Aesthetic and Social Values of Bauhaus

Christiane Wagner

Abstract

This essay intends to analyze the Bauhaus school, whose existence extends formally from 1919–1933 in Germany. In its origins, all events indicated that it would be revolutionary and innovative. Today, however, Bauhaus as an educational institution in the arts field shares opinions regarding the work done during its existence. In this case, it would not be possible to reach a unanimous consent, precisely in its history, brief but significant, complex, polysemic, and full of meandering as a legacy. And in that sense, the school collaborated significantly to the history of design and architecture, including projects that would come later, especially in their participants dedication to accomplishing novelty in the face of social demands. However, some scholars criticized the members of this school. These scholars understood that there had been a kind of commodification of their own projects—that is, they had surrendered to the seduction of capital and accepted that their creations were for production on an industrial scale, a cultural industry. However, regardless of the intentions of each member of the Bauhaus individually, this school had its meaning in its time. Thus, in one way or another, it was a reference for contemporary artists, designers, and architects who have known the worth of these examples, whether good or bad, left by the members of the school that appeared 100 years ago and left its mark in history. That is a central discussion in this essay. As the discussion is almost always in divergence and argumentation, the best ideas and analyses flow through the pipeline for debate.

Introduction

After the revolution in Russia, October 1917, aesthetic-social theories emerged with the constructivists to meet the expectations of a significant portion of the population sympathetic to socialist ideals. They adopted as basic principles the production of materials that had greater functionality and technique, thus featuring a more technical purpose than a style. These principles were the reference for this practice, a kind of Russian Bauhaus—the *Wchutemas,* School of Art and Technique (Bürdek 2006). It should be noted that, even for a political-ideological issue, this school would have to prioritize technical functionality to be consistent with the new regime that would arise in the creation of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the early 1919s, a movement was established with the concept of "machine aesthetics" of the new industrial age—De Stijl—that followed the "technical aesthetics" of the Russian constructivists conceptually. With this movement, the rationalization of the design was conceptualized with an aesthetic of reduction that was marked in the Bauhaus, in Weimar. This period was the birth of the Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius, an art school focused on the interests of industrial development and social needs, paying attention to the functional and technical aspects. Then, in the passage from 1919 to 1920, from the housing culture and with the social principle of consolidating art to the people, Bauhaus influenced the way of life. The basis of an aesthetic and social theory of Bauhaus was characterized by the relationship between art, technology, and industry, exerting influence—especially with the advent of design—from the early 20th century.

The courses taught were aimed at inventing, constructing, repairing, and deconstructing and were empirically developed using an inductive approach in configurations, which consisted of letting students research, experiment, and prove their creations. The cognitive capacity was, therefore, indirectly stimulated. It was at this time that the theory of configuration (*Gestaltungslehre*) arose. Bauhaus left Weimar[1] (1925) and built another headquarters in Dessau[2] between 1925–1932 and in Berlin[3], 1932–1933, on the initiative of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Thus, from 1919–1933, Bauhaus's experiences were to establish an aesthetic of products. Of particular note are the series of chairs by Marcel Breuer - a student since 1920 at the Bauhaus - in a metal tube, characterizing the industrial production

of functional mass production furniture. Even today, these chairs are pieces of the high output and stand out for the aesthetics of this school. However, the best-known product is the Wassily chair, named after Wassily Kandinsky. Its symbolic value raised its market value. Today it can no longer be considered a popular product. It is generally considered a piece of design, as much a work of art. In it's time, the chair was popular; however, currently, attracted by the image of modern times and due to its symbolic value to Bauhaus, it is expensive, a status good and symbol for the elite. If, on the one hand, social stratification determines quality and taste for consumption, it also conditions material value to the symbolic. And these values may, over time, be reciprocally inverted. Everything depends on the imagined construction added to the product.

One can see in its historical trajectory that the Arts and Crafts and Jugendstil movements, De Stijl, and—after the Bauhaus school was waxed—The International Style in proposing innovative ideas, reveal a worldwide tendency of the creation and functional realization of the culture of mass, although in an embryonic form but already sufficiently perceptible. From the American perspective, it was a pragmatic form of social development. According to Hauffe (2008), the organization of the elements aims at the relationship between art, industry, and its aesthetic-social aspects. These professionals have gained prominence and over time become a reference in their respective areas, although they are not exceptions.

The influence of this school, however, was aimed at meeting the interests of the population with products of quality and functionality. However, in a way conscious of social needs, this development of functionality was guided in its practice by architects, artists, and theorists who knew the daily necessities and the work behind the questions of mass consumption. In 1928, Hannes Meyer was one of the leading scholars advocating for the social engagement of architects and designers, showing that the critical function of design is configuration (*Gestaltung*) with balance, technique, materials, and industrial production conditions meeting social needs. Thus, in short, the essential thing was to condition social projects to the needs of the population. However, over time and for a politically ideological issue, two fronts were marked by the design culture after World War II: one focused on Communism and the other on Capitalism.

The Industrial Design

The origin of the name design comes from the Italian *disegno*, a concept that was used from the Renaissance with the purpose of designing, drawing, and representing ideas. In England, the concept of design began to be employed in the 16th century, as planning for something with an object of art. Throughout design history, many definitions have been given to it: what it would start with, then what function it would have, what domain it was in, and what its main points were. Today, however, is still no different. In the German language, until 1945, the word design was not used; there was instead *Produktgestaltung* (composition of the product) or *Industrielle Formgebung* (conception of industrial form).

The literature on design opens a significant space for researchers interested in its aesthetic effects (Hauffe 2008). At the same time, due to its broad reach, some of its specialties—without prejudice to others—have been prioritized in academic research. Product design, graphic design, and fashion design, for example, have gained strength and professional prestige. Indeed, the growing demand for these professionals operating in the sectors of economic production has stimulated this status of the designer. In the same way that a work of art consecrated in fine arts, for example, always has a multiplicity of its meaning, the work of the designer in the visual arts also has it, now.

In Moscow, 1962, the Vnite was founded—an institute of research for technical aesthetics throughout the Soviet Union—which coordinated research and production in design through ten regional units (Bürdek, 2006). We defined a line of design for technical and social aesthetics with bionic designs, uniting nature and technique in harmonic configurations, encouraging rational design. This line of research and projects had the primary purpose of production and work as important factors contributing to the development of ergonomics. These factors contributed to the design functionality designed by the Russians with a technical aesthetic. This aesthetic also manifested itself in other former socialist countries, such as the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). These were not consumer goods but met the labor needs of the working population (fig. 1). The humanist goals of design should manifest themselves in individual interests following the purposes of production of society. Karl Clauss Dietel and Lutz Rudolph were the leading designers of the GDR.[4] Their projects, as a formal proposal, must meet the political and ideological ideals of the country, considering that through these projects, the user behaved compatibly with the political system of that country.

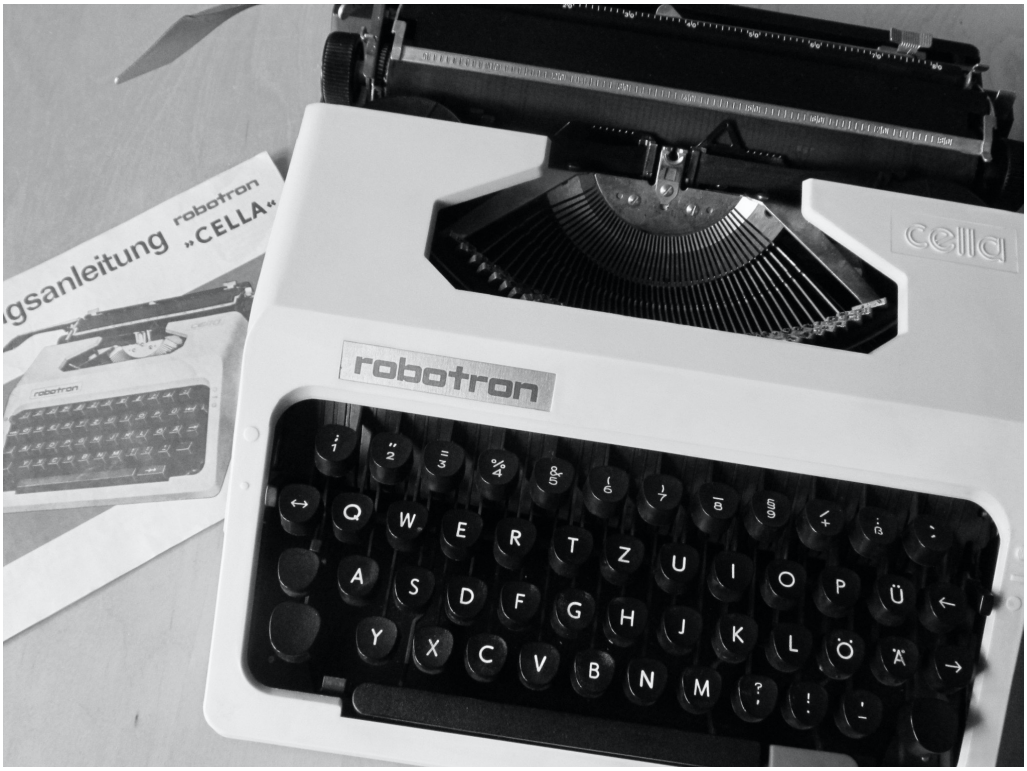

Figure 1. Typewriter Robotron Cella 1987. Designed by Karl Clauss Dietel.
Photo by Uwe Rohwedder. September 2017. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

In the 1960s and 1970s—as did the Russians, Socialist Germans, and Bauhaus school—social themes influenced the design of the market economy in the face of the influences of the political-ideological movements of that period. In this case, the development of industry, whether in the consumer or communist society, has an important aspect. Unlike other artistic manifestations, the "art" of the designer began to have a restricted relationship between object and user, an interaction, a dialog between the two. This "reciprocal appropriation" between designer and objectivity is what differentiates the work of creation. But what we have previously called "reciprocal appropriation" is only one of the distinguishing features inherent in the process of creation. Apart from this aspect, other segments of design have multiple productive activities. Here, one should register the product design, fashion, and graphics, besides, of course, the work of the architect and the artist, precisely because of the close relationship that has always existed and exists between these activities. They have always aimed at innovation.

With the movement of the Italian *Bel Design*, the characteristics of technical and formal innovation appear as a line—*Italian Line*—that stands out to the principles of the capitalist market. However, in the 1960s, the Italian countercurrent stood out, questioning society, seeking freedom, and rejecting repression. Then, it was with a concept design that the Italians expected a "revolutionary transformation" of society, enabling new and significant social projects. They would find a way, according to the revolutionaries, to contribute to the political transformation of the state.

Design and the cultural industry

But from what we have seen so far, a question becomes indispensable, mainly because we must also think of the binomial innovation/consumption. So, can the speed of this technological modernization one day be able to contemplate society independently of its social classes and make technology and consumption democratic? This question not only regards what the experts should do, but also the readers themselves. Democratizing access to the most sophisticated—and therefore, expensive—technologies interests us all. Whether a designer, lawyer, teacher, professional liberal or not, all workers, indistinctly, need technological innovations. For us, the answer to that question is not the most optimistic, but of course, we would like it to be.

What we truly see is the false democratization of consumption. Both the social classes more affluent and their strata, as other social groups, can consume in different ways (cash or credit) the same products and, in some cases, with the same design, functionality, and quality. How this happens, at least in these cases, the ideas of *kitsch* regarding Abraham Moles and of "simulacrum" in Jean Baudrillard disappear. It is easy to understand the reasoning. A product technologically surpassed and, among other things, with consecrated design, is often despised by the very class—the bourgeoisie—that transfer the product utilities for use by the urban middle classes. The macroeconomic theory, in which an increase in the index of industrial production is associated with the participation of financial capital that approximates social classes and democratizes consumption, must be subject to revaluations.

One question, again, is indispensable: does it really democratize? It should be noted that such consumption does not co-occur between the bourgeoisie and the economically subaltern classes. In spite of the technological speed that "ages" the product (and perhaps for this reason), the alternative to consuming the "garbage of luxury"—that is, what the bourgeoisie no longer wants, even discarding given technological obsolescence, physical form, and functionality. And we must still think of the following: although bourgeoisie and subaltern classes are part of the same universe of consumption (mass society), there are significant differences that must be observed. The former lives in a world in which all things (mainly technological innovations) come to be used immediately. The second, however, must wait. It will probably happen; however, it will not occur for some time. In this case, it will only take place with the technological obsolescence of the product and physical form—that is, the design has lost its charm and no longer seduces the consumer with higher purchasing power.

The importance of functionality that emerged with Bauhaus later influenced globalized production from the United States. However, we are referring to projects that are capable of dealing not only with the aspirations of the individual in society but also with the demand for a standard and mass industry. This situation led architecture and design to the ultimate consequences for obsolete object status and pollution today, favoring the goods and consumption market after World War II. Contemporaneously, for example, the design of Jonathan Ive produced in 1998 for Apple no longer has the same impact. And it could not be different. In mass society, with a few exceptions, innovation has a transient life. In a short time, the new product can turn into yet another disposable gadget.

Finally, the designer and his/her work, it seems, has much to do with this dynamic consumption. His/her work of elaborating forms of product presentation undoubtedly helps to seduce the consumer. It is the logic of the cultural industry, recorded Theodor Adorno in 1947, the game of seduction between the aesthetic form of the product function and the consumer. In any case, this professional's work meets the logic of capital, as well as so many other ways of producing wealth with the workforce. From this conception, as we have already noted at the beginning of this essay, Bauhaus when founded had nothing to do with it. Bauhaus's purposes were evident, as stated before.

Final Consideration

Just as a final consideration, and for the better insight of this essay, we remind the reader that in capitalist society, any and all work must generate wealth for the state, for society, and, of course, for those who have done the work. This sequence cannot be interrupted, under penalty of generating serious social problems and major economic crises, as the historian Leo Huberman recorded with great pertinence in his book, *Man's Worldly Goods - The Story of the Wealth of Nations* (2009). The artist, among many other professionals, is no exception; it is a general rule, and as such, his/her creative work must generate wealth, which is absolutely legitimate and necessary. Artists who are presently recognized as talented and consecrated have worked in the Bauhaus Institute to functionally and aesthetically innovate the shape of objects in their works, thereby giving new contours to the relationship between art and industry—and more than that, still showing perfect compatibility between production and mass consumption, something innovative for that time when mass culture ideologized and worked for the insatiable consumption of capital was not yet talked about. Here, it is worth remembering the affirmation of the American poet Ezra Pound[5] in *ABC of Reading* (1934) when he said, "the artist is the antenna of the race". Beside Pound affirmation Marshall McLuhan wrote in his Introduction to the Second Edition of Understanding Media:

> The power of the arts to anticipate future social and technological developments, by a generation and more, has long been recognized. In this century Ezra Pound called the artist 'the antennae of the race'. Art as radar acts as 'an early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrasts with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression. If an art is an 'early warning system,' to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to media study but to the development of media controls.
>
> When radar was new it was found necessary to eliminate the balloon system for city protection that had preceded radar. The balloons got in the way of the electric feedback of the new radar information. Such may well prove to be the case with our existing school curriculum, to say nothing of the generality of the arts. We can afford to use only those portions of them that enhance the perception of our technologies, and their psychic and social consequences. Art as a radar environment takes on the function of indispensable perceptual training rather than the role of a privileged diet for the elite. [6]

Of course, it makes perfect sense. As it is known, this was, in fact, one of the wishes of Walter Gropius, the founder of this school. However, the political and ideological use of mass culture masterfully analyzed by the philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer on the Cultural Industry has nothing to do with the work of Bauhaus artists. What they wanted, however, was the popularization of art, in an attempt to democratize the consumption of products that, until then, only the elites of society could buy. Moreover, it is essential to realize that these artists did not adapt their work to final production on an industrial scale for mass consumption in benefit of capital. Adorno, however, had the merit, a little later, of perceiving the political and ideological use that German market was making of mass culture, at that time already notoriously living under the aegis of Nazi-fascism that permeated the European continent. It was an instrument of further co-optation of the population, using all the communication means available at that time. The Bauhaus artists, of course, had nothing to do with it. They had no political plan to subvert the established order. Their work had no political-ideological content that could counteract the current political system—regardless of individual ideologies and beliefs, even against.

If this school was based on the heterogeneity of its members, then the desire for the democratization of art was unanimous. So much so that at one point in Bauhaus's trajectory, its founder was keenly engaged in negotiating with German industrialists the production and commercialization of works of the school on an industrial scale. These artists, of course, had their political and ideological preferences, but given the heterogeneity of the group, there was no unity of thought in matters of ideology and politics, which weakened any major manifestation in this regard.

The criticism of Bauhaus for having objected to the marketing of its products shows the fact that its products have later become objects of the consumer society is legitimate and understandable. More than that, it was a matter of survival. No institution in capitalism can survive without adapting to it. Even nonprofit institutions must adapt to the rules of the capital market. In these terms, therefore, it is good to note that, with some possible exceptions, the Bauhaus artists had their political and ideological choices, and they were not uninformed, puerile, or naive. They knew what they wanted. Like all people, they needed to survive with the production of their work. They were talented artists, some less politicized but with a keen civic conscience, who wanted to see the usefulness of their creation, of their products, circulating among the population. When Walter Gropius designed the Adler automobile to reconcile the exterior aerodynamic lines and curves of the

vehicle with the complexity of its technical functions, he was looking to give the car more functionality, but also looked forward to the financial reward that his work could bring him. Thus, it is clear that political and ideological issues would be of the same background. Something similar would happen with the photographer László Moholy-Nagy, alerting the Bauhaus artists to the growing importance of the media from that moment on. See the following images of covers designed by Moholy-Nagy. He suggested to his colleagues at the Bauhaus that they think of artworks involving photography, as imagery work was gaining more space as a vehicle of communication in modern society. László Moholy-Nagy was not just defending his interests, he was also showing the Bauhaus artists the emergence of photography as a new communication tool increasingly solicited in messages and reports of the time (fig. 2). Finally, the Bauhaus was dissolved after 1933. Even then, it still had or still has its theoretical and practical principles alive in a fragmented way. This sequence is still being discussed as a normal process of an event with a beginning, middle, and end, but it undoubtedly left its legacy to art history and art institutions. It has not disappeared over time; it remains. However, despite the diversity of thought within this school, and perhaps for that reason, its members—in their own way—left significant contributions to the arts and its followers.

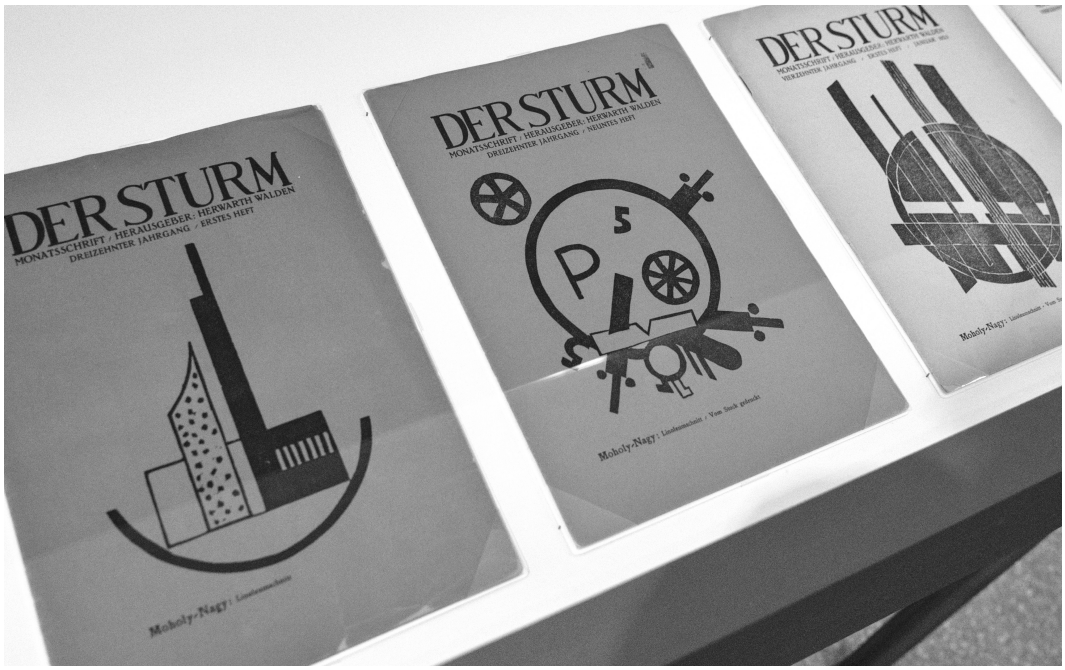

Figure 2. Magazine covers for *Der Sturm*, by László Moholy-Nagy.
Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York.
Photo by Edwardh Blake, June 11, 2016. Linsenced under CC BY 2.0

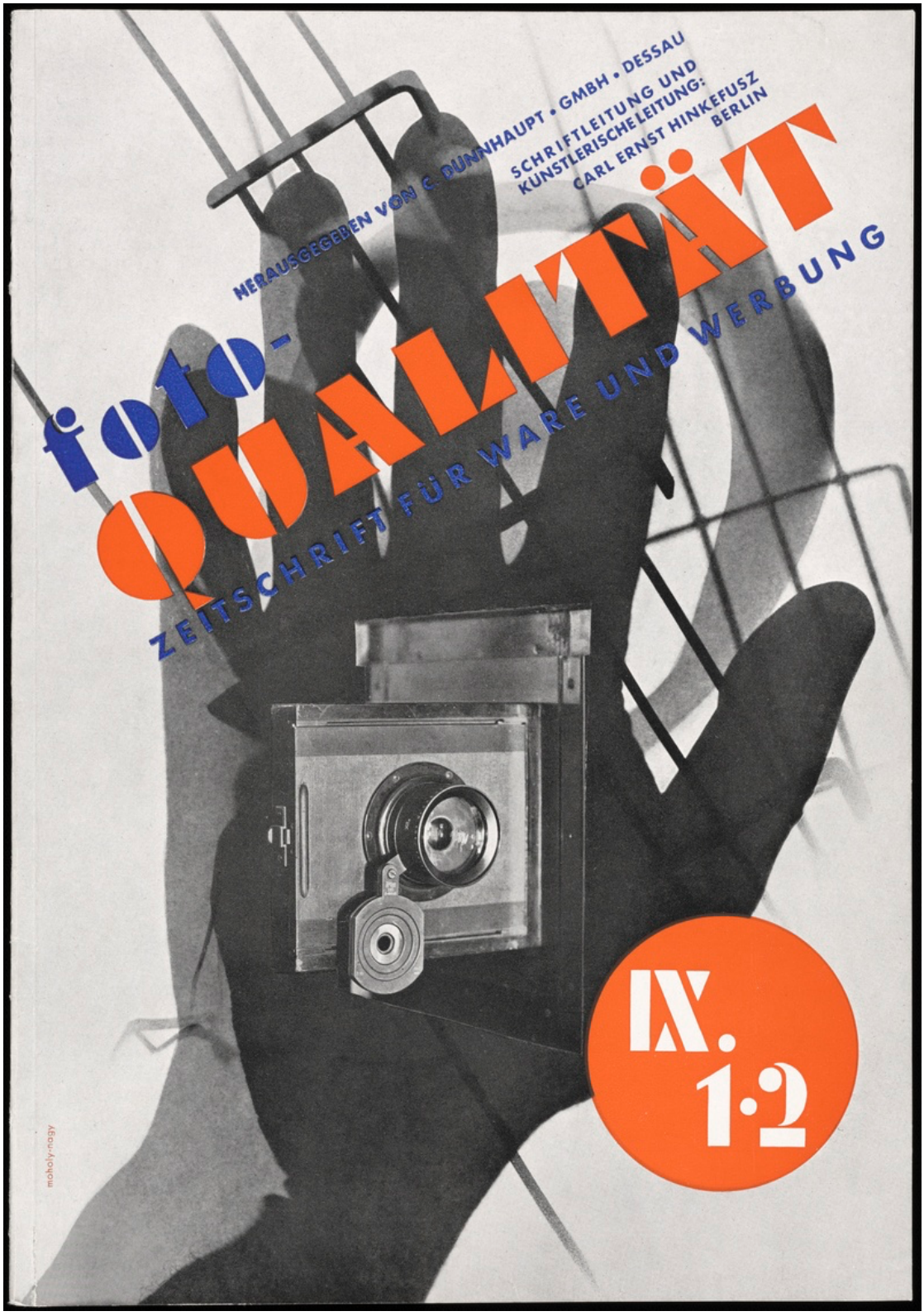

Figure 3. László Moholy-Nagy, Cover for Foto-Qualität (Photo-Quality) Magazine, 1931.
The Moholy-Nagy Foundation

Notes

1. "The cradle of the Bauhaus is located in Thuringia: in Weimar in 1919, this was where everything started that was later to revolutionize architecture, design and art all over the world. The foundation stone for the Bauhaus was already laid in 1902 by Henry van de Velde when he established the Kunstgewerbliches Seminar (College of Applied Arts) in Weimar, which in 1908 became the Grand-Ducal Saxon College of Applied Arts. In 1919, Walter Gropius combined the institution with the former Grand-Ducal College of Art to form the Weimar State Bauhaus. Until 1925, it continued to work in the building designed by van de Velde for the College of Applied Arts. Walter Gropius's Director's Office, designed in 1923 and reconstructed in 1999, is located in the College of Art building opposite, also designed by van de Velde, along with reliefs and mural paintings by Herbert Bayer and Joost Schmidt. Today, the building houses the Bauhaus University of Weimar, and along with the other Bauhaus sites in Weimar and Dessau it has been on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1996," Thuringia: Birthplace of the Bauhaus https://www.bauhaus100.com/the-centenary/thuringia/

2. "Between 1925 and 1932, the Bauhaus in Dessau enjoyed its heyday as a school of design. The liberal atmosphere and sense of a new era dawning in the city of Dessau at the time provided the Bauhaus members with many opportunities for personal development and expression – as a college based on *Reformpädagogik* (an educational theory favoring the promotion of creativity), as a production site for serially manufactured product design, and as a focus for experimentation in a new approach to the theatre and stage – as well as for architecture and for the shared life of an artists' colony," Bauhaus Dessau Foundation https://www.bauhaus100.com/the-centenary/the-bauhaus-association-2019/bauhaus-dessau-foundation/

3. "Many members of the Bauhaus and the modernist movement had close links to Berlin, the capital of the avant-garde. From 1932 until it was closed in 1933 under the pressure of the National Socialists Berlin was also the third and last city in which the Bauhaus was located. Bauhaus master Johannes Itten also founded his own art college in Berlin in 1926, with Georg Muche and Lucia Moholy, among others, teaching there. Designer and architect Marcel Breuer and graphic artist Herbert Bayer also had offices in the capital after their time at the Bauhaus," Berlin: Bauhaus in the Metropolis https://www.bauhaus100.com/the-centenary/berlin/

4. "Clauss Dietel und Lutz Rudolph – Gestaltung ist Kultur," Sammlung Industrielle Gestaltung Berlin, October 24, 2002 to March 9, 2003.

5. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934), 73.

6. Marshall McLuhan in Gordon, W.T. *Understanding Media Critical Edition*. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 16. https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2014/04/26/artists-as-the-antennae-of-the-race/

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Author Biography

Christiane Wagner has been a visiting professor and researcher of Aesthetics and Sciences of Communication, UNICAMP/USP. Web of Science ResearcherID: T-9766-2017.