

Andre Jones

“Helvetica”

Helvetica is a 2007 documentary produced by Gary Hustwit to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Helvetica typeface, which is – arguably – the most used typeface in the world. The film features prominent graphic designers, typographers, and type designers and their opinions concerning the influence and history of Helvetica type and why it is so universally popular. Designers such as Rick Poyner, Jonathan Hoefler, Wim Crowel, Michael Bierut, and Paula Scher, and others also explore issues of modernism vs. post-modernism and why some of them either love Helvetica or hate it.

While there is no hard and fast definition of what Modernism actually is, one of the biggest hallmarks of Modernism is its departure from previous schools of thought regarding everything from religion to literature. In terms of art and graphic design, the Helvetica typeface has come to be widely known as the face of Modernism. A sans serif typeface with no contrast, Helvetica is not only straightforward and simplistic, but also easy to read whether still or in motion.

We can't talk about Helvetica as a representative of Modernism without talking about its roots. Before there was Helvetica, there was *Akzidenz Grotesk*. *Akzidenz Grotesk* was the de facto representative of *International Typographic Design* or – as it's more commonly referred to as – “Swiss style”. The Swiss style was more concerned with function rather than form, largely eliminating serifs, calligraphic elements, brackets, and other distractions to the viewer. In addition, according to *Philip B. Meggs' “History of Graphic Design”*, the Swiss style is based on mathematical grids. Dutch designer Wim Crowel, a staunch Modernist, embodies this ideal, “*I'm always interested in clarity. It should be clear, it should be readable, it should be straightforward, so I started using, gradually, grids for my designs...*”

Akzidenz Grotesk, the first of its kind, was released by the *Berthold Type Foundry* in 1896 and was one of the most popular typefaces used from the turn of the 20th century through World Wars I and II. It was even sold in the United States under the names “Standard” and “Basic Commercial”. Eduard Hoffman, boss of *Haas Type Foundry* (Münchenstein, Switzerland) commissioned designer and former Haas Foundry salesman Max Miedinger to design an updated typeface to compete with *Akzidenz Grotesk*. According to Alfred Hoffmann, son of Eduard Hoffman and former director of *Haas Type Foundry*, “...my father said if ever I have an idea of a new typeface, I'm sure that you could design it” (referring to Miedinger). “when you talk about the design of the Haas Neue Grotesk – or Helvetica – what it's all about is the inter-relationship of the negative shape – the figure/ground relationship, the shapes between characters and within characters.”, said British Typographer and Type Designer, Mike Parker.

Together, E. Hoffmann and Miedinger released “*Neue Haas Grotesk*” in 1957 - was which was later renamed “*Helvetica*” in 1960 by parent company *Stempel*, which was controlled by Swiss foundry *Linotype*. which means “Swiss” in Latin. According to Bruce Steinert, former managing director for *Linotype*, this renaming was considered necessary to increase its marketability in the U.S., “*The marketing director at Stempel had the idea to give it a better name,*” Steinert recalls, “because ‘*Neue Haas Grotesk*’ uh...didn't sound very good for a typeface intended to be sold in the United States.” A.

Hoffman gives greater detail, *“Stempel...suggested the name of ‘Helvetica’ – this is very important – ‘Helvetica’ is the Latin name of Switzerland. My father said ‘that’s impossible – you cannot call a typeface after a name of a country’, so he said, ‘why don’t we call it Helvetica’, so in other words this would be THE Swiss typeface’, and they agreed!”*

Though popular, some designers – who lean more towards post-modernism – avoid Helvetica like the plague. German typographer and designer of *Meta* typeface Erik Spiekermann said, *“...real typeface needs rhythm, needs contrast and comes from handwriting. That’s why I can read your handwriting and you can read mine, and I’m sure our handwriting is miles away from Helvetica – or anything considered legible but we can read, ‘cuz there’s a rhythm to it – a contrast to it. Helvetica hasn’t got any of that!”*

Paula Scher, one of the world’s most influential and decorated designers, and first female principal of iconic design firm *Pentagram*, shares her early aversion to Helvetica, *“you come into design at the point you start out in history, without knowing you’re starting out in history, and very often you don’t have a sense of what came before you and how it got there and you certainly don’t know what’s gonna come after”,* Scher explained. *“when I walked into design...what struck me was sort of two separate cultures of design. One was the corporate culture, and the corporate culture was the visual language of big corporations and at that time they were persuasively Helvetica...they looked alike, they looked a little fascistic to me...they were clean, they reminded me of cleaning up your room.”*

Scher adds, *“I also was morally opposed to Helvetica, because I viewed big corporations that were – you know – slathered in Helvetica as sponsors in the Vietnam war. So therefore, if you used Helvetica, it meant that you were in favor of the Vietnam war, so how could you use it?”* Though not clear if Scher still feels the same way about Helvetica today, it is quite clear that fellow *Pentagram* partner and Professor Emeritus of AIGA National, *Michael Bierut* absolutely loves Helvetica.

“I imagine there was a time when it just felt so good to take something that was old, and dusty, and homemade, and crappy looking and replace it with Helvetica. It just must have felt like you were uh – scraping the crud off of like, filthy old things and restoring them to shining beauty.”, Bierut gushed. Graphic Designer and publisher Lars Mullen called Helvetica the “perfume of the city” meaning that it was something you wouldn’t normally notice, but would miss very much if it weren’t there.

This video has helped me discover that I am – in fact – a die-hard Modernist and it has helped inform and focus my direction in terms of using type as visual representations of my ideas. Bring on the grids!

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