

In Search of a New Graphic Language: Explorations of the New Typography in Portugal (1915–1940) Sofia Leal Rodrigues

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Portugal was a country whose economic and industrial development was incipient. In 1911, 58% of its 5.5 million inhabitants worked in agriculture, with the remaining almost equally divided between industry and the tertiary sector.¹ Society was essentially rural – Lisbon was the only major city in the country, followed by Porto – and seventy per cent of the population over seven years old was illiterate.² The First Republic (1910–1926) was a period characterised by strong political and social instability, marked by attempts to establish a democratic regime that resulted in the succession of forty-five governments and culminated in 1926 in the military coup d'état that gave rise to the Estado Novo (New State), the dictatorial regime led by António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970).

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the literature dedicated to graphic arts in the early decades of the 20th century was dominated by traditional typographic manuals. These included the 1908 *Manual do Tipógrafo* (The Typographer's Handbook) by Libânio da Silva and the 1929 *Iniciação do Compositor Tipográfico* (Initiation of the Typographic Composer) in by Apto de Oliveira. Da Silva's, in particular, became a reference justifying its reprint in 1962. These manuals prioritised topics related to book composition, though da Silva innovated by introducing a chapter dedicated to "commercial and fantasy works" which included guidelines for creating prospectuses, labels, menus and other kinds of ephemera. While book design adhered to fixed rules, "commercial and fantasy works" could enjoy greater graphic freedom. Anything excluded from the technical prescriptions of the traditional book format, such as newspapers, magazines and photograph albums, fell into a hybrid territory where the principles of book design intersected with the creative expression of commercial work.

This may explain why the principles of the New Typography primarily occurred through a series of innovative literary publications in Portugal. The magazines *Orpheu*, *Portugal Futurista*, *Contemporânea*, and *Presença*. *Folha de Arte e Crítica* explored new graphic forms to present and communicate their contents. During the Estado Novo, under the influence of foreign propaganda examples, the modernising language of the New Typography was adopted as the language for the new state. This article addresses the particularities of Portuguese graphic design's approach to European modern movements and

¹ Pinto 2004: 12.

² *Ibid.*: 15.

examines how this influence was incorporated into a graphic expression with a more native inclination.

The Beginnings of a New Graphic Expression: The *Orpheu* Generation

In Portugal, the so-called *Orpheu* generation initiated the journey in search of a new visuality which saw typography as a functional expression of content. Edited by writer António Ferro (1895–1956), the eponymous magazine consisted of two issues. The first was published on 24 March 1915, under the direction of poets Luiz de Montalvor and Ronald de Carvalho. The second issue, released on 28 June, featured writers Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) and Mário de Sá Carneiro (1895–1916) as directors. *Orpheu* stirred scandal and public ridicule due to its “formal and stylistic novelty in literary and artistic domains”.³ Its originality arose from its marked interior sobriety, the simplicity of the running text in an Old-Style typeface, the abundant use of white space, the asymmetry in the arrangement of titles in the poetry pages, and the lines that underlined and reinforced information. (fig. 118) As such, the magazine marked a pioneering ideological alignment with European Modernism.

The poem “Ode Triunfal” by Álvaro de Campos, one of Fernando Pessoa’s heteronyms, closed the first issue of *Orpheu*. With its interjections, onomatopoeias, and repetitions, the poem showed a notable Futurist influence, resembling the “Free-Expression Orthography” proposed by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in the manifesto “Distruzione della sintassi, immaginazione senza fili, parole in libertà” (Destruction of Syntax, Imagination without Strings, Words in Freedom) included in the book *Les en liberté futuristes* (Futurist Words in Freedom).⁴ Writing on the origins of the New Typography in *Die neue Typographie*, Jan Tschichold attributed to Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, the credit for establishing a shift “from ornamental to functional typography”.⁵ According to Tschichold, Marinetti’s work pioneered the conversion of typography into a “functional expression of its content”. The second issue of *Orpheu* came closer to the graphic Modernism that Tschichold considered a precursor to the New Typography. With a cover displaying only the title of the magazine and the oversized issue 2, both composed in Clarendon, the magazine incorporated some Futurist influences in the typographic play of the poem “Manucure” by Sá-Carneiro as well as Dadaist influences in the inclusion of four hors-texte with photographic reproductions of abstract assemblages by Santa-Rita Pintor (1889–1918).

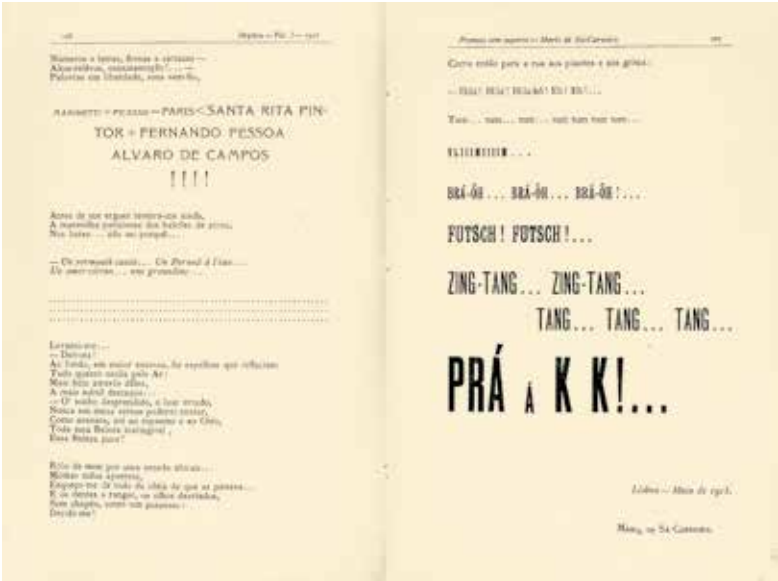
The single issue of the literary magazine *Portugal Futurista*, published in November 1917, provides further evidence of the ways in which the *Orpheu* generation subverted the conventions of the old typography. (fig. 119) In the design of the publication, two elements stand out: the use of photographic reproductions and sans serif typefaces. The unexpected use of sans serif and grotesque typefaces, especially in titles and prominent elements, gives the publication a distinctive character. On the cover, the contrast between sans serif, geometric, and linear typefaces of different weights in a dynamically balanced layout tests the limits of the format. One of its bolder features is the composition of text in a diagonal line, as displayed in an advertisement within the magazine. The layout of the text “Saltimbancos (Contrastes simultâ-

neos)”, signed by Almada Negreiros (1893–1970) and Pintor, shows the experimental approach to typo-

3 Silva n.d.

4 Marinetti 1979 (1913): 134

5 Tschichold 1998 (1928): 53.



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fig. 118 Spread from the magazine *Orpheu*, 1, April–June 1915, pp. 106–107.

fig. 119 Cover of the magazine *Portugal Futurista*, 1, November 1917.

graphy adopted in *Portugal Futurista*. The text challenges the limits of the page with its tight layout and lack of punctuation. Composed exclusively in lower-case letters, the layout predates the 1925 calls by Moholy-Nagy and Tschichold to reduce the alphabet to minuscules for reasons of economy and rationalisation of writing.⁶

The magazine *Contemporânea* (1922–1926), directed by the architect José Pacheco (1885–1934), is characterised by a graphic sobriety that points to the foundations of the New Typography. However, certain elements depart from a canonical adoption of the New Typography, such as the residual use of photography, the incorporation of drawing in lettering and illustrations – sometimes with a markedly decorative tendency – and the exploration of an eclectic range of typographic choices. Printed at Libânio da Silva's printing press, which was synonymous with graphic quality, the signs of a new approach to typography and graphic design in *Contemporânea* became evident primarily in the significant visual impact created by the incorporation of geometric sans serif letters in titles, capital letters, and covers of some issues of the magazine. Tschichold's advocacy for simplicity included the use of sans serif typefaces, especially in titles and other prominent elements. For the text, however, he suggested keeping (temporarily) the use of Old-Style roman letters, as he considered them more legible than sans serif typefaces. The magazine *Contemporânea* followed this principle.

With its use of sans serif letters in the titles, *Contemporânea* stood out from contemporary publications. In fact, the limited availability of typefaces in Portugal hindered a more widespread adoption of sans serif letters. A similar situation was described by Tschichold in *Die neue Typographie*, where he complained: "The main reason why sans serif is so seldom used today for normal text setting is that in general there is not enough of it available".⁷

In *Die neue Typographie*, Tschichold emphasised the predominance of using sans serif typefaces, especially "grotesque" or "block letter" fonts, which, with their refined shapes, fully aligned with the demands of modernity for clarity and functionality. In situations where sans serif typefaces were not available, he advised the use of "bold romans" and "bold Egyptians" for emphasis, and "classic faces like Walbaum, Didot, Bodoni, etc" for text composition. His book, composed in an "ordinary jobbing sans serif" font to demonstrate "how readable it is", constituted a graphic manifesto showcasing the potential of sans serif fonts. While the typeface in question may not be a perfect choice, as he concluded, it was "preferable to all the romans".⁸ Tschichold also regretted that, except for Paul Renner's Futura, the attempts to create new sans serif typefaces often suffered from an excess of "artificialism" and old-fashioned decorativism.

Interestingly, in Portugal, the adoption of Paul Renner's Futura was a clear sign of the influence exerted by the New Typography on European Modernism. The magazine *Presença. Folha de Arte e Crítica* (1927–1940), initially directed by writers João Gaspar Simões (1903–1987), José Régio (1901–1969) and Branquinho da Fonseca (1905–1974), began to use Futura starting from issue 22, in November 1929, in titles, almost always

in lower case. This use explored the expressiveness of typography to accentuate the meaning of the content. Marking the beginning of the second Modernism in Portugal, the magazine

6 Moholy-Nagy 1969b (1925): 114–115; Tschichold 2007a (1925); Tschichold 2007b (1925).

7 Tschichold 1998 (1928): 75.

8 *Ibid.*

developed a literary programme based on “Literatura Viva” (Living Literature). Termed after an article signed by José Régio and published on the first page of issue 1, on 10 March 1927, “Literatura Viva” was a manifesto against “dead literature” and outdated formulas, in favour of originality and literary innovation, in content and form.

The concept of “living literature” guided the graphic design of the publication, essentially focusing on a typographic exploration that subverted the canonical precepts of the classic model through the typographic and compositional choices of titles, the dynamism of poetry texts, the expressive introduction of linoleum initials, or the contrasting effect of double-page spreads with different text columns and layouts. Futura and similar typefaces gained popularity in Portugal and were quickly incorporated into various types of publications, especially from the 1930s on. In 1935, for example, the typographer Luís Moita praised Futura for the modernity of its design in terms not dissimilar to Tschichold's.⁹

Portugal 1934: The Creation of a New Graphic Language Through the New Typography

With the establishment of the Estado Novo, Salazar created the SPN, Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional (Office for National Propaganda) in 1933, at the helm of which he placed António Ferro. As head of the Estado Novo's cultural policy and propaganda chief, Ferro established the so-called “Politics of the Spirit”, a doctrine aimed at promoting the cultural development of the regime. The improvement of national graphic arts was part of the objectives of this policy, which aimed to stimulate the “creators of Beauty” by providing them with a “moral atmosphere in which the Spirit [...] is the triumph of the Spirit”.¹⁰ Ferro therefore advocated for the development of the national graphic industry, which he considered “the conveyer of the idea, thought, and propaganda of the Portuguese nation throughout the world”.¹¹ He primarily blamed Art Nouveau for the spread of “bad taste” in Portuguese graphic arts, as it allowed the introduction of “terrible and hideous types of design”, commonly referred to as ‘fantasy’ letters”, which, in formal terms, adulterated the “classicism previously adopted”.¹² In his view, the fight against “bad taste” involved “entrusting graphic work to artists (*and under no circumstances to amateurs*)”,¹³ following the “exemplary” guide of the magazine *Panorama* (1941–1973), under the graphic direction of the painter Bernardo Marques (1898–1962).

In 1934, the Prime Minister Salazar aimed to foster unity within the National Union, the single political party he had established a year prior. To this end, he decided to commemorate the 8th anniversary of the coup d'état that had established a military dictatorship on 28 May 1926. This commemoration involved two significant events: the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Porto and the National Union Congress at the Lisbon Geographic Society. These events were followed by a *Exposição Documental* (Documentary Exhibition) at the Exhibition Palace in Lisbon's Parque Eduardo VII, from 26 May to 15 June 1926. The exhibition was divided

into two complementary subsections. The first, under the responsibility of António Ferro, was dedicated to the social and political antecedents of the 28 May 1926 Movement, and the

⁹ Moita 1935: 56–57.

¹⁰ Ferro 1950 (1943): 20.

¹¹ Ferro 1934: 1.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ferro 1943.

second, under the responsibility of engineer Carlos Santos (1884–1973), was dedicated to the work accomplished by the governments of the national dictatorship. The *Exposição Documental* consisted essentially of a selection of photographic reproductions and panels with statistical infographics. Visitors were led through a path of visual rhetoric, organised chronologically, “from tragedy and chaos to images of order and the ‘resurgence’ of the nation”.¹⁴

Marking the exhibitions of 1934, the photographic album *Portugal 1934* exemplified the official adoption of Modernist aesthetics and techniques within State’s visual communication. **(fig. 120)** *Portugal 1934* (1935) was part of a group of celebratory publications which included the *Álbum Comemorativo da Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (Commemorative Album of the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition, 1934) that featured illustrations by painter Eduardo Malta, and the *Álbum Fotográfico da Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa* (Photographic Album of the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition, 1934), with photographs by photographer Domingos Alvão. Unlike these previous examples, the *Portugal 1934* album subverted the traditional album format, assuming a thematic continuity with the Documentary Exhibition and showcasing the work and entrepreneurial spirit of the Estado Novo. Ferro commissioned the album to the polymath José Leitão de Barros (1896–1967) – a painter, filmmaker, and journalist – who served as the director of the weeklies *O Domingo Ilustrado* (1925–1927) and *O Notícias Ilustrado* (1928–1935). These two newspapers had pioneered the use of rotogravure in Portugal, and de Barros selected the same printing technique for the album. He had previously undertaken two study trips abroad: one in 1926, accompanied by the painter Jaime Martins Barata, to learn the technique of rotogravure, and another in 1929, in the company of the filmmaker António Lopes Ribeiro, to deepen his knowledge of cinema. In both trips he visited Berlin,¹⁵ the city that, in 1929, hosted the exhibition *Neue Typographie* (New Typography) at the Kunstgewerbemuseum.¹⁶

Portugal 1934 was produced under the direction of de Barros and Barata, who collaborated with a large team of photographers and technicians. Barros defended the graphic direction of the album in these terms: “We would seek a work of sober luxury, but in the European style. Exactly the type of publications of Mussolini and the Russians”.¹⁷ The cover, printed in three different versions (blue, green, and orange), uses sans serif typefaces with a strong visual impact, in a composition reminiscent of the *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919–1923* book-album. The album follows one of the main principles of the New Typography by using sans serif typefaces of various weights and values of black.¹⁸ Inside, the introductory text clarifies that *Portugal 1934* is “merely the record of some remarkable works carried out by the national dictatorship”. The following double pages are occupied by portraits of Salazar and the President of the Portuguese Republic, General Óscar Carmona (1869–1951), which precede and symbolically justify the entire work documented by

the album: the development of roads and communications; the construction of public buildings, commercial ports, and social neighbourhoods; the financial balance of the country; Portugal’s representation in international exhibitions; the Portuguese empire;

¹⁴ Serra and Parreira 2017: 26.

¹⁵ Pinto 2015: 37.

¹⁶ The section of the exhibition “Wohin geht die typografische Entwicklung?” (Where is Typography Headed?) was curated by Moholy-Nagy.

¹⁷ Barros n.d.

¹⁸ Except for the fact sheet at the end.

education, commerce, agriculture, and industry; the army and navy.

The embracing of the spirit of the New Typography is reflected in a departure from the conventions of text composition according to the classical model, in favour of expressing the content on the page. In most of the album, each subject is explored in a logic of double-page spreads with compositions featuring an asymmetrical arrangement of elements. In Tschichold's opinion, adopting an asymmetrical layout facilitated the reading process by allowing the fragmentation of information, guiding the eye from one point of interest to another. Thus, the layout of the album pages results from a dynamic balance between white spaces, the use of images of various formats, dimensions and arrangements, and the exploration of lines and coloured boxes that assist in the reading hierarchy. To accentuate compositional dynamism, the static nature of the orthogonal grid is subverted on certain pages by the introduction of text and image blocks in diagonal and oblique lines. (fig. 120)

The album focused on the communicative clarity of photographic images, another fundamental requirement of the New Typography. The dominance of images and the reduction of text to captions establish a reversal in the power relationship between text and image. The image moves beyond its secondary role as an illustrative element and becomes equivalent to or transforms into the text itself: the so-called "photo-text" as advocated by Moholy-Nagy.¹⁹ The hegemony of the juxtaposed images speeds up the process of reading and enjoying the album. Through photomontage, the album constructs a cinematic visual narrative through the sequential combination of various frames that gain meaning through the unity of the whole.²⁰ (fig. 121) Due to its dimensions (44 × 31 cm) and the use of fold-out panels, the album invites immersion and interaction with the reader.

Through the use of typophoto, *Portugal 1934* explores the concept of Lissitzky's "bioscopic book" and Moholy-Nagy's "visual book". The album also aligns with the idea of the modern "picture book" advocated by Tschichold: a hybrid of text and image with a pronounced predominance of photographic images. Through photomontage, the album approaches the realm of Soviet propaganda publications, such as Lissitzky's catalogue for the Soviet Pavilion at *Pressa* in Cologne, published in 1928, and some issues designed by the Russian designer for the journal *SSSR na Stroi*ke (USSR in Construction). The photographs in the album are often associated with small illustrations and pictograms of statistical charts, displayed at the Documentary Exhibition, drawing inspiration from the work of Otto Neurath in the Isotype system, widely used in the 1930s.

The Aftermath of *Portugal 1934*

The exploration of the album format, or a book with a strong visual component, would continue in the propaganda production of the regime. In 1940, on the double centenary celebrations of the nation, which culminated in the Portuguese World Exhibition, the SPN published the album *Portugal 1940*, again under the direction of Barros and Barata. The comparison between *Portugal 1934* and *Portugal 1940* is inevitable, although they have distinctly different graphic identities. While the former clearly appropriates the Modernist language of New Typography, the latter echoes this influence in the

hegemony of photographic imagery, the use of photomontage, and the concept of "photoplastics" by Moho-

¹⁹ Moholy-Nagy 1969a (1925): 40.

²⁰ Tschichold 1998 (1928): 88.

ly-Nagy, as well as Tschichold's exploration of compositional asymmetries and articulation of contrasts, such as large/small or light/dark. The album encompasses a more nationalist vision, centred on a panoramic view of the country under the achievements of the Estado Novo, underscored by the choice of more historicist typefaces, such as Elzevirs, for prominent texts, or more classical ones, such as modern typefaces, for captions.

The album *Bairros de Casas Económicas 1934–1940* (Social Housing Neighbourhoods, 1934–1940), published by the Instituto Nacional do Trabalho e Previdência (National Institute of Labour and Social Security), explores the traditional album format while adopting a graphic language that filters the principles of New Typography. Sans serif typefaces dominate the album: on the cover, a “fantasy” display typeface is combined with a photographic image in an asymmetrical composition; inside, Renner's Futura is employed. The album explores the notion of a visual book by reducing the text to introductory contexts and short captions that assist in reading the photographic images. The sequentiality of the book, sometimes optimised by the introduction of fold-out pages, constructs a visual narrative that ranges from a comprehensive perspective of the neighbourhood to the details of the interior of its houses. (fig. 122) Although lacking the exuberance of the photomontage seen in *Portugal 1934* and *Portugal 1940*, the album *Bairros de Casas Económicas 1934–1940* heralds the refinement of the New Typography language that would form the basis of the “Swiss Style”.

The publication in 1940 of the book *Vida e Arte do Povo Português* (Life and Art of the Portuguese People) also constitutes a good example of the graphic and aesthetic ideology characterising the propaganda of the Estado Novo. With graphic direction by the painter Paulo Ferreira (1911–1999), the book offers a folkloric and romanticised view of the Portuguese people, with their customs, crafts and traditions, through the integration of photography with illustrations that accentuate the vernacular character of the nation. The choice of 19th-century display faces to compose the title on the frontispiece, such as Tuscan-style letters, allowed for the construction of a graphic symbolism around the idea of “Portugueseness”. This graphic language, which aimed to emphasise a nationalistic character, would be widely used in the quintessential object of the regime's propaganda, the magazine *Panorama*, and in numerous graphic materials, especially those directed towards tourism and the external image of the country.

Conclusion

In Portugal, the evidence of a new graphic expression marked by the progressive adoption of a more functionalist design is provided by the *Orpheu* generation. Influenced by European Modernism, especially futurism, this generation establishes an association between form and content, leading to occasional subversion of the classical model.

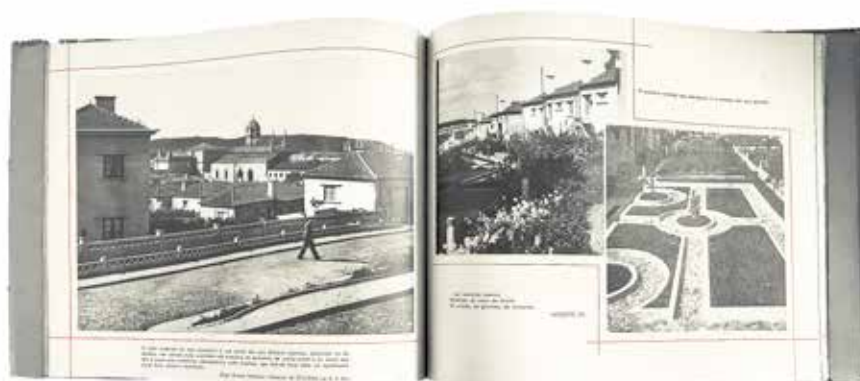
In an attempt to adhere to the trends of European Modernist design and the graphic language of propaganda of dictatorial regimes, such as the Soviet regime, the album *Portugal 1934* stands out for its full application of the principles of New Typography in a national publication. The graphic influence of *Portugal 1934* is also visible in the albums *Portugal 1940* and *Bairros de Casas Económicas 1934–1940*, which adopt and adapt the



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figs. 120–121 Spreads from the album *Portugal 1934*, published by SPN – Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional (Office for National Propaganda), Lisbon 1935.
Photo by Sofia Leal Rodrigues

fig. 122 Spread from the album *Bairros de Casas Económicas 1934–1940* (Social Housing Neighbourhoods 1934–1940), published by Secção das Casas Económicas do Instituto Nacional do Trabalho e Previdência (Social Housing Section of the National Labour and Welfare Institute), Lisbon 1940.
Photo by Sofia Leal Rodrigues

model of New Typography to their propaganda objectives. Although born with socialist purposes, the graphic language of New Typography, due to its Modernist aesthetics and communicative impact and effectiveness, proved adaptable to the ideology of dictatorial regimes. In Portugal, the permeability to the international model was a way to elevate the quality of national graphic arts, as António Ferro advocated.

However, as was the case with other dictatorships, in Portugal the language of Modernism and, consequently, of New Typography, would lead to the adoption of a more native symbolism emphasising the notion of nationalism, as seen in the book *Vida e Arte do Povo Português*. In the graphic design of Estado Novo propaganda, there was often an articulation between a Modernist language – utilising photography, photomontage, composition of text in Old Style, Modern, or sans serif fonts – and a nationalist language drawing on the plasticity of illustration, reverence for the classical model and “fantasy letters”, which took on a more historicist and nationalist connotation.

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