

Reactions against Historicism of German Bauhaus and the Reaction against “Passeism” of Italian Futurism

Jie Chang

Foreign Language Department, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology

Beijing 102617, China

E-mail: changjie@bipt.edu.cn

Abstract

Bauhaus was a school of art and architecture in Germany. It was founded at Weimar with Walter Gropius as the first director. The faculty of the school included artists as famous as Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Wassily Kandinsky and Marcel Breuer. (Note 1) The early years of Bauhaus were marked by a determination to reform art education as well as to create a new society. Due to the hostility from right wing politicians and academicians, the school moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1925, and from Dessau to Berlin in 1933. The end of the school's life was rather bitter, Nazi government forced it closed on April 11, 1933. “It was the first tangible expression of the Party's cultural policy, of its determination to remove from Germany every trace of what it called decadent and Bolshevistic art”. (Note 2)

The Bauhaus art is the art of modernization. The Bauhaus architects considered contemporary architecture as a display of “dead style”. They reacted against the theory of the historicists, whose understanding of the past was held vital to explanation of the present. In this short paper, I have addressed this reaction against historicism from the following aspects. Firstly, I have tried to understand Bauhaus architecture as an art of modernization, which is not only modern, but also functional, clean lined and economical. Secondly, I have tried to analyze the philosophy and the ideology of the Bauhaus artists as Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer, trying to find the ideological roots of their reaction against historicism. Finally, I have turned to the aesthetic aspect of the Bauhaus architecture. Alongside my exploration of the reaction of German Bauhaus artists against historicism, I have compared it with Italian Futurism, which is famous for its strong reaction against “Passeism”. Thus, I hope I have been able to draw a clear picture of the Bauhaus movement reacting against contemporary “dead style” and “historicism”.

Keywords: German Bauhaus, Historicism, Italian Futurism

1. An Art of Modernization

Indisputably, the Bauhaus art had been well adapted to the modern and industrial society. It was an art of modernization. “Modern man, who wears modern not historical dress, also requires a modern dwelling which is in harmony with himself, and with the times in which he lives, and is equipped with all the modern objects in daily use.” (Note 3) This remark made by Walter Gropius, was a proof of his determination of accepting modernization and industrialization. He even tried to combine all the skills of craftsmen, painters and sculptors in building modern architecture.

Since the Bauhaus architects considered contemporary architecture as a display of “dead style”, then, what would “modern style” or “Bauhaus style” be like? Although Gropius always denied the existence of a Bauhaus style in anything, the Bauhaus architects did create a new style: anything and everything geometric, seemingly functional, and employing the primary colors and using modern materials. All Bauhaus architectures were **modern**. The architects researched into the nature of objects, taking into consideration all the modern and advanced methods of production and construction. Their design was different from existing models, and often seemingly simple, geometric, unfamiliar and therefore modern. The Bauhaus dwellings were **functional** because they served the purpose of being cheap, durable and “beautiful”. The Fagus factory buildings at Alfeld (1910-11), the Bauhaus building at Dessau (1925), the Staattheater at Jena (1923), even later the architectural activity of Walter Gropius in America, all reflected the functional architectural theory of the Bauhaus artists. (Note 4) The Bauhaus style was **clean lined**, without any unnecessary ornament. All Bauhaus buildings were characterized by a severe geometry of form and the exclusive of primary forms and colors, which they thought would be

comprehensive to everyone. Without Romantic beautification and ornament, the Bauhaus architects showed simplicity and rationalization in multiplicity. In addition, the Bauhaus architects stressed the importance of **economical** use of space, material, time and money. For instance, they used new method of construction, transferring the whole load of the structure to a steel or concrete framework. The function of the walls in the structure changed from supporting the load of the building to keeping out rain, cold and noise. This helped to save space as well as material and time. Through the combination of aforementioned elements, the Bauhaus architects had been capable of adapting their architecture to the modern society and abandoning all the elements of the contemporary “dead style” architecture.

2. The Ideology of the Bauhaus Architects

It might go too far to take the Bauhaus art as Socialist art or even Bolshevistic art; but it would be right to say that the Bauhaus art embodied some elements of socialist philosophy as equality, co-operation and so on. Walter Gropius, the first director of the Bauhaus school, if not a socialist, was at least sharing some of the aims of the left wing revolutionaries. He joined left wing association of architects, artists and intellectuals, the Arbeitsrat Fur Kunst (Working Soviet For Art), whose aim was to involve creative people directly in the forging of a new social order. He was also a member of another left-wing artists’ organization in Berlin after the war, the Novembergruppe. (Note 5) Hannes Meyer, succeeding Gropius to work as the director of the Bauhaus school at Dessau, went even further and believed in uncompromisingly left-wing political philosophy. (Note 6)

From the very beginning, Gropius determined that the aim of the Bauhaus school was not to reform art education, but also to improve the society. The Bauhaus became much more than a mere school, but a miniature society where students learned and worked together equally and co-operatively. He even introduced a high degree of democracy: students were given two seats on Governing Council of the Bauhaus and a student union was encouraged. His conception of an art education was based on collaborative workshop train. Each workshop had an elected student representative and the student generally organized many independent activities. Thus, he introduced the concept of co-operation and democracy into the structure of the school. As a left wing artist and the director of the school, Gropius tried to set himself as an example of helping the poor and showing the spirit of generosity. Because of the inflation and economic recession, many students could not even offer to buy shoes and clothing, Gropius found fund to buy things as shoes and clothing at wholesale and distributed them to the most need. At root, Gropius believed in the theory of equality and hoped to eliminate the social classes. He even wanted to elevate the status of the crafts to that which the “fine arts” then enjoyed. (Note 7) As the Manifesto of the Bauhaus proclaimed, “There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman...Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class-distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist.” (Note 8) His successor, Meyer further stressed that it was the architects’ job to improve society by designing functional buildings that would improve the lot of the common man. In sum, the Bauhaus architects, sharing many socialist political views, aimed at reform and improve the society, in which the inequality of power and wealth shall be eradicated.

The Bauhaus architects’ reaction against historicism and upholding the theory of social reformism, resulting from their unsatisfying with the contemporary “dead style” architectures, formed an important part of their philosophy. The **historicism** is a respect for, even a dedication to the past on the ground that apart from our recognition of this past, no understanding of the present, or foresight into the future is possible. The historicists, often conservatives believe that what has been transmitted from the past should be cherished rather than cast aside. (Note 9) This theory spread throughout Europe since the end of French Revolution in 1789. John Adams in American, Edmund Burke in Britain, and Joseph De Maistre in France were among numerous writers who sought to undermine the Enlightenment optimism: the conviction that people would be liberated from the old order by a rational reconstruction of society. Especially in France, historicists opposed the theory of irrelevance of the heritage of the past so far as social reform and social reconstruction were concerned, because, for them, past and present are a seamless web. (Note 10)

The Bauhaus architects were strongly against the philosophy of historicism. Gropius ruthlessly pointed out that the weakness of the traditional dwellings: dead styled, not functional, comprehensive, and expensive. For him, the decline of traditional craftsmanship lied in the mass production. He suggested the creation of a “partnership between the artist, individualist and technician who, organized in keeping with times, might perhaps eventually be in a position to replace all the factors of the old, individual work.” (Note 11) Meyer further stressed this argument in the fourth issue of the Bauhaus magazine in 1928: “Architecture which continues a tradition is historicist, the new house is a product of industry and as such is the work of the specialists, economists, statisticians, hygienicists, climatologists”(Note 12) However, no matter how cynical the Bauhaus artists’ attitude towards historicism was, they were not to use aggressive means to destroy the traditional buildings or the

old art schools, but to reform, change and improve them. What is more, they were less able to make use modern communication means to attack on historicism than Futurists.

Comparing with Germany Bauhaus artists' reaction against historicism, Italian Futurists were much more noisy, violent and aggressive. Starting from the first decade of 20th century, an Italian poet and publicist, F. T. Marinetti launched this movement of regeneration. They adopted all available means to attack upon and even to destroy the artistic culture, which clung to the forms and values of the past. Comparing with the Bauhaus, the Futurists were close to "Radical Right" political view, which was very nationalistic, extreme and aggressive. They believed that Italy was the victim of the old generation and the revival of Italy lied in the efforts of destroying the "Passeism".

The word *passatismo* stems from *passato*, meaning past and as a derogatory term, *passéist*, was first used publicly in the Futurist manifesto *Against Passéist Venice* on 27 April 1910. It was used to label anything, everything and anyone the Futurists wished to abolish - museums, libraries, academies, and so on. (Note 13)

Their hatred to the "Passeism" was so strong that the Futurists declared in their Manifestos in 1909 and 1910, "we will destroy the museum, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice." "Destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with the ancients, pedantry and academic formalism." "The dead shall be buried in the earth's deepest bowels. The threshold of the future will be swept free of mummies. Make room for youth, for violence, for daring." (Note 14) In short, they aimed to destruct everything and anything belonging to the "Passeism". They saw old knowledge, old city (like Rome), old architectures and old institutions as diseases and wanted to bury them even destroy them completely. They sang the songs of violence, war, anarchy and nationalism. Their slogan was, "Long live violence against all that makes life ugly." (Note 15)

Aiming directly and deliberately at a mass audience, the futurists had been able to make use of every available means and medium to reach as wide audience as possible. Being called "the Caffeine of Europe", Marinetti was really a publicist of genius. He was an agitator and the entrepreneur of his time, employing all possible means to launch Futurist movement: newspaper, saturation advertising, theatres and stadium. He even invented his own publicity machine. The means that he used included every possible kind of manifestos (ranging from the "painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells" to "The Praise of Prostitution"), and the editions of books from his own publishing house and the cultural newspaper *Lacerba*. (Note 16) There were the Futurist Evenings, in which the Futurists glorified danger, wars and the machine age, and attacked academies, museums and other establishment bastion. Comparing with German Bauhaus, they were more capable of making use of new means as their political weapons to defend their theory.

In sum, German Bauhaus philosophy was close to "left wing" socialist ideology. Therefore, they cherished the value of equality, co-operation and collectivism. They upheld the importance of social reformism and aimed to eradicate social class distinctions. The Italian Futurists absolutely advocated the ideology of the radical right wing and many favored the growth of Fascism and Nazism. Marinetti himself even became a Fascist senator during the Second World War. Their hatred to the "Passeism" was so strong that they aimed to eradicate every thing belonging to the Passeism with violence, while German Bauhaus artists were trying to change, reform and improve the society by designing for the common people, especially the working class, and by reforming art education.

3. Aesthetic Elements of Bauhaus and Futurism

In the following part, I shall try to analyze the difference between the Bauhaus reaction against historicism and Futurists hatred towards Passeism from aesthetic point of view.

It was one of the principles of Bauhaus production to create standard types for all objects in daily use. They believed that **standardization** was social necessity because the necessity of life for most common people was the same. The furnishings and equipment were required by every family and their design was more a matter of reason than that of passion. The standard type of products created by the machined were cheaper and better than those made of hand. People did not have to worry that standardization would jeopardize the individual choice since the competition automatically resulted in so many alternatives. And the individual could make a personal choice of the model, which best suited him. Further, standardization would be able to strengthen the coherence of beauty of a building, within which all the objects are standardized, from chairs to beds, from doors to windows.

The creation of standard types of all objects required the changing of traditional crafts. The Bauhaus believed that "the difference between industry and the crafts consists less in tools each uses than in the division of labor in

industry and the unity of labor in crafts.” (Note 17) Therefore, they tried to reform the traditional crafts. Their laboratory workshops produced a unity of labor, in which crafts would be the medium of experimental work for industrial production. As a result of the experiments in the workshops, new techniques and new materials were positively used to create prototypes for factory production.

Rationalization was another principle emphasized by German Bauhaus artists. Gropius and many his followers criticized that contemporary “dead style” buildings with traditional elements and forms were not logical and functional. They tried to make their design as rational as possible. For instance, they changed the old penthouse roof with the flat roof because the flat roof was light, possible to be used as a sun-loggia, open-air gymnasium, or children’s playground. It made structural provision for subsequent additions simpler, and eliminated unnecessary surfaces presented to the action of wind and weather, and therefore, less needed for repairs. The Bauhaus building designed by Gropius in 1925 was an example of this aesthetic approach. There were large transparent glass walls, which gave everyone the chance to look into the structure from the outside. “The skeleton was of reinforced concrete, the floors were of hollow tiles resting on beams. The flat roofs were covered with a new developed water proofing material.” (Note 18) This building embodied almost all the elements of functional architectural theory.

Comparing with Bauhaus, Futurists accepted new aesthetic values, which were linked with modernization and industrialization. They showed very radical and strong hatred to the old aesthetic values. They glorified the beauty of speed, dynamism, simultaneity and even danger. They dreamed of a life full of actions and further glorified violence and war, which, for them, was a kind of purification of the world. Their analysis of movement and speed could be found in Carra *Portrait of the Poet Marnetti* (1911) and Bragaglia *Image in Motion* (1913). They supported fine art and literature. They glorified the poetry of intuition, which was reacting against rational and logical poetry. Those poems were made in infinitive, breaking away from traditional grammar, norms and punctuations and emphasizing the usage of verbs. In literature, the futurist writers turned to write in “free words”, with nothing in mind and coming out with nothing meaningful. I can still list numerous examples (e.g., the tech-graphic revolution of literature, the music of noises, and photo dynamism) of fine arts and literature, which was aesthetic approach of Futurists.

4. Conclusion

Through the above comparison between Germany Bauhaus and Italian Futurism, we may draw a conclusion that although both of the two movements were aiming to react against artistic culture clinging to the forms and values of the past, the Bauhaus was more moderate, flexible and socialistic. Futurists, on the other hand, were more radical, aggressive and violent. This was due to the ideological differences between the Bauhaus and Futurism, the former emphasizing on social reform, equality, co-operation, and many ideas close to Socialist theory. Futurism was close to the Radical Right, and later the Fascism and Nazism. With the aid of newspaper, manifestos, public performances to explore the theatre of gesture and provocation and many other modern communication means, Italian Futurists reached far more audience than the Germany Bauhaus.

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Notes

Note 1. The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

Note 2. Frank Whitford, Bauhaus, World of art, New York, 1981.

Note 3. Ibid.

Note 4. The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

Note 5. Frank Whitford, Bauhaus, World of art, New York, 1981.

Note 6. Ibid.

Note 7. Ibid.

Note 8. Ibid.

Note 9. This information is from another course: Main Political Currents in Europe.

Note 10. Ibid.

Note 11. Frank Whitford, Bauhaus, World of art, New York, 1981.

Note 12. Ibid.

Note 13. This information is from google website.

Note 14. Umbro Apollonio ed. *Futurist Manifestos*, Thames and Hudon, 1971.

Note 15. Ibid.

Note 16. Ibid.

Note 17. Frank Whitford, Bauhaus, World of art, New York, 1981.

Note 18. Ibid.