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THE BAUHAUS AND THE BUSINESS SCHOOL:

ANALOGIES AND ANTINOMIES

Christina Volkmann

School of Business and Economics
University of Wales Swansea
Haldane Building
Swansea SA2 8PP
United Kingdom

(c.r.volkmann@swansea.ac.uk)

&

Christian De Cock

School of Business and Economics
University of Exeter
Streatham Court
Rennes Drive
Exeter EX4 4PU
United Kingdom

(c.de-cock@exeter.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT:

We offer a case history of one of the twentieth century's most famous organizations: The Bauhaus. In mapping the various tensions and contradictions running through the Bauhaus we endeavour to provide a richer texture to the 'relevance' debates which are so prominent in the field of management and organization studies today. We also aim to contribute to the emerging literature on the 'use' of aesthetics and art in our field through a closer investigation of teaching at the Bauhaus. However, this is not to say that we equate art and management, or the teaching of art and the teaching of management. Indeed, whilst we start out by exploring possible analogies between the Bauhaus and today's business schools, it is this exploration in itself that we wish to scrutinise at the same time. In doing so, some pitfalls and limitations of looking to art and aesthetics for inspiration in terms of business school and management education will become visible, the antinomies we allude to in our title.

Key words : aesthetics – art – practice – relevance debates – teaching

THE BAUHAUS AND THE BUSINESS SCHOOL:

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Introduction

The Bauhaus is considered to be “[...] one of the most significant and consequential cultural initiatives of the twentieth century” (Wick, 2000, p.11). Max Ursin, a former Bauhaus pupil, writes:

An experience from the days after the Second World War

[In Hannover] [...] The streets still wound their way through the rubble. Women covered in chalky dust, scraping limestone, whole building complexes becoming individual bricks. And there it was, in the middle of the pavement, a poster, like a board outside a restaurant:

IF GERMANY

IN THIS CENTURY

ONLY INVENTED

THE BAUHAUS

THEN IT WILL HAVE MADE

AN INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTION

TO THE WORLD!

USIS HANNOVER 1946

UNITED STATES INFORMATION SERVICES

(Kentgens-Craig, 1996, p. 7; our translation¹)

In 1916, Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, whilst still in active service on the Western front, outlined his ideas for an “institute as artistic consultancy for industry, commerce, and the crafts” and for the “co-operation between the artist, the businessman, and the technician” (Isaacs, 1985, p. 152-153)². The attempt of the Bauhaus to teach in an innovative way something usually considered impossible to teach, i.e. art, and to give this teaching practical application for industry and business is what draws us toward exploring analogies between the iconic Bauhaus and the perhaps equally iconic ‘business school’. Gropius’ manifesto for the Bauhaus, emphasizing a practical education of the artist that does not reside in lofty academe, finds clear resonances in Lord Franks’ 1963 report which lay behind the foundation of the first two UK Business Schools in London and Manchester, institutions “the primary purpose of which is technological and practical, to increase competence in managers” (quoted in Thomas, 2003). Yet more often than not, teaching management appears to be a contradiction in terms these days, and its practical applicability is either seen as a main aim of management education or conversely viewed as an impossibility (Thomas, 1993; Willmott, 1994).

A first aim of our paper is to provide an alternative perspective on the heated if rather protracted ‘relevance’ debates flowing from the pressures on business schools to produce ‘applicable’ knowledge (Clark, 2004; Huff, 2000; Pettigrew, 2001; Rynes et al. 2000; Starkey & Madan, 2001). Whilst there has been an overabundance of position taking by academics, often within the rather dubious parameters set by Gibbons et al.’s (1994) Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 model of knowledge generation (see e.g. Böhm, 2002; De Cock & Jeanes, 2005), there is a dearth of studies examining how these pressures are actually played out in specific areas of human endeavour (Nicolai,

2004). When looking at case histories like the Bauhaus it becomes clear that calls to ‘bridge’ the differences between academia and practice (Pettigrew, for example, talks about “meeting the double hurdles”, and Huff about “doing mode 1.5 research”) have a timeless quality about them. Whilst in business school education the trade-off for individual academics appears to be between ‘freedom to experiment’ and ‘relevance’ (Grey, 2001; March, 2000), in our study of the Bauhaus we also will explore the tensions various illustrious individuals experienced between their vocation as artists and their roles as Bauhaus teachers. It is precisely these fundamental tensions which are informative, and the compulsion to reconcile points of tension is liable only to lead to bland generalities. Thus we hope to offer – to borrow Berman’s phrase – “not a way out of the contradictions... but a surer and deeper way into these contradictions” (Berman, 1983, p. 129).

As we have witnessed an increasing disorder in both the theoretical and empirical foundations of the field of organization and management studies over the past decade or so (Jeffcutt, 2004; Westwood & Clegg, 2003), aspects of ‘aesthetics’ or ‘art’ have become ever more popular in the field (e.g. Carr & Hancock, 2003; Gagliardi, 1996; Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999), even leading to claims of the “dissolution of boundaries between humanities and the social sciences” (Linstead, 2003, p. 1).

Hancock (2005, p. 37) recently offered a concise rationale for the emergence of this ‘aesthetics and art in management’ body of work: “It is such accounts of the aesthetic – as an epistemic Other of modernity, one that ‘problematizes the rational’ and offers an alternative mode of cognition... – that have undoubtedly made it such an attractive resource for those seeking to pursue an anti-systemic or post-rational agenda in the field of organization and management studies”. We suggest here, perhaps somewhat

mischievously, that studying the Bauhaus, that crucible of modernism³, offers interesting insights into ‘alternative’ ways of teaching art and design and that parallels to the teaching of management at business schools can be traced. Yet, our objective is *not* simply to mine the Bauhaus as something that existed in the past and whose principles (whatever they are now deemed to be) we can shape into a convenient, handy tool for current management teaching. In looking closely at the Bauhaus example we also detect the pitfalls of tracing straightforward equivalences, and thus we aim to unsettle the notion of a contained, ‘safe’ application of art and aesthetics in management and organization studies.

Origins of the Bauhaus

Founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius as a school of art and design and based in Weimar, the Bauhaus school was intended to remove any distinction between fine arts and applied arts and was thus set apart from the traditional academies of art. Students (both male and female) came from diverse educational backgrounds and were taught simultaneously by master craftsmen and artists, amongst them Oskar Schlemmer, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee, to name but a few. The Bauhaus Manifesto of April 1919 states emphatically:

[...] the old art schools were unable to create this unity [of art and building/architecture] and how could they given that art is not teachable. They have to fuse/coalesce/merge again with the workshop. [...] Architects, sculptors, painters, we all have to return to the crafts! Because art is no trade. There is no substantial difference between the artist and the craftsman. (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p. 39)

In contrast to the rather idealistic views presented in Gropius' Manifesto, his Bauhaus Programme, also of April 1919, contains some detail on how the new school was going to be set up:

Art comes about above all method; it is in itself not teachable, only craft is. [...]

Avoidance of everything rigid; preference of the creative; freedom of individuality, but rigorous study. [...] Participation of the students in the works of the masters. Facilitation of commissions for students through the School. [...]

Constant contact between the School and leaders of craft and industry in the country. [...]

Cultivation of a friendly relationship between masters and students outside work; to include theatre, lectures, poetry, music, costume parties. Maintenance of a serene ceremonial at these events. (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p. 40)

The Bauhaus opened early because of the large number of students wanting to join the school (Isaacs, 1991, p. 68). In his biography of Gropius, Isaacs notes about the first beginnings of the Bauhaus that “[t]here was much improvising and more enthusiasm” (ibid., p. 68). In a speech to the students of the Bauhaus in July 1919, Gropius characterises the main aim of their endeavour as follows:

The main thing for us all remains the personal experience and what the individual makes of it. We find ourselves in the middle of an immense catastrophe of world history, in a revolution of all life and all of the inner human being. [...] what we need is the resolve to experience this personal involvement. (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p.45)

Although the Bauhaus emphasised the link between industry and the teaching institution and hence seems to provide an instructive analogy to business schools, it is somewhat difficult to compare the first Bauhaus students with those frequenting today's business schools. The first students of the Bauhaus stand at the end of World War I and a revolution which established the first German parliament in Weimar. The

Bauhaus is about decisive action and radical new beginnings, difficult beginnings that required personal courage and ‘rigorous study’ as Gropius’ speech and his Bauhaus Programme remind us. Unlike the idea of the ‘business school’, which seems to sit rather snugly in discourses of late capitalist society, Gropius’ ideas were not generally accepted, and Bauhaus students and masters were viewed with suspicion: “[...] [T]he revolutionary situation of 1918-1919 and the anti-bourgeois demeanor of young members of the Bauhaus and of individual ‘masters’ elicited more fear and rejection among the general public than they raised hopes” (Ulbricht, 2000, p. 30).

Thinking about today’s business schools, the ‘immense catastrophe of world history’ – although ultimately of course incomparable – is perhaps reminiscent of the issue of globalisation with its attendant complexity (whether real or perceived shall not be discussed here). Business school education could be seen as a way to help reduce the complexity of the world in which the prospective students work and live. In this case, however, it seems to be more the way in which students arrange themselves in a given situation, the parameters of which are seemingly beyond challenge, that is the focus of attention rather than any radical new beginning. We shall return to this issue later when we reflect on the antinomies inherent in any analogies proposed. When in the following we explore some aspects of Bauhaus teaching, then this introduction should serve as a reminder not to take possible analogies too literally and to bear in mind the historical context of the Bauhaus. Moreover, it is doubtful whether in the days of academic quality assurance individual personalities like Walter Gropius would be able to realise their own concepts, described as “a melting-pot of highly contradictory ideas” (Droste, 1998, p.50), to the same extent as Gropius did in the Bauhaus.

Bauhaus teaching

It is impossible to summarise Bauhaus teaching into one coherent structure.

Background and practice of its teachers are too multi-faceted to allow the description of *the* educational theory of the Bauhaus. Moreover, Bauhaus pedagogy changed over time as teachers left and new directors (first Hannes Meyer, then Ludwig Mies van der Rohe) took charge (Wick, 2000). In the following we explore selected aspects of Bauhaus teaching and of Bauhaus life in attempt to home in on what actually constitutes 'Bauhaus' as we refer to it today. We do so also in the hope of getting closer to what we mean when we talk about it inspiring business school and management teaching in the 21st century and to what it is we do when we refer to 'Bauhaus' in this context.

Lyonel Feininger, acting for a time as Form Master for the printing workshop (in later years he no longer taught although he remained a Master), was an astute observer of life and work at the Bauhaus. For example, in one of many letters to his wife Julia (September 1922), Feininger picked up on a controversy directly concerning Bauhaus teaching. Theo Van Doesburg, the founder of *De Stijl* group and a vocal critic of the Bauhaus, moved to Weimar in 1921 (Isaacs, 1985, p. 285). According to Isaacs, Gropius rejected the ideas of the Stijl group because it did not place sufficient emphasis on the development of individual talent in the artist. With the Bauhaus' critic resident on its doorstep, many of the students went to his lectures, and Gropius was in favour of acquainting them with Van Doesburg's ideas, although he considered the gap too wide to invite Van Doesburg to lecture at the Bauhaus (ibid., p. 286). We quote at some length because Feininger's letter about the affair offers an insight into

the Bauhaus' self image and also provides a good description of the Bauhaus' way of dealing with criticism head-on:

[...] For most, the unsentimental, albeit completely uninspired Van Doesburg is something of a crutch, amongst all the unstable and contradictory individual views; something specific, something clear they can really hold on to [...] [T]he 'Bauhaus' is demanding – Van Doesburgianism does not demand anything, with it one can come and go, it is an entirely voluntary submission from which, so everybody tell themselves, one can free oneself immediately. Of course, this is gross sabotage of anything that the Bauhaus sets up as a goal. But almost all have to go through something like this before they find an equilibrium. If Doesburg were a master at the Bauhaus, he would not be damaging to the whole, but on the contrary be probably rather useful because he would mean an opposition to some of the high-flown Romanticism which is haunting us. But then he would very likely be unable to remain within his limits, and instead would try, like Itten at the time, to command the whole. (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p. 68)

Of particular interest to us here is the way in which Feininger characterises the Bauhaus as being 'demanding' or challenging, as something one cannot just leave behind in order to look for a more comfortable intellectual home and also the way in which he sets up this challenge as being at the core of the Bauhaus as a whole. At the same time, he acknowledges the problems that being at the Bauhaus brings to its members; namely the confusion of a multitude of opinions, the need for intellectual struggle, and last but not least, the 'high-flown Romanticism' 'haunting' the Bauhaus. Indeed, 'chaos' albeit in the association of 'creative chaos' does feature in some comments on the school. In a letter to Ferdinand Kramer, who became disenchanted with the Bauhaus, Gropius stated: "My sole aim is to leave everything in suspension, in flux, in order to avoid our community solidifying into a conventional academy" (Droste, 1998, p.50). Whilst many business schools today would probably relish the

‘intellectual challenge’ and ‘creativity’ aspects of this way of thinking, they are less likely to embrace wholeheartedly the attendant struggle and chaos. Earlier, we mentioned the enthusiasm and improvisation necessary to get the Bauhaus off the ground, another situation where the ‘creative feel’ might be welcomed only after the event, especially when working with today’s academic institutional standards, for example quality control or performance measures.

In his observations on Theo van Doesburg’s approach, Feininger also alludes to the (in)famous Gropius-Itten controversy that ran from 1921 to Johannes Itten’s departure from the Bauhaus in March 1923. Although accounts in the Bauhaus literature vary, the controversy is unanimously cited as an example of the Bauhaus’ internal struggles over its general direction. Buschhoff (2003) locates the disagreement between Itten and Gropius in their differing pedagogical opinions “[...] when Itten – in the wake of his enthusiasm about Mazdaznan – became ever more missionary and Gropius on the other hand favoured a more functional, technical and production-oriented Bauhaus” (p. 16). True to his original idea of close links between the Bauhaus and industry, Gropius considers commissions from industry and especially the income thus derived to be vital for the Bauhaus, whereas Itten rejects the idea of teaching with a practical focus and instead strongly subscribes to the “free artistic manifestation” as a pedagogical principle: “Young people who begin with market research and practical and technical work seldom feel encouraged to search for something really new” (Itten 1975, p.8). The debate does not go without practical ramifications when in January 1922, after an escalation of the conflict, Itten resigns some of his responsibilities and teaching has to be rearranged accordingly (with Josef Albers ultimately taking responsibility for the Preliminary Course). A month later, Gropius tackles the issue

head-on in a circular to the Bauhaus masters entitled 'The resilience of the Bauhaus idea':

Master Itten has recently demanded that one has to decide, either to do individual work in complete opposition to the outside business world, or to seek an understanding with industry. I believe that in this question lies the big 'X' that needs to be resolved. [...] The Bauhaus has made a start in breaking with the usual academic education of the little Raffael [...]. So, it is all about the linking of creative activity of individuals with the broad craft work of the world! If we were to reject the outside world completely, then the only remaining way out would be the romantic [desert] island. (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p. 62-63).

Like some of his colleagues on the council of masters, Paul Klee, who had joined the Bauhaus early in 1921 as a Form Master in the printing workshop, remains somewhat neutral in this discussion. In December 1921, presumably in response to a questionnaire to the Bauhaus masters, he writes:

I welcome the fact that at our Bauhaus so many differently orientated forces work together. I also support the fight of these forces against one another, if the effect should be visible in the resulting achievement. It is a good test for every force to meet with opposition, so long as this opposition remains factual in nature. Value judgements are always subjectively bound, and some negative judgement about the other's achievement can be of decisive value for the whole. For the whole there is no right and wrong, rather it lives and develops through the interplay of forces, just as in the world as a whole good and evil ultimately work together productively (Quoted in Wingler, 1962, p.60).

Klee's statement is often quoted as an example of artists and craftsmen at the Bauhaus working alongside one another as envisaged in the Bauhaus Manifesto and realised in the set-up of the Preliminary Course. More generally it is seen as an endorsement of pluralism at the Bauhaus. Pluralism is a 'value' often espoused by business schools

and theoretical debates in the discipline (De Cock & Jeanes, 2005; Glynn et al. 2000; Hardy, 2002), and the Bauhaus – as manifested here in Klee’s view – could then be seen as an avatar of such pluralism, and as such as something that is to be emulated. Yet, it is worth pointing out the profound conflicts and crises that inevitably flowed from the Bauhaus ideal of pluralism in the early years. In 1930 this ideal would disappear completely with ‘purges’ of communist students in response to right-wing political pressure (Droste, 1998).

The case of Paul Klee

Let us now return to Klee and explore the context of his famous statement. Although a very popular teacher, Klee did not find teaching at the Bauhaus easy: “When I came to teach, I had to understand for myself something that I did for the most part unconsciously” (quoted in Buschhoff, 2003, p. 15). Klee prepared his teaching thoroughly, and in one letter to his wife complains that he has wasted all his ‘ammunition’ on one class so that he had to paint new material for the next session (ibid., p. 15-16). Like his long-standing friend and colleague at the Bauhaus, Wassily Kandinsky, Klee was a well-established artist, which in turn had been one of the main reasons of his appointment to the Bauhaus. As a painter, however, he found it difficult to combine other activities with his artistic work. For example, the administrative tasks as well as the social engagements that were part of his role remained rather burdensome to him. At the beginning of the winter term of 1922, he writes to his wife: “[...] As always at the beginning of term, we have a meeting. We have meetings, and meetings and meetings” (quoted in Buschhoff, 2003, p. 17). In that academic year, Klee was present at at least 16 of the 21 meetings of the Council of Masters.

According to the memoirs of Bauhaus pupils, Klee was a very thorough, popular, and approachable teacher. Indeed, he seems to have been something of a mythical figure. In 1931, shortly after Klee has left the Bauhaus, Christof Hertel, one of Klee's students, publishes a piece on Klee's teaching and his theory of form in the journal *bauhaus* where he tries to summarise the essence of Klee's teaching:

[...] Like a magician, he would in a glance, a word, or a gesture, make the unreal into the real, the irrational into the rational. Things that only were only existent through intuition became graphically manifest (quoted in Wingler, 1962, p. 180).

Who would not, as an academic teacher, like to be written about in this way? The students, however, also ironised the esteem in which they held Klee, for example, when depicting him in a caricature as a buddha throning in the clouds, with women students kneeling below next to the Bauhaus (see, for example, Droste, 1998, p.144).

What emerges here is an idyll of intellectual and academic life at the Bauhaus. The idyll (if it ever was one) did not, however, remain undisturbed. Although Klee by and large kept out of the Gropius-Itten debate, and this controversy comes to an end with Itten's departure from the Bauhaus in 1923, the fundamental dilemma more or less remains the same. After Itten has left and Moholy-Nagy has joined the Bauhaus, Gropius' focus on 'Art and Technology, the new unity' (*Kunst und Technik, die neue Einheit*) is strengthened. In his speech on occasion of the high-profile inauguration ceremony of the Bauhaus in Dessau, Gropius reiterates his vision: "[...] The more we are able to create an intensely close community in our work, the more we will succeed, starting from our shared intellectual centre, in securing the link between

industry, the crafts, the sciences, and the creative forces of our time' (quoted Isaacs, 1985, p. 407). What we have here is a conception of art that makes common cause with industrial production, adapting to its criteria and partaking of its power. As Schwartz (1996, p.1) put it: "This... linking of art and technology is the statement that has come to stand for the artist's final and unequivocal affirmation of modernity: art, it seemed, was no longer threatened by the emergence of the modern world or irrelevant to it, but would achieve its goals as part of this grand process". The teaching in the Preliminary Course is now more 'business-like', more about the economical use of materials and techniques in order to set standards for industrial production, rather than about the development of subjective and emotional creativity (Buschhoff, 2003). This shift in emphasis has a profound effect on the artist painters at the Bauhaus. Feininger, for example, whilst admitting that without support of the "industrialists", the future of the Bauhaus looks very bleak indeed", remains convinced that such dependence is "anathema to all of us and a serious obstacle to the development process" (quoted in Droste, 1998, p.60). Buschhoff suggests that although it is not known if Klee made similar remarks to those of Feininger, he would have been close to Feininger's thinking about art. She continues that "[i]n spite of the new aims, Klee held on to the original idea of the Bauhaus and its ideal of community" (Buschhoff, 2003, p. 18).

The pluralistic 'idyll' alluded to above is thus seen in a rather different light. Inherent contradictions surface and very 'real' and practical concerns over the direction of the Bauhaus and its teaching have become visible. When viewed in this light, the comparison of teachers at the Bauhaus and teachers of management might become less tempting, and we can reassure ourselves in the fact that – unlike being a

practising artist was for the Bauhaus – the practice of management is not usually considered to be integral to the academic teaching of the subject. Klee taught what was not perhaps ‘applicable’, but he gave his students so very much. Yet, at the same time he was one of the ‘painters’ who, according to Ise Gropius’ diary entries, became more and more isolated in the institution that was the Bauhaus, especially so after the departure of Walter Gropius in 1928.

Towards the end of his time at the Bauhaus, when he has already accepted a post at the academy in Düsseldorf, Klee summarises the ultimate dilemma of teaching at the Bauhaus. He writes in June 1930:

The work at the Bauhaus is easy, if as a painter one doesn’t feel obliged to produce anything. At the moment it looks very simple. Because the state is now a temporary one [i.e. he’s leaving soon], I live fairly well with it. The position itself would be easy enough. If I could give it to someone who didn’t have to do anything else, I’d make him very happy. But then he wouldn’t be an artist, and the whole thing would go wrong. (Quoted in Buschhoff, 2003, p. 11)

Klee’s dilemma of having to be a painter in order to teach, which he could not fully accomplish because of his teaching commitments, remained an intractable one, and it is perhaps reminiscent of the debates surrounding ‘practitioner academics’ in today’s business schools without, however, affecting them in the way Klee was affected. Issues surrounding tedious administrative tasks, teaching loads, remuneration, and negotiations about career moves on the other hand are likely to be only too familiar to those working in academic environments today.

Looking back to the Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus (Fiedler, 2000, p. 362ff.; Itten, 1975), with its emphasis on material and texture studies and the theory of primary colours and elementary forms, we do well to remind ourselves that the materiality of the teaching material is not the same at the Bauhaus and at a business school. When Klee is teaching, he is looking at his students' work in the form of paintings, sketches and the like, and he uses his own paintings to illustrate his points. When Albers is teaching the students to see material differently and to become "familiar with work that was appropriate to the requirements of modern industrial production" (Schmitz, 2000, p. 375), he makes them aware, for example, of the different qualities of a piece of paper, its edges, the ways in which it can be used. When students at a business school work on a practical task, e.g., for an Organisational Behaviour course, they will work with some form of representation (e.g. documents, photographs, their own account), never with the event itself. Both the students at a business school and those at the Bauhaus, show their own interpretations of the set task. Yet, in the case of the Bauhaus student showing a tangible result, e.g. of their 'paper study', this result possesses a very different materiality to what a business student is likely to produce (e.g. a 'strategic' analysis). Thus, the skills that can be taught are necessarily also very different. No matter how 'practical' teaching at a business school is designed to be, it cannot match the 'practicality' and 'groundedness' of the craft teaching at the Bauhaus. When Itten (1975, p.133) reflecting on the Preliminary Course claims that "[t]he objective laws of form and color help to strengthen a person's power and the expand his creative gift" (p.133), this stands in stark contrast with the increasingly elusive search for a knowledge foundation in business education (Jeffcutt, 2004). Indeed, as Grey (2004, p.54-59) suggests:

The MBA degree has long been predicated on the assumption that there is, or the desire that there should be, some set of knowledge which transcends the firm-specific know-how of managers. Yet... the MBA has failed to identify such a knowledge base... To put matters plainly, the point about having an MBA is not the technical utility of the content but the fact that it denotes a certain orientation which renders graduates receptive to 'corporate needs'.

At this stage, we have to conclude that there is no single Bauhaus teaching concept that could be applied directly to management and business education, partly because no single concept ever existed at the Bauhaus in the first place. Partly also because the materiality of the teaching – with its practical and concrete aspect on the one hand and the highly abstract concept of teaching art in general on the other – is not mirrored in the substance of what is being taught in management education. Wick (2000, p. 12) also has a general warning against transferring Bauhaus pedagogy to other contexts:

Gunter Otto [...] [in 1969] recognized this problem with complete clarity when he took a critical stand against the professional didactics of those who attempt to derive from the Bauhaus *courses of study* that mirror in excerpted form the system of the Bauhaus – and ... thus not only overlook a series of artistic phenomena that are important to the present but also the very *plan* of the Bauhaus, whose interpretive system cannot be grasped in *excerpts*.

How then can we learn from the Bauhaus without falling victim to the same self-deception that Feininger diagnosed in those following Van Doesburg into an all too comfortable intellectual home, or without disregarding the historical context of Bauhaus pedagogy as Wick and Otto warn against? And why is it that we are still fascinated with the Bauhaus?

The Bauhaus as idea

The previous sections have focused very selectively on aspects of what the Bauhaus looked like at the time of its historical existence. This is partly because it is impossible to even begin to give an accurate account of the wealth of material relating to the Bauhaus, and partly because the Bauhaus' events and personalities were so diverse. In other words, the Bauhaus is impossible to 'pin down' as it was so many things to so many different people and managed to combine many disparate views within itself. One way of speaking of the many facets of the Bauhaus and to balance out inherent contradictions is to describe it as an idea, rather than as an academic institution or as an historical event. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in a speech in honour of Gropius' 70th birthday in 1953, refers to the Bauhaus as follows:

The Bauhaus was an idea, and I believe that the reason for the influence the Bauhaus has had on every progressive school in the world lies in the fact that it was an idea. Such resonance cannot be achieved through organisation nor through propaganda. Only an idea has the power to spread that far. (Wingler, 1962, p. 197)

However, it is by no means just 'posthumous' speeches or the recent research literature that describe the Bauhaus in these terms. We have already quoted Gropius' 1922 notes on "The Resilience of the Bauhaus Idea" in the context of the Gropius-Itten debate. In 1927, when the Bauhaus is under heavy political attack, the prestigious German architects' association 'The Ring' also defends 'this idea of the Bauhaus'. Apart from saying that it is "überpersönlich", beyond the individual, the statement does not, however, go into detail as to what exactly constitutes this idea (Wingler, 1962, p. 138). And in 1928, the *bauhaus* journal features interviews with current students. Hubert Hoffmann remarks:

I came to the Bauhaus because of the strong idea – in spite of the fact that I didn't know what exactly this was. [...] I see the value in the Bauhaus more in the will to create something, rather than in what is actually created (ibid., p. 477).

Even Bauhaus teaching is sometimes described in similar terms. The student interviews in the 1928 edition of the *bauhaus* journal also contain Vera Meyer-Waldeck's comments:

The most positive aspect for me is the pedagogical work that is done here. It is impossible to put it into any timetable, but it is one of the main factors of the Bauhaus idea (ibid., p. 477).

In all the contexts described above, the Bauhaus idea remains vague, even when connected to the teaching at the Bauhaus as in Vera Meyer-Waldeck's remarks. In his 1953 speech, Mies van der Rohe hints at the influence the Bauhaus has exerted beyond itself. We can see that the 'Bauhaus idea' then also exposes a different, a wider meaning of 'Bauhaus'. When viewed from this vantage point, the Bauhaus becomes a historic event in a different sense. Instead of being delimited by the dates of its foundation and its closure, it also contains its own reception history, reaching beyond 1933 to the present day. We use the term 'reception history' loosely, referring to what happens to a text in the period between its creation and its reading in a different time and also to the interpretive layers that previous readings add to later ones (Gadamer, 1999/1960). The way in which the Bauhaus has been read 'posthumously' as an event and/or an idea is of particular interest as it includes us linking the Bauhaus with business school and management teaching. When we look back to the Bauhaus, we appear to have an unruptured link bridging the gap to the Bauhaus, 1919-1933, which had promised a radical new beginning, a radically new

way of teaching what was considered to be unteachable. What we are looking at, however, is already a continuity of appropriations. When we thus gaze at Bauhaus' radicalism to inspire new and radical thinking on management education, we have to be aware of how this radicalism has been made 'safe' for us by its integration over time into our frame of reference, i.e. the capitalist system in which both business schools and management teaching thrive. Critics of the Bauhaus suggest that the seeds of this might be present in Gropius' later ideas of the Bauhaus: "Despite the leftwing cachet that accompanied the school (and was an important part of its history), the policy of the Bauhaus under Gropius came to be that art did not demand political revolution but could work hand in hand with modes of production as they actually existed, achieving transcendence in tandem with objects that would remain capitalist commodities" (Schwartz, 1996, p.1).

Conclusion

Given that 'art' and its teaching were very much contested issues at the Bauhaus, it seems somewhat peculiar that in management and organization studies we talk about art or literature in terms of a stable (reified) input that can be used in teaching management. This peculiarity is doubled in that this reification depicts management as something that cannot be taught as such, that media other than 'traditional' academic teaching or research are needed to teach this 'practical' skill, to create well-rounded manager personalities. At the very least this should entice us to reflect on the wider issue of "the colonial practices by which management knowledge has traditionally and consistently sought transcendence and renewal" (Jeffcutt, 2004, p. 17). It would be all too easy to integrate the Bauhaus idea in an MBA curriculum to augment the potential it offers "of acquiring cultural capital and social prestige"

(Grey, 2004, p. 59). But as Hancock (2003, p. 193) suggests, whilst reflecting on the political implications of an aestheticized environment increasingly driven by the standardized corporate aesthetic: “Yet in doing so, it not only debases the aesthetic, depriving it of that which is genuinely identical to it, but also potentially renders it useless in its own cause as well as depriving humanity of its radical potential, its potential to allow us to experience things other than they are”.

Could it be that after (the aberrations of) postmodernism, Bauhaus ‘modernism’ looks rather attractive, especially since it carries the attributes of radical new beginnings and since it can be safely put into the bounds of a historic event which nevertheless remains present in artistic and architectural manifestations? Perhaps we like the idea of the Bauhaus because its radicalism can fascinate us without being too demanding, because it has become a kind of “conformist innovation” (Clark, 2004, p. 371). The Bauhaus looks radical, but no longer is. Thus we can espouse radicalism and new beginnings whilst at the same time avoiding them and confirming existing ideas. Thus we suggest a view of ‘The Bauhaus as Business School’ as an antinomy in the guise of analogies. Yet it is precisely in the antinomies between ‘Bauhaus’ and ‘business school’ that true, albeit uncomfortable and demanding, inspiration lies and it is these antinomies we would have to embrace if we wanted to learn anything from the Bauhaus and not merely offer yet one more set of mystifications to be learned by management students. Repeating the Bauhaus does not mean simply a return to the Bauhaus principles and methods, but rather increasing our awareness of the field of possibilities the Bauhaus and the people involved with it opened up. Perhaps this involves making a distinction between what happened at the Bauhaus and another dimension: what was in the Bauhaus more than the Bauhaus itself (cf. Žižek, 2002, p.

310). It certainly would involve a fusion of education and social critique of the kind Grey (2004, p.60) suggests; and perhaps even a revisitation of the fundamental problem Gropius struggled with, “the relation of the modern economy to the life of the mind, of the commodity to culture”(Schwartz, 1996, p.5).

Throughout its existence, the Bauhaus contained the risk of its own failure as a radical undertaking necessitated by an ‘immense catastrophe of world history’. When – following the tradition of Bauhaus reappropriations – we see the Bauhaus as a cultural icon or a ‘valuable contribution to the world’, we are likely to ignore this aspect, especially if we are looking for a positive inspiration for business school teaching. To conclude, we refer to Hubert Hoffmann’s failed attempt to re-institute the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1947: “In view of a new Bauhaus in Dessau nothing came of it. What remains is the knowledge of the attempt, and a redesign of education that reacted to its particular time. Does this not constitute a success after all?” (Kentgens-Craig, 1996, p. 88). The idea of ‘a redesign of education that reacts to its particular time’ is of importance here as it implies that is we who have to do the redesigning, that we have to do it in our time, and that failure is always a distinct possibility in our ‘redesign’, just as it was when Gropius first set up the Bauhaus, 1919-1933.

Notes

¹ Unless indicated otherwise the translation of quotes from the original German is ours.

² This emphasis on the cooperation of art, industry and crafts can be traced back to the German *Werkbund* of which Gropius became a member in 1912 (Droste, 1998; also see Schwartz, 1996).

³ For an exploration of the relation between modernism as an aesthetic category, and modernity as an epistemological one, we refer the reader to Jameson (2002, p.122 ff).

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