LOOKING CLOSER 3

CLASSIC WRITINGS ON GRAPHIC DESIGN

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NEW LIFE IN PRINT

Jan Tschichold

IN THE OCTOBER 1925 *issue of* Typographische Mitteilungen, *a printer's trade journal, guest editor Jan Tschichold (1902–1974) introduced international examples of* elementare typographie *(elementary typography), the experiments in reductive design practice by the European avant-garde (de Stijl, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus). Three years later, in 1928, he published his most influential book,* Die neue Typographie *(trans.* The New Typography, *1995), a manual for German typographers on how to apply progressive, modern typographic concepts and thus reject antiquated ideas of composition. As codifier of the New Typography, Tschichold was in demand as both practitioner and commentator; he wrote a stream of books, pamphlets, and articles in Germany and abroad. His second book,* Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung, *included an introduction titled "Was ist und was will Die neue Typographie?" ("The new typography: What is it and what does it want?"); published as "New life in print" in the British journal* Commercial Art, *it is considered his most concise discussion on the subject. From 1930 to 1931,* Commercial Art *featured a series of articles by Tschichold that championed the adoption of asymmetry and sans-serif type.—SH*

The general term "The New Typography" embraces the activities of a few of the younger typographers working principally in Germany, the Soviet Union, Holland, Czechoslovakia, and in Switzerland and Hungary. The inception of the movement in Germany reaches back into the war period. The existence of the New Typography can be said to be due to the personal achievements of its initiators; but to me it seems more accurate to regard these as the exponents of the tendencies and practical needs of our time, a view which by no means attempts to underestimate their extraordinary achievements and creative power or the inestimable value of their individual pioneer work. The movement would never have been so widespread, as in Central Europe it incontestably is, had it not served practical contemporary needs, and this it does so excellently because its primary aim is the unprejudiced adaptation of typography to the purposes of the task in hand.

Here I think it necessary briefly to describe the state of prewar typographical development. Following upon the stylistic confusion of the eighties, England gave birth to the Arts and Craft movement (Morris 1892), which at least from a typographical standpoint, was mainly influenced by traditional tendencies (limitation of incunabula). In the "Youth style" (Jugendstil, ca. 1900) an attempt was made, without however any permanent success, to break away from traditional models, arriving at a misunderstood off-shoot of the Natural Form (Eckmann), finally to end in a renovated Biedermeier type (Wieynck)—in a word, in a new traditionalism. Then the traditional models were rediscovered and further imitated, albeit on this occasion with better understanding (German Book Production 1911-14-20). The reverence for tra-

ditional forms evoked by a more intensive research-work, resulted naturally in a limitation of creative freedom and forced it at length into inanition. Contrary to expectation, the most important gain resulting from these years was the rediscovery of original traditional faces (Walbaum, Unger, Didot, Bodoni, Garamond, etc.), which for some time and with every justification have been preferred above their "precursors," in reality their imitators.

The natural reaction to the inanition of prewar typography was the New Typography aiming above all at suppleness in its methods of design.

Two aims can be discerned in all typographical work: the recognition and fulfillment of practical requirements—and the visual design. (Visual design is a question of aesthetic; it is senseless to attempt to avoid this expression). At this point typography differs not a little from architecture: it is possible (and it has indeed been done by the best architects) that the form of a house may be determined by its practical purpose, but in the case of typography the aesthetic side in the question of design makes itself clearly manifest. This factor relates typography far more nearly to the domain of "free" design on a plane surface (painting, drawing) than to that of architectural art. Both typography and the graphic arts are always concerned with surface (plane) design. Here at this stage the reason why none other than the "new" painters, the "abstract" painters, were destined to be the initiators of the New Typography. It is too wide a subject here to give any account of the development of abstract painting in this connection: visit any exhibition of their work and its relation to the New Typography is immediately discernible. This connection is not, as many believe, a formalist one but is genetic, a fact which abstract painters themselves have failed to understand. Abstract painting is the "unpurposing" relating of pure color and form without any literary admixtures. Typography signifies the visual (or aesthetic) ordering of given elements (practical requirements, type, pictures, color, etc.), on a plane surface. The difference between painting and typography exists only inasmuch as in the former there is a free choice of elements and the resulting design has no practical purpose. Modern typography therefore cannot be better occupied than with an intensive study of surface composition in abstract painting.

Let us examine the principles followed by prewar typography. The majestic traditional model knew of only one scheme of design—the medial axis, the axial symmetry whose plainest example was the title page. The whole of typography followed this scheme, whatever its immediate task might be, whether printing a newspaper or a circular, letterheads or advertisements.

Only in the postwar period did the dim realization dawn that all these were quite different tasks, making entirely different practical demands to be met creatively by the typographer.

A distinction between the New Typography and the old can only be drawn by means of a negation—the New Typography does not traditionalize. And at the door of the old, whose tendency was purely traditional, the blame for this negation must be laid. But at the same time the New Typography, because of its utter rejection of any formalist limitations, is less antitraditional than nontraditional. For instance, to achieve typographical design it is permissible to use every traditional and nontraditional face, every manner of plane relationship and every direction of line. The sole aim is design: the creative harmonious ordering of the practical requirements. Therefore there exist no limitations such as are imposed by the positing of "permissible" and "forbidden" type conjunctions. The old, unique aim of design to present a "restful" page is also reversed—we are at liberty to present a designed "unrest."

The swift tempo of modern business forces us further to a most accurate calculation of economic presentation. Typography had not only to find a simpler and more easily realizable constructive form (than the medial axis) but at the same time had to make this itself more visually attractive and varied in design. Dadaism, through Marinetti in Italy with his "Les mots en liberte futuriste (1919)" and even earlier in Germany, gave the first impulse to the new development in typography. Even today Dadaism is looked upon as sheer idiocy by many who have not taken the trouble to understand its dynamic; only in time to come will the important pioneer work done by those in the schools of Hausmann, Heartfield, Gross, Hulsenbeck, and other Dadaists, be estimated at their proper value. In any case, the handbills and other publications of the Dadaists (which date back into the wartime) were the earliest documents of the New Typography. In 1922 the movement spread; a few abstract painters began typographical experiments. A further impulse was given by the author's supplement ("Elementare Typographie") of the "Typographische Mitteilungen" (1925, out of print), in which the efforts made and results achieved were demonstrated for the first time and which, published in an edition of 28,000, was broadcast to the printing world. The views of the New Typography were the object of savage attack on all sides—today none but a few disgruntled die-hards ever think of raising their voice against them. The New Typography has won through.

Next to its nontraditional attitude the New Typography is characterized by its preference for new technical processes. It prefers:

typefounder's type	to engraved type
machine setting	to hand setting
machine-made paper	to handmade paper
machine presses	to hand presses
photographs	to drawings
photo process blocks	to woodcuts
standardization	to individualization, etc.

Further, the New Typography, by virtue of its methods of design, embraces the whole domain of printing and not merely the narrow field of pure type. Thus in photography we possess an objective means of reproducing objectivity and one which is comprehensible to all. Photography because it is merely another method of visual speech is also regarded as type.

The method of the New Typography is based upon a clear realization of purpose and the best means of achieving it. No modern typography, be it never so "beautiful," is "new" if it sacrifices purpose to form. "Form" is the result of work done and not the realization of an external conception of form. This fact has not been grasped by a whole troupe of pseudo-moderns. The chief demand of the New Typography is the most ideal adaptation to purpose.

This makes the omission of any decorative ingredients self-understood. Purpose further demands, and this cannot be too strongly emphasized, really good legibility. Lines too narrowly or too widely spaced and set are difficult to read and therefore, if for no other reason, to be avoided. The proper use of the various new processes produces in nearly every case specific forms and it is the typographer's proper study to recognize these and adapt his design to them. Thus a good typographer without a most thorough knowledge of technical requirements is unthinkable.

The present mass of printed matter, circulars (a thing which closely affects the individual as he receives no small part of them), renders the use of a standardized format necessary.

Of the available standing types, the New Typography is most partial to the "grotesque" or "block" type, as this is simply formed and easy to read. The use of others, easily legible, or even traditional faces, in the new sense is quite admissible, as they are "evaluated" one against the other, i.e., if the contrast between them be designed. It is not therefore demanded that everything be set in "grotesque," although in most cases this is indicated as most fitting. This face in its many variations (thin, semi-bold, bold-faced, condensed, expanded, hair-spaced, etc.) is open to many effects which in juxtaposition are capable of rich and varied contrasts. Varying contrasts can be obtained by the introduction of antique faces (Egyptienne, Walbaum, Garamond, Italic, etc.), and there is no reason why these effects should not be used in conjunction. Typescript is also a very peculiar and effective face.

Design is the most legible ordering and the correct choice of type dimensions according to their value within the logical bounds of the text (which can be intensified or diminished). The conscious use of movement by means of type or now and again a thick or thin rule, or group of rules, the visual agitated contrast of upper and lower case, thin and bold face, condensed and expanded type, gray and colored patches, slanting and horizontal, compact, and loose groups of type, etc., are further means of design. They represent the "aesthetic" side of typographical composition. Within the definite limits set by practical requirement and logical structure it is possible to tread various paths so that from this point onwards the visual sensibilities of the typographer must be the deciding factor. Thus it comes about that when several typographers are engaged upon the one definite task, they each achieve a varying result, each of which may have the same practical advantages. The various men whose work is illustrated in this article reveal tremendously varying possibilities, in spite of the use of the same means and methods of design. Thus, means which are practically identical meet with an extraordinary variety of usage. And these examples show that modern methods, in spite of frequent surmise, do not lead to monotony of expression, but on the contrary to results of extreme dissimilarity and which above all possess more originality than those of prewar typography.

Color is just such another effective element as type. In a certain sense the unprinted surface must be reckoned in with it and the discovery of its effectiveness must be put to the credit of the New Typographers. The white surface is not regarded as a passive background but as an active element. Among actual colors preference is given to red; as "The" color it forms the most effective contrast to the normal black. The clear tones yellow and blue must also be given place in the foreground of interest as these two are not diffuse. Color is not used as a decorative, "beautifying" ingredient, but the peculiar psychophysical properties of each are used as a means to heighten (or tone down) effects.

Illustration is supplied by photography. By this means we are given the most objective rendering of the object.

Whether photography is in itself an art or not an art need not concern us here; in conjunction with type and a plane surface it can be an art, as then it is purely a matter of values, of fitness in structural contrasts and relationships. Many people incline to mistrust graphic illustrations; the old (often falsifying) graphic illustrations no longer convince us and their individualistic pose and mannerisms affect us unpleasantly. If it be desired to give several pictorial impressions at the same time, to

display several contrasting things, montage must be called into service. For this the same general methods of design as in typography hold good; used in conjunction with type, the photograph becomes a part of the whole and must be properly evaluated in this connection so as to achieve harmonious design. A rare but very attractive photographic possibility is the photogram of which an example is shown. A photogram is taken without a camera simply by placing a more or less transparent object on a sensitized medium (paper, film or plates). Typography + Photography is termed "Typophoto."

The extraordinary adaptability of the New Typography to every conceivable purpose renders it an important phenomenon in contemporary life. Its very attitude and position reveal that it is no mere fashion of a moment but is destined to form the basis of all further typographical progress.

Karel Teige of Prague has formulated the main characteristics of the New Typography as follows:

"Constructivist Typography" (a synonym for the New Typography) means and requires:

1. Freedom from tradition and prejudice; overthrow of archaicism and academicism and the rejection of decoration. No respect for academic and traditional rules unsupported by visual reason and which are here lifeless form ("the golden section," unity of type).
2. A choice of type, more perfect, more legible and cut with more geometric simplicity. Understanding of the spirit of the types suitable and their use in accord with the character of the text, contrast of typographical material to emphasize content.
3. Constant appreciation of purpose and fulfillment of requirement. Differentiation in special aims. Advertisements meant to be seen from a distance require different treatment to a scientific work or a volume of verse.
4. Harmonious disposition of surface and text in accordance with objective visual law; surveyable structure and geometric organization.
5. Exploitation of all means, which are or may be offered by present and future technical discoveries; conjunction of illustration and text by typophoto.
6. The closest cooperation between typographers and experts in the composing room is desirable, just as the designing architect cooperates with the constructional engineer, etc., specialization and division of labor are quite as necessary as close contact.

There is nothing to be added to the above beyond that the "golden section" together with other exact proportional formulas are often far more effective than chance relationships and should therefore not suffer fundamental exclusion.

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