

9 New typography

Modernism in twentieth-century typography was, in its 'heroic' period from the end of the First World War to the National-Socialist seizure of power in Germany in 1933, a phenomenon of the European continent. Britain played no part in it, and the USA was significant mainly as a distant emblem of modern life. Germany was the centre, and the meeting ground for an international exchange of experiments and ideas. A full analysis would entail the separate examination of contributions from post-revolutionary Russia. It would also take up the special case of the Netherlands, and also more distant and obscure developments in Poland and Czechoslovakia, as well as contributions from Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. France would be rapidly passed over even in a more detailed account of new typography.

The phrase 'new typography' is adopted here as the descriptive term for the phenomenon, following contemporary usage, most notably in Jan Tschichold's handbook of the movement, *Die neue Typographie* (1928). In this book the historical perspective of new typography was outlined: what came before the new was dealt with in one chapter, entitled 'The old typography (1440–1914)' (Tschichold, *Die neue Typographie* [also English-language edition], pp. 15–29).

Signs of change had begun to be evident in the nineteenth century, when typography escaped from the book, new letterforms were developed (sanserif especially) and new means of reproduction introduced (lithography, photography).

The Jugendstil designers did at least attempt some harmonization of art and life, but, in choosing to imitate natural forms, they went up a blind alley. The 'book artists', as Tschichold described them (often in ironic quotation marks), who had taken their initial inspiration from English private press printing, had also become stultified. At their simplest and best (in the case of C. E. Poeschel) their work was a kind of zero point between the old decorated typography and the designing ('gestaltend') new typography.

Tschichold then went on to provide a history of new typography, turning first to the 'new art', 'for the laws of this kind of typographic design represent nothing other than the practical application of the laws of design discovered by the new painters' (Tschichold, *Die neue Typographie*, p. 30). Abstract art was an art no longer dependent on imitation and private sentiment; rather it was constructive and belonged to a collective sphere. The old era emphasized individuality and uniqueness; the new era was one of reproducibility and of the dissolution of art into architecture and publicly available forms.

immediate steps leading to the present new typography were then outlined: the interest in sans-serif early in the century; the Futurist manifesto of 1909 ('Les mots en liberté futuristes'); Dada; De Stijl; Russian elementarism. The ideas and approaches of these movements coalesced around 1923 into what then became the new typography. This account of the origins of new typography, as essentially artistic, has become orthodox; and by extension, the movement itself as it developed during the 1920s and early 1930s has been regarded as also an artistic phenomenon.

It is clearly true that much of the impulse for the new typography came from people outside the printing trade and from outside the larger world of typography.

Rejecting the bourgeois confinement of art to the framed easel painting, the drawing room and the sale room, they looked for forms of production that escaped those shackles. The more positive or utopian elements

the Stijl group – went beyond rejection, producing models for a new art, in which distinctions between art and life had been dissolved. Their interest in graphic and typographic design thus took its place as part of a concern with the whole of the humanly constructed world.

The formulation of some of the leading ideas of the new typography can be traced in the manifestos and articles published by, most notably, El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy, and, less centrally, Kurt Schwitters. Between 1923 and 1925 they published summarizing statements on the nature and aims of a new typography,

The statement 'Topographie der Typographie' by Lissitzky, from 1923, may stand as a representative of this early, visionary phase of new typography, in which every convention was open to question:

- 1 The words on the printed surface are taken in by seeing, not by hearing.
- 2 One communicates meanings through the convention of words; meaning attains form through letters.
- 3 Economy of expression: optics not phonetics.
- 4 The design of the book-space, set according to the constraints of printing mechanics, must correspond to the tensions and pressures of content.
- 5 The design of the book-space using process blocks which issue from the new optics. The supernatural reality of the perfected eye.
- 6 The continuous sequence of pages: the bioscopic book.
- 7 The new book demands the new writer. Ink-pot and quill-pen are dead.
- 8 The printed surface transcends space and time. The printed surface, the infinity of books, must be transcended. The electro-library.¹

By 1925, the essential theory of the movement had been articulated. In this year the first summarizing anthology appeared: 'Elementare Typographie', a special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, the magazine of the Bildungsverband der Deutschen Buchdrucker (educational organization of the German printing trade union).

Elemental typography

- 1 The new typography is oriented towards purpose.
- 2 The purpose of any piece of typography is communication (the means of which it displays). The communication must appear in the briefest, simplest, most urgent form.
- 3 In order to make typography serviceable to social ends, it requires the *inner organization* of its materials (the ordering of content) and their *outer organization* (the means of typography configured in relation to one another).
- 4 *Inner organization* is the limitation to the elemental means of typography: letters, numbers, signs, rules – from the typecase and the composing machine.

In the present, visually-attuned world, the exact image – photography – also belongs to the elemental means of typography.

The elemental letterform is the sanserif, in all variations: light, medium, bold, and from condensed to expanded.

Letterforms that belong to particular style-categories or which bear definite national characteristics (Gothic, Fraktur, Kirchen-Slavisch) are not elementally designed, and to some extent limit the possibilities of being understood internationally. Mediaeval-Antiqua [roman] is the most usual form of typeface for the majority of people. For the setting of continuous text, it still – without being elementally designed – has the advantage of better legibility over many sanserifs.

As long as there exists no thoroughly elemental form that is

also legible in text setting, it is appropriate to prefer (against a sanserif) the least obtrusive form of Mediaeval-Antiqua [roman] – one in which period or personal characteristics are least evident.

An extraordinary economy could be achieved through the exclusive use of small letters – the elimination of all capital letters; a form of writing and setting that is recommended as a new script by all innovators in the field. See the book *Sprache und Schrift* by Dr Porstmann (Beuth-Verlag, Berlin SW19, Beuthstraße 8. Price: 5.25 Marks). our script loses nothing through writing in small letters only – but becomes, rather, more legible, easier to learn, essentially more economical. for one sound, for example 'a', why two signs: A and a? one sound, one sign. why two alphabets for one word, why double the quantity of signs, when a half achieves the same?

Through the use of strongly differentiated sizes and forms, and without consideration for previous aesthetic attitudes, the logical arrangement of printed text is made visually perceptible.

The unprinted areas of the paper are as much a means of

design as are the visually appearing forms.

5 *Outer organization* is the forming of the strongest contrast (simultaneity) through the use of differentiated shapes, sizes, weights (which must correspond to the value of their content) and the creation of the relation between the positive (coloured) formal values and the (white) negative values of the unprinted paper.

6 Elemental typographic design is the creation of the logical and visual relation between the letters, words, and text, which are given by the job in hand.

7 In order to increase the sense of urgency of new typography, vertical and diagonal lines can also be employed as a means of inner organization.

8 Elemental designing excludes the use of any *ornament* (also 'swelled' and other ornamental rules). The use of rules and inherently elemental forms (squares, circles, triangles) must be convincingly grounded in the total construction.

The *decorative-artistic-fanciful* use of essentially elemental forms is not in keeping with elemental designing.

9 Ordering of elements in new typography should in future be based on the standardized (DIN) paper formats of the Normenausschuß der Deutschen Industrie (NDI), which alone make possible a comprehensive organization for all typographic design. (See: Dr Porstmann, *Die Dinformate und ihre Einführung in die Praxis*, Selbstverlag Dinorm, Berlin NW7, Sommerstraße 4a. 3.00 Marks.)

In particular the DIN format A4 (210:297 mm) should be the basis of all business and other letterheadings. The business letterheading has itself also been standardized: DIN 676, 'Geschäftsbrief', obtainable direct from Beuth-Verlag, Berlin SW19, Beuthstraße 8; 0.40 Mark. The DIN standard 'Papierformate' is number 476. The DIN formats have only recently been introduced into practice. In this special issue there is only one job that is consciously based on a DIN format.

10 Elemental designing is, in typography as in other fields, not absolute or conclusive. Elements change through discoveries that create new means of typographic designing – photography, for example – therefore the concept of elemental designing will necessarily also change continually.²

The leading idea is that of purpose ('Zweck'), which informs both the details of the designed object and the larger context, of the artefact in society. Thus formal questions, of the use of space and of the visual elements of typography, are joined with social considerations.

Norms and standards

Attempts to devise norms for the manufacture of products had quickened in pace in the conditions of the First World War. The need to co-ordinate production for efficiency now became urgent and governments were able to take greater steps towards the regulation of industry than in peacetime. Thus a German standards organization, the Normenausschuß der Deutschen Industrie, was established in 1917; in a reorganization of 1926 it became the Deutscher Normenausschuß.

But while the Werkbund artists and architects thought in terms of a settled style and of established type-forms for artefacts, the Deutscher Normenausschuß was concerned rather with the standardization of the dimensions of the elements of manufacture: screw threads, but not whole ensembles. In the paradox of standardization, however, the more that elements were 'normed', the more easily and the more variously they could be combined.

For new typographers, the role of this aesthetic of industry and mechanical production can be seen by contrasting their attitudes with the new traditionalists. These latter accepted machine composition and powered printing presses, but they made no connection between methods of production and the visual appearance of their work, which followed traditional forms. For modernist typographers, however, visual appearance was to be shaped by new methods of production: this process of manufacture took its place within the totality of the demands of the 'modern age', which would include the new needs of users or readers too.

As well as its activities in the domain of heavy industry, the Deutscher Normenausschuß had soon become concerned with the area of business administration and thus impinged on the printing trade and typography. Standards were issued for, among other items, paper formats (1922), business letterheadings (1924), envelopes (1924), newspapers (1924), book formats (1926).

The immediate initiative for the German system seems to have come from the scientist (and theorist of colour) Wilhelm Ostwald who, in 1911, published a proposal for a 'Weltformat' for paper sizes.⁴

Letters of the modern age

New typographers explained their preference for sanserif as following directly from the belief in forms appropriate to the time: the modern age of the machine. This was the essential difference with others who had earlier taken up sanserif in the search for aesthetic simplicity (Stefan George or J. L. M. Lauweriks).

Though it was sometimes implied that letters without ornaments (serifs) enabled better, less fettered communication, their arguments referred very little to legibility, but rather to 'atmosphere' or association. Sanserif transcended the individual qualities of the artist's typeface;

Sanserif was without national connotations and provided a complete break: from blackletter into the world of international exchange.

The interest in the project of a universal alphabet at the Bauhaus dates from around 1925, the time of its move from Weimar to Dessau, where a fully equipped typographic workshop was established. The central figure here was László Moholy-Nagy,

the full weight of modernist theory: an international letterform, suitable for all applications (both in type and in handwriting), and in its 'exact' character and as composed of primary forms it corresponded to the demands of the machine: 'to print a hand-produced letterform with a machine is false romanticism'.⁶

The search of the Bauhäusler for a new alphabet was conducted under a vision of industry and the machine that was little touched by the mentality of the actually-existing printing trade. But if no typefaces issued from their research, their work, and the school's effective publicity for itself, did help to create a climate in which typefoundries were encouraged to take up the idea of a new sanserif. The first of these to appear was Erbar, designed by Jakob Erbar and issued by Ludwig & Mayer in 1926; early drawings for the typeface are dated 1922. The idea for a freshly designed sanserif, breaking from the hitherto 'undesigned' grotesque, might in Germany be traced back to the Behrens-Schrift

Futura, designed by Paul Renner for the Bauer typefoundry, became accepted by the new typographers as the most satisfactory of the new (twentieth-century) sanserifs.

The achievement of Futura was of a typeface that satisfied both the desire for a geometrical typeface, constructed with ruler and compass, and for a typeface that composed well as text, over a whole range of sizes. This latter capacity was achieved by subtle

of forms. With Futura, new typography might have seemed to have found its ideal letterform: a sanserif that was satisfactory in practice as well as in theory. But the matter was still open to debate. Thus Tschichold, in 1928, while welcoming Futura as 'a substantial step forward' went on to voice a fundamental doubt: 'I myself think that it cannot be open to one person to create the letterform of our age, which is something that must be free of any personal traces. It will be the work of several people, among whom one will probably find an engineer.' (Tschichold, *Die neue Typographie*, p.76.) The argument was taken up again in Switzerland after the Second World War.

The new book

It was one of the complaints made by the new typographers that the traditionalists were limited to book typography. If it was not said at the time, it may be fair to observe that everything designed by the new traditionalists, whether book or not, tended to look like a traditional book. The traditionalists, for their part, claimed that new typography was limited to display and publicity typography, and was incapable of tackling the more intricate problems of books. Both of these views were well articulated by Jan Tschichold, before and after his break with modernism.

The utopian-visionary statements of artist-designers looked forward beyond the book as a container of 'grey' continuous text to 'the coloured picture book ... as a continuous visual design (a coherent sequence of many individual pages)' (Moholy-Nagy), and further to 'the electro-library' (Lissitzky).⁹ In practice, the new typography of the book was constrained by the techniques of the day – letterpress, for the most part – and by printing-trade attitudes. The gap between the ideas of these artists and the reality of their printed products may be explained by the difficulties that outsiders to typography would have had in specifying their wishes to printers, as well as the limited materials that an average printer could provide. But modernist designers with a typographic education did begin to design books that broke significantly from traditional patterns.

reticence. Content was to shape form, rather than to be poured into

some ancient container (as in the theories of correct page proportion). New typography thus resisted the idea that literature should enjoy a separate, special status: it was another design problem.

And perhaps more interesting than 'literature' for new typographers were industrial catalogues and other texts with complex problems of ordering and configuration to be resolved. Here the contrast with the traditionalist artist-typographers became complete.

Organization and dissemination

New typography, like all of the activity of the modern movement in design between the two world wars, was a minority affair.

Tschichold was the most active propagandist and explainer of the movement. He was the son of a sign-writer in Leipzig and had had a thorough calligraphic and typographic education, going to the Akademie in that city.

The movement did begin to take root within education, in the training of both designers and printers. Although the Bauhaus has been most celebrated among the schools of the period in Germany, its reputation (over all fields of design) is probably out of true proportion to its real achievements and effects.

A more developed interest in new typography came from the Meisterschule für Deutschlands Buchdrucker in Munich, under Paul Renner and with Tschichold on the staff.

Before the economic crisis of 1929 and the return of political turmoil in the early 1930s, one can recognize a brief phase, in the later 1920s, when there was in Germany some greater economic and political stability. At this moment, in typography, there seemed to be the prospect of a rational approach that had worked through an initial, artistic phase. Writing in 1928, Tschichold sensed that

further progress 'will rest less on artistic developments than on changes in the means of reproduction and on the altered needs created by these technical changes and by social relations' (Tschichold, *Die neue Typographie*, p. 65.) But this hope would be defeated in the 1930s. The conclusive event was the National-Socialist seizure of power in January 1933.

For the centres of modernism in Germany, enforced closure or take-over came very rapidly

traditionalist factions within that party. But in 1933 conditions at the centre of modernism did change with as drastic a rupture as can occur in human history. From this time, in the years up to and into the Second World War, it was no longer possible to maintain the spirit of hope that is necessary to the life of modern design.