Benjamins Translation Library

155

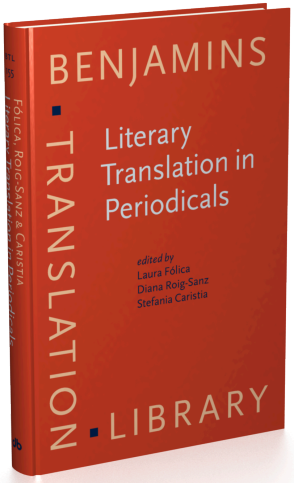
CHAPTER 16

The politics of translation

Textual-visual strategies towards transnational network building in the periodicals of the Czech interwar avant-garde

Meghan Forbes | The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.155.16for



Pages 365–384 of
Literary Translation in Periodicals: Methodological challenges for a transnational approach
Edited by Laura Fólica, Diana Roig-Sanz and Stefania Caristia
[**Benjamins Translation Library**, 155] 2020. vii, 401 pp.

John Benjamins Publishing Company

CHAPTER 16

The politics of translation

Textual-visual strategies towards transnational network building in the periodicals of the Czech interwar avant-garde

Meghan Forbes
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Founded in 1920, Devětsil – a Czech group of young leftist artists and poets – set out to create a distinctly modern avant-garde movement with broad international ties. This was a goal that Devětsil managed to achieve with remarkable success through a variety of strategies; the scope of its project is perhaps most visible in the case of its periodicals, which were circulated widely across Europe.

This essay looks at several specific examples of the use of translation and multilingualism, as well as a "universal" visual language, in the magazines published by the Czech avant-garde in the 1920s, towards a better understanding how transnational and non-hierarchal modes of network formation were enacted via the periodical publications of the historical avant-garde.

Keywords: Devětsil, New Typography, historical avant-garde, magazines, periodical studies, translation

In December of 1920, two years after the foundation of Czechoslovakia, a group of young, leftist artists and poets came together to form the Czech group Devětsil, which announced itself in the weekly paper *Pražské pondělí* (Prague Monday). "The times are changing", the manifesto opened, "Behind us remains the old era, sentenced to decay in the libraries, and before us shines a new day" (Teige et al. 1970[1920]: 81).[1] The group's vision for the future was an international one, situated as it was geographically and temporally in a newly configured Europe, and it was an early goal of the young signatories to align themselves with artists and

1. The original signees were Artuš Černík, Josef Frič, Josef Havlíček, Adolf Hoffmeister, Karel Prox, Jaroslav Seifert, Ivan Suk, Ladislav Süss, Vladimír Štulc, Karel Teige, Vladislav Vančura, Karel Vaněk, Karel Veselík, and Alois Wachsmann.

https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.155.16for

thinkers from beyond Czechoslovak borders engaged in a similar struggle for an art that was fully integrated into everyday life. Even before Devětsil was officially founded, Karel Teige,[2] arguably the most visible member of the group today, wrote to fellow member Artuš Černík[3] with the comment, "It would be good if our commune (*komuna*), as soon as it is founded, established international ties".[4]

It is significant that Devětsil would announce itself in a periodical publication, and such a choice in platform for its founding manifesto situated the movement within a growing tradition. Perhaps most famously and influentially, F. T. Marinetti's 1909 Futurist Manifesto was first printed in the French daily paper *Le Figaro*. While Devětsil would not always publish in such mainstream, popular (and inherently local) venues as a weekly newspaper, the site of the periodical publishing platform would remain an important medium of dissemination for the group's radical ideas throughout its short but illustrious life,[5] especially as it came to produce its own publications in a few years' time. Devětsil would publish several books, anthologies, and periodicals in its short tenure, such as the two anthologies, *Život* (Life) and the *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil) and the magazines *Disk*, *Pásmo*, and *ReD*. These included poetry, fiction, and theoretical texts, photographs and art reproductions and it was through its publications that the group signaled its place at the forefront of Czech avant-garde production, and forged alliances with concurrent movements across the European continent.

---

2. Karel Teige, born at the dawn of the new century, was a polyglot and his interests were multidisciplinary. He studied in the Philosophical Faculty at Charles University and went on to edit a wide range of magazines, from the Devětsil publications *Disk* (1923–1925) and *ReD* (1927–1931), to the architectural magazine *Stavba* (1922–1938), and published many books. He wrote copious essays on literature, art, and architecture, created many surrealist collages, and also worked as a typographer.

3. Artuš Černík, born in the same year as Teige, was his collaborator on several Devětsil publications and the main editor of *Pásmo*, the publishing arm of Devětsil in Brno, where Černík was living at the time. In Brno, he also served as the literary editor for the Communist daily *Rovnost* while pursuing a law degree. Before obtaining his degree, he also did a brief stint as a clerk for Czech Railways in 1923. Černík's best known Devětsil contributions are his editorial role at *Pásmo* and his writings on film (See Forst 1985).

Hundreds of pages of letters from Teige to Černík exist in the archive of the Památník Národního Písemnictví (Museum of Czech Literature). I have written in great detail on the collaborative relationship of Teige and Černík in my dissertation (See Forbes, "In the Middle of It All", 2016).

4. Karel Teige to Artuš Černík, Apr. 1, 1920, Památník Národního Písemnictví, Prague (hereafter cited as PNP), Artuš Černík Archive (hereafter cited as AČ Archive).

5. Devětsil was no longer by the early 1930s. Many of its members went on to join the Czech Surrealist group, founded by Vítězslav Nezval in 1934.

This chapter takes up the Devětsil print periodical, considered here as a strategic mode of exchange, to show how networks were generated from Prague and Brno, and maintained across the European avant-gardes. Underscoring the strategic use of translation in these platforms, it looks both at the magazines' written content and modes of distribution (what Matthew Philpotts might call their "social" codes, considering "the wide network of actors involved in the creation, circulation and reception of the journal"), and at how the serial publications of the Czech interwar avant-garde functioned *visually* to signal the editors' place within an international dialogue (their "compositional codes", that is their "textual, visual, and design" elements. See Philpotts 2013). I thus consider translation not only in its most fundamental sense, as the "substitution of one language for another" (Grutman 2009: 182), but rather engage a more broadly constitutive use of the word to suggest a transfer of knowledge and exchange of ideas between different cultural contexts, that incorporates as well multilingualism and internationally legible visual tropes.

The equally important textual and visual elements of the magazines are utilized by the Devětsil editors towards a dual purpose, which can be described as their micro and macro functions.[6] On the micro level, the magazines were intended to educate the Czech reader at home on interwar trends in the avant-garde, being forged both locally and abroad, and to engage a popular audience in these developments. They were also a forum by which the young Czech avant-garde conducted publicly debates with an older generation of artists and competing contemporaries at home (Forbes 2016a; Ort 2013). The Devětsil affiliated magazines portrayed a specific sociopolitical stance, through which their editors engaged in debates locally on the place of art in post-war society. On the macro level, the magazines were intended to be shared with artistic peers abroad, and all aspects of their curation – from the languages used to the individual page layout – were carefully curated to achieve that goal and thus sustain an active dialogue with members of an international avant-garde. It is this aspect of the magazines that will be the focus here, as I will show how serial publications kept the Czech avant-garde in conversation with peers abroad – in some cases already underway thanks to travel, exhibitions, or correspondence, but in other instances, initiated entirely via the publications themselves.

The use of the magazine as a platform for exchange and conversation in the interwar period is in no way particular to the Czech context, and it is in fact

6. As Ann Ardis noted in her opening remarks to the Modern Languages Association [MLA] Special Session "What is a Journal? Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies", the study of serial publications is especially well suited to "attending simultaneously to both macro- and micro-level analysis: for addressing the dialogics of an increasingly complexly mediated, post-bourgeois public sphere *through* analysis of the 'politics of the page' (George Bornstein's phrasing), that is, through the study of literary artifacts in their original sites of publication" (Ardis 2013).

contingent on this fact that the magazine could be utilized to form transnational networks at all (Ades 1978; Brooker et al. 2013; Mertins and Jennings 2010). Across Europe, it was common practice for magazines to cross advertise other publications within a broad linguistic and geographic zone and signal an international group of peers. To take but one example, on the inside back cover of the first issue of *Disk*, the French *L'Esprit nouveau*, Italian *Noi*, Yugoslav *Zenit*, and German *Merz* and *G* are all listed with their publishing addresses, along with other Czech magazines *Stavba*, *Host*, and *Veraikon*. The Devětsil publications functioned to solidify and disseminate the values of the Czech avant-garde through these widely understood uses of the magazine as tools for conducting conversation, bringing artists and thinkers of different geographical locations and languages into close contact, and ideally disseminating ideas discussed within a relatively small circle to a larger public, through both textual and visual production. In short, the avant-garde journal served as an efficient, affordable vehicle for the theoretical position of the artists and intellectuals it represented.

This article considers specifically the role of translation in the success of the Devětsil magazines to build transnational networks, by offering several close readings and case studies across various publications to present illustrative instances in which the magazines employed a range of textual and visual languages to convey information multi-linguistically and/or a-textually – what Johanna Drucker sees as the indelible "relation between the literary conception and visual production" (Drucker 1994: 2). It considers how the magazines accomplished this both through the translation of certain texts out of Czech and into another, more dominant language (such as German or French), the translation of foreign text *into* Czech, the publication of the same text side by side in different languages, and also the employment of visual strategies that helped to circumvent the limitations of Czech language literacy in the wider European sphere.

Text: Multilingualism in Devětsil publications

While the Devětsil anthologies and periodicals featured a significant amount of translation *into* Czech from a broad swath of languages, including German, French, Italian, and Russian, indicating a desire to bring visibility of an international avant-garde to a local, Czech audience, Devětsil simultaneously aimed to reach outwards to that international avant-garde by featuring at least some text in foreign languages, most often in German and French, in their publications.[7]

7. While the question of local perception is an important one, there is little evidence of how these magazines were received by a broader Czech public. Based on the archival evidence of

This could take the form of publishing foreign language texts directly in their source languages, or translating Czech language texts into French or German, and sometimes publishing the same text in two different languages, such as Czech *and* German, or Czech *and* French, translating in both directions.

Already in 1922 with the preparation of a special Devětsil issue of *Život*, and the group's first real publication under its own editorial control – alongside another anthology published the same year, the *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* – a page dedicated to the names and locations of "collaborators" reveals the wide and international scope of the publication, and the broad network in which it operated. The list includes: "Archipenko – Berlin"; "Delluc – (Cinéa) Paris"; "Erenburg – Vesc, Berlin"; "Man Ray – Paris"; "Jeanneret (Le Corbusier Saugnier) – 'L'Esprit nouveau', Paris"; and even "Charlie Chaplin – U.S.A. Los Angelos [*sic*]".[8] Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) and Saugnier (Amédée Ozenfant) have an especially significant presence in *Život*, contributing, for instance, an article titled "Architecture and Purism". This article is reproduced with images of Le Corbusier's architectural work, and includes a subtitle that affirms it was "written especially for 'Život'" (Le Corbusier and Saugnier 1922: 74). They also contributed a separate article entitled simply "Le Purisme". Both essays were printed in French, and subsequently on the following pages in Czech translation. In a letter to Teige from March 1923, Le Corbusier thanks him (in French) for the issue: "I have received Život and thank you emphatically; I offer you all my compliments for the beautiful edition that you have put together".[9] Le Corbusier's note (and many others like it, that are addressed to Teige and held in his archive at the Museum of Czech Literature) evidences the success of Devětsil in using local publishing platforms towards achieving international visibility and exchange.

---

correspondence, it is clear that major figures of the European avant-garde were looking at these magazines with great interest, but there is almost nothing to suggest that they reached a wider local audience beyond the small circle of the Czech avant-garde itself. One example of an attempt by Devětsil to engage with its local readership can be found however in a paragraph in volume 1, issue 5 of the magazine *ReD* from 1927, in which opinions are solicited with regard to the avant-garde theater group Osvobozené divadlo (Liberated Theater). Reader responses are subsequently published in issue 7, offering some limited sense of the magazine's readership. (For more on this incident, see Witkovsky 2002: 257–259). Devětsil activities did also receive attention in more popular, illustrated magazines, to which its members also occasionally contributed.

8. While this list is particularly Western-centric, Teige also looked seriously at magazines produced by his Eastern neighbors in Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the USSR, and actively worked in collaboration with other such editors. A notable example is the case of the Yugoslav *Zenit*. For more on this exchange, please see Forbes 2016b.

9. Le Corbusier to Teige, March 3, 1923, PNP, Karel Teige (hereafter KT) Archive.

Devětsil would also adopt the convention of including certain important identifying information in multiple languages. The platform of *Život* was essentially loaned to Devětsil by the Umělecká beseda group; it was in 1923 that the first issue of the first magazine that was a solely Devětsil undertaking, *Disk*, appears. Already in *Život*, the title of the magazine runs along the spine in Czech and French (*La Vie*) and the information of the title page is provided once in French and in Czech. A similar – and admittedly somewhat superficial – gesture of multilingualism, can be found on the cover of *Disk* (and corresponding stationary), in which the letterhead includes the title of the journal in Russian (only on the stationary), French, German, English, and Italian (see Figure 1). This practice is maintained with the second Devětsil magazine, *Pásmo* (the "*Mezinárodní moderní leták*"), first published in 1924 in Brno. Again, the title of the magazine and its description were translated into English ("*The Zone international pamphlet*"), French ("*La zone pamphlet international*"), German ("*Die Zone internationale Flugblatt*"), and Italian ("*La zone rivista internationale*").[10] This convention of providing basic editorial information in a multitude of languages is maintained in later Devětsil publications, and was also a custom commonly employed in other international avant-garde magazines, such as: Theo van Doesburg's *Mécano*; the Berlin based *Veshch/Objekt/Gegenstand* of Ilja Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky; the single issue of the Soviet *Izvestia ASNOVA* co-edited by Lissitzky and Nikolai Ladovsky; the Yugoslav publication *Zenit*, edited by Ljubomir Micić, along with Yvan Goll for issues eight through thirteen; and in 1931, another Czechoslovak publication related tangentially to Devětsil, *nová bratislava*, designed by Zdeněk Rossmann.[11]

10. The title of the magazine *Pásmo* in and of itself signals the centrality of translation to the ways in which the Czech publications were aligned with an international milieu. "*Pásmo*" can mean 'band' or 'belt', and on the cover of the magazine the descender of a lower-case "p" for "pásmo" is a filmstrip (the letter is created as a photomontage, that also includes a gramophone record to create the bowl of the "p"). Looking ahead to an example of a visual translation, concurrent examples of a very similar "P" crop up elsewhere, evidencing an international adoption of tropes in popular imagery. For instance, in Jan Tschichold's important book, *The New Typography*, he includes typographic work from Kurt Schwitters' advertisements for the firm Pelikan, which features a "P" quite like that used on the front page of *Pásmo*.

Additionally, the word "pásmo" can also mean 'zone' – as it is translated in English, French, German, and Italian on the cover of the magazine. Pásmo is in fact the same word used by the Czech author Karel Čapek as the title of his wildly popular translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's "Zone." This translation had been enthusiastically welcomed by the young avant-garde, for it served, as Deborah Garfinkle writes, "the aims of cultural development" at home (See Garfinkle 2003: 356).

11. Many comparable strategies were employed in the Bratislava-based magazine to its counterparts in Prague and Brno (See de Puineuf 2010).

Figure 1. Cover of *Disk* no. 1 (1923). Private collection

Such a form of multilingualism can be understood as a largely symbolic gesture towards internationalism, as the reader would need to be able to read Czech (in the instances of *Disk* or *Pásmo*) to have access to the real content of the published texts. But there are several important instances in which full poems or articles were reproduced in a foreign language, a convention also adopted by *Veshch* and *Zenit*, for instance. On the very first page of the fourth issue of *Pásmo* from 1924 there are articles in Czech (as the original language of a poem by František Halas, but also in translation, in a statement by *Ma* editor Lajos Kassák), Polish (by the Constructivist and *Blok* editor Mieczysław Szczuka), and German (by Kurt Schwitters and Willi Baumeister). There is even a quotation from the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe running vertically up the page, in French (see Figure 2). And also in *Pásmo*, a year later in 1925, László Moholy-Nagy's important example of "typophoto" called "Dynamik der Großstadt" ('Dynamic of a Metropolis') is printed in German (in a rather stripped down version in comparison to its far better-known

appearance that same year in the *Bauhausbuch. Malerei Photographie Film*), which had first appeared in Hungarian in the magazine *Ma* in 1924. But in general, it was a proportionally rare occurrence to publish articles or poems in a language other than Czech, and when this did occur, it was almost always in French or German, which would have been the languages most widely known by Devětsil members and any other Czech readers. There are also a few instances in which Czech writers chose to have their work published at home in a foreign language, translating themselves – again, typically if not exclusively in French and German – as a means by which to reach further into the consciousness of the greater European avant-garde. For instance, in the second and final issue of *Disk* from 1925, a poem by Nezval, "Rakete: Photogenisches Gedicht" ('Rocket: A Photogenic Poem'), appears only in German, translated by Greta Reiner-Straschnov. It had first appeared the year before in Czech in Nezval's volume of poems entitled *Pantomima*.


LA ZONE pamphlet international
DIE ZONE internationales Flugblatt
THE ZONE international pamphlet
LA ZONE rivista internationale

PÁSMO MODERNÍ LETÁK 4

Spolupracovníci Collaborateurs Mit arbeiter der 4 čísla: Jan Bartoš, Willy Baumeister, Ad. Behne, A. Černík, Lilien Gish, F. Halas, Ct. Haluza, L. Kassak, F. Léger, V. Naxera, V. Santholzer, M. Szczuka, J. Seifert, K. Schulz, K. Schwitters, J. Štyrský, K. Teige, B. Václavek, G. Valmier, J. Voskovec.

Pathé-Baby.

Merz.

Ruch artystyczny w Polsce.

Mechano (1921).

Plující ostrov.

Nous ne connaissons pas des problèmes de forme, mais des problèmes de construction. M. v. der Rohe.

Figure 2. Cover of *Pásmo* 1, no. 4 (1924). Private collection

Figure 3. Cover of *ReD* 1, no. 1 (October 1927). Private collection

In the first issue of *ReD* from October 1927 – which was perhaps the most important, and certainly the longest running Devětsil publication, ceasing only in 1931, and edited solely by Teige – a simultaneous employment of all of the different modes of translation and multilingualism described above come together in a succession of just a few pages (see Figure 3). The magazine would prove to cover a broad range of themes, with issues over the years dedicated to Italian Futurism, the Bauhaus in Dessau, and the Liberated Theater in Prague, to name just a few examples, and often explicitly highlighted connections between Devětsil members and their colleagues abroad. The first issue is emblematic of this, in as much as it showcases a recent visit of the erstwhile surrealist Philippe Soupault,[12] opening with a poem by him titled "Do Prahy" ('To Prague'), a reminiscence on the

12. With some embellishment, Derek Sayer writes: "Breton forced Philippe Soupault out of the Paris surrealist group at the end of 1926 for wasting his talent in journalism, publishing in an Italian fascist journal, and smoking English cigarettes" (Sayer 2013).

author's time in Prague earlier that same year.[13] With the exception of the title and a line about the unforgettable taste of "*bilá káva*" ('white coffee'), the poem is in French (Soupault 1927: 4). It is followed by a note (in Czech) that had initially appeared just the month before (in French) in the Paris-based daily *L'Intransigeant*, with the heading "The Young Czechs and Us" and reports on a poem by Nezval: "Mr. Vítězslav Nezval has written a poem dedicated to Philippe Soupault, a poem of beautiful, modern form and happy invention. – Apollinaire and Soupault, formerly in Prague, 20 years apart in age, have both born the seed that has grown into a friendship".[14] The poem by Soupault is then followed by this poem for him, written by Nezval, which is here also published in French (translated from Czech by the comedian and actor Jiří Voskovec, and it appeared again in *La Revue française de Prague*). Nezval's poem includes the names of a string of French visitors to Prague, including Guillaume Apollinaire, asserting the city's central status.[15] Finally, a short poem by Apollinaire ("June 14th, 1915" from *Calligrammes*) appears on the same page as Nezval's poem starts, running horizontally and wedged between thick black lines, in this case printed in Czech and translated from French by Teige. This succession of pages, which move fluidly between French and Czech, and encapsulates the level of exchange between poets working in both contexts – which is observed and reported upon even in the French press – underscores not only the successful and mutual exchange between (distinct) literary cultures, but also the way in which Teige aimed to showcase and instrumentalize this fact through his magazines.

Teige also made certain that his efforts to bring international representation into the Devětsil magazines would not be lost on that more international target audience. As the letter from Le Corbusier cited previously suggests, international contributors did receive copies of the magazines. Teige conscientiously cultivated mailing lists of notable international figures to whom to send out exemplars of

13. Soupault had visited Prague once in 1926 and again in 1927. Evidence of Soupault's later visit to Prague appears also in magazines not under Devětsil editorship, but with which the group collaborated and in which Devětsil members published, such as *Kmen* and *Rozpravy Aventina*. The "Do Prahy" poem was also reproduced in another magazine, *Kmen*, with a note that it had originally been published in *ReD*.

14. "Novinářská zpráva", *ReD* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1927):4. Originally published in "Les jeunes Tchèques et nous", *L'Intransigeant* (Sept. 19, 1927): 2. Interestingly, the word "femme" ('female') in the French original was migrated to "forma" ('form') in the Czech translation, apparently as a correction.

15. Apollinaire, writes Sayer, "made a brief visit" to Prague "during the first week of March 1902." (Sayer 2013) His recollection of the city would make its way into the poem "Zone", from *Alcools* of 1913, a major point of reference for later Czech literature and scholarship.

Devětsil publications. He clearly saw this as a key component to furthering the reach of Devětsil in a European context. Teige's letters from Prague to Černík in Brno (the main editor of *Pásmo*) at times feature a laundry list of foreign names and addresses to whom to send various periodicals. As early as 1921, before Devětsil had any real publications of its own, Teige writes to Černík with one such list of addresses to which he suggests Černík send the political journal *Červen*, and to which Teige contributed. Several years later, when it came time to distribute *Pásmo*, Teige's list has expanded. Sent in a letter from April 1924, it is a who's who of the major figures of the day, including Ehrenburg (living in Berlin at the time), Walter Gropius (at the Bauhaus in Weimar), Ossip Zadkine (in Paris), and the journals *G* (published in Berlin by El Lissitzky, who was also working with Ehrenburg on *Veshch*) as well as *Zenit* (here associated with Goll).[16] Teige writes again in July 1924 with the addresses of the same figures, and new personalities added, such as Baumeister and van Doesburg.[17] Below the appended list of addresses, Teige scrawls the exclamation "definitely!! these are important addresses! Send me as well some copies for propaganda on my travels. I'm stopping in Vienna, Trieste, Venice, Milan, Genoa, Nice, Marseille, Lyon, Paris, Strasbourg, Stuttgart."[18]

Indicative of Devětsil's success in making the group's work known beyond Czech borders, notable figures abroad also took it upon themselves to request exemplars, when they did not automatically receive them. The father of New Typography, Jan Tschichold, sent Černík a postcard in late 1925 requesting in German a copy of the art review *Veraikon*,[19] and a year later asks simply, "where is 'tam-tam' published?" indicating such close attention to Czech publishing culture that he would have heard of this rather obscure and short-lived publication dedicated to avant-garde music and theater.[20] And the Italian scholar of Slavonic stud-

16. Karel Teige to Artuš Černík, April 17, 1924, PNP, AČ Archive.

Again, though the magazines were generally directed westward, ties to the Soviet Union and South Slavic avant-gardes can be ascertained throughout this list, which includes several émigrés living in Berlin and Paris. Ehrenburg, born in Kiev, lived in various centers of Europe, such as Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, where he was residing when Teige suggested they send him a copy of *Pásmo*. Zadkine was a sculptor, born in Vitebsk and living in Paris.

17. Teige to Černík, July 23, 1924, PNP, AČ Archive.

18. Ibid.

This same list is more or less reiterated in a letter to Seifert from summer 1924, with whom Teige was planning to travel, and which also includes van Doesburg's address. [Teige to Jaroslav Seifert, 1924, PNP, Jaroslav Seifert Archive.]

19. Tschichold to Černík, Dec. (possibly Nov.) 21, 1925, PNP, AČ Archive.

20. Tschichold to Černík, Aug. 3, 1926, PNP, AČ Archive.

ies, Wolfgang Giusti, sent Teige a postcard from within Prague in 1928 – notably, writing in Czech – requesting three to four copies of the most recent issue of *ReD*, and offering to pick them up directly from the publisher.[21]

The subsequent section will consider how these exemplars could be understood and appreciated by a pan-European set of editors and artists. It continues the conversation about a strategic use of textual translation, particularly with regards to articles about innovations in typography, to also better understand how an excellent use of the visual language of New Typography was intended to further aid in the international reception of the magazines.

Image: Typography as universal language

The efforts of editors such as Teige and Černík to make sure that the Devětsil magazines were sent out to like-minded colleagues abroad was a successful campaign that lead to further collaboration and solicitation of Czech materials for publication elsewhere. This final section will consider how Teige in particular, as an editor and typographer, theorized a universal visual language that could reach beyond a Czech audience, and in practice, how he utilized graphic design alongside a strategic selection of images to translate the Devětsil magazine's transnational alignment a-textually.

Visually, the Devětsil periodicals under consideration evidence an affiliation with "New Typography", which championed an unadorned, "international" graphic style, now widely recognizable by its employment of sans serif fonts and uncluttered page layouts, and governed by principles of standardization. A German engineer Walter Porstmann published the manual *Sprache und Schrift* (Language and Type) in 1920, which came to be highly influential to the Bauhaus typographers in Germany, and ultimately paved the road to New Typography. It is Jan Tschichold, though, who best deserves to be described as the main ambassador for New Typography, publishing a handbook of the same name in 1928, which was already at that point an articulation of a well-known and firmly developed style. Tschichold actually lectured in Prague and Brno in January 1931, on the topic of photomontage. In a glowing review that Teige writes of the lectures, he highlights the significance of Tschichold's travel within the context of what impact he hopes it might have on aesthetic developments at home, concluding: "One would hope that the Prague and Brno lectures of Tschichold will mark the beginning of a working relationship of our professional circles with this master graphic artist of contemporary Germany" (Teige 1931). In fact, this professed aspiration

21. Giusti to Teige, March 21, 1928, PNP, KT Archive.

was already a reality by the time that Tschichold arrived in Czechoslovakia, for he had already included examples of Czech design, such as the photomontage cover of *Život*, in *The New Typography*, evidencing Devětsil's conversant and innovative use of graphic design, and its strong reception abroad. In the introduction to *The New Typography*, Tschichold writes of just how omnipresent its principles had become: "Its manifestations confront modern man at every step" (Tschichold 1995[1928]: 7). The pervasiveness of New Typography, and its quickly recognizable anti-ornamentalism, in favor of sans serif fonts and straight lines, made it an especially convenient way for Devětsil to be a part of a much wider conversation.

The theory and aesthetics of the New Typography, and its adoption by a wide swath of Central European magazines, is key to a discussion of how graphic design functioned to engage a modern public, in magazines, books, and advertisement. As suggested above, despite a variety of ambitious linguistic strategies, the Devětsil publications were primarily legible to an international audience visually, as most editors and other peers from beyond Czechoslovak borders could not read Czech. But even text can convey a message without a reading knowledge of its language. Johanna Drucker describes the visual component of printed words well in her 1984 essay, "Letterpress Language": "Writing produces a visual image: the shapes, sizes, and placement of letters on a page contribute to the message produced, creating statements which cannot always be rendered in spoken language" (Drucker 2008[1984]: 66). Such a conception of the use of text to also generate information via visual cues is very close to the way in which the Czech avant-garde conceived of their magazines. The magazines were simultaneously (and not separately) a visual and textual platform, speaking in different ways to the reader at home and the one abroad.

In the essay, "Words, Words, Words", printed serially in the architectural magazine *Horizont*, Teige imagined a "speech without words. A speech without an alphabet. The possibility of a non-verbal typographic communication" (Teige 1927b: 3). Again, such an a-textual form of communication would well suit the international ambitions of an avant-garde group operating in a small language. Already in 1923, for instance, we can see an emphasis on graphic "communication" in one of Moholy-Nagy's first projects at the Bauhaus, in which he published a manifesto of typography, aptly titled, "The New Typography," in a volume propagating the activities of the school, published in house by the Bauhausverlag. It opens declaratively: "Typography is an instrument of communication. It must present a clear message in the most powerful form" (Moholy-Nagy 1995[1923]: 15). "Clarity" ("*Klarheit*") and "communication" ("*Mitteilung*") were of utmost importance to the so-called New Typographers, and they aimed to adhere to these tenets via a textual-visual presentation of information that could be grasped quickly, keeping pace with the "tempo" of modern urbanity. Similarly, in

1925, Tschichold included as one point in his own manifesto on typography, titled "elementare typographie" ('elementary typography', also the title of this special issue of the magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen*, which he edited): "The purpose of all typography is communication" (Tschichold 1995[1925]: 333).[22] While it is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss in depth how Devětsil innovated in relation to these concepts – specifically through the development of the textual-visual project of Poetism, and the related "obrazová báseň" ('picture poem') – a look at the three covers of *Disk*, *Pásmo*, and *ReD* pictured above provide a cursory illustration of how these principles were employed in the Czech magazines. They make rational use, for instance, of the popular iconography of the disk, bold, black lines, and in the case of *ReD*, a grid-like page layout that intends to synthetically incorporate text and image (see Figures 1–3). Rather than pursuing a close reading of the graphic design of the Devětsil publications here, in relation to the topic of textual translation it is relevant to consider how these Czech and German texts on typography made their way into print in Prague.

In 1927, Tschichold's essay "Die neue Gestaltung" ('New Design') which was also included in the special issue of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, now appeared in Czech translation (as "Nová tvorba") in a comparable Czech trade journal *Typografia*, which had given significant real estate on its pages to reflecting new trends in modern typography under the editorial direction of Oldřich Poskočil. In a previous issue that same year, *Typografia* had also published an essay by Teige with the apt if unoriginal title, "Modern Typography." His essay was printed in both Czech and German, indicating that it was intended to be read by German-language practitioners of New Typography, such as Tschichold. In "Modern Typography", Teige likewise writes, "Typography is optical communication", highlighting the potential of typography to aid in communicating information by reaching beyond considerations of textual content alone, to also consider elements of graphic design (Teige 1999 [1927a]: 100). Also in 1927, *Typografia* had included in a single issue essays and samples of work by two Bauhaus new typographers: in issue three, Moholy-Nagy's "Contemporary Typography" ("Zeitgemäße Typographie", appearing in Czech as "Časová typografie") is directly followed by Herbert Bayer's "Attempt at a New Script" (originally published in a special Bauhaus issue of the typographic trade magazine *Offset* in 1926 as "Versuch einer neuen Schrift", and here appearing in Czech as "Pokus o nové písmo").

In "Attempt at a New Typeface", Bayer makes a familiar call for a lettering that matches the speed and technology of modern life. And Bayer does not only

22. When Tschichold published the book *The New Typography* a few years later, he writes similarly, "the essence of the New Typography is clarity", and that there is a "need for clarity in communication" (Tschichold 1928/1995).

theorize a new, universal, and international font, he also publishes alongside his article a rendering of the proposed "neue Schrift", an all lowercase sans-serif typeface (which has become immensely popular in the decades since, but was never actually "cut as type" during Bayer's tenure at the Bauhaus [Kinross 2002]). In a subsequent issue of *Typografia*, once Bayer's treatise, "Attempt at a New Typeface", had already been reproduced in Czech, Teige takes the opportunity with his own essay, "Modern Typography", to respond to Bayer's proposed typeface and gives it a mixed, though on the whole positive, review:

> Bayer's type, used by the author of this essay several times for book cover design, will have to be further refined, but it is already a *justified new form* aiming to perfect type in the sense of desirable simplification. Progressive simplification is the meaning of long-term development. Discarding ornaments. Simplifying the range of characters. (Teige 1927a: 103; Emphasis is the author's)

Again, this essay was printed not only in Czech but also German, suggesting that Teige was not just hiding his critique in a language that Bayer could not understand, but rather might have hoped Bayer himself would read the statement in German and engage with Teige. And Teige does not only describe what he finds lacking in Bayer's new font. He too offers concrete modifications and publishes his own proposal for a universal script that is a revision of Bayer's with nuanced changes to certain letters. The proposed adjustments appear alongside Bayer's original typeface in the April 1929 issue of *ReD*, which was dedicated to "foto film typo," and which adopted Bayer's convention of all lowercase print (see Figure 4).

Bayer and Teige's proposals, side by side, are illustrated in the middle of Poskočil's essay, "new typographic tendencies".[23] In his essay, Poskočil reiterates the rejection of ornament in New Typography, and the use of photography as a fundamental means by which to convey information in printed matter. He also asserts the position of Czech typography within a field "that knows no borders" and "accepts the thoughts of colleagues from other countries" (Poskočil 256). Poskočil simultaneously addresses the capacity for Czech typographers to innovate technically, and their interest in looking to international examples for inspiration. It was within the context of this idea of a borderless culture that Teige sought to engage in just such an international conversation, and was able to have the impact abroad that he did. Poskočil's essay is followed by a brief list of six points by Teige,

23. Poskočil was a professional typographer, of which little has been written, though he regularly contributed to Czech typographic trade publications, and was even the editor of *Typografia* in this period. As his inclusion of Teige's "Modern Typography" essay would suggest, he supported the avant-garde typographic work of Devětsil, for which he also expressed admiration in correspondence with Černík, and was in touch with Teige about publication even after World War Two.

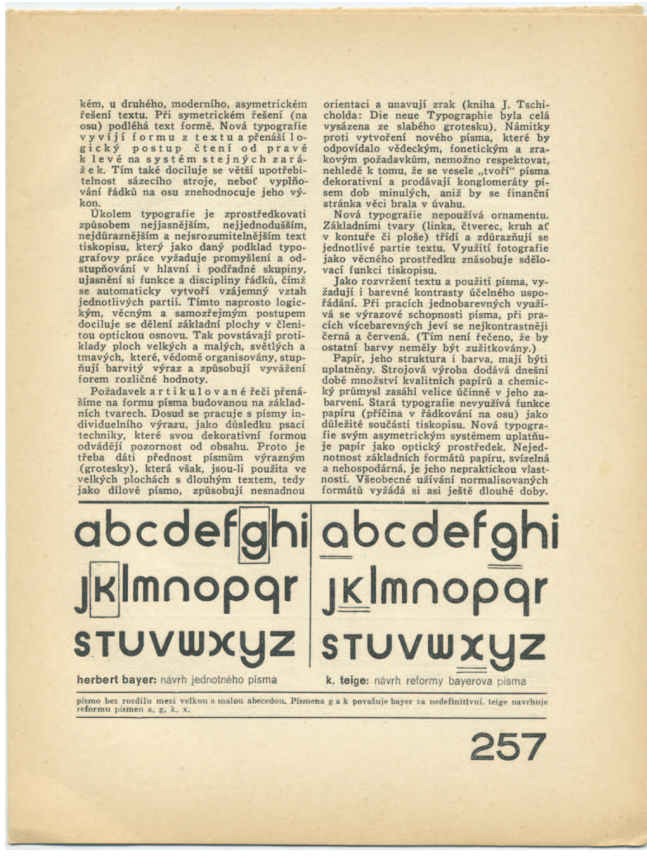
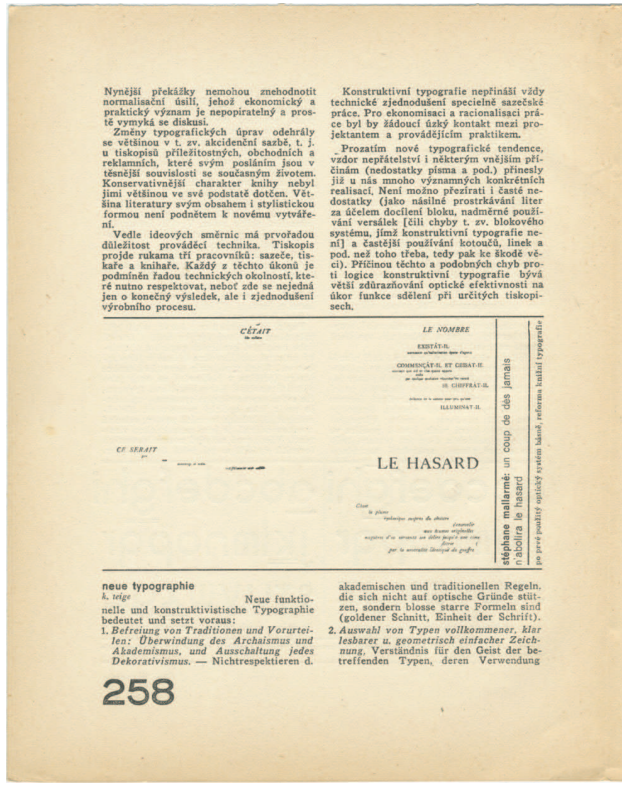


Figure 4. Interior of *ReD* 2, no. 8 (April 1928): 257. Private collection

written in German with the simple title "new typography", which echoes demands that a "functional and Constructivist typography" break from decorative and academic traditions, employing instead "clearly legible and geometric" typefaces and fully utilizing the possibilities of new technologies (Teige 1929: 258–259). This text again appears in German (and this time, only in German), once more signaling explicitly that he intended for his participation in discussions around New Typography to be observed and understood by those with whom he was engaging beyond the Czech linguistic sphere, such as Bayer.

Significantly, wedged between Poskočil's essay and Teige's list of points is Stéphane Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés", the poem that Drucker situates as "the single most striking precedent for avant-garde experiment with the visual form of poetic language" and "a touchstone of both historical and aesthetic reference for all subsequent twentieth-century typographical experimental poetry" (Drucker 1994) (see Figure 5). In his own time, Teige reviews the poem similarly; an editorial note



Nynější překážky nemohou zmehodnotit normalisační úsilí, jehož ekonomický a praktický význam je nepopiratelný a prostě vynyká se diskusi.

Změny typografických úprav odehrály se většinou v t. zv. akcidenční sazbě, t. j. u tiskopisů příležitostných, obchodních a reklamních, které svým posláním jsou v těsnější souvislosti se současným životem. Konservativnější charakter knihy nebyl jimi většinou ve své podstatě dotčen. Většina literatury svým obsahem i stylistickou formou není podnětem k novému vytváření.

Vedle ideových směrnic má prvořadou důležitost provádějící technika. Tiskopis projde rukama tří pracovníků: sazeče, tiskaře a knihaře. Každý z těchto úkonů je podmíněn řadou technických okolností, které nutno respektovat, neboť zde se nejedná jen o konečný výsledek, ale i zjednodušení výrobního procesu.

Konstruktivní typografie nepřináší vždy technické zjednodušení specielně sazečské práce. Pro ekonomisaci a racionalisaci práce byl by žádoucí úzký kontakt mezi projektantem a provádějícím praktikem.

Prozatím nové typografické tendence, vzdor nepřátelství i některým vnějším příčinám (nedostatky písma a pod.) přinesly již u nás mnoho významných konkrétních realisací. Není možno přezírati i časté nedostatky (jako násilné prostrkávání liter za účelem docílení bloku, nadměrné používání verzálek [čili chyby t. zv. blokového systému, jímž konstruktivní typografie není] a častějšího používání kotoučů, linek a pod. než toho třeba, tedy pak ke škodě věci). Příčinou těchto a podobných chyb proti logice konstruktivní typografie bývá větší zdůrazňování optické efektivnosti na úkor funkce sdělení při určitých tiskopisech.

CÉTAIT

LE NOMBRE

EXISTÂT-IL

COMMENÇÂT-IL ET CESSÂT-IL

SI CHIFFRÂT-IL

ILLUMINÂT-IL

CE SERAIT

LE HASARD

stéphane mallarmé: un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard

jan první použitý optický systém básně, reforma knižní typografie

neue typographie

k. teige

Neue funktionelle und konstruktivistische Typographie bedeutet und setzt voraus:

1. *Befreiung von Traditionen und Vorurteilen: Überwindung des Archaismus und Akademismus, und Ausschaltung jedes Dekorativismus.* — Nichtrespektieren d. akademischen und traditionellen Regeln, die sich nicht auf optische Gründe stützen, sondern blosse starre Formeln sind (goldener Schnitt, Einheit der Schrift).
2. *Auswahl von Typen vollkommener, klar lesbarer u. geometrisch einfacher Zeichnung,* Verständnis für den Geist der betreffenden Typen, deren Verwendung

258

Figure 5. Interior of *ReD* 2, no. 8 (April 1928): 258. Private collection

(presumably penned by him) that runs alongside the poem's reproduction in *ReD* claims it as "the first implementation of optical poetry, a reform of book typography" (258). Returning to Drucker's claim that the textual must also be read for its visual integrity, and the argument put forth here that a holistic consideration of the page layout offers salient evidence of how the Czech magazines conveyed their place within an international network, this page from *ReD* is an especially illustrative instance. It evinces both a notable example of the kind of visual poetry that was one influence in Devětsil's own artistic and poetic innovation, as well as the significant multilingualism of the magazine – in as much as we start at the top with Poskočil in Czech, then can read Mallarmé in the middle in the original French, and Teige in German below.

A synthetic reading of the full-page layout of the Czech magazines and a consideration of the ways in which translation was employed helps us to understand how editors might have intended for them to be legible to a wider linguistic audience. These examples together show several ways in which Devětsil developed an international language that was multilingual and strived for universality, through a form of synthetic typography.

Conclusion

It is ironic that the impressive periodical production of the Czech interwar avant-garde has so often been left out of literary and art historical narratives of the period in Europe – which tend to privilege Western models originating in hegemonic languages, such as English, French, or German – when Czech editors took the proactive stance with their magazines of making the work of Devětsil legible beyond the linguistic confines of one small Slavic language. A careful look at the magazines produced by the group reveals their integral place within artistic and poetic discussions occurring at the time, and welcomes a better historical understanding of their inextricable contribution to those networks. Indeed, thanks to the employment of translation and an international graphic style, this should be apparent to the scholar today even without a reading knowledge of Czech – precisely as Teige and his colleagues intended it.

Acknowledgements

This essay is adapted from my dissertation, and as such I would like to acknowledge my dissertation advisory committee, which was comprised of Tatjana Aleksić, Kerstin Barndt, Nicholas Sawicki, and Jindřich Toman, for their feedback on earlier versions of this text. Thanks are also due to the editors of this volume, Laura Fólica, Diana Roig-Sanz and Stefania Caristia for their comments.

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

References

Ades, Dawn. 1978. *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same titled, organized by and presented at the Hayward Gallery, London, January 11-March 27, 1978.

Ardis, Ann. January 2013. "Towards a Theory of Periodical Studies". Paper presented at the Annual MLA Convention, Boston.

Brooker, Peter, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, eds. 2013. *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199654291.001.0001

De Puineuf, Sonia. 2010. "A Dot on the Map: Some Remarks on the Magazine *Nová Bratislava*". *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1, no. 1, 100–111. https://doi.org/10.1353/jmp.0.0003

Drucker, Johanna. 1994. *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Drucker, Johanna. 2008. "Letterpress Language: Typography as a Medium for the Visual Representation of Language". *Leonardo* 17, no. 1 (1984):8–16. Reprinted in *Leonardo* 41, 1:66–74. https://doi.org/10.2307/1574850

Forbes, Meghan. 2016a. "In the Middle of It All: Prague, Brno, and the Avant-Garde Networks of Interwar Europe". PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Forbes, Meghan. 2016b. "Advertisement as Collaboration in the Central European Magazines of the Interwar Avant-Garde", *post* (March 22, 2016): https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/769-advertisement-as-collaboration-in-the-central-european-avant-garde-magazines Accessed March 4, 2020.

Forbes, Meghan, ed. 2019. *International Perspectives on Publishing Platforms: Image, Object, Text*. London, New York: Routledge.

Forst, Vladimír, ed. 1985. "Artuš Černík". In *Lexikon české literatury: A-G*, vol. 1, 445. Prague: Academia.

Garfinkle, Deborah. 2003. "Karel Čapek's 'Pásmo' and the Construction of Literary Modernity through the Art of Translation". *The Slavic and East European Journal* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2003):345–366.

Grutman, Rainier. 2009. "Multilingualism". In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Edited by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha:182–186. London and New York: Routledge.

Kinross, Robin. 2002. *Unjustified texts: perspectives on typography*. London: Hyphen Press.

Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris) and Saugnier (Amédée Ozenfant). 1922. "Architektura a Purism/Architecture et Purisme." *Život* 2: 74–85.

Mertins, Detlef, and Michael W. Jennings, eds. 2010. *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film 1923–1926*, translated by Steven Lindberg with Margareta Ingrid Christian. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

Moholy-Nagy, László. 1995. "Die neue Typographie". In *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919–1923* Weimar-München: Bauhausverlag, 1923. Anthologized in *bauhaus: drucksachen, typografie, reklame*, edited by Gerd Fleischmann, 14–16. Stuttgart: Oktagon.

"Novinářská zpráva." *ReD* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1927):4.

Ort, Thomas. 2013. *Art and Life in Modernist Prague: Karel Čapek and His Generation, 1911–1938*. New York: Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137077394

Philpotts, Matthew. 2013. "Defining the Thick Journal: Periodical Codes and Common Habitus". Paper presented at the annual MLA Convention, Boston, Jan. 4.

Poskočil, Oskar. "nové typografické tendence". *ReD* 2, no. 8 (April 1929): 255–258.

Sayer, Derek. 2013. *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Soupault, Philippe. "Do Prahy". *ReD* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1927):3–4.

Teige, Karel. 1927a. "Moderní Typo". *Typografia* 34, no. 7-9:189–198.

Teige, Karel. 1927b. "Slova, slova, slova". *Horizont* 1, no. 1–4: 1–3, 29–32, 45–47, 70–73.

Teige, Karel. 1929. "neue typographie". *ReD* 2, no. 8 (April 1929):258–259.

Teige, Karel. 1931. "Jan Tschichold v Praze". *Rozpravy Aventina* 6, no. 18 (Jan. 1931):212.

Teige, Karel. 1999. "Modern Typography". In *Karel Teige/1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-garde*, edited by Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, translated by Alexandra Büchler, 92–105. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Teige, Karel, et al. 1970. "U. S. Devětsil". *Pražské ponděli* (Dec. 6, 1920). Anthologized in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*. Edited by Vlašín Štěpán. Vol. 1.:81–83. Praha: Svoboda.

Tschichold, Jan. 1928. *Die neue Typographie: Ein Handbuch für Zeitgemäss Schaffende*. Berlin: Verlag des Bildungsverbandes des Deutschen Buchdrucker.

Tschichold, Jan. 1995. "elementare typographie". Special issue, *Typographische Mitteilungen* 22, no. 10 (1925). Anthologized in *bauhaus: drucksachen, typografie, reklame*, edited by Gerd Fleischmann, 333. Stuttgart: Oktagon.

Tschichold, Jan 1995. *The New Typography: A Handbook for Modern Designers*. Translated by Ruari McLean. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Witkovsky, Matthew. 2002. "Avant-Garde and Center: Devětsil and Czech Culture, 1918–1938". PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania.