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Helvetica Documentary

Helvetica is a 2007 documentary film by Gary Hustwit that looks into the creation and the impact of the titular font. Informative but rather dull and dragging in delivery, I will admit that this documentary really didn't help me in understanding the importance of using type as a visual voice in design as I already have a basic understanding for the main root of using font and type as a voice- to give off a sense of what you're getting into, whether it be a magazine or a product, or anything else that we consume in everyday life. I feel like I personally missed the possible message of this film.

Helvetica, originally called Neue Haas Grotesk, is a popular sans-serif typeface created in 1957 by Max Miedinger with help from Eduard Hoffmann. Helvetica could be considered part of the Modernist movement. Modernism was a movement in society and culture that wanted a new way to express the experiences and values of modern life. Modernism was considered to be a utopian vision of human life and society and a belief in progress, and Helvetica is almost a perfect match for the Modernist movement- it's a simple and easy font that anyone can use and that can be readable and accessible to all.

At one point, Lars Muller says “Helvetica is the perfume of the city, we don’t notice it, but we would miss it if it wasn’t there” and goes on to say that Helvetica is the typeface of socialism as it invites everyone to type design- and while I understand what he is saying with that quote- and anyone and everyone can read and understand what the font choice of Helvetica is trying to say- I disagree with him. I think Helvetica is useful for smaller everyday things like schoolwork, Helvetica is a rather boring font choice that tells me nothing about a product. Another person I strongly disagreed with due to this viewpoint was Maximo Vignelli, who says “You can say, "I love you" in Helvetica. And you can say it with Helvetica Extra Light if you want to be really fancy. Or you can say it with the Extra Bold if it's really intensive and passionate, you know, and it might work.”

I personally agreed with Stefan Sagmeister’s view of the font- I couldn’t catch a quote from him I liked right away, but when I did a little more research I discovered a quote by him that goes “I discovered that I never really used Helvetica but I like to look at it. I like the VW beetle too, although I've never driven one”, and I think this describes how I personally feel about Helvetica- it’s simple and non-assaulting to the eyes which makes it pleasing to look at, but for my personal projects and work, I find it incredibly plain and boring. David Carson also had a wonderful quote I loved- “Don't confuse legibility with communication. Just because something is legible doesn't mean it communicates and, more importantly, doesn't mean it communicates the right thing.”

Rick Poyner says at one point that “type is saying things to us all the time. Typefaces express a mood, an atmosphere. They give words a certain coloring”, and I absolutely agree with that. But I personally don’t think Helvetica expresses anything or speaks to the person viewing it in a unique tone, and overall I believe that we can make better choices than Helvetica. There are thousands of fonts out in the world that are more expressive and interesting to look at, and maybe I would’ve appreciated the subject of this documentary more if a more intriguing type was picked.