

Typography papers 4

**The dispute between Max Bill and Jan Tschichold of 1946,
with a later contribution by Paul Renner**

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Preface

This is the first publication together in English translation of 'Über Typografie', by Max Bill, and 'Glaube und Wirklichkeit', by Jan Tschichold. These essays constitute a seminal dispute of 1946, which can be seen as a defining moment for the Swiss typography that developed fully in the 1950s. The two essays are brought together for the first time with a later contribution by Paul Renner from 1948, 'Über moderne Typographie'. Considered as a whole, this debate raises significant practical and moral issues concerning typography. The original German texts are also given here.

Translations of the Bill, Tschichold and Renner texts by Robin Kinross, Ruari McLean and Christopher Burke respectively.

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1. The further exposition of Renner's views on 'modern typography', which he alludes to at the end of his essay, were expressed in 'Die moderne Typographie wird funktionell sein' (Modern typography will be functional) in *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, Jhg 67, Heft 7, July 1948. pp. 310–312 (reprinted in slightly rewritten form in *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 1951, pp. 178–181).

2. A letter from Bill on this matter is quoted by Paul Rand in 'Typography: style is not substance' (see item 12 in bibliography here; this essay is also reprinted in item 13). Evidently, the editor of *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, Rudolf Hostettler, was rather incredulous about the whole affair. See Jost Hochuli, *Book design in Switzerland* (11) p. 76.

Max Bill's provocative article of 1946, 'Über Typografie', was a founding statement of Swiss typography, and Jan Tschichold's almost immediate reply, 'Glaube und Wirklichkeit', is a central document of Tschichold's 'conversion' from modernist to traditionalist typographer. In the sense that Swiss typography exerts a strong influence even today, albeit in a variegated form, this central debate from the immediate aftermath of the Second World War still seems vital. Yet it also remains relevant because it has wider implications than might at first be expected; the argument may hinge on certain arcane issues, such as whether to use justified or unjustified typesetting, but the discussion is broadened to encompass moral and ethical matters.

Tschichold had begun to turn away from a blanket use of the idioms of New Typography in the mid-1930s, after he began to work for book publishers in his new home, Switzerland. His public statements in favour of traditional typographic solutions were attacked by Bill in his article with the force of a disciple turning on his apostate leader. Bill reaffirmed faith in a constructive 'elemental typography', as Tschichold had first defined it in 1925. In his reply, Tschichold attempts to refute the correctness of any narrow approach, seemingly having taken to heart the real dangers – which he had experienced personally – that arose from the polarization of views in all aspects of society, including design, under the Nazi regime. In his later, meditative contribution to this debate Paul Renner attempted not to deal with the specific points made by either the antagonist or the protagonist, but to continue thinking on the central issues.¹ He recognized the value of the dispute in the difference of opinion itself, invoking the notion of dialectic that had been developed by the German philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). (This dialectical direction was hinted at by Bill in his initial article.) Evidently, Bill himself drafted a third contribution before Renner's, in the form of a vitriolic play, but he claimed that the editors of *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, who had requested it, did not have the courage to publish it.²

Renner commented that 'it would not be at all useful to take sides rashly'. Equally, it should not be the purpose of this introduction to do so. Instead it is worth reflecting on some of the aspects of the debate that anchor it in a particular German-language tradition of design thinking, which may also aid us in focusing on the central issues. From the outset Bill is concerned with the relationship between 'technical, economic, functional and aesthetic requirements' of typography, and the 'technical and artistic possibilities of our time'. His implication that

form is innately linked to technology is an unquestionably progressive-modernist stance, which is addressed by both of the other contributors. Renner's plea for a 'style' of the time should not be regarded too superficially – for 'style' one can read 'form'. In these terms can be discerned the spectre of the architect and theoretician, Gottfried Semper, who formulated the scriptural trinity of German design theory in 1848, when he expressed form as a result of *Gebrauchszweck, Rohstoff und Technik* (purpose, material and technology). Semper's theories, or at least this axiom, is likely to have been known by all three contributors, and can be seen as the beginning of a thread of functionalist thinking that runs through design theory of the twentieth century. The matter can be re-expressed so as to reflect the particular debate under discussion here as the balancing of technical, functional and stylistic aspects of typography.

In more general terms, this issue can be seen in the larger context of the *Streit um die Technik* (Debate on technology), a long-running intellectual reaction to Germany's rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth century. This debate reached a height in the aftermath of the First World War, with impassioned arguments on the sanctity of the worker's soul, and the fate of creativity in an industrialized world. Bill's faith in technological progress is countered by Tschichold's evocation of the soul-destroying labour that humans must endure in modern production – an argument that is familiar from the *Streit um die Technik*. This had been a constant theme in Renner's work, and he revisits it here with his reflection on the differences between work done in a craft tradition and design of the modern era.³

In the industrialization of German printing, mechanical techniques eventually supplanted hand composition (although it lingered longer there than in some other European countries). This contributed to the firmer establishment of the typographer's role in the production process. Tschichold and Renner had begun to articulate the responsibilities of such a position in the 1920s, and the Bill–Tschichold dispute can be seen as a continuation of this work in typographical theory. In the broadest terms, it can be regarded as a struggle towards a consciousness of the possible consequences of typographic practice.

CHRISTOPHER BURKE

On the bibliography of the debate

One should note first that Max Bill's 'Über Typografie' was published in the April 1946 issue of the *Schweizer Graphische Mitteilungen*, with Jan Tschichold's 'Glaube und Wirklichkeit' following in the issue of June 1946. In several of the comments on and references to the debate, it is assumed that Bill's article appeared in the May 1946 issue. This mistake is understandable, given Tschichold's opening reference to Bill's article 'im vorigen Heft' ['in the previous issue']. No doubt when Tschichold was writing his reply, he *was* addressing Bill's article 'in the previous issue'. But evidently the wheels of publication of his text did not move so quickly.

Apart from Paul Renner's discussion in 'Über moderne Typographie', the Bill–Tschichold debate seems to have been hardly mentioned in print until the 1970s. In 1972, on the occasion of his seventieth

3. Renner also brought to the debate the views of Adolf Loos about modern design. Loos's infamous coupling of 'ornament and crime' had previously been cited by Tschichold in his seminal book of 1928, *Die neue Typographie*, translated as *The new typography* (item 14 in bibliography) p. 69.

birthday, the *Typografische Monatsblätter* (the old *SGM*) published a special issue on Tschichold (1), with an extensive bibliography of his writings and an autobiographical text outlining his career – signed only with the pseudonym ‘Reminiscor’. Apart from the appearance of ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’ in the bibliography of writings, this special issue, which is the foundation of what one might risk calling ‘Tschichold studies’, made no mention of the exchange with Max Bill. Jan Tschichold never reprinted the text of ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’ in any of the collections of writings that he assembled in his lifetime. He died in 1974.

In 1976 the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich held a major exhibition of Tschichold’s work, overseen by Jost Hochuli in collaboration with Max Caflisch and Rudolf Hostettler, and accompanied by a useful catalogue (3) that published again, in slightly expanded form, the bibliography given in (1). An English-language version of this book was eventually published in Edinburgh (5). Then in 1977 the monograph that Tschichold himself had planned, the *Leben und Werk des Typographen Jan Tschichold*, was published in Dresden (4). This work expanded the record given in (1) in its illustrations and in reprinting five essays by Tschichold (but not ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’); its textual backbone was again the ‘Reminiscor’ essay. Meanwhile, in 1975, Ruari McLean had published *Jan Tschichold: typographer* (2). Essentially based in its biographical parts on the information provided in (1), with additional material from McLean’s personal knowledge of his subject, the book added some appendixes of writing by Tschichold, among which was ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’. This was its first re-appearance in print, and in the translation used again in the present publication.

A so-called ‘second edition’ of Tschichold’s *Die neue Typographie* (6) – in fact a facsimile edition of the book of 1928, with merely a changed title and imprint page – was important in signalling that ‘young Tschichold’ had now been freed from his own later, even posthumous grip, which would not have allowed an unmodified republication of this text. The facsimile of the book was accompanied in a slipcase by a pamphlet containing two essays about Tschichold, by Werner Doede and Gerd Fleischmann, and one by him: ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’. The choice was not explained, but it gave the impression that this was the most important of Tschichold’s essays. Later, the same imprint of Brinkmann & Bose issued a very substantial selection of Tschichold’s writings (7), including ‘Glaube und Wirklichkeit’.

The Bill–Tschichold debate was discussed in a lecture by Jost Hochuli (8), delivered and then also published in Stuttgart in 1991. Hochuli referred to the debate in his account of book design in Switzerland (10, 11). Later he reprinted his essay of 1991 in a book of ‘practice and theory’, in German-language (16) and English-language (17) editions. Meanwhile, the present writer had published a discussion of the debate within a short history of typography (9). And Paul Rand – a sideline witness of the discussion of 1946 – had published an account of it (12), which he later reprinted (under the new title of ‘Jan Tschichold versus Max Bill’) in his testament-like last book (18).

Paul Barnes’s anthology *Jan Tschichold: reflections and reappraisals* (13) included contributions by Hochuli (evidently by then rather bored

with ‘Tschichold studies’) and reprinted Paul Rand’s essay. Prominent among its fresh material was an essay by Christopher Burke in which Paul Renner’s contribution to the debate was recovered. Burke was later to include discussion of the debate in his book on Renner (20). Two Tschicholdians – Ruari McLean and the present writer – were among those who were asked, but failed to contribute to Barnes’s book. Just then they were at work on the English-language edition of *Die neue Typographie* (14).

In 1995 the *Revue suisse de l’imprimerie* (the French–Swiss partner of *Typografische Monatsblätter*) brought together Bill’s and Tschichold’s texts for the first time, now in French translation as ‘Sur la typographie’ and ‘Foi et réalité’ (15). The essays were prefaced by short introductions by Roger Chatelain, editor of the *RSI*, and François Rappo, the translator of the texts. Two years later the two essays were published in their original German in *Typografische Monatsblätter*, as part of the special issue (19) edited by Gerd Fleischmann on Max Bill’s work. A monograph on Bill’s typographic and graphic design (21) also reprinted ‘Über Typografie’, adding an English translation. The most recent publication to throw light on the debate is a work about another Tschicholdian, Anthony Froshaug (22). It includes letters between Froshaug and Tschichold, and Froshaug and Bill, from just that moment in 1946.

This survey has concentrated on German- and English-language writings, assuming that they have constituted the literature of the debate. Until recently this was a fair assumption. But, given the now world-wide interest in this history, it is clear that in the future one must look more widely for discussion of ‘Bill–Tschichold’.

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