

# Ulf Erdmann Ziegler

## *Nothing White*

Sample, pp. 166-170

Titus Passeraub did not look like a genius. He had his silver-shimmering shock of hair, certainly, and a serious, composed face; but he was not very tall, and whether sitting or standing he always bent forwards slightly, which made a servile impression. That had no bearing on his view of himself, however, for he firmly believed that he had made the decisive contribution to the number of readable typefaces in the twentieth century. At the age of thirty he had completed Cosmos, a system font elaborated in every direction, which only needed to be fed detail by detail into the filmsetting templates to yield everything – from the finest cursive minuscules to ultra-bold majuscules, narrowly spaced, widely spaced, a cosmos indeed for the typographer in action. Confident in his work, Passeraub had taken the opportunity to do away with such terms as ‘light’, ‘semibold’ and ‘bold’, instead indicating the weight with numbers such as 55, 65 or 75; for anyone working in his cosmos was no longer a craftsman, and perhaps even an engineer. Whether it came on tiptoe or with drum rolls and fanfares, Cosmos was essentially the same creation for each type size and weight. It was modern, but not narrow-minded; clear, but not cold; sans serif, but spirited. And that had only been the beginning, Passeraub’s debut at Terreau & Racine, whose boom with filmsetting would have been impossible without him. Marleen had stumbled on Cosmos the previous year, initially taking it for a completely new font; yet it was older than she was herself.

Marleen, as she appeared in Titus Passeraub’s studio, was now twenty-two years old. She sat there, sunken in her chair, and listened to him. The street noise drifted up from the boulevard. It was autumn. She was surprised by Passeraub’s attention; why should he show

her of all people, the newcomer, his latest font design, which was long finished and had just come onto the market? But Marleen listened to the most powerful of her inner voices, which told her that she was in the right place. Her task was to listen to Passeraub explain his *Tempi Novi*, his final attempt – as he made unequivocally clear – to yield to the urging of modernity and cautiously link it back to the traditions of writing, which Passeraub was certain were human rather than technical.

‘So, what do you think?’ he asked.

Marleen had a slim face, the kind that cuts the air. One was tempted to turn around when listening to her, to follow her gaze. What she said was not necessarily connected to where she was looking. Her natural inclination was to agree with Passeraub and proclaim *Tempi Novi* the solution to all problems, the perfection of modern typography. But how would she support her claim? This was certainly not the place to speak of ‘feeling’ or ‘good taste’. In any case, it was clear that Passeraub knew the advantages of his typeface better than anyone, especially her. If she simply parroted his own description, he would think her dim-witted; if she mentioned the advantage she herself sensed, namely its inconspicuousness, he might feel underappreciated – or, worse still, that she was lecturing him. The other possibility, of course, was to contradict him and point out its shortcomings. *Cosmos* had already been minimalistic, but dynamic nonetheless; a summation, the last in the sequence of generations, combining all their advantages, with *Futura* and *Helvetica* as its older sisters. *Tempi Novi*, on the other hand, did not seem to have any relatives; its similarities were those of a clone. Its name could be taken as much as a promise as a threat. Marleen thought of the goal she had envisaged for years: to create a script with no signature, purged of all remnants of stone-carved language. Only now did it dawn on her that there was a difference between reducing traditions to their lowest common denominator and honing them like bothersome ornaments. Nor was she entirely sure that she had correctly identified the differences between *Cosmos* and *Tempi Novi*, and she would have to ask Passeraub about it – which she intended to do immediately.

He had invented both, after all, to say nothing of a third, by no means unimportant typeface located somewhere in the middle; it had been developed for an airport in Paris, and later, because a name was required for its general market launch, dubbed 'Passeraub'. If it was true, however, that Cosmos was the one possibility and Tempi Novi the other – two ends of the spectrum, if one resolves to create a font that does not develop a life of its own –, then there was nothing left to be done. Perhaps that was the reason she was sitting there now, preordained by secret forces; then Passeraub, as a modern, would be a god of godlessness – not in actual life, but in the realm of writing –, and she would be the heretic who was forced to acknowledge that it was no longer possible to found the cult of godlessness, for it had long since come into existence. She would have to join it here and now without much ado, and then forever remain silent.

That was what went through Marleen's head. She barely noticed how the light on the boulevard was becoming hazy. She did not hear the calling and screaming. She was surprised that her sense of smell detected melting plastic while she pondered the future of grotesque script. She assumed that the seething of confusion and disaster reaching her was connected to her own thoughts.

To outsiders, the everyday life of a typographer may have given the impression that nothing was really happening. Grown men and women sat all day long over formations of letters. Unlike sculpture, which also took time, drawing typefaces did not even make any noise. A typographer was aware of the snail's pace of their work, which is probably why they were as conscientious as a watchmaker. To them a day was short, not long. Little time was wasted with chit-chat and there was no drawn-out lunch, nor any white wine to accompany it. It took something like the Citronique breaking down or a power cut to cause a genuine interruption of the working day, but even that was no real reason to put down one's work at the drawing table. Something must really have happened outside.

The first question was whether to go down and help. Running into a smoking department store with fire engines and ambulances parked outside did not seem particularly sensible, however. The second option was to evacuate the office; if the fire had been caused by an attack, there might be another one. Or the fire in the department store could get out of control. Every few minutes, Stüssi touched the big windows onto the boulevard to feel whether they were heating up.

Marleen had now been forgotten, like some errand boy. She noticed that she and Fränzi were the only women present at that moment; Fränzi was particularly busy, as she had to try to prevent time from passing on the telephone. The men – eight today, seven of them Swiss – were standing close together in the workshop. They looked like a group of penguins in their black and white clothes, sometimes in the middle of the room, sometimes at the window, and sometimes crowded around Fränzi's working space.

There it was: war, brought from Algeria or wherever, in a suitcase, invisible, had flared up before their eyes. The present had been taken hostage, pain distributed at random, and everything forced to a standstill. Standstill in the studio of Passeraub, Furrer and Stüssi was subject to the law of proportionality, which dictated that one does not continue working on the arches and pillars of civil society to make them more solid, more well-rounded, more open and more beautiful – goals that the Swiss typographers had taken up as their cause. It could not be right to put the finishing touches to a letter while people were being carried out of the smoking building with burns, and by no means all of them alive.

*Translation: Wieland Hoban*