant powers to create a world based on scientific and technological progress. However, the search for an identity away from capitalist consumption was reflected in an "escape from the West," the case of Gauguin, former agent of change and office worker in Paris, is exemplary: rejecting the metropolis, he tried to conquer an Eden lost in time, becoming a savage among the savages in French Polynesia.

In a theoretical sense, and in the face of the imminent advance of the Second Industrial Revolution in Europe, particularly in England and France, the writings of John Ruskin or William Morris, theorists and pioneers of the Arts and Crafts movement, refer to an approach and revaluation of the natural world as a result of the criticism of the modern society of the time and the rejection of industrial interference in the aesthetic process of the artistic object. In the book *Unto this Last* first published in 1860 in the form of articles in Cornhill magazine, Ruskin openly disapproved of the devastating effects of English industrialization on nature and the British landscape, in a clear anti-capitalist position, warning:

I proceed to state the main facts bearing on that probable future of the labouring classes (...) and expressing regret at the probability of the destruction of natural scenery (...) Men can neither drink steam, nor eat stone. The maximum of population on a given space of land also implies the relative maximum of edible vegetable, whether for men or cattle; it implies a maximum of pure air; and of pure water (...) But the world cannot become a factory, nor a mine.

(Ruskin, 1872, pp. 122–123)

In another essential work for understanding the effects of industrialization on the landscape, *The Political Economy of Art* of 1857, Ruskin stated:

Wherever you see want, or misery, or degradation, in this world about you, there, be sure, either industry has been wanting, or industry has been in error. It is not accident, it is not Heaven-commanded calamity, it is not the original and inevitable evil of man's nature, which fill your streets with lamentation, and your graves with prey. It is only that, when there should have been providence, there has been waste.

(Ruskin, 1857, p. 8)

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The tendencies to land in the “social” world, abandoning the major arts, such as painting, architecture or sculpture, to devote themselves to the applied arts were reflected in Morris when he tried to realize a Socialism of Beauty oriented towards all social strata and not only to a privileged and closed circle. The author repeatedly denounced the loss of quality of life and connection with nature caused by the Industrial Revolution, providing alternative solutions such as totally handmade and handmade production instead of the creation of artistic objects using industrial machines. Towards his artistic maturity, Morris tried to move away from the militant political plane to, among other things, devote himself to a utopian literary project: *News from Nowhere* of 1891, a romance that was published in episodes in a magazine where a futuristic and post-industrial England was presented as an idyllic paradise, ruled by a group of anarchist communists who found in the neo-medieval world. Agricultural and pastoral a guide to direct the direction of the population and the country.

It is interesting to consider the pedagogical positions of Johannes Itten in the face of this modern panorama, especially those forged in the experience of the Preliminary Course of the Bauhaus, which he himself created and developed:

The terrible events and the shattering losses of the war had brought in their wake confusion and helplessness in every walk of life. The students held endless discussions in their eager search for a new intellectual approach. My attention was drawn to Spengler's book “The Decline of the West.” I became aware of the fact that our scientific, technological civilization had reached a critical point.

(Itten, 1975, p. 9)

The course had three primary objectives: to unleash the creative power and hidden talents of the students, to facilitate and strengthen the decision of the careers to follow, and, finally, to transmit to the enrolees the fundamental principles of design for future artistic experiences. It lasted a full semester and, once passed, those admitted could access the services and attend the laboratories of the school, where they learned an art-trade, at the same time that they were trained for possible labour collaborations with industries in the sector.

Itten's didactics aimed to create an environment in which

students could express themselves without external conditioning and without ideological barriers, in this way, results created from the world of expression, and not representation, were achieved.

In this way Bauhaus proposed a change of coordinates in the educational objectives of that period:

Morris's concept of a career in craftwork was eradicated; Bauhaus students achieved mastery of a craft to prepare for designing for an industrial society, and many of the models made in the school's “industrial laboratories” or workshop were successfully mass-produced by industrial firms.

(Macdonald, 1970, p. 317)

In this sense, Itten said:

I did not believe that the slogans “Back to the Crafts” or “Unity of Art and Technology” were capable of solving our problems. I studied Eastern philosophy and became interested in Persian Zoroastrianism and Early Christianity. This made me realize that our outward-looking scientific, research and technology must be balanced by inward-looking thinking and by our spiritual forces.

(Itten, 1975, p. 9).

It is useful to allude to the theories of Franz Cizek to deepen Itten's experiences at the Bauhaus, particularly those related to children's art. Cizek's basic philosophy was near that Rousseau, “that the first impulses of nature are always right” (Macdonald, 1970, p. 343).

In line with these statements, an educational institution should favour creative freedom without imposing bonds, with the aim of cultivating sensitivity, intuition, and imagination. For this reason, for Cizek, “the child's mind must be protected from adult influence” (Macdonald, 1970, p. 344).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Under the direction of Gropius, the German school evidenced the importance of the art-industry binomial, however, the encounter between art and education intensified studies, theories, and practices to develop new pedagogical proposals. It is enough to think that, according to Cizek, during early childhood education, it was necessary to encourage the design of things that had not been seen before, and not, things that were known and on which the notions and structures acquired could have influence. For his part, Itten prepared the ground for a new grammar of art education, like all projects that are developed for the first time, Itten's experiences must be analysed as pioneer actions linked to modifications, errors, and imbalances. In this sense, Kandinsky also carried out unreleased proposals, “at the Bauhaus in 1920s Kandinsky was probably the teacher most inclined to draw, as we know from his lecture notes, on the recent literature of experimental psychology, notably *Neue Psychologische Studien* (1926f)” (Gage, 1999, p. 49).

In his methods Kandinsky introduced some examples

which are close to Itten's:

After the war Kandinsky introduced the study of the medical and physiological, as well as the occult aspects of colour into his proposals for the curriculum of the Moscow Institute of Art Culture; and three years later, at the Bauhaus, he dropped the occult, and added psychology, stressing that all these studies should be carried out by means of exact measurements and experiments.

(Gage, 1999, p. 252)

We have also found this didactic tendency in the experiences and theories in other texts that became true pillars of the school: *Point and Line to Plane*, 1926, Wassily Kandinsky; *Painting, Photography, and Film*, 1927, Moholy-Nagy and after *Language of Vision*, 1944, György Kepes.

With the present work, we have tried to demonstrate that we can still find in the past of artistic pedagogy models, examples and paradigms that deserve to be considered by current educational trends.

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