

Typeset at a Precise Moment in Time

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We cannot talk about *Die neue Typographie* without mentioning the typeface in which it is typeset. The book is entirely printed in Aurora Grotesk, which had been previously chosen by Tschichold for both his business card (undated) and wedding invitation (1926). (figs. 33, 34) As expected, he typeset both in minimal layouts without decorations. Aurora provided the starting point for me to develop a revival.¹ Faced with this task, I was left with questions that type designers often encounter: what makes a typeface contemporary, and what is the value of a revival? Would its merit be in making a typeface available again, or should it be to offer new forms for existing typographic styles?

In my Aurora revival, I initially took a position of continuity. As I tried to recreate the same feeling offered by the original Aurora, I increasingly questioned how far I could push the modifications without losing the soul of the typeface. After initially developing what I thought was a faithful revival – a reproduction in a new technological form – I realised that the notion of “faithful” doesn’t apply to a discipline that relies on the smallest details. Free of this bias, I followed a new path, taking choices connected to what I was most afraid of involving: my own taste. Yet the exercise was difficult. I was aware that if I carefully tried to achieve a contemporary look, I could also easily lose continuity with the source. I therefore divided the approach into two phases and two corresponding results: one is a revival that tries to keep the shapes as faithful as possible, focusing on a precise source at a precise size. The other, named “Metodo”, is a reinterpretation that takes the liberty of omitting certain features to obtain a grotesque fit for contemporary use, such as reducing the contrast, increasing the x-height, narrowing the spacing.

The Reference: Aurora Grotesk

Aurora Grotesk was produced by the C. E. Weber Foundry and its design was based on Neue moderne Grotesk, itself developed in 1908 at the Leipzig punchcutting firm Wagner & Schmidt and first cast by Ludwig Wagner.² The designer of Neue moderne Grotesk has not yet been uncovered; it could have been any from a series of people, since Wagner & Schmidt worked with renowned *Schriftkünstler* (lettering artists) and collaborated with many type designers. Wagner & Schmidt sold matrices to several European foundries, which then cast and resold these typefaces under various names.

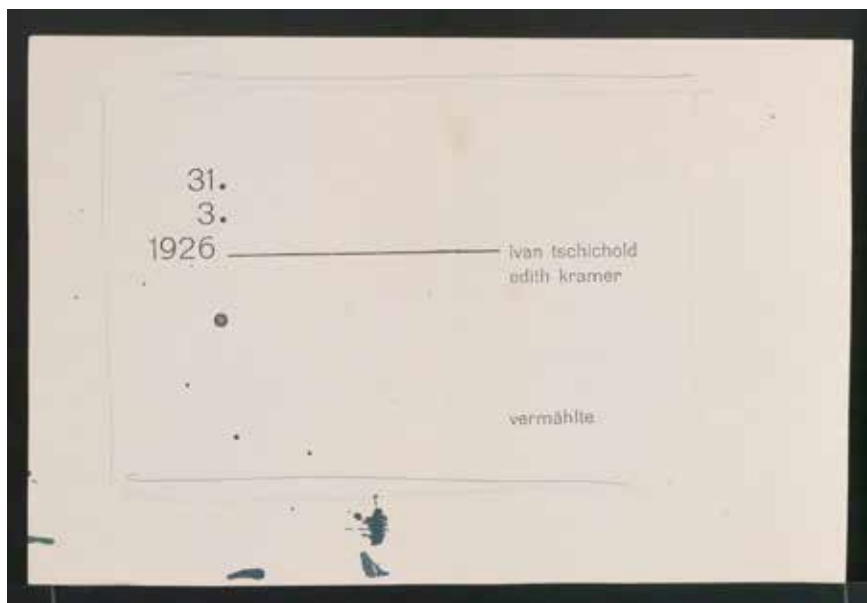
Creating types was a lengthy and expensive enterprise, which encouraged foundries to acquire and trade matrices and designs with each other. And so, Neue moderne Grotesk circulated through European foundries under different names. German

1 A revival typeface is a reinterpretation or recreation of a historical typeface, often one that is no longer available due to obsolete printing technologies.

2 Kupferschmid n.d.



33



34

fig. 33 Tschichold's business card (undated) as shown on p. 150 of *Die neue Typographie* (1928). Photo by Niccolò Quaresima

fig. 34 Print test for Tschichold's wedding invitation, 1926.

type designer Indra Kupferschmid has identified more than twenty known versions.³ Among the most well-known variants are Aurora Grotesk by Weber in Stuttgart, Cairolì by Nebiolo in Turin, and Accidenz Grotesk (later renamed Akzidenz Grotesk) by the Haas in Munich, Basel (not to be confused with Berthold's Akzidenz Grotesk). Though remaining somewhat obscure in their origins, as they were often acquired and copied by many foundries, the typeface and its many variants were widely used in Europe for most of the 20th century in applications ranging from technical manuals to advertising copy. Right from the outset, Neue moderne Grotesk was also used in avant-garde and modern contexts, appearing amongst others in the *Dada* journal issues 3 (1918) and 4–5 (1919), and in the avant-garde bolted book *Depero Futurista* by Fortunato Depero (1927).

Die neue Typographie was set in Aurora Grotesk. To understand the implications of choosing a typeface, a reminder of the printing industry of the time may be useful. The process was quite different from today's, where a file is sent electronically and used directly to create offset plates. In the 1920s, a typographer would use a catalogue to show clients what characters and sizes were available at his print shop and then typeset the whole text in the agreed layout. This was indeed Tschichold's occupation for a Leipzig printing firm from 1924: designing page layouts which would be produced by the typesetters. Because each typeface represented

a significant monetary investment, even the best-stocked printers usually owned only a small number of fonts in the quantities and size variations needed to compose an entire publication.

A book entirely typeset in sans serif was particularly unconventional for the time, therefore printers rarely stocked enough. As Tschichold pointed out in *Die neue Typographie*:

The main reason why sans-serif so seldom used today for normal text setting is that in general there is not enough of it available. So, for much printed matter and books like the present one, entirely set in sans-serif, it will remain the exception.⁴

According to Tschichold, a jobbing sans serif was "the best face in use today" as it was "quiet and easy to read".⁵ His book was meant to convince the audience of how readable a sans serif was over longer texts. Although he "still [had] certain reservations", Tschichold remained convinced that a grotesque was "preferable to all the romans".⁶ In fact, it was the only option:

3 *Ibid.* Kupferschmid lists the following styles in regular width (additional names used for the condensed and extended styles not included). Germany: Ludwig Wagner (Leipzig): Neue moderne Grotesk, Reichs Grotesk / Aktiengesellschaft für Schriftgießerei und Maschinenbau (Offenbach): Breite Magere Grotesk, Breite Halbfette Grotesk / G. Böttger (Leipzig) later H. Berthold AG (Berlin): Grotesk P / Brötz and Glock (Frankfurt/M): Lithographen Grotesk / H. Hoffmeister (Leipzig) later D. Stempel AG (Frankfurt/M.): Salon Grotesk / J. John Söhne (Hamburg): Viktoria / C. Klobberg (Leipzig): Gudrun / Norddeutsche Schriftgießerei (Berlin): Wotan Grotesk / A. Numrich (Leipzig): Grotesk / Roos and Junge (Offenbach): Germania Grotesk / C. F. Rühl (Leipzig): Moderne Grotesk / Schriftguß AG formerly Brüder Butter (Dresden): Planeta, Saturn, Jupiter, Neptun / Otto Tech (Berlin): Reform Grotesque / J. D. Trennert: Klassische Grotesk / Johannes Wagner (Berlin): Edel Grotesk / C. E. Weber (Stuttgart): Aurora Grotesk / Otto Weisert (Stuttgart): Favorit-Grotesk. Rest of Europe: Berlingska Stilgjuteriet (Lund, Sweden): Scania Grotesk / Karl Brendler (Vienna): Doria Grotesk / Fonderia Tipografica Cooperativa (Milan): Etruria / Fundición Tipográfica Nacional (Madrid): Grotesca Estrecha / Richard Gans (Madrid): Grotesca Ideal / Haas (Münchenstein, Switzerland): Accidenz Grotesk (Akzidenz Grotesk) later Normal Grotesk / Jan Idźkowski i S-ka (Warsaw): Baccarat, Helios / Società Nebiolo (Turin): Cairolì / Poppelbaum (Vienna): Elite Grotesk / Warnery (Paris): Ronsard. Kupferschmid n.d.

4 Tschichold 1995: 75–76.

5 *Ibid.*: 75.

6 *Ibid.*

None of the typefaces to whose basic form some kind of ornament has been added [...] meet our requirements for clarity and purity. Among all the types that are available, the so-called Grotesque [...] is the only one in spiritual accordance with our time.⁷

Tschichold therefore used Aurora – not only as a matter of choice, but also because it was available, pointing out that “In the particular choice of type for this book I was limited to what the printer held”.⁸

Still, he clearly preferred early grotesques over geometric typefaces, like Erbar and Kabel. He chose the light cut for running text, stating that “A bolder face is out of the question because continuous reading matter in bold sans serif is not easy to read”.⁹ He stuck with his choice even though the print shop was lacking the corresponding italics, substituted in *Die neue Typographie* by a widely spaced regular cut or even by a different typeface. **(fig. 35)** Nevertheless, he was unsatisfied with the available sans serif typefaces:

There is no doubt that the sans serif types available today are not yet wholly satisfactory as all-purpose faces. [...] Personally, I believe that no single designer can produce the typeface we need, which must be free from all personal characteristics: it will be the work of a group, among whom I think there must be an engineer.¹⁰

What he meant can easily be understood by looking at the typeface he was working on while writing his book. Universal was a unicas typeface influenced by Herbert Bayer’s homonymous typeface. It was based on geometric shapes, had no contrast, and offered alternative glyphs for phonetic signs. **(fig. 36)** This approach also provides an explanation for his typesetting the title in upper case or his business card in lower-case. As Tschichold rhetorically asked in “Elementare Typographie”: “why [have] two characters [...] for one sound [...]?”¹¹

These limitations do not diminish the value of Aurora, which has been widely used precisely because it is a solid workhorse adapted for projects needing a perfectly working tool, but without great stylistic pretensions. *Die neue Typographie* alone contains at least twelve examples featuring the typeface in various layouts by both the author and other exponents of the movement, not counting examples specifically made for the book.¹² Aurora was one of the first sans serifs produced as a large “family” in eleven stylistic variations. The Weber Foundry slowly developed a number of cuts ranging from light to heavy and from ultra-condensed to extended. **(fig. 37)** Aurora variations were released at a time when sans serifs were making their way into a society increasingly fascinated by cold mechanical precision. This trend was in continuity with what Marinetti had called “splendeur géométrique et mécanique” (geometric and mechanical splendour) a decade earlier.¹³

Die neue Typographie was published in 1928, during the *Goldene Zwan-*

ziger Jahre (The Golden Twenties), when Tschichold was only 26. It is a handbook for graphic designers, with strict rules to be followed that reflect his fascination with Bauhaus and Constructivism, but also its social context, including an incredibly prosperous economy. When he was

7 *Ibid.*: 73–74.

8 *Ibid.*: 75–76.

9 *Ibid.*: 75.

10 *Ibid.*: 73–74.

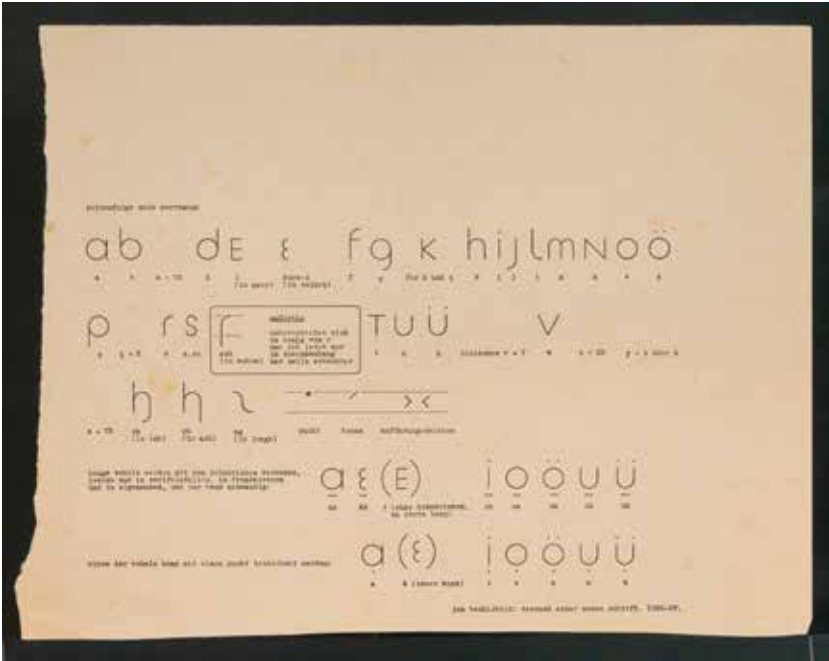
11 “warum für einen laut [...] zwei zeichen [...]?”, *Typographische Mitteilungen* 1925: 198.

12 Tschichold 1928: 99, 131, 136, 139, 141, 143, 146, 149, 150, 152, 153, 223.

13 Marinetti 1914.

Typographische Revolution

Ich unternehme eine typographische Revolution, die sich vor allem gegen die idiotische, zum Brechen reizende Auffassung des passéistischen • Gedichtbuches mit seinem handgemachten Papier, seinem Stil des 16. Jahrhunderts, verziert mit Galeeren, Minervens, Apolls, großen Initialen, Schnörkeln und mythologischem Gemüse, mit seinen Schließen, Motti und römischen Ziffern richtet. Das Buch muß der futuristische Ausdruck unseres futuristischen Gedankens sein. Besser: meine Revolution wendet sich unter anderem gegen die sogenannte typographische Harmonie der Buchseite, die im Gegensatz steht zu dem Fluß des Stils, der sich in der Seite kundtut. Wir werden, wenn es not tut, auf derselben Seite 3 oder 4 verschiedene Farben und 20 verschiedene Schriften anwenden. Zum Beispiel: *Kursiv* für eine Aufeinanderfolge ähnlicher und schneller Sensationen, **fett** für die Nachahmungen heftiger Töne usw. Ein neuer Begriff der typographisch-malerischen Buchseite.





37



- fig. 35 Italics substituted by a different typeface in *Die neue Typographie*, 1928, p. 54.
Photo by Niccolò Quaresima
- fig. 36 First drafts of the typeface Universal, Jan Tschichold, 1929.
- fig. 37 Different cuts of the typeface Aurora Grotesk, C.E. Weber Type Foundry catalogue, Stuttgart, date unknown.
- fig. 38 The Haas Foundry's Normal-Grotesk, 1953. Modified glyphs are printed in red, and the original Wagner & Schmidt version is printed in black only below.
Photo by Stephen Coles

finally able to work on the re-edition of his text in 1967, Tschichold annotated a series of corrections, as if the wiser and older Jan was in conversation with his younger, inexperienced self. His notes demonstrate how time had softened his radical stance that denied beauty in favour of efficiency. For example, alongside the speculations about the future of typefaces reported above, he notes: "The situation today is quite different. Univers [...] is one of the best sans-serif, and is what I dreamed of in 1928".¹⁴ Following this indication, the 1995 posthumous English translation of *Die neue Typographie* was indeed composed in Univers – by that point available in digital – and offset printed on matt coated paper. This choice created both a perfect continuity with what the author would have desired, but also an anachronistic friction by using a typeface that had not been created when the book was written – almost as if an effect had been used to describe a cause. Philosophical and artistic considerations have a repercussion on the discipline and, in turn, (type) design reflects them through small changes in the tension of the curves and the proportions of the letters. Typefaces reflect the time in which they were printed through their shapes, but also through their printing techniques and materials. Their combination creates a specific atmosphere. This is one of the strengths of *Die neue Typographie*: every detail of the book transparently represents the era of renewal and redefinition in which it was written.

Revivals

In the different books, catalogues and specimens I consulted, dating from the 1910s to the 1950s, Aurora, its siblings and cousins appear frequently. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nebiolo's version, Cairoli, suddenly featured in Pirelli advertisements conceived by designers such as Armando Testa and Laura Lamm. In 1964, the typeface made a notable appearance again in the Modernist canon, when it was used by Bruno Munari in the first edition of *La scoperta del cerchio*.¹⁵

Typefaces cast by different foundries were sometimes different in minute details not even perceivable to the human eye. Conversely, they were sometimes reworked completely. One example that stands out is the Haas Foundry's version, which it cast as Accidenz Grotesk (later spelt Akzidenz Grotesk) in the 1910s, adding a fifth medium weight in 1943, and then reworking the design in 1953 when the typeface was already less popular and its art nouveau, unbalanced proportions were already feeling outdated. This updated version with a more contemporary feel was named "Normal-Grotesk". (fig. 38) Going back to my initial concerns on revivals, we could wonder whether Normal-Grotesk was already a revival of Aurora Grotesk or an upgraded version. Regardless, the foundry decided to change letter shapes to make the typeface catchy again on the market. Designers were keen to find more modular, smoother typefaces matching their taste for optical corrections, precise values and balanced geometry. These changes in proportions made it "contemporary" again, and this revision of Aurora could be seen as an anticipation of what would soon happen with the design of both Univers and Helvetica.

¹⁴ Jan Tschichold, "Revisions to *Die neue Typographie*", 1967, quoted in Tschichold 1995: xii.

¹⁵ Munari 1964

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