

In Continuity with History

François Rappo

in Conversation with

Davide Tomatis

In this insightful dialogue with the type designer and my mentor François Rappo, we delve into the goals of Jan Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie*, which encompassed both technical literature aimed at industrial workers and technicians, and a Modernist manifesto shaping graphic norms and aesthetics. The conversation delves into the historical and contextual frictions surrounding this shift, but also touches on the social implications of design, the emergence of graphic design as a profession, and the dynamics of the graphic design industry in early 20th-century Germany. Moreover, François Rappo shares his perspectives on the revivals of various design disciplines and their role in contemporary practice. He highlights the complexities of type design revivals, the challenges in translating historical typefaces into digital formats, and the sense of appropriation that can arise when engaging in such design endeavours.

Davide Tomatis — What do you think was the main goal of *Die neue Typographie*?

François Rappo — It was part of a technical literature very specific to Wilhelmine industrial Germany. On the one hand, it targeted an audience of skilled workers and technicians and aimed at fostering a *Weiterbildung* (continuing education) through specialised monthly magazines and practical handbooks. On the other hand, of course, it was also a Modernist manifesto. *Die neue Typographie* is usually perceived primarily as a manifesto, while its link with this trade literature is less emphasised. As such, it is an interesting combination of aesthetic statement and pragmatic description of the newly formulated “DIN 476” graphic norms (defining paper size standards). It's a mapping of the graphic media from the perspective of an early *typografischer Gestalter* (typographic designer). My feeling is that Tschichold was already the perfect go-between, something that made him famous: being able to follow the avant-garde stream, being one of the first graphic designers as we understand it today, and trained to deal with the design of all forms of printed media.

DT — Having printed the book in Aurora Grotesk, Tschichold later said he was not satisfied with the contemporary typefaces and the long-dreamed of Univers. The English edition was later set entirely in Univers, potentially because they did not have a digital version of Aurora, but also in response to Tschichold's statement, even if the choice is historically inaccurate. Do you think this is too much of a friction?

FR — An English, French or other translation of this book was quite challenging! To render the tone of the very “apodictic” approach in the German context of the time was no easy thing. Maybe it would have been better to choose a solution like your re-publication of Alfa-Beta by Aldo Novarese, where you did a facsimile reprint, with an accompanying booklet containing the translations. Which results in a definitely different object. It’s strange today to read the discourse of young Jan Tschichold directly in English and French. I remember Robin Kinross made an interesting statement comparing Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture* with Tschichold’s *The New Typography*. Not *Eine neue Typographie* but *Die neue Typographie*.

Le Corbusier proposed architecture as a global culture, his book was much more in dialogue and conversation with history, industry, technical products – the breakthrough and tradition.

But that was Tschichold, you know, he was such a purist! I knew people who met him. The father of one of my colleagues, a book designer from Basel, told me a little anecdote: Tschichold had designed a sign for a hospital in Basel. He was on the site, in front of the building, directing at a distance how to space the letters properly – for hours and hours – and the team of technicians went mad. But sure enough, the spacing was perfect. And it would have made a nice video!

DT — Was he too radical?

FR — It’s history. Today, as an essay, *Die neue Typographie* is perhaps a niche subject: interesting for the niche of emerging graphic designers. In Tschichold’s intentions, one can see both the momentum of the new aesthetics and something of the power of the Leipzig printing industry – the most powerful graphic industry in the world in 1914).

Again, *Die neue Typographie* was part of trade publications – like *Typographische Monatsblätter* in Switzerland, for example, which was not even available in normal bookshops. To receive the *Monatsblätter*, you had to subscribe or be a member of one of the trade unions. There were strong networks behind these publications: printers, machine manufacturers, publishers, all kinds of technicians, engineers, artists involved in the printing industry. These were very dynamic publications in which *Weiterbildung* meant keeping updated on both highly technical evolutions and the trendiest aesthetic changes. Typically, these networks received support and partnerships from both the industry and from the state.

DT — I remember that during a lesson you said: “When architects don’t get enough commissions, they write architecture books, but type and graphic designers rarely do”. Do you think there are any books that we can compare to *Die neue Typographie*? Perhaps Eric Gill’s *Essay on Typography*, which is from the same period?

FR — Yes, it is interesting to compare *Die neue Typographie* with Gill because the latter was more concerned with the social impact of the new aesthetics, its social value, the position of the (new) graphic designer in the industrial production process and what it meant for the other workers. This connects Gill with publications of renewed catholic circles, French philos-

opher Jacques Maritain, for example, linking contemporary art, applied art with everyday life, simplicity, authenticity, and a touch of handicrafts of magic value.

We focused on graphic designers, but in this growing business there were also other actors approaching the field from a scientific point of view: market studies, mass communication studies, people from the humanities and the sciences joining the advertising field. Let's think about Johannes Weidenmüller and his agency Werkstatt für neue deutsche Wortkunst (Workshop for new German word art) about Wilhelm Ostwald and his colour system for the industry, as well as his early format system for graphic arts, or *Weltformat* (world format), still in use in Switzerland.

Early 20th-century Germany was in a period of great development in visual design: there were strong advertising agencies, global visual strategies for cities and companies, and corporate design. Huge billboards and neon signs were covering the cities, a landscape you can see in many movies of the time. See for example the graphic design of Wilhelm Deffke. It was a very dynamic field in Germany, maybe more advanced than anywhere else in the world, and Jan Tschichold was riding that wave.

DT — Do you think Tschichold was better trained in advertising than in type design?

FR — On type design I cannot say, but he had trained intensively in lettering and what we understand today as art direction. He became the assistant of his teacher Walter Tiemann. He was among the first to have this new training as *typografischer Gestalter* (typographic designer). The first in the field to be able to tell a printer something like: "I am the specialist for any design. You are supposed to be dedicated to production. I am the designer – the creative part is my business". This was a new position in production. And, again, Leipzig had the most important printing industry in the world, more important than America.

DT — During his lifetime, Tschichold changed his design methods and opinions quite radically.

FR — Not so much in terms of design choices, but in terms of definitions for sure. He had an exceptionally comprehensive education in book design. I don't really know the context of his early twenties, when he chose to dress like a Bolshevik and become an avant-gardist. But was it not also a strategy? I am sure he always kept an eye on the other tricks he had up his sleeve. He followed the latest trends while still using exquisitely historical typefaces – a very nice style he developed in the 30s, mixing modern sans serif with 19th century British Script, in beautifully balanced asymmetrical layouts. Tschichold developed different strategies in his discourses for different times and contexts, but in his design he remained quite faithful to the same core values.

DT — What do you mean by "revival" and why is that an interesting practice to you? Does the practice of "revival" also apply to other disciplines?

FR — Revival and history are (critical) tools and possible strategies in fields like architecture (see Peter Eisenman with Giuseppe Terragni), music, literature, fashion design or even cuisine. They are sensors of disciplines playing with tradition and repertoire. History can inform contemporary practice in many ways. In the 1990s, revivals were firstly a way for me to learn to draw by looking at the history of the discipline and to understand how to properly develop an effective text typeface. Before the digital era, finding information about these topics was a challenging task. In the 1990s, I was curious to track back the “Modernist taste” that was familiar to me in the 1970s, trying to have a better view about its crisis – it was a postmodern time then... To get a kind of perspective on the Modernist typography, so familiar in Switzerland, to try and understand its potential, I designed a kind of imaginary timeline running from Didot to Theinhardt to Gerstner. It was primarily for personal study, but occasionally I released some of these digital interpretations for commercial purposes.

DT — What is interesting in the Aurora typeface from your perspective?

FR — Aurora Grotesk stands out as an original design among the sans serifs breaking any links with historical grotesques, both regarding its ductus¹ and stroke modulation – unlike many 19th-century grotesques, which kept historical stylistic elements rooted in Neoclassicism or in the Didone). It is one of the first successful designs based on a modular structure, keeping an interesting complexity with its mix of curves and end strokes. Aurora was also among the first designs to be developed and cut with accuracy in a consistent family. Its italic is a slanted Roman including some nice refinements in its details. It is still a challenge today to translate these drawings digitally.

I think the designers in the 1950s were keen to find more modular, smoother fonts matching their taste for optical values and contrasts. I guess the revised version of Aurora could be seen as an anticipation of both Univers (in terms of modularity) and Helvetica.

DT — Susan Sontag said that “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed”.² Does it apply to type design as well? Do you feel this sense of appropriation when designing a revival, or a typeface that relies on strong historical references?

FR — When you take a photograph of a lamp, you don’t have to own the lamp. A picture of a lamp is a visual experience per se. My interest in trying a revival of a typeface was mainly to “learn by drawing”; to learn both a repertoire and the fine-tuning a text typeface. And to test the potential of a font – yes, maybe also to develop something like a feeling of appropriation.

I was also interested in exploring the visual potential of certain forgotten typefaces. Twenty years ago, the original design of Helvetica – the nice medium weight – was no longer available, and nobody was very keen

1 “Ductus” is a term used in calligraphy to describe the layout of letters and the gestures made by the nib when writing. It refers to the direction, number and sequence of strokes necessary to create letterforms.

2 Sontag 1977: 174.

on Helvetica. Do we remember the mainstream taste back then? The “Helvetica bashing”? I digitised a single cut, that medium weight, and released it as a free font for a small network. The font gained a lot of success and interest. Appropriation? Yes, you feel you’re becoming part of the project. And as a result, you bring back into your – our? – visual environment something that was missing. Helvetica still conveys the image of being “universal”, being a quasi-generic style. Nevertheless, each of its designs has its own flavour. It’s a bit like cooking, you can buy a pizza – which is also a kind of generic, “universal” thing, available around the corner, but sometimes in a good pizza there’s something special: is it cheese? A well-chosen herb? Or was it even a little mistake in cooking? It’s unique and part of a repertoire. You are part of that process, working alone on a typeface, but also part of a community, sharing and fostering values – the past and contemporary taste.

References

Sontag 1977

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus
and Giroux, New York 1977
