

type

The SECRET HISTORY *of* LETTERS

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11 | Dangerous passions: radical European typography in the inter-war years

As Europeans go, the English are not intellectual. They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic 'world-view'. (George Orwell, *England Your England*, 1941)

The knock at the door was brusque, peremptory. Annie Renner froze, her heart beating lightly but more insistently. She had been expecting something like this, but now the moment had arrived, she was uncertain she could cope with it as Paul would wish. Steeling herself, she opened the door. Four brown-shirted men immediately pushed their way past her into the apartment, each wearing a red armband bearing the black hooked cross, the swastika. They were armed, and appeared tense, like a coiled spring waiting to be unleashed.

'We would like to speak to Herr Renner,' announced the leader. 'Bring him here, please.'

Annie swallowed. 'I'm sorry. He's not home. He's in Berlin. Please – what's this about?'

The speaker allowed himself a grim smile. 'We have evidence that your husband has been producing Russian propaganda against Germany. He is a graphic artist, is he not?' He thrust a copy of the magazine *Gebrauchsgraphik* towards her. 'I believe he is also responsible for an article in here.'

'He is a type designer,' Annie replied through dry lips. That article – she knew nothing good could come of it. 'Political idiocy,' Paul had written, 'growing more violent and malicious every day, may eventually sweep the whole of western culture to the ground with its muddy sleeve.' He was right of course, but these days it wasn't safe to say such things. Now how on earth was she going to get these men out of their home?

In the first century AD, Boudicca, queen of the English tribe the Iceni, led a rebellion against their Roman rulers which ultimately came to grief in open battle against a

much smaller but well-organized Roman force. Working as a unit, they used a shield wall and the short stabbing sword to systematically reduce a rebel force reliant on the broadsword-wielding warrior hero. It was an early triumph of the system over the individual.

Orwell wrote his lines during the Second World War, but they still hold true today. Mainland Europe largely favours the 'system', at least as an overriding idea, however much individual behaviour may stray within it. It is this discrepancy of outlook which still informs Britain's dealings with its partners in the European Union, feeding the national uncertainty about membership and the unified monetary system that France, Holland and Germany seem to be able to adopt without the soul-searching that goes on across the Channel.

Moving from the world of British and American typography to that of Europe in the aftermath of the First World War feels like a shift from the domain of the maverick to a terrain where philosophy transcends the individual, however gifted. Design subscribed patently to one system of thought or another. In the English-speaking world, Baskerville, Goudy and Gill were all essentially creative loners, as was Edward Johnston, a solitary spirit putting his talent at the disposal of a corporation, but with no wider game plan for the application and development of his work beyond the design of a single upper case alphabet. The Caslons and the Bentons worked with a constant eye to the market; it was business first, aesthetics next. Stanley Morison would claim a 'programme' of type revivals, but it hardly amounted to a creative vision for the future, or a radical reshaping of the present.

The German mindset is usually characterized by its detractors as one obsessed with order and efficiency, and lacking in humour. Yet there is a strong romantic, and even superstitious, side to the German nature.[1] The language has been described as ordered yet dreamy; it follows numerous strict rules, yet the grammatic convention that pushes any second verb to the end of the sentence means that the listener or reader takes in information in quite a different way to how they do so in English or French. You have to wait. It is also perhaps only an ordered but dreamy nature which can believe that such a gentle thing as lower case sans serif typography can

1 The British newspaper *The Observer* reported on the morning of the 2002 World Cup final that the German team, generally regarded as having reached the final by dour Teutonic organization rather than talent, had actually been relying on a lucky penny, a common German talisman, which they buried in the pitch prior to each game. Security for the final meant this was not possible, and the coin had to be held by a suspended player. They lost the game.

tangibly improve people's lives. Few in Britain would have thought this, or probably even have cared, but in inter-war Germany a fierce ideological battle was fought, a struggle that was later to threaten the lives of those who found themselves on the wrong side.

For Germany the Great War of 1914–18 had ended in defeat, with over two million men killed. Germany had not started the war, but the nervousness induced by the aggressive military presence of the German state and the resulting system of alliances had been the major reason for its outbreak, and it was Germany which carried the vast weight of the struggle on behalf of itself and its allies. Exhausted by four years of attritional warfare, the country took a gamble on one last great offensive before the weight of American reinforcements began to tell on the Western Front. It was a gamble that came close to succeeding, but after the tide of the German advance had been halted, retreat and a naval mutiny quickly followed. The German Emperor abdicated and an armistice was called with the German Army – although materially unable to carry on the fight – technically undefeated in the field, and still on foreign soil.

The Paris peace conference in 1919 found the opposing forces in unforgiving mood. Germany lost a large tract of its territory in the east and its coalfields in the west, and a republic was created. Punitive payments were demanded by France to compensate for the devastation that had been inflicted on its northern industrial territory.

In an unstable post-war world, the German economy was particularly vulnerable. Its inability to meet war reparations sparked a French invasion of the German industrial regions in 1923, causing astronomical inflation in which the German currency became almost worthless. The political situation was equally volatile. Extreme left- and right-wing groups had been in conflict since the end of the war; in 1923 Adolf Hitler carried out an early, unsuccessful bid to seize power. He was not the first to attempt to do so.

It seems improbable that in such a climate anyone would have time to think about art and design, so absorbed would they be in mere survival. But the years 1919 to 1933 were golden ones for creative innovation in many branches of art and design, not least in the graphic

ones. Artists such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Georg Grosz and the Dadaists Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters were just a few of those for whom the era was a particularly fruitful one, a creativity that was ruthlessly quashed once Hitler gained the reins of power in 1933.

Long before he was able to turn his attention to the rest of Europe, the first damage the new leader inflicted was on his adopted nation, not least by his suppression of all artistic thought and activity that did not chime with his own ultra-conservative outlook and serve the propaganda needs of his party. Any train of thought that led elsewhere was branded as decadent or 'Bolshevist'.[2] The subsequent repression usually culminated in the persecuted leaving Germany for permanent exile – scientifically Germany experienced a 'brain drain' that robbed it of the capacity to win the next war, and artistically a loss of cultural standing from which it has arguably yet to recover. It was a creative pogrom that was also to make its influence felt in the world of typography.

But even as Germany's fate was being decided at the Paris peace conference, an architect called Walter Gropius was founding a new type of art school. The Bauhaus was to have a peripatetic existence, starting life in Weimar, capital and soubriquet of the new German republic, later moving to Dessau, and ending its life in Berlin, where it was closed by the new Nazi regime in 1933.

The original aim of the Bauhaus was to reconcile design with mass production. Following German unification in 1871, industrialization had taken place at a far more rapid rate than it had in Britain, as Germany strove to catch up with and overtake its European rivals. With this development came the inevitable social transformation as large numbers of people moved from rural areas to the cities in search of work. The Bauhaus was responding to what it saw as the dehumanizing influences of mass production, the division of labour it brought about, and the resultant dishonest and degraded nature of the artefacts produced.

In this it was drawing on earlier ideas, those of the English Arts and Crafts movement and the German Deutsche Werkbund. This had been founded in 1907 to address concerns about the quality of goods being produced in Germany, with a view to improving economic performance and exports. But whereas the Arts

2 Bolshevism, or communism, was for many in the inter-war years the great terror from the East. Fear of it was a considerable factor in the tolerance of Hitler; he was seen as a force to oppose Soviet Russia. Karl Marx had always believed Germany the most likely candidate for revolution, with a more cohesive and potentially organizable working class than Russia. After the success of the Russian revolution, it seemed, with the end of the war, that Germany might follow suit. Councils of workers and soldiers were forming all over the country even before the armistice, and a short-lived socialist republic was proclaimed in Bavaria. An attempt to establish a communist government in Berlin, by the Spartacists, led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, was violently crushed by right-wing irregular forces in January 1919.



Der Herr Profeſſor. 173

iſt wie eine Statue. Ihr gemaltes Geſicht, weiß, roſig und bläulich unter ihren gelockten Haaren, iſt wie das einer Meduſe. Sie ſinkt in ihren Stuhl. Die Flammen, die vielen Flammen, krachend ſchießen ſie über ihr zuſammen ... Wie gelähmt iſt ihr Denken, die Falkenaugen bohren ſich in ſie hinein und lähmen ihr den Willen ... Der Herr Profeſſor wendet kein Auge von ihr. Dann redet er weiter. „Durchlaucht bedürfen durchaus der Ruhe, einer längeren Ruhezeit. Ich werde mit dem Herrn Hofrat reden, ob es beſſer hier im Hauſe zu machen iſt, die vollſtändige Ruhe meine ich, oder ob Durchlaucht eine Heilſtätte aufſuchen ſollten. Ich wäre ja für das letztere."

49 Familiarity breeds legibility: blackletter as a text face, from a German novel of 1916.

and Crafts movement turned away from mass production, the Bauhaus philosophy saw it as a means by which everyone could have affordable good things, rather than just affordable bad things.

Gropius had been a member of the Werkbund; it had tentatively concluded that the way forward was to address the surface style of things, to appeal to middle-class taste. But Gropius wanted to cut deeper, to start with the actual methods of working – to concentrate on craft rather than art. His belief, undoubtedly a sound one, was that if one concentrated on one's craft, on doing something to the limits of one's abilities, then 'art' would sometimes result, almost as a bolt from heaven.

The Bauhaus is associated in the modern mind chiefly with three-dimensional design, architecture, furniture and household items, but it also produced and influenced graphic design, and by extension typography. Design reform was in the air in Germany in the 1920s, and the Bauhaus and its fellow travellers were to make an indelible mark.

Germany after the First World War was a unique typographic environment offering an unparalleled opportunity for profound and radical change – if such reforms were allowed to happen. Ranged against any such attempts were the urgings of tradition and conservatism, a perception of national identity, and later the full force of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

Germany was the last bastion of blackletter (*fraktur*), the heavy, jagged typefaces based on monastic script that had been in use since Gutenberg. Some German type designers, such as Emil Weiss (1875–1943), whose elegant roman alphabet Weiss is still commercially

available, also attempted to design better, more legible blackletter faces – his Weiss Fraktur of 1913 was a highly regarded example. But although blackletter represented a very traditional, inward-looking German culture, it had also been a symbol of national identity when that identity was under threat. Although during the eighteenth century German scientific textbooks began to be printed in roman lettering, the period of Napoleon's domination of the continent gave blackletter a symbolic role as a beacon of a national culture under attack from outside forces.

Later, in the nineteenth century, there were calls for its abolition, those in opposition arguing that blackletter was detrimental to the international standing of German literature and thought. Notable among its opponents was Jakob Grimm, famous, with his brother Wilhelm, as a collector of traditional folk tales. Many who supported blackletter's retention felt that it was inherently tied up with the handwritten and printed representation of the German language. The first Chancellor of united Germany, Otto von Bismarck, claimed that it took him considerably longer to read a page of text set in roman than it did one set in blackletter, which supports the theory that people find legible that with which they are familiar; readability is not intrinsically a question of type design.

The issue became political. In 1911 the German parliament debated a proposal for roman type to be made standard, and also to be taught as handwriting in German schools. The argument split roughly along party lines, liberals and social democrats tending to form the pro-roman lobby. The final vote was considered to be inconclusive. Later debates by academic bodies also produced results in favour of both roman and blackletter.

So the question of the retention of blackletter was a heated issue, at least in intellectual circles. It was into this arena of debate that the progressive design forces of the Bauhaus and its sympathizers would stride in the 1920s; they were to side unequivocally with roman text, but not just any roman text – it had to be sans serif.

The debate was made complex by the uniquely German question of orthography. In the sixteenth century, capital letters were adopted for every noun in written German – table, chair, house, everything. Again,

there had been subsequent attempts to change this. Jakob Grimm's *German Grammar* of 1822 was set in roman and used capitals only for the start of sentences and for 'proper' nouns, as in English usage.

In 1920 Walter Porstmann published *Languages and Writing* in which he went one step farther, and proposed the total abolition of capital letters. The book was read by László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), a Hungarian designer, photographer and painter, and teacher at the Bauhaus. One of the students, and later himself a Bauhaus teacher, Herbert Bayer (1900–85), designed a lower-case-only alphabet, called Universal. Universal it never became, seeing little usage beyond some Bauhaus-designed exhibition stands, but it was an interesting contribution to a typographic hare that was already up and running.

Jakob Erbar (1878–1935) designed Erbar, a geometrically based sans serif released in 1926, for the Frankfurt foundry Ludwig and Mayer. In 1927 Rudolf Koch (1876–1934) produced the distinctive Kabel (Cable), with large ascender to x-height ratio, a traditional roman shape to the lower case a, a tail to the t, a Venetian e,[3] and oblique endings to many of the strokes. But both these faces, excellent though they are, were to be eclipsed in popularity by the most famous German typeface of the period – Futura.

The designer of Futura was Paul Renner (1878–1956). Like Edward Johnston, he was an unlikely figure, in the light of his early work, to become a standard-bearer for a change in typographical thought. He was born in Wernigerode in the Harz region, south of Brunswick and Magdeburg. His father was a theologian, and had been the court chaplain to the Earl of Stolberg in Wernigerode. On leaving school, Renner studied art, studies that concluded at the turn of century in Munich, a city and area where he was to remain for most of his life. His initial aim was to be a painter, and from this he first made a living, also contributing illustrations to the satirical magazine *Simplizissimus*. When the Deutsche Werkbund held its first meeting in Munich in 1907, Renner attended and was impressed by the call to reconcile art with mass production. He joined the Werkbund, and took part in its early debates on the role of art in society.

It was at this time that Renner started working in the field of applied arts. He met the publisher George

3 The Venetian-style e has a sloping crossbar.



50 Paul Renner, 'a modern of the moderns' who argued for the value of the past; his outspokenness against Hitler's regime and its cultural policies was to cost him his career.

Müller, who handed him a strip of cardboard the size of a book spine, and asked him to create a design for it. It was the first of many commissions. The company published French, Italian and Spanish literature as well as German authors, and as Renner was trying to use typefaces sympathetic to the texts, this meant both blackletter and roman faces. At this stage he didn't consider type style as an either/or situation – he was happy with coexistence. It was only later, in the 1920s, that he moved to a position where he considered blackletter to be a decadent form. Indeed, he argued that it was not particularly German, having been developed in northern France, whereas the lower case letter forms of the roman alphabet were developed in what now constituted Germany. He concluded that sans serif was the way forward, but that it was a style that needed development.

Müller originally used Renner purely to design the bindings, but gradually his workload increased, and painting took a back seat as he began designing the pages as well. He developed ideas about text, admiring in particular the typesetting of the English private press movement. In the years leading up to the First World War, he was involved in two educational establishments, setting up the Munich School for Illustration and Book

Production, which merged in 1914 with the state-subsidized Debschitz School, of which Renner then became co-director. He gave this up at the end of his contract, the exigencies of wartime having left insufficient funding to run things as he would have wished. He was by then also serving in the army, in charge of a recruiting depot near Munich. His experiences of trying to teach artillery skills by means of a system of diagrams, laying down a set of guidelines, led him to try this approach with typography, an idea that came to fruition in his first book, *Typography as Art*, published in 1922.

But between 1919 and 1924 Renner largely gave up book design and returned to painting, unwillingly taking a position as adviser to the German Publishing Association in Stuttgart when disastrous inflation took hold of the German economy. Many of the middle class lost their savings during this period, an experience that Hitler was later to play on to his advantage, with his promises of escape from political and economic anarchy. The work at least enabled Renner and his family to survive, but he gave up the job at the end of 1923 and returned to his home near Lake Constance to concentrate on painting.

Oddly, it was Renner's credentials as a painter which gained him the commission to design what would become Futura. He was visited by Jakob Hegner, who ran a publishing and printing company near Dresden, and was an adviser to a Dresden type founder. Hegner was looking for new roman typefaces. He believed that only painters had the necessary fresh, left-field approach to the problem of designing lettering, unhindered by a type designer's preconceptions, a theory he had already put into practice. Inspired, Renner began work the next day, designing different versions of the words 'the typeface of our time', Hegner's phrase to describe what he wanted. Hegner was encouraging, and Renner duly drew the rest of the alphabet, and sent it off. Hegner then fell strangely silent; after months of waiting, Renner asked for the drawings back. A former student of his, Heinrich Jost, was now an adviser to the Frankfurt foundry Bauer, and showed the alphabet to Georg Hartmann, the owner. Hartmann liked what he saw, and by the winter of 1924 a trial cut of Futura had been made.

The earlier versions of Futura contained a set of lower



51 Futura: Renner skilfully breathed warmth into what is at first glance purely an exercise in ruler and compass. The j, shown here, is a stylistic oddity that survived the culling of his alternative radical letter forms offered in the first specimen.

case characters with alternative versions that were radically different to the Futura available today – particularly the a and the g – while the r was an unconnected stem and spot. Renner's approach to the design of the typeface was very geometric; a marriage of the circle and the straight line. When he applied this approach to the lower case, some strange character shapes resulted; g's with angular lower loops, a's with right angles in the upper loop. The first type specimen of Futura released in 1927 featured some of these characters, but by the second edition in 1928 they were gone. Renner later stated that he considered there to be two versions of Futura, a more conventional and a 'Constructivist' one, but the foundry, doubtless with an eye to sales, abandoned the more radical forms. Renner himself conceded that type design, if the type was to work as a legible face, could not depart too drastically from traditional forms. He clearly still had affection for some of his earlier versions, and the stem-and-spot r turned up in his book *Mechanised Graphics* in 1931.

Futura was an immediate success on its release, and has remained so ever since. Bauer's full-page advertising in *The Inland Printer* heralded it in impressive terms: 'Futura, the type of today and tomorrow, the finest expression of the sans serif ideal in types, was designed in fullest sympathy with the modernist trend, by Paul Renner, himself a modern of the moderns.'

Renner developed Futura as a whole family from the outset. On first release there was Light, Regular and Bold, followed in 1929 by Futura Black, a stencil version; 1930 saw the arrival of Semi-bold, a slanted version of Light and Regular, and Bold Condensed.

Along with Gill Sans, Futura stands as the classic sans serif face. It works as text and as headlines, and it carries a style and personality that to an extent defy close analysis. Such a geometric face should look cold and sterile, but it doesn't. But there was more to it than just circles and lines. In a 1930 essay called 'The problem of form in printed type', Renner spoke of the almost imperceptible visual adjustments and careful drawing needed to design letters that seemed purely geometric in character. On studying the face, you can see that the counters, the spaces in a, b, d, p and q are not circular, and their bowls become narrower as they meet the stem.



52 Some of Renner's original alternative lower case characters for Futura: a, g and the stem-and-spot r.



This version of g never made it past the development stage, but it is a form which has been taken up by some designers in the modern wave of san serifs.



53 No discussion will take place: wunderkind Jan Tschichold in his early years in Leipzig.

There are subtle features too; the top counter of the B is smaller than the lower, the G is a broken circle with a cross-piece, with no straight edge on the right. The M is splayed. The j has no tail. But overall it is the proportions combined with the stroke weights, that elusive factor, which makes Futura so appealing. Like Gill Sans, it can evoke the period in which it was created, yet still look utterly modern today.

If, as Orwell said, the British shy away from abstract thought, this is not true of the Germans. This intense typographical debate needed a philosopher to make sense of it, to point the way ahead, and one was duly to arrive. Johannes Tzschichhold (1902–74) was born in Leipzig, the son of a sign-writer. Lettering was in his blood, and in his teenage years he studied calligraphy, typography and engraving, enrolling at the Academy for Graphic Arts and Book Trades in Leipzig, and then studying at the School of Art and Crafts in Dresden. At sixteen he drew an italic alphabet, an impressive blueprint for his later creation Sabon Italic. By the time he was seventeen

he was not only studying but teaching calligraphy and lettering at evening classes. Although he was essentially of a different generation to Renner (and there was always some clash of outlook between the two), from the mid-1920s their careers, and their later problems, would become interwoven.

In 1923 Tschichold, as he now spelt his name, visited the Bauhaus Exhibition in Weimar, and was deeply impressed by the work and the manifesto of the art school. The phrase 'New Typography' was first used by Moholy-Nagy in the exhibition catalogue, but it is a tag that will for ever be associated with Tschichold. Bayer's design of the catalogue used heavy sans serif or '*grotesk*' lettering which employed the Russian 'Constructivist' approach; type didn't just have to run horizontally on the page. It could go vertically too, or at angles. This was typography that was heading in the right direction – for Tschichold, the art as traditionally practised in Germany, was, frankly, a mess. He set about laying down some guidelines, which first saw the light of day in 'Elementary Typography', a feature he contributed to a special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, which he edited in 1925, and which also featured work by the the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky[4] and Kurt Schwitters.[5] Tschichold's ideas would find full expression in 1928 in his enduring monument, *The New Typography*, still a valuable manual today.

Before this, his and Renner's paths had already crossed. In 1925 Renner had taught a course in elementary typography at Frankfurt School of Art, and then later in the year was invited to take up the post of principal of the Munich Printing Trade School. At the beginning of 1926 he had contacted Tschichold in Berlin, with a view to offering him his former job in Frankfurt. Tschichold had read Renner's *Typography as Art*, and Renner would have seen 'Elementary Typography', so both knew something of the other's work and viewpoints. They had further ground in common, in that two publications had labelled both of them as 'Bolshevists', a loaded accusation in this period. This was provoked by Renner's publicly stated views on typographical reform; Tschichold's own sympathies with Russia, at least on the design front, were self-evident, and he had changed his name to Iwan in tribute. Renner invited Tschichold to join the staff

4 El Lissitzky (Liezer Markovich), 1890–1941, the Russian designer best known for his red and black graphics, featuring geometric forms and angled, sans serif typography.

5 Kurt Schwitters, 1887–1948, the German Dadaist famous for his collages, language experiments and Merzbau interior design construction project. He moved to England from Norway in 1940, but died impoverished in 1948 in the Lake District, where he had been working on the Merzbau.

at what was now called the Graphische Berufsschule (graphic trade or vocational school) in Munich. Although neither took the Bolshevist tag seriously, it was one that was to have grave consequences later on. Nevertheless, Renner advised Tschichold to undergo another name change to secure the post in conservative Munich. Iwan became Jan.

'The essence of the New Typography is clarity.' Tschichold argued that with the increasing amount of print and information battling for the reader's attention, greater economy of expression was needed. Old typefaces were concerned with beauty, but this was achieved by superfluous ornamentation, which now had to be stripped away in the search for purer, clearer forms.

As we read from left to right, the proper layout was left aligned. Centred type created a central focal point that was meaningless, especially in terms of delivering a message effectively. It was purely decorative. Ornamentation, said Tschichold, came 'from an attitude of childish naivety'. Tschichold carried this philosophy through to the question of typefaces:

> None of the typefaces to whose basic form some kind of ornament has been added (serifs in roman type, lozenge shapes and curlicues in fraktur) meet our requirements for clarity and purity. Among all the types that are available, the so-called 'Grotesque' (sans serif) or 'block letter' ('skeleton letters' would be a better name) is the only one in spiritual accordance with our time...
>
> There is no doubt that the sans serif types available today are not yet wholly satisfactory as all-purpose faces... Most of them, in particular the newest designs, such as Erbar and Kabel, are inferior to the old sans serifs, and have modifications which place them basically in line with the rest of the 'art' faces. As bread and butter faces they are less good than the old sans faces. Paul Renner's Futura makes a significant step in the right direction ...
>
> The essential limitation of this restricted range of typefaces does not mean that printers who have no or too few sans serif faces cannot produce good contemporary typography while using other faces. But it must be laid down that sans serif is absolutely and always better.[6]

6 Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography*, translated by Ruari McLean, 1928.

On the subject of orthography, Tschichold unsurprisingly opted for the complete abandonment of capital letters. He argued that historically capitals and lower case forms had begun life as separate entities, and were only artificially grafted together during the Renaissance. The New Typography required economy in type design, so one set of letters should go. Lower case was easier to read, so it should be the one to stay.

> Of course such a revolution in orthography and type will not happen in a day, but its time will assuredly come. Whether consciously or unconsciously, cultural developments take place and men change with them. The typeface of the future will not come from a single person but from a group of people …
>
> Personally I believe that no single designer can produce the typeface we need, which must be free from all personal characteristics: it will be the work of a group, among whom I think there must be an engineer.[7]

This small sample of Tschichold's ideas might provoke accusations of 'type fascism'. This would be unfair; with the use of *fraktur* Germany was labouring under a considerable and well-entrenched visual handicap – strong declarations of logic and intent would be needed to remove it. Also, Tschichold was only in his mid-twenties when he wrote the book. In this it's remarkable, but at that age one is more inclined to see the world in black-and-white terms. Certainly he and Renner, nearly a quarter of a century his senior, did not always see eye to eye. Renner believed that anyone who was truly 'modern' would not discard everything that had gone before as without value. Tschichold described Renner as an *überläufer*,[8] someone who has changed sides, and his opinion of Futura is not effusive; it is 'a step in the right direction', but that is all.

In 1927 Renner was instrumental in setting up the new Master School for Germany's Printers, at which Tschichold also taught, but the two men never became particularly close. Tschichold's wife Edith thought Renner a rather distant figure with the rest of his staff, including Jan. However, it's all too easy to imagine how the wunderkind Tschichold must have irritated his seniors with his confident, absolute opinions. After all, here was someone set on overturning centuries of tradition

7 Ibid.

8 Christopher Burke, *Paul Renner, the Art of Typography*, quoting a 1927 letter from Tschichold to the Dutch designer Piet Zwart.

and who wasn't interested in considering any counter-opinions. A poster advertising a lecture Tschichold was to give on the New Typography carried the caveat: 'No discussion will take place.'[9]

While the orthographic debate was raging with renewed intensity in Germany, across the border in France one man was proposing go in completely the opposite direction; abandoning lower case letters for just capitals. His name was Adolphe Mouron, but he was better known to the world as the celebrated poster designer and artist Cassandre.

Cassandre was born in January 1901, in the Ukraine, then a part of Tsarist Russia; his mother was Russian, his father was French. One of Cassandre's great-uncles ran a successful business importing French wine into the Ukraine, and his father had moved there to help in this enterprise. Following the outbreak of the First World War and the early death in action of one of Cassandre's older brothers, the family returned to France, to Paris, and there Cassandre was to stay. By the end of the war he had made the decision to become an artist, and studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and the Académie Julian.

He designed his first poster in 1923, and until the start of the Second World War this was the work on which his reputation was built. His powerful and beautiful advertisements now stand almost as a visual shorthand for inter-war France, broadly art deco in feel, but with that elusive something extra that the French bring to most things they do, not least their type design. His most memorable work was for the railway company Chemin du Fer du Nord, and the delightfully playful Dubonnet poster, in which, in a series of images, an outline man, seated at a café table with bottle and glass, gradually fills with colour and substance as he drinks.

In 1925 Cassandre was awarded first prize by the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs for his poster for the Au Bûcheron furniture store in the rue de Rivoli. Through this he met Charles Peignot of Deberny & Peignot, one of France's most adventurous and innovative foundries. Deeply impressed by Cassandre's posters, which were the total creation of the artist – both illustration and lettering – he commissioned him to design some new faces for his company. The first result was Bifur, which appeared in 1929; it was in bold sans serif capitals only,

9 Hans Schmoller, *Two Titans, Mardersteig and Tschichold, a study in contrasts,* New York, 1990.



54 Cassandre: his posters are now almost a visual shorthand for inter-war France. His type design, its philosophy influenced by his work in poster advertising, was a small but striking part of his creative palette.

and tried to eliminate all unnecessary verticals. Cassandre said of it: 'I want to stress the fact that Bifur is not an ornamental letter. Bifur was conceived in the same spirit as a vacuum cleaner or an internal combustion engine. It is meant to answer a specific need, not be decorative. It is this functional character that makes it suitable for use in our contemporary world ... It was designed for a word, a single word, a poster word.'[10]

Despite this rationale, Bifur was a commercial failure. A year later Cassandre produced Acier, another all-capitals bold sans serif, this time an outline face with two versions, featuring internal sections of either black or grey. But his most famous typeface came in 1937, named Peignot in honour of Charles and his company. Cassandre had always liked capital letters best, for their block geometry, and in Peignot he took this a step farther. Cassandre agreed with Tschichold that the union of capitals and lower case letter forms was an unnatural one, and he also favoured sans serifs, but there the consensus ended. In his opinion, it was the minuscules that should go, being as they were simply debased versions of the upper case, and in the case of the lower case a, a distortion of the

10 *Arts des Métiers Graphiques*, 1929.

capital form, brought about by scribes. Why not discard them altogether?

Cassandre recognized that lower case letters did have a vital contribution to make, the varied 'word-shapes' created by the ascenders and descenders which aid prolonged reading. To avoid the visual monotony of all-capitals text reading, he took the upper case letter forms and modified them for use as a lower case, giving them ascenders and descenders:

> The eye has become accustomed to long ascenders and descenders and this habit must be respected. That is why, in Peignot, we have not done away with those indispensable aids to rapid reading. None of the ascenders or descenders is anachronic, however: l, b and f are atrophied capitals; h and k are capitals transformed into lances, for easy reading; p, q and y are capitals which have dropped from the baseline. Only one minuscule has been retained – the cursive form d. Our reading habits being what they are, it would not have been feasible to conceive it differently.
>
> This new principle may jar at first. But while there are honourable habits which deserve to be respected, there are others which can easily be dispensed with, since they have no deep physiological roots in the individual. New habits will replace them.[11]

Cassandre came by this route to design a delightful, quirky and very distinctive face strongly evoking the period in which it was created. Needless to say, his ideas didn't catch on. Testament to Peignot's style and grace is the fact that it has remained commercially available ever since. A modified version, designed in 1947 with Charles Peignot, and named Touraine, had more conventional lower case characters.

By the onset of the 1930s the cultural horizons in Germany were starting to darken. Since the stabilization of the currency in 1924 the economy had been a house of cards, built on huge American loans. The 1929 crash threw America into an abyss, Europe inevitably pulled in after it. The resulting mass unemployment and the helplessness of the government to cope with the crisis created a fertile campaigning ground for the Nazi Party. The 1930 elections gave them 18 per cent of the vote,

11 Peignot specimen, 1937.

and made them in parliamentary terms the second-largest party.

Hitler and his supporters were now on an unstoppable upward surge. Even though political power was more than two years away, those who supported and fed the Nazis' extreme views grew increasingly confident in airing their opinions. Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an architect and founder member of the Werkbund, was also a member of the Bund Heimatschutz, the Association for the Protection of the Homeland, a body dedicated to preserving what were seen as pure Germanic styles in art and design. He objected to the flat-roofed style of architecture of the 1920s as being non-German. The editor of the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Alfred Rosenberg, backed this theory, and Schultze-Naumburg undertook a lecture tour of German cities to expound his views. A lecture in Munich, at which Renner was present, branded Asian art and modern Western art as the work of diseased minds. An artist in the audience who protested was hospitalized by Nazi guards.

Renner saw the cultural threat that National Socialism posed, and tried to organize another public meeting to give his viewpoint, to which the writer Thomas Mann, author of *Death in Venice* and *The Magic Mountain*, was to contribute. Unable to achieve this, he put down his thoughts in a booklet, *Kulturbolschewismus?* (Cultural Bolshevism?), questioning the whole racist attitude to art that Schultze-Naumburg and the Nazis were promoting. It was a plea for sanity at a time when Germany was falling into the hands of a madman. Two German publishers rejected the book; Renner had to go to Zurich to find someone prepared to back the project.

During March 1933, as Hitler was consolidating his grip on his newly acquired power, Renner was supervising the German stand at the fifth Triennale exhibition in Milan. His choice of material for the stand came under scrutiny from the Foreign Office, who deemed that there was too much roman type and not enough blackletter. Renner was unhappy about this interference, a resistance that was noted.

It is hard to imagine how holding a view on design and typography could be life-threatening, but that was exactly the situation that Renner and Tschichold were now to find themselves in. In the middle of March, Tschichold

abcdefghi
jklmnopqr
stuvwxyz

55 Peignot: the radical lower case. 'There is no technical reason in printing why we cannot return to the noble clasical shapes of the alphabet and discard the lower case forms, which will soon come to seem as archaic as the shapes of Gothic characters' (Peignot specimen, 1937).

and his wife were arrested. In the new reign of terror that was sweeping through Germany, this meant a concentration camp. At this stage, although Hitler had only been Chancellor for a mere six weeks, the Nazi camps were already up and running. Although these were not the death camps of the war years, they were nevertheless already brutal institutions in which those who had spoken against the regime were rounded up, and where some, such as Fritz Gerlach, the editor of the Munich Catholic magazine *Der Gerade Weg* (The Straight Path), were to die. The first concentration camp, its opening announced by SS leader Heinrich Himmler on 20 March, was nearby, at Dachau on the edge of Munich.

Renner protested, and Tschichold later believed that this shortened his term of imprisonment. But the net was closing around Renner too. His office and his home were searched; some slides of photomontages were taken on the grounds that they were Russian anti-German propaganda. In *Kulturbolschewismus?* and elsewhere Renner had publicly stated his opposition to the views of the new government. He too was arrested, but released the next day on condition he report to the police every two days. Renner was lucky – the father of his daughter's fiancé was a friend of Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess. Hess asked for leniency in Renner's case. But there was a body of evidence against him, not least his association with Thomas Mann, who had now fled Germany, and his appointment of Tschichold, a 'Bolshevik'. He was finally dismissed from his position at the school in 1934 on grounds of 'national untrustworthiness'. Futura was labelled as anti-German, but ironically Renner's work on the stand in Milan won him the Grand Diploma of Honour, and Futura received much admiration from Mussolini's regime.

Tschichold was released after six weeks, but life in Germany was now impossible for him and his family and they moved to Switzerland. Renner moved there too for a short period, during which he was accused of spreading anti-German propaganda. He returned to Germany, and it was probably only Hess's further intervention which saved him from reprisals. He lived in semi-retirement until the end of the war, forbidden to earn a salary, and with no pension, although Futura sales provided royalties. He wrote, painted and designed some other typefaces. One, Renner-Antiqua, a distinctive serif

face with a slight calligraphic feel, was adopted by the newspaper the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He also designed a blackletter face, Ballade, which was released by Berthold in 1937, but with little success. After the war his health began to fail, but he produced a final sans serif face, Steile Futura, which today looks startlingly contemporary. He died in 1956, in Munich.

The war years would unexpectedly see the end of the blackletter debate. Although blackletter experienced official party backing as the true and only style of German lettering in the early years of the Third Reich, it never existed to the total exclusion of other forms. Indeed, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, had a certain taste for modern trends, and publicity material for the 1936 Berlin Olympics used roman and sans serif lettering, probably in an attempt to evoke connections with the grandeur of classical Greece. Herbert Bayer managed to carry on working in Germany until 1938, when he left for America. But to Hitler blackletter was synonymous with patriotism and a deep feeling for German culture.

Then, suddenly, the change that Tschichold, Renner and others had striven for was brought about by the Nazis themselves. In early 1941 a decree outlawed blackletter as a Jewish innovation into the printing trade. Roman was now to be the standard.

The probable true reason for this about-face was nothing to do with any supposed Jewishness. Germany now had many conquered territories in which blackletter was not a legible face; its use hindered the spread of German ideas abroad, ironically – although with different purposes in mind – a point that Renner had made in *Kulturbolschewismus?* ten years before, and Jakob Grimm over a century previously. It has also been suggested that a factor in the abandonment of blackletter was complaints by German pilots that it was hard to read at a distance when used for aircraft markings.

By contrast, Mussolini's Fascist Italy embraced sans serif lettering. The 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, to mark the tenth anniversary of the dictator's rise to power, featured monolithic sans serif relief and three-dimensional lettering, a modern yet grandiose inscriptional style that accorded with Mussolini's vision of a Second Roman Empire.

By 1945 Germany was once again in ruins, this time with a physically devastated homeland to add to the collapse of its political institutions. But just as in the 1920s, the post-war years would see another swift and remarkable recovery.