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What Directs Graphic Design?

David Versluis

Dordt College, david.versluis@dordt.edu

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Looking at Feininger’s *Cathedral* image, which was used on the cover of Gropius’ Bauhaus manifesto leaflet, one might ask this question: To what extent did the concept represented by the *Cathedral* image influence the Bauhaus? Also, considering the spirit of the time, one might ask if Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919) had any influence on the early Bauhaus. Specifically, does Kierkegaard have something to say to design educators about discerning the spirits of the age, and their influence, and about authenticity and graphic design?

Ascertaining whether Kierkegaard’s philosophical ideas influenced the Bauhaus is difficult, but threads of Romanticism and Existentialist philosophy certainly had great impact on Germany after World War I at the time of the Weimar Republic and the early Bauhaus. Both of these philosophies are characterized by a reaction to the excesses of rationalism; by an elevation of the individual’s uniqueness in terms of passions, urges, and intuitions; and by the idea of the “exceptional individual,” explains Christiane Thompson, of the Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg. Students in Johannes Itten’s “Basic Course” art classes, of the Weimar Bauhaus period, were reading various writers, including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; perhaps it was Kierkegaard’s book *Either/Or*, which is about the choice between aesthetics and ethics, that influenced their work. In particular, Itten the “Unitarian” was seeking a “spirit of truth” and would recite, as pedagogy, quotations from Christ, Nietzsche, and Lao-tse. Also, artist/teacher Oskar Schlemmer credited his theatrical “Dances” to having been inspired by reading Kierkegaard.

Colleague Dr. Charles Adams, Science Division Dean and Professor of Engineering at Dordt College, provides insight into Kierkegaard. In his essay “Meaning, Authenticity, and Engineering Design,” Adams lists three concerns, in considering modernity and post-modernity, that are relevant to an alternative perspective on engineering design: “authenticity, leveling, and passion.” Perhaps Adams’ suggestions could also be applied to designers in general. Authenticity, according to Kierkegaard, is anti-hypocritical.

The writings of the late Chicago syndicated columnist Sidney Harris, too, seem Kierkegaardian. The following statement about authenticity seems to epitomize an educational philosophy:

A person is either himself or not himself; is either rooted in his existence or is a fabrication; has either found his human-hood or is still playing with masks...
and roles and status symbols. And nobody is more aware of this difference than a child [student]. Only an authentic person can evoke a good response in the core of the other person; only person is resonant to person.

Knowledge is not enough. Technique is not enough. Mere experience is not enough. This is the heart of the teaching process; and the same mystery is at the heart of the healing process. Both are an art, more than a science or a skill—and the art is at bottom the ability to be in-tune to the other's wavelength.  

My questions about educational philosophy began to cohere as I was forced to reconsider various influences on my own art.

The basis for this paper began a few years ago. In 1999, while visiting the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and slowly moving through the permanent exhibit of a Jewish ghetto in World War II, I was touched by the profound experience and moved by the reality of that environment. The Jewish people, in an effort to create a normal cultural community, implemented an economy while sequestered. In particular, I was struck by the recreation of a print shop with letterpress equipment displaying functional printed materials designed in a clean sans serif typographic layout.

A few years later, I came across Sol Sender’s essay “Is it Better to Revive Than to Deceive? Design and Complicity: Herbert Bayer’s Silent Legacy.” This essay looks at Bayer’s publication-design services on behalf of German Nazi clients in the 1930s. I was astonished. As a student, I considered Bayer my hero, the consummate modernist designer of the Bauhaus, who could design anything and who lived the life of an artist—a role model. In fact, several authors had led me to believe that Bayer left Germany because of unbearable Nazi restrictions and came to the United States to work in freedom.

However, in an essay, Sender criticizes Rolf Sachsse’s article “Out of Austria: Herbert Bayer,” which was published in Camera Austria International 46 (1994). Sender accuses Sachsse of not going far enough to analyze modern design or Bayer’s disconcerting designer/client relationship with a Nazi bureaucracy. Bayer seemingly could not distinguish right from wrong because of his professional work ethic and obedience to the wishes of any client. As Sender states, he [Sachsse] doesn’t see the significance of this designer-client configuration as a problematic foundation for the practice of modern design, nor does he discuss graphic design as a significant development in the aesthetic practices of modernism. But it is. The evolution of the designer-client relationship is extremely troubling in the climate of the totalitarianism of the 1930s, but if we are to learn from it, we must also see it as paradigmatic. It permanently scars the aesthetics of modernism and our understanding of its application to the practice of graphic design.

Bayer’s complicity with the Nazis is a conundrum, especially as he was married to a Jewish woman and had a Jewish daughter. Bayer’s family situation makes it difficult to understand his real motivations. While the aesthetics of modern design and the Bauhaus philosophy can still be admired, this revelation about Bayer has colored and changed the paradigm of design education, causing more balanced, critical thinking about modernity. One must now ask, “What are modernity’s problems? Are there alternatives?” Obviously, critical thinking has import in design education.

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Problems with Obedience to Modernism

One need for critical thinking in design education is in deciding and producing the intended effect or message of corporate design. A graphic-design capabilities brochure written in 1993 suggests the importance of that effect. Notice the implied service character of design as well as the appeal to the modern pragmatic spirit:

Is your corporate identity helping or hindering you? Does your public have an accurate image of your company’s products, information, services, people, and environment?
Every form of communication sent outside or within your company creates an impression of your business. It will be clear / functional / appropriate or unclear / nonfunctional / inappropriate or somewhere in between—confusing. You can choose to manage your company’s identity or let it happen by default. You do have a corporate identity. All corporate visual and verbal appearances with your public should have a designed-in appropriateness. Repetition of appropriate appearance backed by solid performance builds a positive reputation. When all your visual and verbal contacts are intelligent, coherent, and consistent, it becomes a memorable reputation. And that’s how a tailored corporate identity will differentiate your company in the marketplace.

The brochure goes on to explain expected changes in the market and the need for corporations to prepare for those changes in communicating with customers:

The future is almost here … and by then we’ll be living in an even more complex, competitive, high-tech world like we’ve never seen before… marked by worldwide change, global markets, multidimensional market segmentation with information tailored to each audience … and flexible information systems allowing for person-to-person communication. The purchasing decision-makers in the seats of power are or will be sophisticated high-tech veterans. And the business climate, like today, will be even faster-moving … and faster-changing, with closer margins … no room for errors, even more pragmatic … with strategic long-term planning the order of the day … a strong demand for unique products and services, a greater emphasis on how businesses talk to their customers … a climate that requires good and useful corporate identity … up-to-date … with sound business rationale.

As if in response to this forecast, Professor Michael Erlhoff, in his essay “Raymond Loewy: The First Professional Designer,” explains the conflict of modern designers in a corporate world:

All modern designers found themselves deeply confronted with conflicts they were not able to solve either conceptually or materially…. The reason is, that they wanted to stick to traditional formats of ethics and aesthetics, but lived and acted within capitalistic structures …. Erlhoff is referring to the “heroic and noble ideals” of twentieth-century Rationalist designers, who were serving “the people,” or, in the Bauhaus’ socialist day, “the workers.” However, these twentieth-century “International Style” architects and graphic designers too wanted people to conform to their aesthetic rules and standards of clean, pure, and perfected forms. This style, they felt, would best serve the public by raising the public’s level of sophistication, thus making life better; the alternative was simply to continue designing and building artifacts that conformed to people’s uneducated aesthetic tastes. Perhaps they did not anticipate a possible tension that can arise when imperfect people live amidst so-called perfect artifacts.

As author Tom Wolfe explains, in From Bauhaus to Our House, the modern building tradition of “heroic and original” was meant to best serve humanity in general:

The roots of Modernism wanted to design from a pure set of principles that went back before the industrial revolution to a time when the master craftsmen of the Renaissance [or medieval cathedrals] built from out of the impulses of the people; when the patronage was primarily the clergy and aristocracy and looking back at a time before capitalism had corrupted architecture [design integrity of artifacts rather than design for just profit].

By contrast, modern designers practice in a cultural context that is quite different from that of the cathedral builders in the Renaissance. Instead of building out of the impulses of the people, modern designers view themselves as the stewards of good taste and thus seem arrogant to Wolfe. Perhaps it is to this elitist attitude of modernism that Erlhoff seems to be referring to as well.

Erlhoff’s point about capitalism can also be interpreted as a response to Kierkegaard’s concern for authenticity, but with a twist: looking at the authenticity of not only the individual but also the artifact. Perhaps Erlhoff is suggesting that near the end of Mies van der Rohe’s (the last director of the Bauhaus) “International Style” architectural practice (late 1960s), capitalistic corporations were beginning to hire architects in the modern style who could do cheaper imitations of van der Rohe’s
buildings, imitations that looked the same from the outside but were not the same inside. Whereas Mies could spend an hour or more deciding to move a wall one inch, the imitators would not.

Erlhoff concludes with a judgment on this kind of practice:

This trend [“heroic and original”] continues to this day. Designers still tend to try to create something new, to believe in creativity as roots in order to become an individual and a monument beyond history. Taking into consideration that the word “original” derives from “origin,” this directly traces back to the fundamental principles of Modern Design and adds to it the hidden (and at the same moment so evident) narcissism of modern designers who are often so self-concerned that they believe in the ability to construct something new and independent.  

It is sad to consider the extent to which this attitude was bound to romantic ideas and the extent to which it connected narcissism with liberalism (in the sense of Friedrich Naumann, whose weekly journal Die Hilfe [translated The Help/Aid, Divine Help, Self Help], Walter Gropius had subscribed to very early).

In regards to Naumann, Marty Bax, in his book Bauhaus Lecture Notes 1930-1933, talks about the Werkbund, which preceded the Bauhaus of 1919 and held similar objectives. Bax says that “the Werkbund posed questions such as: How can those involved in the applied arts find pleasure in their work within the new, industrialized society? What role does craft play in this new society? How can the gap between high culture and popular culture be bridged?” Bax also refers to Christian-socialist Friedrich Naumann as “the union’s spokesman,” who “focused primarily on the social-political meaning of aesthetic issues and enthusiastically applauded both industrialization and the revival of the once-lost German culture.” Gropius’ strong conviction of service to society was the result of Naumann’s influence, among that of others. Actually, during the Werkbund era, Naumann, along with others, advocated a national German spirit free from capitalism and, according to Bax, “an organic quality instead of a materialistic society, one spiritually free rather than centered on profit.” However, these ideals were never realized.

Naumann, a social and theological liberal yet a pious Lutheran minister, advocated reforms and, by genuine service, put words into action regarding brotherly love to the poor and the dignity of human work as Christian calling. Naumann viewed the design, handcraft, and industrial production of German products as a way to rebuild German culture. At the same time, he tended to glorify the laborer and supported building a strong military prior to World War I in order the preserve the German spirit, all the while struggling to reconcile his thinking with Christ’s Beatitudes. While Naumann was influential enough as a politician to be a member of the Weimar assembly, he died in 1919, the year the Bauhaus was formed.

As was mentioned earlier, Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, was a reader of Naumann’s Die Hilfe. In summary, Wolfhart Pentz, in a paper entitled “The Meaning of Religion in the Politics of Friedrich Naumann,” explains Nauman’s influence on Gropius:

What I call Naumann’s civil religious confession is best found in those of his articles in Die Hilfe that deal with the topic of religion….Furthermore, from September 1918 until his death in 1919, Naumann again wrote short devotions. About half of these little articles contain references to religion in one way or the other. Though often borrowed from liberal Protestant Christianity, Naumann’s religious language and symbolism is not Christian in any specific sense. The references to religion are general enough even for Catholics and Jews, and at the same time often secularized enough for “non-religious” persons to accept. The nations as well as the idea of humanity are at the center of this development. He endeavored to show that the new belief in the “resurrection of the ‘volk’” did not contradict the “old belief” of Christianity, i.e., the belief in the resurrection of the individual. Old Christianity was “concerned with heaven, but not with the greatness of peoples and the unity of humanity.”

The early twentieth-century art-manifesto period produced a menagerie of art movements, including the architectural philosophy of Bauhaus. In the Bauhaus manifesto, which will be discussed shortly, Gropius seems to echo Naumann’s religious tone. The Bauhaus, a house for building, was a continuation of an arts-and-crafts revival be-
gun in the nineteenth century by the British John Ruskin and William Morris.

Morris in particular was troubled, not only by the dearth of aesthetic qualities of machine-produced artifacts but also by the effects of industrialization on worker/job satisfaction, vocational attitudes, and societal structures. An advocate for the decorative arts, he practiced an aesthetic philosophy of simplicity, utility, and beauty. He passionately began to implement changes, primarily beginning with the printing press and growing to include handcrafted design and production. Morris saw a disconnection among the art academy (salon art), the craft tradition, and the service to society that both were meant to perform. He viewed art as beginning with a small “a” but, unlike Gropius, viewed the advent of machine technology as part of the problem.

The influence of John Ruskin and William Morris is evident in the Cathedral image, an expressionistic woodcut by Lyonel Feininger, which was used on the cover for Walter Gropius' Bauhaus flyer in April 1919. (Feininger and sculptor Gerhard Marcks were the first teachers hired by Gropius at the Bauhaus.) The significance and symbolism of the Feininger woodcut suggests the influence of the modern-arts-and-crafts movement begun by British John Ruskin and William Morris in the nineteenth century, as mentioned earlier. Pointing to handicrafts as a necessary counteraction to the beginnings of mass production and industrialism, Ruskin and Morris used the Medieval Guild System of artisans as inspiration. They glorified and romanticized all things Gothic and ironically revived the past in order to develop a new and relevant design philosophy. Feininger’s print also reflects the sensibilities of a new generation of young German expressionist artists who, in the early twentieth century, were also interested in reinterpreting the medieval German Gothic spirit. The Gothic spirit represents the ideals of a new German society, as expressed visually in Feininger’s woodcut. These ideals are also powerfully present in the Gropius Bauhaus manifesto, which accompanied the woodcut. The manifesto reads as follows:

The ultimate aim of all creative activity is a building! The decoration of buildings was once the noblest function of fine arts, and fine arts were indispensable to great architecture. Today they exist in complacent isolation, and can only be rescued by the conscious cooperation and collaboration of all craftsmen ....

Denying the existence of “professional art” or the difference between artist and craftsman in essence, Gropius continues by urging artists to “return to crafts” as the “source of creativity.” He claims that only by working in crafts may the artist be inspired by Heaven’s grace to “transcend the will” and “see art…unconsciously blossom” from his labor.

Removing the distinction between craftsman and artist, Gropius makes his plea for a new order, to result in a new religion:

Let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen without the class-distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us desire, conceive, and create the new building of the future together. It will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting in a single form, and will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith [serving humanity].

To understand and contextualize Gropius’ manifesto, one should consider that the manifesto did not, in reality, result in a structured Bauhaus program but functioned as the persuasive call-to-action when combined with Feininger’s expressionistic woodcut cover. It created great impact, as it resonated with young people looking for radical cultural change. With this effect in mind, one gets a better sense of his statement, “create a new guild of craftsmen and artists,” particularly as one looks at the medieval guild system.

To illustrate the aesthetic aspects of the medieval city, Lewis Mumford, in his book The City in History, describes the expression and romance of the processional and pageantry of sixteenth-cen-
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On Sunday after Our Dear Lady’s Assumption, I saw the Great Procession from the Church of Our Lady at Antwerp, when the whole town of every craft and rank was assembled. Each dressed in his best according to his rank. And all ranks and guilds had their signs; by which they might be known. In the intervals, great costly pole-candles were borne, and three long old Frankish trumpets of silver. There were also in the German fashion many pipes and drummers. All the instruments were loudly and noisily blown and beaten.

I saw the Procession pass along the street, the people being arranged in rows, each man some distance from his neighbor, but the rows close behind the other. There were the Goldsmiths, the Painters, the Masons, the Broiders, the Sculptors, the Joiners, the Carpenters, the Sailors, the Fishermen, the Butchers, the Leatherers, the Cloth makers, the Bakers, the Tailors, the Cordwainers—indeed, workmen of all kind, and many craftsmen and dealers who work for their livelihood. Likewise the shopkeepers and merchants and their assistants of all kinds were there. After came the shooters with guns, bows, and crossbows, and the horsemen and foot soldiers also. Then followed the watch of the Lord Magistrates. Then came a fine troop all in red, nobly and splendidly clad. Before them, however, went all the religious orders and the members of some foundations, very devoutly, all in their different robes.

He goes on to describe the white-clad widows, various members of the clergy, the twenty persons bearing the image of “the Virgin Mary with our Lord Jesus,” and various characters and scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

This pageantry ritual, procession, and pilgrimage suggest Coram Deo, or community celebrated in the presence of the divine, a profound sense of life that is unified and centered on the religious institution of the Church. As an amalgamation of expressionistic building activity and a vocational standard of community service, Gothic art appealed to an early twentieth-century European society in search of life, wholeness, and meaning.

According to Marty Bax, Gropius was a proponent of medieval craftsmanship. As such, he viewed the Gothic cathedral along with the system of guilds, an association of merchants or craftsmen, as a metaphor of the new society—one of unity among artist, craft, and community.

Gropius’ Bauhaus Manifesto, a modest, four-page leaflet, featured Lyonel Feininger’s expressionistic woodcut, showing ambiguously a Gothic cathedral being anointed by the rays of three stars. Or, are the stars being illuminated by the cathedral? As Wolf Von Eckardt says, in his 1961 Bauhaus article in Horizon magazine, “The stars were symbols of

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Gropius announced threefold intention: ‘to break down the arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist,’ ‘to achieve a new unity of art and technology,’ and to ‘conceive and create the new building of the future.’” Also note the “spiritual” reference to facets of Cubism with a symbol of crystalline geometry placed at the gable end of the portico. Seen at close range, Feininger’s Cathedral suggests a Christian church displaying the pointed arches and flying buttresses of the Gothic style, but seen from a distance, it becomes emblematic and symbolic.

The procession described earlier would not have seen the church quite this way, since the vantage point of the processional would have been looking up at the church, the spire pointing toward heaven and symbolic of salvation. Feininger’s image, on the other hand, is metaphor for a new religion—cultural and societal salvation through the spirit of art, craft, and design (see image, p. 22).

This religion, obviously not the Christian faith of the Middle Ages, nevertheless sought to restore a medieval spiritual view of art, which viewed the individual work of art as being inseparable from its function. The guild system—which, as has already
Cathedral by Lyonnel Feininger (1871-1956); 1919; Woodcut; Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (156.1945); The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A;
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been stated, was admired by Gropius, Ruskin, and Morris—may have been partially responsible for this attitude. The system typically consisted of a shop master craftsman, who trained a journeyman and also had apprentices. Usually a journeyman traveled to another city for on-the-job training with the master. A great many of these craftsmen were in the service of the highest levels of the social order, the church clergy; therefore, building the church cathedrals was indeed community service. The emphasis on architecture may be seen in the fact that stonemasons (the Bauhütte) held top status in guild hierarchy because of their work as builders.

This was the kind of artistic community that Gropius wanted to restore but with Socialistic/Humanistic spirit replacing Christianity. In essence, this spirit combined socialistic and capitalistic concerns in the service of community.

Perhaps the problem of Bayer’s complicity during the Nazi era can be compared to that of the new Bauhaus in Chicago in the late 1930s, which adopted the motto “design in the service of industry,” in contrast to Gropius’ call for “design in the service of humanity.” At the heart of the designer can be Christ’s call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Who is my neighbor? My neighbor is every person and every creature. Designers should also ask the question, “Who is my client?” In reality, this can be a very difficult question to answer, but the answer is critical to pursue. In this way—loving our neighbor and our client as ourselves—we can be Christ’s contemporaries, as Kierkegaard thought.

Endnotes

1. Lyonel Feininger, who was born in the United States in 1871 but moved with his parents to Germany as a child, eventually spent several decades as an artist working in Europe. He started as an illustrator and cartoonist, was influenced by French Cubism in the early twentieth century, and developed a more eclectic style. The fact that Feininger’s expressionist and German romantic Cathedral woodcut image was the cover art for Walter Gropius’ brochure and would be the emblem of the Bauhaus in 1919 is ironic because the woodcut-relief print media was the primary illustrative technique of the nineteenth century, in contrast to photography, the primary illustrative technique of the twentieth century. It is also ironic that the Bauhaus became synonymous with machine-made, industrialized artifacts and rational aesthetics, in contrast to expressionist ideas. The choice of the Christian Church as metaphor of a new aesthetic is the especially intriguing element that this paper explores.

2. The Bauhaus, from the start, began reforming art training by teaching design foundations in new ways and advocating the workshop for practical experience and training. Feininger was one of the first masters hired by Gropius to teach the print workshop. For political lack of funding, the Bauhaus left Weimar in 1925 and continued training students in Dessau. Moving again in the early 1930s to Berlin, the Bauhaus eventually closed in 1933, when the Nazis cut off funding. In the late 1930s, Gropius moved to the U.S., where he served as professor and chair of the architecture department at Harvard. He died in Boston, Massachusetts in 1969.


8. Sol Sender is currently Principal of Brand Strategy for Designkitchen in Chicago and also serves on the faculty of the Art Institute of Chicago.

9. Herbert Bayer (1900-1985) received early training as a German military officer in World War I, Gropius founded the state Bauhaus in Weimar in April 1919. The Bauhaus was a single school, formed out of the old art school and the school for arts and crafts.
In a few years, he became a master and innovative graphic designer, using imaginatively the photomontage medium type; he also became a type designer and teacher at the Dessau Bauhaus. Essentially a freelance designer from the late 1920s through the 1930s, he came to New York in the late 1930s to work in advertising as creative director and graphic designer; he also practiced architecture.


12. Ibid.

13. Michael Erlhoff is Dean of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences at the University of Applied Sciences Kielin, Germany. He is also President of the Raymond Loewy Foundation. Erlhoff’s main point in this essay seems to refer to Ray Loewy’s ability to redesign existing artifacts to satisfy market demands rather than to simply create so-called “new and original products” in order to perpetuate consumerist tendencies.


17. Marty Bax is a Dutch art historian and writer on twentieth-century European art and has written a major book about the work of Piet Mondrian.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 21.


22. Ibid, 92.


24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.


Bibliography


