

Origins of the New Typography

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Tschichold prefaced his famous book *Die neue Typographie* with a quotation from Mondrian and, before discussing the New Typography itself, he included a chapter on “the new art”. Yet, the connection between art and typography is never fully explained. Rather vaguely, he stated: “In the period after the war the creators of abstract painting and Constructivism worked out the rules for a contemporary style of typography in practical work”; this meant “design coming from basic form and proportion”, which had also led to purely abstract painting.¹ He was thinking of people like El Lissitzky, Willi Baumeister, Walter Dexel, and Kurt Schwitters – all artists who did typography in the 1920s and 1930s as a way of earning a living in times of recurrent financial crisis. However, while Tschichold recognised that the look of New Typography borrowed heavily from abstract painting and montage, with the use of geometric shapes and primary colours, he stressed that a superficial application of these elements would lead to formalism. In other words, it would result in typography that was as bad as the old typography he sought to reject.

In his section on the history of the New Typography, Tschichold hints that some steps towards it were made by Peter Behrens, an applied artist who became seriously involved in typography. Tschichold was no doubt intrigued by Behrens's frequent use of sans serif types, like the wonderful grotesque used for the text of his book *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst* (Celebrations of Life and Art, 1900). (**fig. 2**) Tschichold thought that Jugendstil graphic artists preferred sans serif for its simplicity, seeing it as a kind of “prototype” or *Urform*. On the other hand, the decorative elements that were characteristic of Jugendstil did not meet with Tschichold's approval.

Tschichold did make it clear that, in his view, “the change-over from ornamental to functional typography” was begun by the Futurist Filippo Marinetti, whom Tschichold called a *Nichtfachmann* (non-specialist) – someone from outside the profession of printing and typography. This notion became the conventional view, accepted by subsequent historians such as Herbert Spencer and Robin Kinross. Marinetti was a poet and journalist, not a visual artist, but he took concrete poetry in visual directions. Tschichold quoted at length from his book of 1919, *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Futurist Words in Freedom), although the text by Marinetti that Tschichold quotes about the “typographic revolution” originated in a manifesto of 1913.

The revolutionary aspect of Marinetti's *parole in libertà* (words in freedom / mots en liberté) is that they explode the horizontal and vertical

¹ Tschichold 1995: 56–57.



fig. 2 Double page from the book by Peter Behrens, *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst: eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols* (Celebrations of Life and Art: A Consideration of Theatre as the Highest Cultural Symbol), Diederichs, Leipzig 1900.

constraints of metal types, making something between painting and poetry, which is impossible to read in any linear way. **(fig. 3)** They operate on a graphic as well as a semantic level, with extreme contrasts of size and weight of types. Such typographic collage is difficult to do with traditional letterpress printing. Marinetti lived close to a printing workshop, and he was able to borrow pieces of type and experiment with them, but his compositions mostly took advantage of modern techniques of photographic reproduction. They embody a kind of “ransom-note” typography: letters are taken from various sources and stuck together for artwork. These graphic poems were an innovative expression of Futurism, and they were made by other Futurists as well as Marinetti. Newspapers such as *Lacerba* and *L'Italia Futurista* included whole pages of words in freedom as poetic reportage of actions during World War I, in which many of the Futurists were fighting.

Tschichold recognised the graphic innovation of Futurism, but he kept quiet about the nasty parts of it: the warmongering and the misogyny. It would not have helped Tschichold's case that Futurism had strong links with Italian fascism, given that there is a strong socialist subtext to his book *Die neue Typographie*. Tschichold tried to get in touch with many of the people whose work he admired, but apparently not with Marinetti. Later, he did contact another Futurist, Fortunato Depero, in order to acquire his book *Depero Futurista* (1927), which Schwitters had shown him. This was published in 1927, but it seems that Tschichold had not seen it early enough to include it in *Die neue Typographie*. It is much closer to Tschichold's definition, sticking to type material itself, composed with great ingenuity. But again, the quotation from Mussolini in it would not have pleased him.

Marinetti made a lecture tour all over Europe in 1913, during which he performed his poems in noisy renditions expressing the noisy typography. One of his stops was London, and his lecture there sparked a British variation of Futurism, named Vorticism. From 1914, the Vorticists published a journal called *Blast* that expressed anarchic sentiments similar to those of Futurism, but it seems that Tschichold had not seen it because Britain is excluded from the zone covered by his book. *Blast* features sans serif types more consistently than Marinetti's work, in a way that anticipates later developments. **(fig. 4)**

The avant-garde movements that Tschichold definitely recognised as influences on the New Typography were Dada, De Stijl, and Constructivism. The founders of Dada, exiled in neutral Switzerland during World War I, did not share Marinetti's fascination with machines and war, but they were inspired by his writings. Tschichold illustrates the invitation to a Dada soirée of 1923 and credits it to the Romanian Tristan Tzara, but evidently it was designed by Ilia Zdanevich, who was from Georgia. **(fig. 5)**

Dada established itself in Germany too, with the work of pioneering photomonteurs Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann and John Heartfield. In an advertisement of 1917 for a portfolio of lithographs by Georg Grosz, Heartfield used typography in an anarchic manner, with lines arranged at various angles. As with Futurist examples, it is obviously difficult to lock metal or wooden types in a composition like this, because all the elements are rectangular and have to fit the procrustean bed of typography. Heartfield had a different solution to Marinetti's: he poured wet plaster between the elements to set them in place for printing.

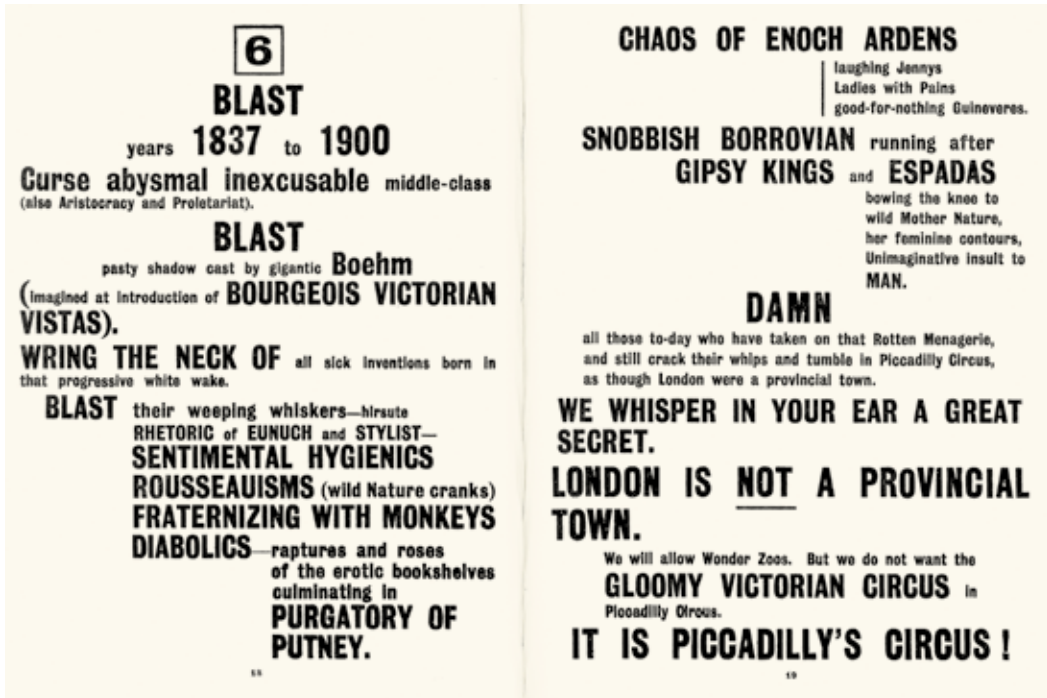
Another kind of Dadaist was Kurt Schwitters, the artist and poet from Hanover, who had close connections to De Stijl. Together with Käthe Steinitz



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fig. 3

Pull-out page from the book by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Futurist Words in Freedom), Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, Milan 1919. Photo by Vincent Levrat



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fig. 4 Manifesto of Vortex, double page from issue 1 of *Blast* magazine, 20 June 1914. Letterpress. Facsimile reprint: Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara CA 1981. Photo by Christopher Burke



fig. 5 Announcement of *Soirée du cœur à barbe* (The Bearded Heart Soirée), Paris, 6 and 7 July 1923, graphic design by Ilia Zdanevich. Letterpress. Merrill C. Berman Collection. Photo by Jolie Simpson

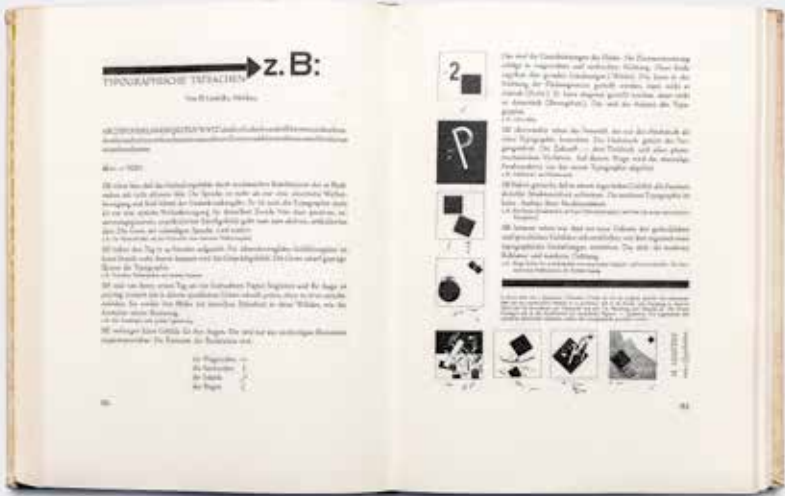
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fig. 6

Self-Portrait (The Constructor), photo by El Lissitzky, 1924.
Collage of lithographic and drawn elements added to a photographic
image, gelatin silver print.



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fig. 7 El Lissitzky, *Typographische Tatsachen* (Typographic Facts), double page from *Gutenberg Festschrift*, Verlag der Gutenberg-Gesellschaft, Mainz 1925. Photo by Niccolò Quaresima

and Theo van Doesburg (the founder of De Stijl), he created a series of fairytale books featuring elementary typography. Schwitters also designed advertising, and he published a magazine called *Merz* from 1923 as a showcase for Modernist typography. (The title is a nonsense word arrived at by chance when Schwitters ripped some paper with the word *Kommerz* printed on it, and ended up with *Merz*). The style that we think of as the New Typography coalesced here, with large sans serif types, geometric shapes, and a lack of symmetrical layout. Schwitters published his own typographical manifesto in *Merz*, called “Theses on Typography”, showing his Dada credentials with an anarchistic tone: one of his principles was “Do it as nobody else has done it before”.

Schwitters also published a manifesto by the Russian designer El Lissitzky in 1923, called “Topography of Typography”, which Tschichold reprinted in *Die neue Typographie*. Lissitzky represents the principal “-ism” which laid the foundation of the New Typography: Constructivism, which began in Russia but had direct links to Italian Futurism. Lissitzky was trained as an architect, but worked in many fields – he called himself “The Constructor”, which is the name of his famous photomontage self-portrait showing the tools of his trade. **(fig. 6)** Constructivism was concerned with making objects from everyday materials, and integral to it was a cult of the artist or designer as a worker, as one might expect in the early days of Soviet Russia. One of Lissitzky’s best known achievements was the edition of Mayakovsky’s poetry “*Dlia golosa*” (For the Voice), published by the Soviet State in 1923. Here he used all available typographic elements to create a kind of concrete poetry, including its famous tab index with symbols of the different poems.

Lissitzky even broke into the traditional confines of the *Gutenberg Festschrift* (Gutenberg commemorative publication) of 1925 with an essay called “Typographic Facts”. **(fig. 7)** There was also an essay by Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy in the same volume. These two Eastern Europeans were among key figures of the New Typography who congregated in Germany in the early 1920s: additionally, Van Doesburg came from Holland and set himself up as a kind of unofficial teacher at the Bauhaus school in Weimar. All three met in Berlin in the early 1920s and swapped ideas. Van Doesburg and Lissitzky even co-founded the Constructivist International, which makes clear the affinities of Constructivism with Communism. Lissitzky was influential in spreading word of Russian ideas, although he was not in the innermost circle of Constructivists linked to the Soviet State.

When in Berlin, Lissitzky collaborated with another Russian, Ilya Ehrenburg, to produce the trilingual magazine *Veshch* (Object) – perhaps the first such multilingual journal about art and design. It featured contributions by Le Corbusier, whose books were important for Tschichold too, perhaps more for their text than their design. Tschichold seems to have absorbed the cult of the engineer from Le Corbusier, writing in *Die neue Typographie*: “Car Aeroplane Telephone Wireless Factory Neon-advertising New York! These objects, designed without reference to the aesthetics of the past, have been created by a new kind of man: **the engineer!**”²

Tschichold’s most intense exchange in this formative period of the New Typography was with Lissitzky. He was evidently inspired by the title-page of Lissitzky’s book *Pro dva kvadrata* (About Two Squares, 1922) when designing an advertisement for the Polish publisher Philobiblon in 1924. Intriguingly, Tschichold signed it in a Polish form,

2 Tschichold 1995: 11 (words set in bold by the author).

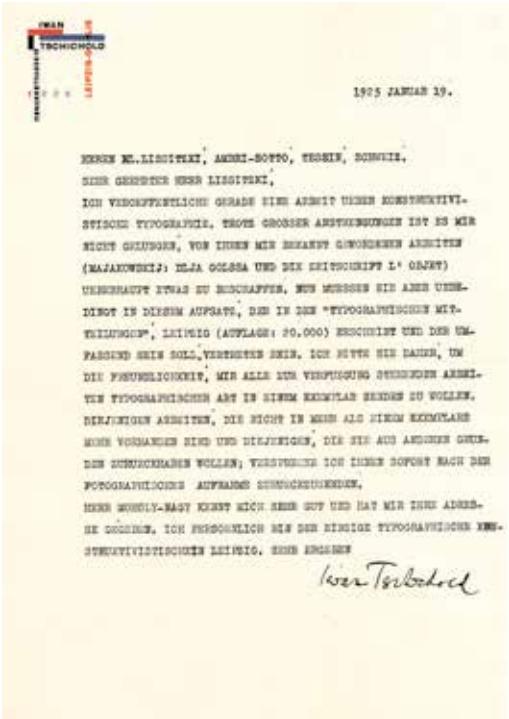
so that his surname required fewer consonants than in German – Czychold; but he also used the Polish and Czech form of his given first name, Johannes – Jan. He only settled on Jan as his first name in 1926, and before that, due to his enthusiasm for Russian Constructivism, he briefly renamed himself Ivan (or Iwan in German). With this identity, he experimented with Constructivist designs for his personal letterhead that were clearly inspired by Lissitzky. In the first letter that Tschichold wrote to him, he declared: “I am the only typographic Constructivist in Leipzig”. **(fig. 8)**

Tschichold was inclined to look eastwards more generally, and was also fascinated by Czech and Polish typography. One principal figure in Modernist Polish typography, Henryk Berlewi, escaped Tschichold's attention in the 1920s. This is perplexing because Berlewi came to typography via their mutual friend Lissitzky. He co-founded an advertising agency called Reklama Mechano. The advertisements they made are examples of Constructivist typography that are as impressive as Lissitzky's work, and more consistent in the use of typefaces (all sans serif) as opposed to lettering drawn by hand. **(fig. 9)**

The defining group in Czechoslovakia was Devětsil (literally “nine forces”), led by Karel Teige. Photomontage played a major part in Czech Modernism, which tempered utilitarianism with a more playful and poetic element that Devětsil called Poetism – Teige described this in its manifesto (1924) as a “modern Epicureanism”, or “the art of wasting time”. Delightful examples of this poetic form of photomontage were applied to book covers by the painters-typographers of Devětsil, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová).

Although Tschichold did not regard the Bauhaus as synonymous with the New Typography (as some historical accounts do), the importance of this institution in his development should not be underestimated. Tschichold had a traditional printing education, and worked in a kind of classical, calligraphic style until he saw the Bauhaus exhibition at Weimar in 1923 and, by his own account, he was converted immediately – it shook him up, and he saw the light.³ Moholy-Nagy was the key person in defining the functionalist approach to typography at the Bauhaus, which relates to his connections with Constructivism. Yet, before he replaced Johannes Itten as teacher of the Bauhaus *Grundkurs* (Foundation Course) in 1923, elements of both Futurism and Dada seemed to be present in a unique typographical creation of 1921 made at the Bauhaus: a typographical construction of a text by Itten for a publication called *Utopia*. **(fig. 10)** Tschichold seemed to be unaware of it (at least he did not mention it in his book). It is a real curiosity, and is perhaps still under-appreciated. It was not designed by Johannes Itten but by the Austrian artist Frederika “Friedl” Dicker-Brandeis, who had studied with Itten at his private art school in Vienna. She then went and studied with him at the Bauhaus. The volume relates more to concrete poetry than later Bauhaus typography, but seems to indicate future developments there with its mixture of typefaces and use of only black and red.

The fundamental text in which Moholy-Nagy defined the Bauhaus approach to typography was his short essay in the catalogue for the 1923 exhibition that was such a revelation for Tschichold. The title of Moholy-Nagy's essay was the first use of the phrase “Die neue Typographie”. He advocated breaking the horizontal/vertical grid of typography and using all kinds of typefaces and geometric forms in an “elastic, variable, and fresh typographical language”, in contrast to the flat,



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- fig. 8 Letter from Jan Tschichold to El Lissitzky, 19 January 1925. Typewritten letter on headed notepaper, from the book *J. T.: Johannes Tzschichold, Iwan Tschichold, Jan Tschichold*, edited by Philipp Luidl, Typographische Gesellschaft, Munich 1976.
- fig. 9 Advertising brochure for Plutos chocolate brand, graphic design by Henryk Berlew, 1925. Letterpress.
- fig. 10 Johannes Itten, *Analysen alter Meister* (Analysis of Old Masters), from issue 1–2, 1921, of the magazine *Utopia. Dokumente der Wirklichkeit* (Documents of Reality), lettering by Johannes Itten, typesetting by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. Letterpress.



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fig. 11 Iwan Tschichold, "Die neue Typographie", in *Kulturschau*, 4, Spring 1925, pp. 9–11. Letterpress. Photo by Christopher Burke.

fig. 12 Herbert Bayer, *Katalog der Muster* (Catalogue of Designs), Bauhaus, Dessau 1925, graphic design by Herbert Bayer. Letterpress.



fig. 13 Front cover of the magazine *The Next Call*, 8, February 1926, design by Hendrik Werkman. Letterpress. Photo credit by Jolie Simpson

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grey texture of traditional typography. The text design of the catalogue is a little naïve, filling the width of the page with lines that are far too long to be comfortably legible – most likely decided by a compositor or printer.⁴ When Jan Tschichold emulated this text, exactly two years later, in his first manifesto, also named “Die neue Typographie”, he took the opportunity to demonstrate the point about using contrasting styles and weights of type in the typography of his text itself. (fig. 11)

Some of Moholy-Nagy’s early typography seems to take his ideas very superficially, putting text in a block, and introducing the contrast with heavy bars and often enormous page numbers. Just a few years later, Moholy-Nagy thought that the heavy details in this kind of typography were a mistake, distracting the eye from the unity of the visual impression. He said that they were not necessary, and that pure typography could achieve the desired aims of “clarity, concision and precision”.⁵

Moholy-Nagy was more of a *graphiste* than a typographer, and he was keen to use the newest technology to make things: indeed, he stated that the most important thing for modern typography was photography. At this time, photographs were still printed “typographically” – in other words, with letterpress technology. Moholy-Nagy called this fusion “typo-foto”, and provided an iconic example in his “Dynamic of the Metropolis” from one of the first Bauhaus books, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Painting, Photography Film, 1925). The expressive typography, combined with references to abstract painting and filmic devices, reflected Moholy-Nagy’s view that film would soon make much literature redundant.

Two of Moholy-Nagy’s students at the Bauhaus followed his lead and became lecturers there: Joost Schmidt and Herbert Bayer. But typography was really only a sideline at the Bauhaus; the main interest there was architecture and product design. There was no proper typography workshop until 1927, and it was called the “advertising department”. Most of the graphic work we know from the Bauhaus is publicity material designed by the typography lecturers for the school itself. The catalogue for its design business is an archetypal example: it was designed by Bayer, who wrote manifestos about the scientific nature of the Bauhaus approach to typography, and its functional nature in conveying clearly the sense of words. (fig. 12)

Another aspect of Bauhaus typography, which is common in most works by Modernist typographers, is the use of sans serif typefaces. This was not an absolutely essential part of the New Typography, as defined in the earliest manifestos by Moholy Nagy and Tschichold, but sans serif typefaces were a significant feature of it from the outset. These typefaces were not new, having been common since the middle of the 19th century, but in the opinion of theorists like Jan Tschichold and Paul Renner, sans serifs expressed best the impersonality of modern industrial life. They represented a kind of technical form, designed by engineers, equivalent to the

industrial buildings that Le Corbusier praised so much. Some new sans serifs were designed, but the only one which became really popular in New Typography was Renner’s Futura, released in 1927, which brought the idea of geometric construction to a usable typeface.

4 There are some peculiar, old-fashioned details in its text composition: Roman type is used as more modern than the German Fraktur, but the convention for emphasis is adopted from Fraktur – letter spacing instead of italic.

5 Moholy-Nagy 1925; and (uncredited) *Typographische Mitteilungen* 1931. See also Burke 2007: 98.

6 Spencer 1982: 58–59.

A different kind of engineering element that was important to Tschichold's conception of the New Typography was standardisation, in particular the adoption of the DIN norms on paper sizes and layout, which were new at that time. This seems to be in contradiction with the rule-breaking creativity of Futurism and Dada, for example, but one typographer who combined the two aspects in some way was Piet Zwart, whose work Tschichold appreciated very much. Another Dutch designer whom Tschichold contacted in 1926 was Hendrik Werkman, who published the magazine *The Next Call*. **(fig. 13)** Werkman was mentioned in *Die neue Typographie* but his work was not illustrated; it probably did not correspond to Tschichold's utilitarian ideas for what New Typography should be. The New Typography, defined by Tschichold as a functionalist approach in his book, was not a direct continuation of some of the work that inspired it. Tschichold's emphasis on clarity and direct communication is quite different to the aims of Futurism or Dada, for example, which often aimed to destroy clarity. Marinetti also was not afraid of ugliness and imbalance, which were qualities alien to Tschichold's own work as a designer.

A criticism that Herbert Spencer made in his book *Pioneers of Modern Typography* (1969) was that Tschichold codified these early efforts and made them into something boring.⁶ This is a questionable criticism, especially as British typographers of the 1950s and 1960s, like Spencer, were very much influenced by Tschichold. It is not quite clear how this influence happened, because few of them had read or even seen *Die neue Typographie*, which was only published in English and other translations from 1995, almost seventy years after the original; and there was no facsimile reprint until the 1980s. Those who got hold of an original copy may have found its cover even more mysterious than it already was: it never had a jacket, and the silver blocking on the spine, which revealed the title, did not always survive very well.

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