Triest Verlag für
Architektur, Design
und **Typografie**

Foreword «Schiff nach Europa», long version, Felix Wiedler

A novel as a homage to Akzidenz-Grotesk

Anyone travelling the world in the 1950s didn't always board a plane, but often took a ship. As did Swiss intellectuals and authors: Max Frisch, inspired by his own trip to America, had the protagonist of his 1957 novel *Homo Faber* take a ship to Europe. *Schiff nach Europa* by Markus Kutter was published the same year, his first novel describing a voyage across the Atlantic. Frisch and Kutter had more things in common at the time, among them the utopian notion of founding a modern-day model city in Switzerland. Their manifesto *achtung: die Schweiz* published in 1955 – fresh and cheeky both in terms of content and the design by Karl Gerstner – struck a chord, continuing to generate discussion today, while the idea itself remained a utopia.

Frisch's *Homo Faber* became a classic, something that cannot be said of Kutter's novel – despite the support of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who wrote the blurb. The book published by Arthur Niggli however was awarded as one of the "Most Beautiful Swiss Books" in 1957 – thanks primarily to the outstanding typography of Karl Gerstner.

At times, the novel, with its montage-style blend of different text types, can cause the reader to lose track of the characters and their stories. The focus is all the more on the book's secret protagonist, who takes centre stage even on the cover: it's name is Berthold Akzidenz-Grotesk. Now large, now smaller, now bold, now semi-bold, in a constantly changing grid layout, now upright, now sideways, but always strictly asymmetric down to the page numbers. Page 155, finally, sees the climax of the drama: a letter G blares out 60 points loud. And an H refusing to fit in the type area is unceremoniously halved by the typographer – sawn in two like the magician's assistant. *Schiff nach Europa* is in fact a typographical novel that is above all about Akzidenz-Grotesk. (Monotype Grotesk plays a walk-on part as running text.)

Akzidenz-Grotesk is *the* font of functional Swiss typography in the 1950s. Unadorned and sober, created by anonymous typecutters at the end of the 19th century, it became the archetype for later sans-serifs such as Futura, Helvetica or Univers. Compared with these designer-made font families, the "crafted" Akzidenz-Grotesk has a somewhat unpolished look to it, which

does, however, give it a very special quality. In his 1964 collection of essays entitled *Programme entwerfen*, Karl Gerstner himself explained what he liked so much about this font: "We see what is sometimes criticised as being 'untidy' about Akzidenz as its greatest merit: its original freshness. Indeed: Akzidenz-Grotesk has transcended all whims of fashion for more than sixty years."

The words "Schiff nach Europa" on the cover are much more than a title: a meticulously designed logo of types set full bleed, "optically organised" like the pictorial elements of constructive-concrete art. The lettering is broken down into modules on the half title, deconstructed, coming together again at the end of the book to form a logo. This "synthetic novel" derives, as it were, from the laboratory of the Basel-based chemicals firm Geigy, or rather its advertising department, where Kutter and Gerstner were working at the time – in retrospect a stronghold and talent incubator for modern Swiss graphic design. What we see heralded here in the form of a novel is the design philosophy with which the author/designer team would subsequently become a successful advertising agency as Gerstner + Kutter and later GGK.

Palpable in the literature and typography/art is the influence of the avant-garde 1920s, that a younger generation of intellectuals and designers consciously sought to follow on from after the Second World War. The futurists, constructivists and Bauhaus masters had propagated the unity of architecture, literature, art, typography and advertising. El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Kurt Schwitters and others were both artists and typographic designers. In their footsteps, leading graphic designers of the Swiss Style made constructive-concrete art – Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse and equally Karl Gerstner.

Today, *Schiff nach Europa* may be seen as a typography classic of the twentieth century that has stood the test of time. An icon of functional typography of the 1950s, in much the same way as El Lissitzky's book design for Mayakovsky's anthology of poems *Dlia Golosa* (For the Voice) is an icon of the avant-garde 1920s. Accordingly, the long out-of-print original edition of the novel is meanwhile a sought-after antiquarian rarity and almost impossible to buy.

High time then for this reprint – with the original cover on the inside of this dust jacket – that sets out to put this typographical work of art back in the public eye.

Felix Wiedler