

Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography*. Translated from the German by Ruari McLean. Introduction by Robin Kinross. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

In a special issue of the German printing journal *Typographische Mitteilungen*, entitled “elementare typographie” and dated October 1925, Jan Tschichold, its editor, proposed a radically new direction for German typography and advertising art. Amidst reproductions of avant-garde books and Constructivist-influenced periodicals, as well as manifestos by László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky, Tschichold presented his own manifesto of ten principles and rules for a new typographic practice that summarized convictions about elemental forms and clarity of communication which avant-garde artists in Germany had called for earlier.

Tschichold’s special issue provoked considerable debate in subsequent numbers of *Typographische Mitteilungen* and in 1928 he followed it with an entire book, *De neue Typographie* (The New Typography), which was brought out by the Bildungsverband der Deutschen Buchdrucker, the educational wing of the German printing trade union who also published *Typographische Mitteilungen*. By 1931, the book was out of print and was not reprinted in German until 1987. In the years following the publication of *The New Typography* Tschichold had recanted some of his earlier positions and adopted what he considered to be a more mature and inclusive approach to typography. This change had aroused the ire of his more doctrinaire followers such as Max Bill, who, in 1946, wrote an article in the Swiss printing journal *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, attacking Tschichold for his shift of views.

In 1967 Tschichold asked the British author Ruari McLean to prepare an English translation of *The New Typography* which would include extensive revisions. McLean completed his translation, incorporating Tschichold’s changes and after Tschichold’s death in 1974, because no publisher could be found, he placed his manuscript in London’s St. Bride Printing Library. Fortunately for the historical record, the version published by the University of California Press, also translated by Ruari McLean, is from the original edition of the book rather than from McLean’s first translation. This distinction is particularly important because Tschichold’s book is the most complete exposition we have from the 1920s of the “new typography” and embodies the argument for it with which those who have rejected it must engage.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to decry the formal limits of the modern movement, whether in architecture, furniture design, or typography and to position this perceived reductionism against a richer, denser, more complex contemporary practice. Most often, however, critics have done so with little or no understanding of the original modernist argument. This is not to say that Tschichold’s justification for the new typography is without its reductive side. It isn’t. Tschichold adopts a form of binary rhetoric which polarizes the old and the new

with the new being superior to the old. His principal claim for the new typography is that it is characteristic of the modern age. He was writing at a time when many new mass produced products appeared on the market and his intention was to bring typography into line with these other manifestations of industrial culture. Similar to the Russian Constructivists, Tschichold lauds the **engineer** (boldface in the original) whose work is marked by “economy, precision, “ and the “use of pure constructional forms that correspond to the functions of the object.” (11) Actually, Tschichold does not characterize all prior typefaces as being inherently bad; they are simply not appropriate for the modern era. He recognizes Aldus Manutius as the initiator of a new age of book design and commends the clarity of typefaces designed by Didot, Bodoni, and Waldbaum. What Tschichold *cannot* tolerate from the past, however, are the recycling of historic forms and the gratuitous decorative impulses that “playfully covered printed matter with all kinds of pretty shapes...” (28)

Tschichold believes strongly in the *Zeitgeist* argument that each age has forms which are uniquely appropriate to it. Therefore, he can formulate a set of principles for his time and reject all prior work, regardless of its quality. One of the characteristics of the modern age for Tschichold is speed. It then follows for him that printing must facilitate a quicker and more efficient mode of reading. Forms, therefore must be adapted to this purpose. Whereas the aim of the older typography was beauty, clarity is the purpose of modern design. Through the analysis of many examples of both old and new typography, Tschichold graphically demonstrates his thesis. Whereas much has been made of El Lissitzky’s theory of reading a graphic form as he outlined it staccato-like in “Topography of Typography” (1923) and demonstrated it masterfully in his children’s book *Of Two Squares* (1922), Tschichold’s own abilities as a reader of modern print material have been seen all too infrequently in the English-language design literature, an imbalance which this edition of *The New Typography* will correct. Tschichold was a much greater technician than Lissitzky or Moholy-Nagy, due to his solid training in typography; consequently his own readings of modernist design are based on an intimate knowledge of typesetting techniques such as leading, spacing, and the overall arrangement of type on a page.

It is, in fact, Tschichold’s extensive knowledge of typographic history and practice that remains most impressive in this book. His manifesto-like assertions of the need for typographic modernity add little to the prior exhortations of the avant-garde, whether Futurist or Constructivist. They are also less interesting because they are so clearly derivative. As one senses from various comments in the text, Tschichold’s sentiments are with the progressive forces of change, though his focus is on graphic forms that grow squarely out of the prevailing system of production and exchange—capitalism.

In the opening chapters Tschichold teleologically traces the development of typography in Europe, comparing it to related achievements in the history of modern art before outlining the relation between the new typography and the characteristics of the modern age. Following these chapters, he devotes a considerable portion of the book to more technical matters relating to standardization and the design of particular kinds of forms for business communication. Tschichold is a forceful advocate for standardization or *Normung* and a strong supporter of efforts by the German Standards Committee to introduce a paper standardization system known as the DIN formats. According to Tschichold, this system would make things easier for users, printers, and tradesmen by reducing paper costs and making printing and the distribution of printed materials more efficient. While Tschichold had recommended to Ruari McLean that the section on standardization not be included in a revised edition, it is nonetheless important to the book, even though quite technical, because it reinforces the point that Tschichold was more deeply concerned with efficiency and function than he was aesthetics. This interest in issues of use, which one also finds in modernist architecture and product design thinking of the 1920s, is often overlooked by contemporary critics who demonize the new typography as an unnecessarily simple technique of visual display that cannot represent the qualities of complexity and ambiguity which they value,

The sections of the book that Tschichold devotes to the design of specific forms such as logotypes, letterheads, business cards, envelopes, and posters make clear his interest in the efficient transmission of information. He envisions the various forms of communication as part of a system of information storage and retrieval. As he says of the letterhead:

Thus the letter becomes part of a multiplicity, i.e. of a correspondence. Without order, such a multiplicity becomes unmanageable. The old quarto and the various other unique formats, among which the old folio format was an attempt at standardization, were—because of all their different dimensions—difficult if not impossible to file and therefore find. (112)

He then breaks down the letterhead analytically into component parts that determine the position of the address, receipt and treatment marks, the date and other numerical references, and the firm's particulars. Standardizing the locations of this information on the page, Tschichold claims, is both attractive and efficient.

Regarding the symbol or logotype, which Tschichold calls a *typosignet*, he makes a distinction between those pictorial logos that are drawn by graphic artists and the new logos that are designed with typography. The advantages of the latter, says Tschichold, are both pragmatic and semantic. On the pragmatic side, they can be reproduced with elements from the printer's case—straight and curves rules, geometrical shapes, and letters—while on the

semantic side, they convey a “strength inherent in all things whose appearance comes from a technical manufacturing process.” (109) Tschichold also occasionally brings a social concern to his proposals for new graphic forms as with his aim to erase the former distinctions between men’s and women’s visiting cards which have become “stupid and in addition unpractical.” (150)

While Tschichold makes good sense with his arguments for the design of graphic forms so that they can be successfully organized in filing and retrieval systems or more easily and less expensively printed, he conflates efficiency with ideology when he opposes drawing as a technique for the production of pictorial posters. He acknowledges that the images and lettering of fact-posters, or *sachplakate* by Lucian Bernhard and Ludwig Hohlwein were effective but he then claims that the drawn poster is not as simple and clear as a photographic and typographic one. Given the simplicity of Bernhard’s posters, characterized by what Tschichold called “nibbled” lettering, it is hard to be persuaded by his denigration of their efficacy. While Tschichold’s ability to analyze a graphic form is generally quite keen, his ideological judgment, which one might argue, is the entitlement of a young 26-year-old reformer, occasionally clouds his normally lucid analyses.

It is not surprising that Tschichold would have wanted to recant some of his ideological rigidity in later years, particularly since some of his rhetorical arguments are based on extremely weak premises needing only a shift of sensibility to expose them. However, unlike Max Bill, we should not be astonished that he returned to an appreciation of classical typefaces and symmetrical layouts within a few years of *The New Typography*’s publication. He was too well trained in typography to totally reject these forms as some of the avant-garde artists did. Curiously enough this leads to a paradox. The more one knows of history, the more difficult it is to reject. it. For that reason, *The New Typography* merits a reading by contemporary designers, particularly those who have had the biggest ax to grind with modernism.

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