

# COLOUR THEORIES OF KLEE, ITTEN AND KANDINSKY AS A PARADOX OF AESTHETIC SHARING IN BAUHAUS

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## Abstract

This article is dedicated to the colour theories by Paul Klee, Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky, presenting them as instances of multidimensional sharing. The synthetic Bauhaus colour theory might be examined from philosophical, aesthetical, culturological, ethical, value and other perspectives. The article briefly discusses three interpretations of colour phenomenon based on non-classical art philosophy – the dynamic artistic investigations carried out by the Bauhaus colourists, originating from the influence of Eastern philosophy and aesthetics that has determined major radical shifts of the Western artistic consciousness. Primary focus is placed on the contribution of the best known representatives of this school to the history of design aesthetics, and, specifically – the research of colour phenomenon inspired by the disillusionment in Western rationalist worldview and the logic of binary thought. The text analyses a paradoxical sharing of diverse conceptual approaches within Bauhaus: interweaving of various aesthetic programmes, innovative exchange of practical and theoretical knowledge in joint workshops. It addresses different aspects of the intentionally undefined, unfinished and open artistic research of said authors, which pose a challenge to the official Bauhaus school programme saturated with a spirit of rationalism and functionalism.

**Keywords:** Colour theory, aesthetics, Bauhaus, design, Itten, Klee, Kandinsky, sharing paradox

The Bauhaus colour theory or the sum of ideologically adjacent theories might be viewed as an ontologised vision of the colour phenomenon combining many original ideas, where the topical problems of arts is considered beyond a framework of narrowly perceived aesthetic discourse. It incorporates the philosophical questions of life, death, spirit and matter, equally questioning the phenomenon of colour, which is spiritualised, emphasising the aesthetical and stressing the ethical dimension. This theory might serve as a paradoxical example of multidimensional sharing that could be analysed in several ways. On the one hand we might discuss the activities of the authors of colour theories (Itten, Kandinsky and Klee) within the Bauhaus school, the connections and intersections of their teaching methods with the official programme proposed by the school management represented by rational architects. On the other hand, the Bauhaus colour theory that has formed within a tension of the rational and irrational methodical

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fields might be discussed as an example of paradoxical aesthetic sharing, placing the emphasis on the influence that the colour theory of this school had within a wider context, i.e. design-oriented schools around the world, which have adopted the model of Bauhaus colour theory – it was taught as part of the preliminary course presenting an interaction of form and colour. The most innovative part of the Bauhaus *curriculum*, according to Leah Dickerman<sup>2</sup>, was unrelated to the 1919 programme of the school's founder Walter Gropius, but rather associated with the preliminary course prepared by Johannes Itten, who headed creative workshops of sculpture, metal, wood, weaving and fresco. This course was later taught by *László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers*, and together with a supplementary course in colour and form that was taught by Kandinsky and Klee, it was mandatory for all students from 1921 to 1930. It was considered the most distinctive feature of the Bauhaus school<sup>3</sup>.

The then quite radical character of this course was determined by the eccentric and charismatic personality of Johannes Itten, a gifted painter and teacher, also known for his interest in Eastern philosophy. He had introduced original unconventional teaching methodologies that were quite unusual in the academic world, yet today after many decades they have become widely applicable – along the psychological aspects of perception of creative phenomenon, the preliminary course was supplemented with the oriental corporeality concept; the colour theory was expanded by combining the mathematical, analytical schematic method and a radically opposite – intuitive, emotional approach, associated with the spreading of the creative impulses of the unconscious.

A complex analysis of circumstances of emergence of the innovative colour theories of the Bauhaus school (1919–1933) seamlessly unveils the conceptual transformations of traditional aesthetic theory, disclosing its associations with the aesthetic ideas of non-classical art philosophy and East Asian nations. These transformations gain special significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Colour theories of the Bauhaus adherers, marking gradual establishment of new modernist aesthetic theory and design artistic practice, developed immediately after World War I, when Germany went through moods of defeat and despair that were also characteristic to the turn of the centuries – when the resignation following the end of the old world entwines with the hope for the tomorrow and reassessment of values. This is where the radicalism of these theories springs from.

Itten, Kandinsky, Klee and Feininger were the key Bauhaus theoreticians researching colour problems. They have come to recognise the significance of the colour phenomenon and the possibilities of its emotional impact – and they all came from a background of late neo-romanticism, which was heavily influenced by non-classical art philosophy and which later expanded into symbolism. Later they have

<sup>2</sup> Leah Dickerman, graduate of Harvard College and Columbia University, PhD (Art theory), since 2008 curator of Painting and Sculpture dept. at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMa).

<sup>3</sup> B. Bergdoll, L. Dickerman: *Bauhaus 1919-1933: workshops for modernity*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2009, 15.

proceeded through creative explorations in fauvism, expressionism, abstractionism and other major modernist art trends, quite often indirectly debating with the pursuits in the area of colour carried out by Piet Mondrian and De Stijl group, which opposed the spontaneous trends in modernism. Hence, through the investigation of the colour phenomenon they have not only summarised personal experience and practical pursuits in painting, but also creatively transferred them into the colour problem field of earlier classical modernism. Therefore, the analysis (actualisation) of colour concepts that have emerged at Bauhaus and were affected by ideas of classical modernity provides the development of contemporary design with ample invaluable educational, theoretical and practical material applicable in the future studies of contemporary design creative process.

Aesthetic ideas formed within Bauhaus occupy a special place in the history of Western design aesthetics, even though one must admit that in late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there have been schools and scholars who have raised and successfully implemented similar objectives: pursuing an organic link between different disciplines, craft and art; applying the then novel teaching models and principles of lecturing art subjects. There even was an architectural analogy of the Bauhaus school – in 1907 Bernard Pankok designed a unique for that time glass and concrete building in Stuttgart, intended as the *atelier* space for the guest artists.

Why did Bauhaus become the most prominent example? Two explanations are possible: on the one hand, the dramatic historic climate of the beginning of the century and the political and social events of the time have formed an aura of uniqueness, while the founder of the school Walter Gropius put a lot of effort to promote the novelty of the school and to practically implement the new ideas. On the other hand, I would assume that the rise of this school might be associated with charismatic, diverse and multifaceted personalities of exceptionally talented artists, whose joint effort has produced a unique result – probably the last (after Goethe's) magnificent synthetic theory of colour in the history of modern Western art. The director of the school and rational architect W. Gropius invited a number of prominent artists of the time to lecture at the school, and among them were painters Paul Klee, Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky – all oriented towards irrational, intuitivist art philosophy and Eastern aesthetic and artistic ideas. Due to the intersection of different philosophical attitudes, both rational and irrational, the non-classical aesthetic ideas and principles of artistic creation that have emerged at this school still remain a subject of harsh academic discussions.

Another point of interest to me in this article is a unique cultural paradox, which can be unlocked by looking at the origins of the school in question: on the one hand, Bauhaus does not have a consistent art theory or philosophy, yet, on the other hand, it would be difficult to negate the obvious fact that synthetic colour theory created at this school is a recognisable theoretical model directly associated with conceptual shifts of modern art. Further investigation into the ideological origins of the Bauhaus colour theory reveals that the main block of these innovative

colour ideas of design aesthetics have emerged from conflicting theoretical and philosophical influences, when the orientalist and non-classical art philosophy and aesthetics confronted the techno-functional vision of the school favoured by the architects.

Although today scholars agree that the Bauhaus school did not develop consistent artistic language, the tension between design (rational discipline) and fine arts produced a uniquely viable and suggestive synthetic colour theory and an associated artistic practice, which, looking at it today from a wider historical perspective, does not demonstrate any diverse approaches. These particular approaches might be interpreted as a conflicting, yet successful example of aesthetic sharing. The idealistic objective of the school to create *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art seemed like an external consolidation of diverse approaches, but it was subject to different interpretations: the architects focussed on industrial production, dedicating craft workshops to produce industrial prototypes, while the Bauhaus colourists presented the art practices to students like a path towards spirituality.

In this article I shall discuss from the *sharing* point of view the investigations of colour concepts by the most influential representatives of Bauhaus; the colour study by the famous painter and knowledgeable theoretician W. Kandinsky, P. Klee's artistic investigation and the interpretation of the colour phenomenon by perhaps a lesser known painter Johannes Itten. Within the context of sharing, the activities of these artists might be presented in several ways: on the one hand, it is possible to analyse the influence their theories, teaching and painting exerted upon Bauhaus school, on the other hand, the contrasting integral aspects of their colour theories might also be articulated as a form of sharing – here we would speak about overlapping of synesthesia, influences of Eastern cultures, diverse art genres and disciplines within the colour theory.

Itten's and Kandinsky's theories seem systematic compared to Klee's – there are texts dedicated to each colour, yet disguised under the rationality of form there are Klee-like intuitive interpretations of the colour phenomenon, at the heart of which we can trace the ideas of oriental aesthetics. This particular aspect reveals the sharing paradox at Bauhaus – the pedagogical model of the best known Western design school, which was later adopted by design-oriented schools worldwide is construed on the basis of Japanese and Chinese art and the principles of Chan, Zen and Mazdaism. None of the three authors has presented clear definitions of colour: Kandinsky did not dismiss the possibility that practice (including his own) might differ from theory, Klee thought it was unacceptable to regard any artistic phenomenon as being superior to others, while Itten spoke about the need to develop the subjective and intuitive child-like perception of colour. Bauhaus colourists see the research as an open question – expressive possibilities of a phenomenon are presented through continuous improvisation. Psychological principles of colour perception are disclosed in their artistic schemata – an aggregate of drawings, diaries, teaching notes and explanatory theories.

## Colour schemata of Paul Klee

The basis of Klee's worldview and the resulting original concept of painting aesthetics lie in the East Asian aesthetics and art tradition, which the painter was heavily attracted to, even to the point of becoming a collector. Theoretical knowledge and interpretations of artistic practices of Daoism, Chan, Zen – *zenga*, *sumi-e*, *shakuhachi* and others – assisted Klee in creating a multifaceted interdisciplinary artistic system that revealed the fundamental creative principles of modern painting aesthetics. From the same source come the basis for his colour concept and the psychological strategy of perception of the phenomenon.

It is difficult to accurately define Klee's colour theory, as we have to look for it in his diaries and notes, extract it from sometimes conflicting thoughts – such attempts can easily turn to absurd, given Klee's use of satire, paradox and metaphor. It is a good question, whether the author, who was a master of innuendo, had an objective to create a logical and consistent colour theory? It is more likely, that the concept of colour represents an organic part of his creative schemata that might be perceived only together with form theory and other insights. The fundamental principle of colour theory is concerned with the constantly changing interaction of colours. "Ingres, they say, is supposed to have organized repose. I should like, beyond pathos, to organize motion,"<sup>4</sup> writes Klee. Nature studies were of a less interest to him compared to the internal aesthetic processes, the ability to focus upon the contents of personal colour palette and the possibility to *freely* fantasise on the plane of colour.

Klee's aesthetic concept of art's meaning is similar to Bergson's equivocal intuitivism, Georges Bataille's attempts to "grasp the ungraspable", as well as the ideas of advocates of non-classical life philosophy, when aesthetics is seen as a movement, being or living in the creative act. When one looks at the works of this artist – their unique sensitivity towards relations between colours, as well as their musical qualities make an impression that the artist defies all borders between arts or barriers of expressive means; the oppositions mysteriously entwine into a unified texture of colour, form and line; the artist's hands turn even the most serious matters into spontaneous creative play; elements of script, letters and mystic hieroglyphs dance in squares of different colours; a brush-written word visualises the rhythm of language, where poetry becomes colour (*Einst dem Grau der Nacht Enttauch*, 1918) and the voice turns into a magic fabric (*Das Vokaltuch der Kammersängerin Rosa Silber*, 1922).

Johannes Itten, a colleague from Bauhaus, who discusses many representatives of old and modern painting in his *Kunst der Farbe* (1961), wrote about Klee: "Klee's work generally presents an uncommon breadth in the use of color resources. He practiced all the possibilities of color effect, and cannot be reduced to any specific character of coloration or expression. He was an austere, cheerfully somber melody of all the

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<sup>4</sup> Klee's quote in: D. Chevalier: *Klee*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1979, 26.

chromatic entities beneath, above and upon the earth. Klee loved colors and treated them accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

Klee's orientalism in art and colour interpretations did not manifest directly, but rather through accentuations of flow, anticipation, intuition, pause and underlying unconscious creative forces, similar to the philosophy of Zen and Buddhism, which the painter had good knowledge of. The Eastern line in Klee's works is represented by calligraphic watercolours, series of works reminding of Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) and a polyphonic, playful Baroque aesthetics of the Kabuki theatre. The laconic and expressive minimalist works Klee painted in his late years strongly resemble the old ink technique of Japanese masters and might be compared to *haiga* and *zenga* painting. Noting merely superficial similarities of form is not enough, in this case Klee's philosophical approach is important, as a certain position of an artist, which was reflected both in theory (diaries, lecture outlines) and in painting aesthetics, the principal aim of which was, to my point of view, an attempt to picture, or convey eidos, the spirit of the subject. Klee looks for complex and significant matters in a playful manner, with irony directed towards himself and the world, in a single breath, as a child in play. His humour is similar to the auto irony contained in the artistic practice of the great masters of Zen painting tradition, when any attempt to classify the reality into strict categories appears absurd and raises a smile on one's face.

The aspects I have mentioned above might be traced in the painter's works; they are also present in Klee's thoughts on colour. Although it is frequently said that Klee became interested in colour after his journey to Tunisia at the age of 35, whereas before that he would maintain the position that (quoted by D. Chevalier) "color appears in my work only as an embellishment of the plastic impressions<sup>6</sup>", even his graphic works allow us to discuss colour. Also, in his diaries before 1914 Klee mentions the search for colour, for instance in 1902 he writes: "Serious color studies of nudes and heads. <...> This month of February is devoted to color<sup>7</sup>".

When discussing the early works of Paul Klee, attention should be drawn to his special disposition towards black colour (later this relation emerges in the series of "magic" colour squares). When analysing his etchings and drawings performed using different techniques, we see an especially rich palette of black and white halftones, enriched with nuances of experimental textures, different depths, the tonality impressed upon the self-made paper. The painter did not differentiate drawing from writing, regarding them as essentially identical<sup>8</sup> – a position similar to the tradition of Chinese and Japanese ink painting and calligraphy, where writing was attributed to the fine arts.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Itten: *The Art of Colour*, USA: John Wiley&Sons 1973, 102.

<sup>6</sup> C Chevalier, op. cit., 11.

<sup>7</sup> P. Klee: *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1968, 135-136.

<sup>8</sup> Chevalier, op. cit., 12.

## Colour concept of Johannes Itten

Sharing might also be understood as a reinterpretation of different artists' ideas to create one's own theory and this is the case we see at the origins of Itten's theory: three of four authors of colour theories that Itten was fascinated with were multifaceted personalities of wide (sometimes conflicting) views and irrational philosophical attitudes – in fact, they were more like artists rather than scholars. Their colour theories were mostly based on intuition, arising from metaphysical and theosophical (*Runge*), or sentimental, idealistic and immanent (*Goethe, Hölzel*) worldview. French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul is perhaps the only one to be regarded a strictly logical, rational and analytical scholar.

Norbert M. Schmitz identifies one major characteristic difference between Itten and his teachers (the said *Hölzel and his teacher in Geneva* Eugène Samuel Grasset) and that is the “spiritual vision”<sup>9</sup>, through the prism of which Itten saw (and set) the rules of form and colour. Itten's concept of colour was formed balancing between the rational form and often irrational content, when it was important to surrender and be led by one's senses<sup>10</sup>. Itten liked the ideas of a German psychologist, philosopher and graphology Ludwig Klages, who, inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, spoke about the life-creating spirit and the destructive rational mind. On the other hand, despite his fascination with Mazdaism, Itten was not at home with the extremes. He admits (and maintains) the significance of sensual and unconscious beginning upon creativity, yet he agrees that other features are important as well. “As the tortoise draws its limbs into its shell at need, so the artist reserves his scientific principles when working intuitively. But would it be better for the tortoise to have no legs?” asks Itten in the introduction to his book *The Art of Color* (*Kunst der Farbe*) and immediately paradoxically adds: “The word and its sound, form and its color, are vessels of a transcendental essence that we dimly surmise. <...> The primeval essence of color is a phantasmagorical resonance, light become music.”<sup>11</sup>

*An obvious example of trans-cultural sharing is the inclusion of Mazdaism, an ancient Persian cult of fire into the teaching process and the scale of its spreading at Bauhaus. Itten's texts contain descriptions of characteristic Eastern artistic practices, along with accounts of how he applied these practices to form an individual teaching methodology at Bauhaus and how his students managed to work following the methods of Japanese ink painting, haiga or zenga techniques. He writes: “After endless practice, the strokes at last flow effortlessly from the brush; and in the same way, the Chinese or Japanese painter practices the lexicon of nature until he can reproduce it at will. This discipline presupposes mental concentration and physical relaxation. Meditation as practiced*

<sup>9</sup> N.M. Schmitz: *The Preliminary Course under Johannes Itten in:* Fiedler J. Feierabend P.: *Bauhaus*, Germany: Tandem Verlag GmbH 2006, 366.

<sup>10</sup> J. Itten: *Mein Vorkurs am Bauhaus (My Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus)*, Ravensburg 1963, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Itten, op. cit., 13.

particularly in Chan, or Zen, Buddhism provides the foundation of this training of mind and body<sup>12</sup>. Most Itten's statements do not require interpretation as they have a direct literal connection to the tradition of oriental art and clearly demonstrate the origins of his colour theory – Itten's colour concept relies on non-classical philosophy of art and Eastern aesthetic principles and the Mazdaism doctrine is inseparable from his colour theory. The latter factor made decisive influence to his personality and affected the decision making process: inclusion of Mazdaism practice elements in the teaching methodology was one of the reasons he was forced to leave Bauhaus. Itten quit teaching practice at the school in 1923 following a conflict with the school's director H. Meyer, a radically rational architect.

Certain “law of wholeness” might be seen as the key principle of Mazdaism and other Eastern religious practices (Daoism, Chan, Zen) and this law refers to both the unity with the surrounding world and the harmony of body and mind (spirit). Such unity (bearing different names) is the objective of Eastern religious practices seeking to release the creative and intuitive beginnings of the personality and to teach relaxation of hidden and irrational creative forces. By practicing Mazdaism, Itten raised these objectives for himself and the students who attended his *Vorkurs* at Bauhaus. Students have helped Itten to expand his colour concept and Itten included their drawings and experiments into his book *Kunst der Farbe*. Hence, sharing is present in his analysis of the colour phenomenon, in this case it is an exchange of ideas with students and results of such exchange can be found in the book.

Although W. Gropius was not overly happy with these eccentricities at the school, many specific Itten's ideas about teaching strategies and expansion of creativity research field to the level of metaphysical problems have remained in the centre of Bauhaus teaching and aesthetics<sup>13</sup>. His theory (although written in different form) has no essential difference from the ideas expressed by two other Bauhaus irrationalists Klee and Kandinsky. Itten employed the Bauhaus ideology and even major geometrical forms – “popular epitome of Bauhaus rationalis”<sup>14</sup> to express his metaphysical philosophy; through emphasis of relations with theosophical symbols he presented transcendental content to his students.

Recalling the Bauhaus period, in 1963 Itten wrote that the chaos and striking losses caused by war brought about the confusion in all spheres. Students were involved in continuous discussions and search for new spiritual worldview. Itten claimed he got interested in Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West, 1918–1922), and while studying it came to the conclusion that our scholarly-technical civilisation has arrived to a critical point. Itten did not think that slogans like “back to the craft” or “link between art and technology” adopted by Bauhaus will solve all problems. He said he studied oriental

<sup>12</sup> Itten, op. cit., 49.

<sup>13</sup> N.M. Schmitz in: Fiedler J. Feierabend P.: *Bauhaus*, Germany: Tandem Verlag GmbH 2006, 367.

<sup>14</sup> J. Fiedler, P. Feierabend, op. cit., 367.



philosophy with focus on Persian Mazdaism and early Christianity and came to understand that our outward-directed scientific research and technologies may only achieve balance if they were used together with inward-directed thought and spiritual powers<sup>15</sup>.

When exposing the objective and subjective perception of the colour phenomenon, Itten's colour theory focuses on the *relation*; he does not try to combine the rational and irrational ways of perception into a single one, but is looking for harmony and balance. When such balance is discovered, it will not be finite, but rather will become an individual point of reference for every artist, an attitude or set of personal rules, a kind of creative signpost. According to Itten, if new ideas need to be expressed in new artistic form, the harmony between painter's physical, sensual, spiritual and intellectual forces should be developed and coordinated respectively. "Such stance determined my further teaching methods at Bauhaus. To form the creative essence of a human, to encompass everything was my programme and I continued to defend it at all Bauhaus board meetings."<sup>16</sup> This programme is also reflected in his colour concept.

The key position of Itten's colour theory regards the original, pre-experience source of authentic creativity as a matter of highest significance, while the matters learned and comprehensible to the intellect are second-rate and can become a burden to the artist. Although the composite schemes of colour aspects appear fairly simple, Itten's comments clearly show that beneath the laconism of form hides a complicated multilayered content from which it becomes evident that Itten's colour theory encompasses nearly all possible aspects of creative process: not only the formal subjects as composition, form, etc., but also such 'global' phenomena as ethics, language, history, culture or even depth psychology exploring the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. Such enclosing approach, a multilevel analysis of colour phenomenon might be illustrated with an example, when discussing one of seven types of contrasts, the contrast of warm and cold, Itten introduces another eight verbal structures, eight opposing pairs (shadow-sun, transparent-opaque, sedative-stimulant, rare-dense, airy-earthly, near-far, light-heavy, wet-dry), which, according to him, represent diverse impressions, reflecting the universality of warm-cold contrast<sup>17</sup>. This and similar examples of overlapping contrast types, when one is explained with a help of another, by inserting concepts of plasticity or perspective, the perception of colour phenomenon and possible explanations of its symbolism interrelation, are close to the tradition of Eastern art aesthetics, where even the simplest form might be perceived as certain aesthetic universum expressing the structure of the world and metaphysical balance of *yin* and *yang*.

<sup>15</sup> J. Itten: *Design and Form - the Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, NY: Reinhold Publishing Corporation 1964, 12-13. (Org. *Mein Vorkurs am Bauhaus: Gestaltun-und Formenlehre*, Ravensburg: Otto Mayer Verlag 1963)

<sup>16</sup> Й. Иттен: *Мой форкурс в Баухаузе и других школах. Искусство формы*. Москва: Издатель Д. Аронов 2011, 10.

<sup>17</sup> J. Itten, op. cit., 65.

## Kandinsky's colour concept

The colour theory of Wassily Kandinsky, mostly presented in his book *On the Spiritual in Art* (Original title *Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei*) in 1911 is part of the unofficial Bauhaus manifest, essentially different from the one declared by Walter Gropius in 1919. This book, which might be called Kandinsky's East-inspired ode to abstract painting, was quite influential to the Bauhaus design school even before the author himself was invited to teach there. At the suggestion of Paul Klee, Walter Gropius invited Kandinsky to Bauhaus not only because of his modern theories, but also in the hope to have a supporter in the power struggle<sup>18</sup> with another Bauhaus lecturer, the eccentric Johannes Itten. Paradoxically, the director of the school soon came to realise that the position of this seemingly reserved artist was not that much different from those propagated by advocate of Mazdaism Itten or Buddhism adept Klee. So, instead of becoming an opponent to the said lecturers, Kandinsky (of Eastern descent himself – his family was from Buryatia, near the border with China) enthusiastically supported the other two Bauhaus colourists permeated with oriental ideas, and in particular Klee, with whom Kandinsky maintained long-term friendship, sharing similar views towards art. For over a decade at Bauhaus, Kandinsky spread the ideas of non-classical Eastern philosophy, continually speaking of “inner necessity” (*innere Notwendigkeit*), which he regarded the fundament of all artistic phenomena, and which was even dubbed “a Kandinsky mantra”<sup>19</sup> by later researchers of Bauhaus.

Kandinsky's colour theory might also be considered criticism towards verbal, materialism-oriented modernity, which he regarded as “business which has nothing to do with art”<sup>20</sup> and which was contrary to his oriental perception of human personality, where the limits between the physical body and psyche or spirit are erased. The Bauhaus strive to create *Gesamtkunstwerk* was in line with Kandinsky's views. The term was originally coined by Richard Wagner, whom Kandinsky appreciated (*Lohengrin* was his most admired piece). He also accepted the theosophy of Helena Blavatskaja – an eclectic and esoteric spiritualist Buddhism, which later influenced the *New Age* movement of the sixties. When discussing the origins of Kandinsky's colour theory, his friendships with musicians and composers shall be taken into account. A synaesthete himself, Kandinsky had an especially sensitive perception of music. Without knowing his synaesthetic abilities it is impossible to perceive the colour theory: his *colour vocabulary* was written on the basis of musical associations; the painter called a colour research “spiritual exer-

<sup>18</sup> N.F. Weber: *The Bauhaus Group / Six Masters of Modernism*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press 2011, 220.

<sup>19</sup> Hal Foster's quote in: B. Bergdoll, L. Dickerman: *Bauhaus 1919-1933: workshops for modernity*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2009, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Kandinsky quote in: B. Bergdoll, L. Dickerman: *Bauhaus 1919-1933: workshops for modernity*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2009, 24.

cises”, seeing colours and forms as an expression of feelings, emotions and thoughts, arising out of the “inner necessity”<sup>21</sup>.

The association of colour theory with music so often stressed by him is multilayered: although Kandinsky creates a certain network of specific associations, where different colours are matched by different instruments, tones, etc. – of utmost significance to him is the underlying analogy of painting and music, which he draws believing that music is a phenomenon inborn to humans, a kind of natural premise. Different qualities characteristic to musical structures (movement, rhythm) are attributed to colours in order to show the inward-orientation of the colour phenomenon, which is expressed through abstract language of art forms. According to Kandinsky, borrowing of methods from certain arts or subjects for the others can only be successful when the fundamental principles are shared.

Rejection of direct representation in art brings Kandinsky ideologically close not only to Schönberg (their friendship is often emphasised by biographers), but also to our best known painter and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis; their priority in the genesis of abstract art is subject to significant debate.<sup>22</sup> Just like Kandinsky, Čiurlionis was heavily influenced by the oriental tendencies of late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Nietzschean philosophy; the spiritual was prioritised in his works (and life), while the material values were of little significance. The works of Čiurlionis, who produced his first abstract paintings in 1906–1907 (i.e. only a year later than Adolf Hölzel, whose *Komposition in Rot painted in 1905 is often regarded as the first piece of abstract art*), have undoubtedly influenced Kandinsky. According to academician A. Sidorov, who has been Kandinsky’s close friend for many years, the latter often mentioned his wish to “to defeat Čiurlionis”<sup>23</sup>.

Kandinsky’s colour theory encompasses not only the relationship between painting and music, but also a variety of sensory experiences; it expands in diverse directions at unexpected excursions, when the emphasis is placed on the surrounding environment and nature (the latter is often referenced). Kandinsky and Čiurlionis (as well as Schönberg and Klee) were also related through synaesthetic experiences – an important factor to note when speaking of the origins of Kandinsky’s colour theory. The principle of “inner necessity” might be interpreted as a kind of organisational mechanism introduced by Kandinsky as a methodical tool to manage and systematically theoretically articulate the ephemeral and hard to define synaesthetic colour experiences. It is a principle and a general reference to the inner sphere echoing the ideas of non-classical art philosophy expressed by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and other authors (Baudelaire, Maeterlinck, etc.) affined to Kandinsky.

This principle might be perceived in a number of ways: on the one hand it might be seen as a source or *drive* that inspires artistic intentions directed towards spirituality. When interpreting Kandinsky – this is the

<sup>21</sup> Л. Миронова: *Учение о цвете*, Минск: “Вышэйшая школа” 1993, 343.

<sup>22</sup> A. Andrijauskas: *Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno profiliai (Rytai-Vakarai-Lietuva)*, Vilnius, KFMI I-kla 2004, 623.

<sup>23</sup> Andrijauskas, op. cit., 623.

path from the outside towards the inside<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, the inner necessity might be seen as an idealised image of art, artistry or the artist's self, consisting of three major characteristics referred by Kandinsky as the "mystical elements": an element of personality that determines the way of expression; an element of style that impels the artist to express the spirit of his age<sup>25</sup> and an element of pure artistry, constant in all ages and among all nationalities.<sup>26</sup> This double transposition, when the preparation of *eidetic* principle shows its inner hierarchical layering, where another general idealistic formula of pure artistry emerges, demonstrates the conceptual and philosophical nature of Kandinsky's colour theory. Hence, this synthetic and synaesthetic colour theory must have been born with synaesthetic experiences acting as inspiration and used as basic material to expand the problem and raise question, while studies of philosophy and art theory, along with focus on orientalism, have formed the principal argument construed using philosophical concepts. Due to these characteristics, Kandinsky's colour theory might be regarded as an ontological study of phenomenon, when art topics are considered without limiting oneself within a narrow aesthetic discourse, but rather through the inclusion of questions of life, death, spirit and matter which are on par with the question about the colour phenomenon. Kandinsky's scheme depicts the colour system between two hypothetical poles, or, like he himself has put it "the antitheses as a circle between two poles, *i.e.*, the life of colours between birth and death"<sup>27</sup>. He identifies life and death with black and white colours, yet not through direct association but via several layers: black colour is defined through absence of movement, dead silence, minimal harmony, neutral basis or background; he also sets a relationship with other colours and the musical association – a final pause. White is described as bearing negative function, but it also contains potential, is full of possibilities and reminds of sequence of pauses in music, which only temporarily interrupt the melody. Kandinsky opens these two, as well as other colours, as if he were handling Pandora's box, from which he pours unexpected features defining the character of each colour. According to him, from the perspective of inner *necessity*, the outwardly wrong (dirty) might be pure on the inside and vice versa. Such approach demonstrates that Kandinsky focuses on the *content* of colour consisting of features of different nature (movement, direction<sup>28</sup>, temperature, sound, taste, scent), while the success and harmony of their configurations increase the more they maintain *direction* towards the inner (or spirituality). "Today" human beings are

<sup>24</sup> W. Kandinsky: *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1977, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Meaning that this element is *temporal*.

<sup>26</sup> Kandinsky, *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Kandinsky's *Figure III* in: Kandinsky, *op. cit.*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> In the book *Point and Line to Plane* Kandinsky draws a parallel between principal colours and straight lines, direction of which reflects different colours: horizontal-black, vertical-white, diagonal-red (grey or green), straight line-yellow or blue. According to him, these are not equivalents but *inner parallels*. (*Point and Line to Plane*, 64 p).

completely absorbed with the external; the inner is dead for them. This is the last step of the descent, the end of the blind alley. In former times, such places were called “abysses”; today the modest expression “blind alley” suffices.”<sup>29</sup> The path out of this cul-de-sac relies on intense creative process inspired by irrational, subjective and spontaneous impressions and anticipations that can be expressed via overlapping and connections of different subjects and art forms, since all art content is seen as integral and continuous.

The search for universal model instead of finite rules in Kandinsky’s colour theory allows to associate the origins of this theory with the oriental *non finito* aspect and, in contrast to the common opinion regarding Kandinsky’s rationality, to speak about the openness of his theory, to perceive it as *consciously* unfinished and to emphasise the latter aspect as a novelty in the aesthetics of the modernity of the time. The problems of art (and colour) are lifted from purely aesthetic level to the ethic level, the field of problems expands to encompass the criteria of good and evil and the issues of the sense of actions carried out by a human being and creator. The art that possesses *power*, i.e. capable of educating and up-rearing is not the mirror or echo of the present day, and even though it arises from the “emotional feeling” thereof it belongs to the sphere of spirituality (interior). Of utmost significance to Kandinsky are the fundamental existential aspects of artistic phenomena (form, colour, etc.), he is preoccupied with how individual elements of the art world facilitate arrival to the spiritual and *how* do they function. Subordination of form and colour is not essential for his colour theory. According to the painter himself: “It is evident therefore that colour harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul; and this is one of the guiding principles of the inner need”<sup>30</sup>. The phenomenon of colour is made spiritual, by highlighting the aesthetical and emphasising the ethical dimensions.

## Conclusions

Klee, Kandinsky and Itten have created an original theory of interpretation of colour phenomenon that is directly related to non-classical art philosophy and is based on the traditions of Eastern aesthetics and art. This theory has exerted significant influence upon the development of visual aesthetics and practice of design art in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Radically different artists at Bauhaus have put efforts to resolve the colour problems from theoretical and practical perspectives and this environment allowed coexistence of paradoxically different approaches towards colour and the use of its power of emotional impact, as well as the possibilities of its decorative functions. It is an example of highly successful teamwork (sharing), which resulted in unique theories of colour phenomenon that have since attracted the attention of colour researchers.

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<sup>29</sup> W. Kandinsky: *Point and Line to Plane*, New York: Dover Publikations, Inc. 1979, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Kandinsky, op. cit., 26.

Therefore, the Bauhaus colour theory that we have reviewed from different angles represents not only a successful example of multi-aspect (cultural, value, aesthetic) sharing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also serves as impetus to use the analysis of perception of colour phenomenon in order to take a fresh look into the origins of certain present-day phenomena of the art world and the artificial division between the fine arts and design. Bauhaus colour theory discloses paradoxical and unexpected connections of seemingly opposing phenomena of art and is the result of successful collective creative process – sharing.

In the synthetic colour theories of Itten and Kandinsky and the artistic investigation of Klee this sharing appears to unfold from the inside – not only by showing the relation of the colour phenomenon to all key aspects of artistic process (composition, fore- and backgrounds, etc.), but also its association with artistic practices and teaching methodology. On the other hand, the colour itself appears to be investigated from outside – the phenomenon is reviewed from aesthetic, ethic, philosophical and cultural aspects.

These colour theories, as part of the course about colour and form, have been adopted by design-oriented schools worldwide. They represent a challenge to the rationalist Western aesthetic tradition that is based on logocentric and binary thought – and that is a paradoxical example of sharing. The strategy of perception of colour phenomenon that reached European schools through Bauhaus design school is based on Eastern aesthetic tradition and philosophy of Chan and Zen Buddhism and Mazdaism.

Perhaps the last synthetic colour theory in history, based on non-classical art philosophy and aesthetic attitudes of the Eastern art – this is the paradoxical contribution that painters Klee, Itten and Kandinsky have presented to the development of design subject.