

Can the New Typography Be Written in French?¹

Catherine de Smet

N'aimez que moi (Love only me) pleads the advertisement for Caron perfume in lower-case lettering visible on the transparent bottle.² (fig. 84) Not much French is spoken in the illustrations to *Die neue Typographie*, where the German language prevails, yet the variety of examples reveals the international scope of Jan Tschichold's documentation for his book. That scope reflects, on one hand, a concern to demonstrate the strength of a trend that already extended across Europe and was destined to spread, and on the other hand, a desire to transcend the typographic specificities advocated by the author in order to promote "present-day transnational bonds between people".³

Alongside printed material in English, Dutch, Russian, Czech and Japanese, a few examples in French back up Tschichold's argument, reinforcing the "transnational" spirit of the New Typography all the more when they are works by artists expressing themselves in French rather than their mother tongue, such as the Romanian Tristan Tzara and the Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. The chapter on the history of the New Typography includes both men as precursors of the movement, reproducing Tzara's poster for a Dada event – *Le Coeur à Barbe* (The Bearded Heart) show at the Théâtre Michel in Paris – as well as a poem drawn from Marinetti's *Les mots en liberté futuristes* (Futurist Words in Freedom), "Lettre d'une jolie femme à un monsieur passéiste" (Letter from a Pretty Woman to a Traditionalist Man).⁴ Tschichold's field of investigation extended not just to space but also to time: a highly decorative 18th-century announcement for a French funeral mass (not a garden party, the caption blithely explains) to be celebrated at the church of the Discalced Carmelites supports the idea that typography expresses above all its period, whatever the subject.⁵ Meanwhile, "the whole-page [Caron] advertisement" for *N'aimez que moi* was remarkable not only 'as a photograph', but also as a particularly effective advert in which "no lettering [was] used except that on the objects photographed".⁶ It was taken from an issue of the French edition of *Vogue* magazine, as was another advert, this time mainly typographic: *Tous les élégants connaissent / avenue du bois / c'est le dernier parfum de rosine* (All stylish people know avenue du bois, it's

rosine's latest scent), which demonstrated "the independent use of lower case only" in fashion, as allegedly often employed in France.⁷ (fig. 85)

These last two examples at least show that Tschichold, an attentive observer, detected some promise in contemporary design in France.⁸ French output, for that matter, extended far beyond the illustrations discussed in

1 Translated from the French by Deke Dusinberre.
2 Tschichold 1995: 89.
3 *Ibid.*: 74–75.
4 *Ibid.*: 55, 57. In his book, Tschichold credits the poster to Tristan Tzara, but it was designed by Il'ia Zdanevich.
5 *Ibid.*: 20 (announcement), 77 (commentary).
6 *Ibid.*: 88.
7 *Ibid.*: 79–80.
8 The Rosine advert is not dated, but the caption to the Caron illustration gives the year 1926.



84



85

fig. 84 Advertisement for Caron's *N' aimez que moi* perfume, created in 1916, featured in a 1926 issue of *Vogue* magazine and in *Die neue Typographie* published in 1928. Photo by Niccolò Quaresima

fig. 85 Advertisement for Rosine's *Avenue du bois* perfume, originally featured in *Vogue* in 1926, and published in *Die neue Typographie* in 1928. Photo by Niccolò Quaresima

his book. We will not dwell here on the considerable role unsurprisingly played by French – or France-based – artists in Tschichold's history of "The New Art", from Manet to Man Ray (always described as "the American Man Ray, now living in Paris"), nor on the analysis of the work of Swiss Dadaists in Paris during the war, pictorially interesting as abstract art but incomprehensible to typographers.⁹ Instead, we will focus on Tschichold's allusions to a more recent past, discussed as contributions to the development of the New Typography. Thus, in his chapter on illustrated posters, alongside Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, and himself, Tschichold – at the end of a long passage otherwise vaunting the advantages of photography – mentioned Cassandre, citing "some outstandingly drawn posters, full of the spirit of our times", and adding that they are "worthy to be called classical achievements".¹⁰ There follow two long quotations from *Der Querschnitt* (The Cross Section),¹¹ a Francophile German monthly, by Fernand Léger and Robert Delaunay respectively, both described as "founder members of the Cubist movement"; their viewpoints on what a poster should be – orchestral music to accompany the theatre of the street according to Léger, a scientific arrangement of colours for Delaunay – reinforced and legitimised the link made throughout the book between art and typography in their latest incarnations.¹²

Although Tschichold explicitly mentioned that the passages in question were taken from *Der Querschnitt*, he did not include that magazine in the bibliography at the end of his book. There, the list of periodicals was limited to the ten titles most representative of the avant-garde, as defined both by their editorial content and their form. The inclusion in that list of *L'Esprit nouveau* (the only French-language publication to be found there)¹³ may seem surprising in view of its layout – far removed from the Modernist experiments implemented elsewhere¹⁴ – and its typographic design, which in no way adhered to the principles followed by those magazines recommended in the book itself.¹⁵ The titles of articles in *L'Esprit nouveau*, only occasionally set in the bold or semi-bold sans serif advocated by Tschichold, are consistently

inevitably centred and often underscored by one or two lines; symmetry always prevails, including in the layout of illustrations, and there is never any reprieve from "the mysterious groups of three stars" that conclude articles. Meanwhile, the covers, although limited to an alphanumeric presentation, do not employ purely typographic means – displayed in the middle, on a scale giving it the impact of an illustration, is a drawing of the number of the given issue, with the illusion of depth. (**fig. 86**)

This conventional appearance was not adopted by default, but on the contrary represented a deliberate choice by the editors – artists Amédée Ozenfant and architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) – who soon took over the

9 Tschichold 1995: 56.

10 *Ibid.*: 186.

11 The German magazine *Der Querschnitt* reflected the Francophilia of its founder, Berlin art dealer Alfred Flechtheim, as well as the strong Parisian connections of its editor-in-chief, Hermann von Wedderkop. See Esau 2013: 868–887.

12 Tschichold 1995: 186, 191.

13 The magazine *Vesc, Objet, Gegenstand*, edited by Ilya Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky, also included in Tschichold's list, published a few French texts in its three issues, but Russian and German were heavily predominant.

14 Apart from *L'Esprit nouveau*, of the ten periodicals listed in the bibliography, only *Der Ararat* consistently employed a traditional layout.

15 Tschichold 1995: 208–211 "On the typographical design of periodicals". Stanislaus von Moos has commented on the divergence in layout between *L'Esprit nouveau* and the *Bauhausbücher*, comparing it to the difference between Adolf Loos's design of *Das Andere* and the experimental compositions in *Ver Sacrum*, concluding that both Loos and Le Corbusier rejected efforts to bring "art" into industry. See Von Moos 1987: 29.

magazine by elbowing out of the way the poet who had co-founded it with them in 1920, Paul Dermée.¹⁶ Although fully aware of French and foreign avant-garde publications, Ozenfant and Jeanneret wanted to situate *L'Esprit nouveau* within a certain French publishing tradition that reflected their classic aspirations and their “institutional ambitions”, as Iuliana Roxana Vicovanu has pointed out.¹⁷ There can be no doubt about their awareness of the importance of visual presentation; Ozenfant himself had founded a magazine in 1915, *L'Élan*, in which he occasionally indulged in experiments he called “typometric” and “psychotypic”, combining many typefaces, bodies, and fonts¹⁸ when setting poetic texts.¹⁹ The final issue also constituted a remarkable example of asymmetry, with its title running diagonally across the cover. In order to explain his views, Ozenfant quoted the comments of two critics sympathetic to his experiments. “The new typography already has a name: psychotypy, the art of making typographic characters participate in the expression of ideas and the depiction of moods, no longer as conventional symbols but as though having their own meaning”. These experiments came on top of “those by Restif de la Bretonne, Mallarmé and Apollinaire”.²⁰ Ozenfant thereby claimed a literary kinship for his “visual artist’s intentions”, which were similar, if not as radical as, Futurist free-wordism;²¹ although they remained an isolated experiment, they clearly reflected a consideration of issues related to typesetting. It should be noted that this literary connection underpinned the magazine’s agenda, having been named after a lecture given by Apollinaire in 1917, “*L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes*” (The New Spirit and Poets), in which he asserted that “typographical stratagems [...] can go much further, consummating a synthesis of the arts, music, painting and literature”.²² Meanwhile, Le Corbusier devoted a chapter of his *Étude sur le mouvement d'art décoratif en Allemagne* (Study of the Decorative Art Movement in Germany, 1912) to the reform of typography and rejuvenation of book design, underscoring the role played in this movement by Peter Behrens.²³ Finally, it should be pointed out that Paul Dermée, after having failed to fully influence the direction of *L'Esprit nouveau*, launched another magazine in 1927, one more in keeping with his views and apparently much closer to the experimentations of New Typography. Titled *Documents inter-*

nationaux de l'Esprit nouveau (International Documentation on the New Spirit),²⁴ it was co-founded by Michel Seuphor, which is very probably why the latter’s name was mentioned by Tschichold in his list of artists who were “producing new work in our field”.²⁵ **(fig. 87)**

Although hardly exemplary of the New Typography, *L'Esprit nouveau* nevertheless was an influential supporter of the people promoting it, given the magazine’s international scope, its wide range of interests (which included the arts, letters and sciences in its analysis of contemporary events), and its original illustrations, notably the photographs ac-

16 Paul Dermée edited only the first four issues of *L'Esprit nouveau*.

17 Vicovanu 2009: 68, 210–249.

18 Translator’s note: Font is used here in the technical sense of a specific variant (say, 12-point italic) of a given typeface (say, Times New Roman).

19 Amédée Ozenfant identified himself as the designer of the “typometric layout” of poems by Sébastien Voiret in *L'Élan*, 8 (1916): 14, and 9 (1916): 8, as well as the author of the “psychotypic essay” in *L'Élan*, 8 (1916): 18–19.

20 The critics were André Billy and E. Depuis, quoted in Ozenfant 1916: 2.

21 It should be recalled that Marinetti opposed Mallarmé at an early date, seeking to counter the latter’s “decorative, affected aesthetics” and “static ideal”. Marinetti 1914: 25–26.

22 Apollinaire 1991: 944.

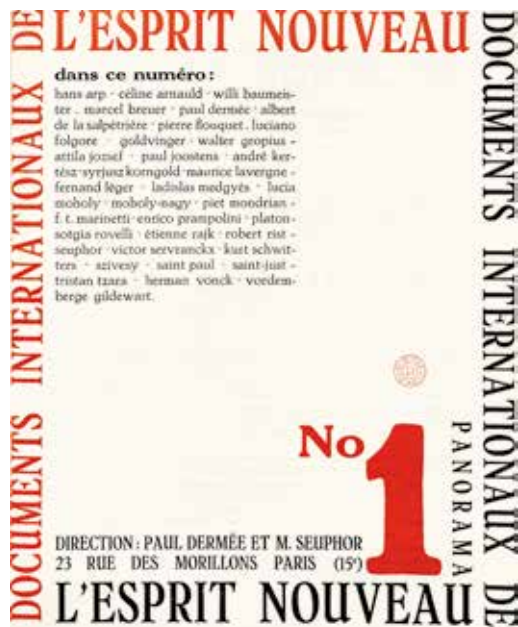
23 Le Corbusier 2008: 173.

24 Only one issue of *Documents internationaux de l'Esprit nouveau* appeared, in 1927.

25 Tschichold 1995: 60.



86



87

fig. 86

Cover of *L'Esprit nouveau*, 20, January–February 1924.

fig. 87

Cover of *Documents internationaux de l'Esprit nouveau*, 1, 1927.



88

fig. 88 Christian [Georges Herbiet], "La Typographie", in *L'Esprit nouveau*, 11–12, November 1921, p. 1245.



89

fig. 89 Advertisement in *Arts et métiers graphiques*, 2, December 1927, p. XX.

companying the articles that Le Corbusier republished (under that name) in his books of the 1920s.²⁶ The main themes addressed by Tschichold – standardisation, the role of engineers, the primacy of function, the opposition to ornament, the fusion of energies through collective effort – were raised again and again in *L'Esprit nouveau*, which even devoted two articles to typography, although the subject did not receive sustained attention. Those two articles, published respectively in 1920 and – several issues later – in 1921, were written by Christian, the pen name adopted by Georges Herbiet, an artist and writer close to the Dadaists, a friend of Picabia and, at that time, a bookseller in Saint-Raphaël.²⁷ **(fig. 88)** Christian wanted to “come up with new elements that would help to produce a Modern Art of book design [...] in order to escape the errors of archaism”.²⁸ He hailed the “concise rigor and simplicity of a handsome typeface” with no flourishes, and a “continuous ascent toward clarity in the design of letterforms”.²⁹ Christian’s argument accorded with ideas set forth in both *Die neue Typographie* and *L'Esprit nouveau*, including his conviction that “true future innovation would involve reducing the number of symbols in our writing systems”,³⁰ which echoed Tschichold’s desire to simplify writing. He concluded that we had to “respect the machine spirit that has long imposed its law on us”.³¹ However, his argument was qualified – if not undermined – by several considerations. Indeed, Christian questioned the relevance of changes to the canons of typography, “for which there are often underlying reasons”.³² He also admired the “perfect, and apparently definitive” forms of certain letters,³³ adding that “if no true originality is possible, wouldn’t it be better to restrict oneself to the use of perfected letterforms? Messrs Peignot & Sons, to whom modern French typography owes so much, have performed a useful task by recasting old typefaces”.³⁴ Finally, Christian felt it was “regrettable” that mankind was henceforth subject to mechanical forces, and he stressed the “inelegant, inevitably geometric” action to which every machine reduced its users, “whether that be a simple press or a typesetting machine”.³⁵ Yet, even though Christian expressed reservations about potential novelty in typography, and even though he stressed the losses induced by mechanisation, he glimpsed new possibilities via the figure of Mallarmé who, thanks to “Un coup de dés” (A Throw of the Dice), was responsible for “new norms in the art of book design” and “crucial changes that typography has brought to typefaces in the past half century”.³⁶

This consistently literary perspective seems to characterise the French approach to the issue of typography. The example of Mallarmé constituted a key reference, sometimes mentioned directly (by Ozenfant) and sometimes merely implied (by other exegetes). Thus, in his introduction to a new English edition of Le Corbusier’s 1923 book *Vers une architecture* (Toward an Architecture), Jean-Louis Cohen suggested that the handling of space on the

page is “an extension of Mallarmé’s explorations with scattered ‘blanks’ and Apollinaire’s with calligrams”.³⁷ Cohen’s allusion to this heritage was based on Le Corbusier’s acknowledged admiration for Mallarmé; yet, although the architect quoted the poet various times in his letters and books,³⁸ such references were limited to the *verbal* register; the *visual*

²⁶ See Vicovanu 2009: 100–110.

²⁷ See Ernout 2005.

²⁸ Christian 1920: 343.

²⁹ Christian 1921: 1249.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 1254.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 1255.

³² Christian 1920: 347.

³³ Christian 1921: 1248.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 1252.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 1255–1256.

³⁶ *Ibid.*: 1252.

³⁷ Cohen 2007.

impact of Le Corbusier's books, published by Crès, can be traced to less scholarly, less modern sources, such as the 19th-century illustrated press.³⁹ It is precisely the five books published by Crès between 1923 and 1926 that are included in the French bibliography of *Die neue Typographie*,⁴⁰ making Le Corbusier the author with the largest number of entries, especially since the German translation of *Vers une architecture* is included in the German section. The originality of the layout of these books – basically the same one used for *L'Esprit nouveau*, the direct source of their content – lies in “the explicit argument revealed through illustrations” (as stressed by an advertising brochure for the French edition of *Vers une architecture*), in the striking juxtapositions of photographs, and in the countless variations on body size, weight of face and typeface used to enhance the rhetorical efficacy of the discourse (Guillemette Morel Journal counted no fewer than seventeen different variants in the book).⁴¹ But there is no evidence of any radical visual transformation in the direction of the New Typography. Of course, throughout Le Corbusier's long career – marked by the publication of thirty-five books, often designed by himself – several counter-arguments can be found,⁴² beginning with his recognition, in the 1920s of the industrial nature of book production, which made him complain of the traditionally uncut pages of the first edition of *Vers une architecture* and then demand that the pages be guillotined when it was reprinted. Much later, in 1963, for new editions in a series that featured a serif typeface on the cover, Le Corbusier insisted that the publisher, Gonthier, use the extended sans serif that he had often selected for his titles down through the years. “Your paperbacks can well tolerate that Le Corbusier is (typographically) modern whilst Plato remains classic”. Le Corbusier occasionally used photomontage, examples of which can be found in his 1938 book, *Des canons, des munitions? Merci! Des logis... s.v.p.* (Guns, Ammunition? No Thanks! Housing, please), in which one page is exceptionally typeset on the diagonal. Yet at the same time, he could write to the publisher of *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (When Cathedrals Were White, 1937), “Layout and typeface have been decided, right? Classic look, please – no Modernism”.

Finally, he claimed the full paternity of his *Oeuvre complète* (Complete Works), published in Zurich by Girsberger from 1929 to 1965, stating that he designed “the format [...], the type of layout [...] [and] standardised grids”. Yet, the Swiss publisher oversaw the general appearance and, whilst traces of the New Typography can sometimes be detected (sans serif for running text, asymmetrical layout of illustrations), it is hard to see Le Corbusier's hand alone (especially once one knows that Max Bill, among others, worked on it).

Thus, Tschichold's conviction that Le Corbusier was a kindred spirit (having not only listed him in the bibliography but also mentioned him twice in the text) never resulted in the architect's conversion to the

38 *Ibid.*, Cohen mentions one letter from Jeanneret to William Ritter (p. 65) and another to Auguste Perret (p. 13), both quoting Mallarmé, plus several potentially Mallarmé-inspired passages in the text of *Toward an Architecture*.

Le Corbusier wrote out by hand a line of Mallarmé on his mural for the Swiss Pavilion in 1948, the motif of which was used as a cover drawing for his book *Poésie sur Alger* (1950) and as an illustration to his *Poème de l'angle droit* (1955).

39 Elsewhere I proposed *Le Magasin Pittoresque* as a model. See De Smet 2005: 72 and De Smet 2007: 31.

40 The five titles were *Vers une architecture*, *Urbanisme*, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, *Almanach* and *La Peinture moderne* (this last attributed to Le Corbusier alone, even though it was published under the names of Ozenfant and Jeanneret).

41 Morel Journal 1984: 70. See also Morel Journal 1997: 24–29.

42 On this subject, and for the references to the quotations and examples that follow, see De Smet 2007, *passim*.

principles of graphic innovation envisaged by the New Typography. However, this did not prevent Le Corbusier from retrospectively stressing his own novelty upon Vincent Fréal's publication of a new edition of *Vers une architecture*: "The layouts of my (collected) articles sparked amazement and indignation at our printer, the Arrault print shop in Tours. They said, speaking of me and the profession (typography): 'He's mad enough as it is! And when it comes to typography – a madman!'" Le Corbusier and Tschichold were both convinced there was a profound link between architecture and typography, as asserted by Tschichold in his book⁴³ and by Le Corbusier on many occasions – very explicitly in *Le Modulor*.⁴⁴ But their conclusions differed. Tschichold, nevertheless, seemed to continue to detect signs that the French might align themselves with the movement. The rejection of his 1929 proposal to the Deberny & Peignot Foundry for a new sans serif typeface designed by himself seemed to prove him right: the firm rejected his offer on the grounds that it already planned to produce a similar typeface, having just bought the rights to Paul Renner's Futura from Bauer in Frankfurt. Futura had been marketed since 1927 and won the New Typography's approval. Deberny & Peignot would launch it on the French market under the name Europe.⁴⁵ In a 1931 article for *Die Form* – the year after *Arts et métiers graphiques* published one called "Qu'est-ce que la nouvelle typographie et que veut-elle?" (What is the New Typography and What Does it Want?)⁴⁶ – Tschichold judged France's participation in the effort to be "wonderful" thanks to the work of Maximilien Vox and above all to Deberny & Peignot's production of the Bifur typeface by Cassandre, "a decisive step in the right direction".⁴⁷ It was nevertheless not until 2016 that *Die neue Typographie* was translated into French⁴⁸; significantly, the first book by Tschichold in French was a collection of later writings, which marked the distance he had adopted from the avant-garde enthusiasms of his youth.⁴⁹

Unlike the books by Le Corbusier, the thirteen other publications listed by Tschichold in the French bibliography of *La Nouvelle typographie* – by Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist authors, plus Jean Epstein's *Cinéma*, dating from 1909 to 1929 – related to the New Typography in one way or another, notably to its roots. It was the subsequent application of its principles

that seemed more problematic. Optimistic about future developments, Tschichold suggested the causes for the delay of full French endorsement: classic typographical rules were still in force; powerful conventions functioned as a standard which avoided poor taste; and, despite insufficient adaptation to the needs of the age, vestiges of an authentic liveliness made change less urgent.⁵⁰ *L'Esprit nouveau*, with its quest for a "modern classicism" and its ambiguities – wavering between cosmopolitanism and nationalism⁵¹ – also supplied a possible clue to understanding certain reticences, as clearly expressed in the sphere of typography by Christian's

43 Tschichold 1995: 13.

44 Le Corbusier 1950: 9.

45 Tschichold 1995: described Futura as "a significant step in the right direction" and would even use it himself. On Tschichold's proposal to Deberny & Peignot, see Burke 2007: 150–151 and 159–161. On Europe, see also Dumas de Rauly 2011: 70–71.

46 Tschichold 1930: 46–52.

47 Tschichold 1931: 382–384. It should be noted that Charles Peignot, who launched the magazine *Arts et métiers graphiques*, was the art director at the Deberny & Peignot Type Foundry, which hired Maximilien Vox as a typographic adviser.

48 Tschichold 2016. The last chapter of *The New Typography* had previously been translated into French.

49 Tschichold 1987.

50 Tschichold 1931.

51 Vicovanu 2009: 108, stresses *L'Esprit nouveau's* "closed-mindedness with respect to Germany". See also Vicovanu 2014.

articles: French tradition was sufficiently rich, and innovation in the field of literature, notably “Un coup de dés”, arguably sufficed to reinvigorate it. A 1927 advert for the Deberny & Peignot Type Foundry read: “Don’t forget that typography also follows the whims of fashion”.⁵² **(fig. 89)** Almost in echo, Maximilien Vox – praised by Tschichold in 1931 for his ability to discover fresh, witty uses for familiar materials⁵³ – having become the apostle of the traditionalist Graphie Latine movement, voiced some self-criticism: “Our era has learned to do charming things with any old, outmoded material; it has also strictly followed, not unprofitably, certain foreign disciplines. Antique (i.e., sans serif) letterforms, the least “antique” thing in the world, have effected a healthy purge of our typography. Such totalitarianism, however, ill suited to French sensibility”. He added, “the fashion to Germanise, Slavicise or Americanise passes, and has passed”.⁵⁴ That was a patriotic way of settling scores with the New Typography, relegated to the level of a whim to which it might be doubted that many succumbed.

52 *Arts et métiers graphiques* 1927.

53 Tschichold 1931.

54 Vox 1950, n. p.

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