This essay will compare the work and principles of typographer Jan Tschichold (1902–1974) and Emigre designers, Zuzana Licko (1961–) and Rudy VanderLans (1955–). It will show how these designers used typography and type design to challenge the status quo in book and magazine design. First, it will examine Tschichold’s development as a typographer, his success as a writer, and how, through his tenure at Penguin Books, he revolutionised the mid-century publishing industry. It will compare their differing views on what type legibility meant to them. Licko and VanderLans’s design journal, Emigre, pushed the limitations of the new digital age for typography and layout, despite what had previously been considered ‘good design’.

Jan Tschichold’s education, high standards and dedication to precision set him apart from his peers, both the traditional- and artistic-typographers. The son of a sign-writer, Tschichold was formally educated and technically trained in calligraphy, typography and bookbinding (Eskilson, 2013). At 21, Tschichold attended an exhibition at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany. There he was introduced to the New Typography-style that was being influenced by the De Stijl and constructivism movements of the time, and Tschichold was captivated (Armstrong, 2009). Though, while many of the Bauhaus artist-typographers, like El Lissitzky (1890–1941) and László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), were basing their work on the “expression of content through form”, Tschichold preferred a logical order and organisation of printed text (Kinross, 2004, p.108). As a result, of his education and comprehensive understanding of typography he had the ability translate how theories could become rules and where “complex experiments became simple, reproducible systems” (Armstrong, 2009, p.35). These preferences were presented in his book, Die Neue Typografie (“The New Typography”, 1928) which outlined strict typographic standards, “aimed to free designers from traditional restrictions and move them beyond centred type and ornaments” (Clifford, 2014, p.65) (Fig.1). The new approach, “form
ever follows function”, revealed more logical and legible arrangements including modern sans-serif, asymmetrical layouts, geometric grids and flexible margins (Archer-Parré, 2020, p.91) (Fig.2). Although Tschichold’s harsh stance of his early years would evolve throughout his career, his dedication to the legibility of text and typography would remain steadfast and became a major influence in the world of book publishing.

In the years that preceded World War II, the book and publishing industry faced both disruptions (destinations of factories, material and paper shortages) and successes (booming sales as paperbacks were portable, diverse in choice and cheap). Penguin Books, founded in 1935, were one of the companies that thrived. Despite the industries ups and downs, they printed and sold more books than anyone else at the time (Allington, Brewer, Colclough, Echard, & Lesser, 2009). Due to their popularity and production Penguin commissioned many printing factories to meet the high-volume demand for paperbacks. Unfortunately, this resulted in inconsistencies and, sometimes, vast differences in layout, design and quality, even within the same title (Doubleday, 2005). When Tschichold arrived in 1947, having worked in the publishing industry during the war in Switzerland, he was appalled at the layout and print standards evident at Penguin (Allington, 2009; Doubleday, 2005). He felt that high-quality, well-made books should be obtainable to everyone and not only the affluent: “Standardization, instead of individualization. Cheap books, instead of private-press editions. Active literature, instead of passive leather bindings – Jan Tschichold 1930” (Kinross, 2004, p.11). Tschichold’s three-year tenure, resulted in, not only, the redesign of 500 plus Penguin Books paperbacks but, the on-going transformation of the printing and typesetting standards in the entire publishing industry.

The new standards for design that Tschichold instilled were all included in the ‘Penguin Composition Rules’ (Fig.3). The four-page document outlined the new typefaces introduced (classic, legible) in addition to the rules for typography (spacing, indenting, capitalisation, punctuation, page numbering), grid structures (title pages, covers, text and images), quality (paper colour and type) and special guidelines for plays and poems (Allington, 2009; Doubleday, 2005; Eskilson, 2012). His revamp of the paperback covers included subtle improvements to kerning, tracking and the spacing of type, regulation of the colours in different editions as well as refining the penguin logo (Benham, 2020) (Fig.4). Tschichold found the conformity of the composers, typesetters and printers of the industry frustratingly unwilling. As a result, he regularly dropped by to inspect their work, perform adjustments to the typography being set and ensure his personal quality standards were met (Allington, 2009). The dedication, precision and knowledge that Tschichold imparted throughout his
time at Penguin Books are evident. He created a system that standardised and constrained the process, while allowing his successors a quality foundation to build on.

In contrast to Tschichold’s commitment to book text and typography legibility, Zuzana Licko, Rudy VanderLans, their type foundry, Emigre Fonts, and experimental design journal, Emigre, pushed illegibility to its limits. As a designer duo, Licko and VanderLans believed that it was a familiarity with fonts that increased their legibility and that typefaces are individually expressive, rather than text being “an invisible container of thought” (Kincross, 2004, p.173). The pair uniquely combine Licko’s innovative typefaces and VanderLans’ exploratory layouts in “the magazine that ignores boundaries,” (as seen as the title of issue 5 (Fig.5)) (Barness, 2016, p.182). As Licko and VanderLans broke all the previously held design rules that were adhered to by the traditional designers and publishers at the time, there was an understandable pushback. Predictably, many peers, like Massimo Vignelli, Paul Rand and Steven Heller, spoke out against what was being printed at Emigre. They wrote about their displeasure in essays, describing the magazine as a ‘factory of garbage’, ‘lacking originality’ with a ‘superficial style’ and an ‘ugly design’ (Poynor, 2003, pp.148-150; Haley, 2001). Despite this, Emigre held a ‘cult-like status’ and for the magazines 21-year, 69-issue run, it demonstrated its evolving experimentation in typography and juxtaposition by “drawing attention to how design is read and seen, written and visualised” (Barness, 2016, p.187). Together they pushed magazine design boundaries while influencing new and future generations of designers to do the work they believed in and wanted to make, rather than kowtow to the traditional naysayers.

Coincidently, the timing of Emigre’s launch in 1984 coincided with the new release of the Apple Macintosh computer and the couple, as early adopters of the technology, used this to their advantage in two significant areas. Firstly, Licko began designing and developing her own ‘anti-modernist’ typefaces for the magazine using the new technology (Heller, 2003). Her first type designs (Emperor, Oakland and Emigre) were dictated by the computer’s limitations and displayed as course bitmaps, however, they were the beginning of the magazines’ exclusive use of Licko’s typefaces (Haley, 2001; Jones, 2004). Her innovatively designed fonts used old techniques that she adjusted and developed as the technology evolved and paved the way for smoother more traditional typefaces in the future (Gomez-Palacio & Vit, 2009; Heller, 2003). The magazine aimed to continually blur the lines between the writing, design, art and music from contributors, and using original typefaces in “both written and visual compositions” (Barness, 2006, pp.187–188). Second, was the new ‘desktop publishing’ computer that offered improvements allowing for more complex WYSIWYG (“What you see is what you get”) software. It provided Licko and VanderLans innovative new ways to interpret text, images and layouts how they envisaged (Luna, 2020, p.603). Although the first few issues of Emigre were
produced using ‘paste-ups’ and the reproduction camera, the conventional method of production at the time, the emerging technology began to transform the publications output (Kinross, 2004; Allington et al., 2019). Licko and VanderLans expertly used unexpected white spaces, irregular grid structures, clashing typography and distorted letterforms that showed the integration and advancements of the computer throughout the timeline of the issues (Clifford, 2014) (Fig.6). This combination of embracing new technologies available and their progressive graphic and type design talents marked the success of both the design journal, the font foundry and their future careers.

Even though Licko and VanderLans began their magazine at the start of the new digital age, they also strived for more visual and tactile innovations. Not only did the inside of Emigre aspire to be different to the other journals available, the outside did too. The periodical began its life at a tabloid-size (11 x 17.5 inches), having only a full-colour cover and one- or two-colour pages inside. Emigre kept these printed dimensions for 32 issues, often including pull-out full-colour posters until sizing down in 1995 (to 8.5 x 10.875 inches) (Heller, 2003). Throughout the magazines’ history they pushed concept boundaries in many ways. For example, issue 6 was published in four parts housed together in a corrugated cardboard mailer. Later issues 60 through 63 were made with paper-engineered fold-over casings and contain either a music CD or a DVD, and issue 64 was a paperback book (Barness, 2016). These editions of the journal demonstrate that Licko and VanderLans, even toward the end of their reign, continued to explore and design new and exciting content for their audience.

Although there are differing opinions between their views on legibility, the contributions that Tschichold, Licko and VanderLans had on the typography and type design world are significant. Jan Tschichold revolutionised publishing and printing with his work at Penguin Books and his book, The New Typography, is still in print and a relevant resource in the design industry. Similarly, the 69-issue cult hit Emigre and the continued production at Emigre Fonts means that Zuzana Licko and Rudy VanderLans pursuit of design, despite ridicule, was inspiring and influential. The legacy of these designers for typographers and graphic designers is a credit to their beliefs, innovation, and determination to challenge the status quo.
Figure 1: *The Wood Beyond the World*, 1894
Designed by William Morris (British, 1834–1896) and Edward Burne-Jones (British, 1833–1898); Engraved by W.H. Hooper (British, 1834–1912); Written by William Morris (British, 1834–1896); Published by Kelmscott Press (London, England)
Wood engraving on paper
20.5 × 14 cm (8 1/16 × 5 1/2 in.)
Collection of Smithsonian Institution Libraries
Figure 2: Jan Tschichold, *Die Neue Typografie* ("The New Typography"), 1928
Figure 3: Penguin Books – “Penguin Composition Rules”
Figure 4: Penguin Books – Jan Tschichold’s grid layout example (left) and final printed book using the new system, type and logo (right)
Figure 5: Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko, cover of Emigre 5, Edizione Italo-Francesa, 1986
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Figure 6: Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko, a page from *Emigre 19, Starting from Zero*, 1991


