

Helvetica

BY GARY HUSTWIT

You can't escape if you try—it's on your computer, the subway, U.S. mailboxes, IRS tax forms, and spells out countless corporate logos from Target to Fendi. No doubt, Helvetica is the king of fonts. But why? To find the answer, first-time Director Gary Hustwit meets with historians and designers whose passion for typefaces run high, and discovers the secrets behind the fonts we use and read every day.

FROM THE FILMMAKER

Why make a film about a typeface, let alone a feature documentary film about Helvetica? Because it's all around us. You've probably already seen Helvetica several times today. It might have told you which subway platform you needed, or tried to sell you investment services or vacation getaways in the ads in your morning paper. Maybe it gave you the latest headlines on television, or let you know whether to 'push' or 'pull' to open your office door.

Since millions of people see and use Helvetica every day, I guess I just wondered, "Why?" How did a typeface drawn by a little-known Swiss designer in 1957 become one of the most popular ways for us to communicate our words fifty years later? And what are the repercussions of that popularity, has it resulted in the globalization of our visual culture? Does a storefront today look the same in Minneapolis, Melbourne and Munich? How do we interact with type on a daily basis? And what about the effects of technology on type and graphic design, and the ways we consume it? Most of us use computers and digital fonts every day, so are we all graphic designers now, in a sense?

So let's just say I had a few questions, and I thought making a film would be a good way to answer them. I also thought that looking at Helvetica's "career" would be a good structure to look at the past 50 years of graphic design, and a starting point for some interesting conversations in the film. And hopefully the film could make people who aren't in the design trade think twice about the words that surround them, and the effect that typefaces have on the way we process those words.

I definitely did not want to make a film that had 75 people all saying one quick sound bite about Helvetica, all chopped together. Since there really haven't been any great documentaries made about graphic design and type, I wanted to try to focus on the interviewees in the film as much as the subject matter. People like Wim Crowel, Massimo Vignelli, Hermann Zapf, Matthew Carter...these are incredibly talented, knowledgeable, humble people, who each deserve an extensive documentary about their careers. And there are so many younger designers doing amazing work today as well, work that hasn't been celebrated in documentary form yet. So I hope that in this film you'll be able to get to know some of these people a little, see some of their work, and then hear their thoughts on type, and, of course, Helvetica.

-Gary Hustwit



Photo: Brigid Hughes / ITVS



THE FILM

We live in a media-saturated environment that exposes us to a daily stream of visual information. Typography and other graphics that shape those visual messages can determine how we respond to the information. HELVETICA, ostensibly a film about a typeface, delves into the world of graphic arts, then goes deeper to look at the changes in style and controversies over the role of the graphic designer in the decades following World War II. Through some of the major figures in the field, the film makes it clear that print is much more than letters forming words.

When the typeface Helvetica was created in 1957, it became an international hit in the graphic arts world. With its clean, smooth lines, it expressed the modern look that designers were seeking. At a time when countries were recovering from the ravages of war, Helvetica presented a way to express newness, a rebuilding and a turning away from old ideas. Once it caught on, the typeface began to be used extensively in signage, in package labeling, in poster art, in advertising—in short, everywhere.

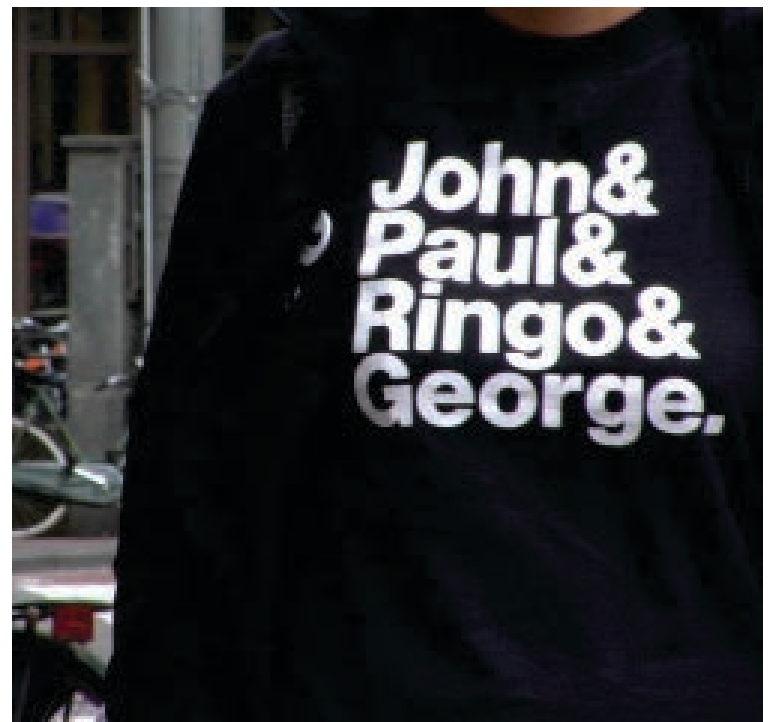
Fans of Helvetica tout its legibility and its versatility. It is equally “perfect” for a corporate logo and a local street sign. Not everyone is a fan, however. Some designers find Helvetica to be predictable and boring. A backlash occurred in the 1970s when young designers began looking for more energetic, expressive ways to present information. This post-modernist reaction to Helvetica included the “grunge” period of the 1990s, when designers experimented with new concepts in graphic communication, moving away from the orderly, predictable look of Helvetica to a mix of print styles and a wildly varying use of color and line.

More recently, designers have come back to order and legibility, but with a subjective edge. To the extent they use Helvetica, they continue to experiment with ways of making it “speak in a different way,” by doing such things as introducing design elements into the words themselves. The idealism that once drove the development and use of Helvetica has given way to a more personal search among designers for expressive possibilities. Just as graphic artists now inject their own feelings about the world into their work, so does the average person have opportunities to participate in the activities of personal visual communication. Internet-based sites such as Facebook and MySpace have opened up a new democratic dimension, allowing anyone to be a designer of information.

Through the framework of graphic design, HELVETICA explores the tension between the adherence to established principles of design and the desire to express individual thought and taste. The film acknowledges the belief that art is subjective, giving the viewer ample information to evaluate a good visual message.

A scene from Helvetica shot in Amsterdam.

Courtesy of Swiss Dots / ITVS



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN HELVETICA

Massimo Vignelli – Italian designer; considered the ‘high priest’ of graphic design in the 1960s

Richard Poyner – British design writer

Leslie Savan – American media writer

Wim Crowel – Dutch designer

Mike Parker – Director of Typographic Development, Mergenthaler Linotype USA, 1961-1981

Erik Spiekermann – German type designer

Paula Scher – American designer

Lars Müller – German graphic designer

Stefan Sagmeister – Austrian designer

David Carson – American designer; credited with starting the “grunge” style of graphic design

Jonathan Hoefler & Tobias Frere-Jones – American print designers

Neville Brody – British graphic designer

Danny van den Dungen – Dutch graphic designer

Michael C. Place – British graphic designer

Manuel Krebs & Dimitri Bruni – Swiss graphic designers

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A Few Useful Definitions

font / typeface – These terms are often used interchangeably, but there is a difference. A font is a complete assortment of type in one size and style, such as 10-point Times New Roman. A typeface is a set of one or more fonts that have stylistic unity.

graphic design – This refers to a number of professional artistic disciplines that focus on visual communication through the use of typography, page layout, color, images, symbols and words to create a message or represent an idea.

grunge – Most commonly used in reference to the music scene in Seattle during the 1990s, grunge also became a style of graphic design. Unkempt, jumbled-looking, ragged, disheveled and chaotic, grunge was in part a response to modernism by designers looking for a more expressive, energetic style.

modernism – This is considered both a style and a way of thinking. It takes a “form follows function” approach, in which the design of an object is based purely on its purpose. Characteristics are clean lines, smooth surfaces, abstract motifs, and a lack of ornamentation or clutter.

serif / sans serif – A serif is a stroke or fine line projecting from the beginning or end of one of the main strokes of a letter. Sans serif is a style of type with no serifs.

Helvetica Facts

Designer: Max Miedinger, working with Edüard Hoffmann, in 1957 for the Haas Type Foundry in Münchenstein, Switzerland

Style: Sans serif

Original name: Neue Haas Grotesk

Derivation of name: Helvetia, the Latin name for Switzerland

Descriptors: clear; readable; straightforward; efficient; smooth; balanced; rational; modern; neutral; conformist; dull; safe; predictable; boring; ubiquitous; corporate; socialist

Did you know ...

... that there are 35 different styles of Helvetica? See them all at www.myfonts.com/fonts/linotype/helvetica.

... that Arial, a widely used font that is standard on Windows operating systems, is a knock-off of Helvetica? To most people the two typefaces look the same, but experienced designers can spot the differences, and some don't like what they see. Find more information at www.ms-studio.com/articles.html.

... that the font Arial is considered in some circles to be a knock-off of Helvetica.

... that fonts are considered creative, intellectual property? Printers, type-setters, designers and computer software providers must pay a license fee to use them.

... that movable type was invented by a Chinese commoner named Bi Sheng in the 11th century? In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg invented a more practical movable type that allowed for the mass printing of books and other materials. The typeface he used for printing the Bible was blackletter, or Gothic, script, also known as Textualis and Gothic Bookhand.

... that the homemade-looking signs at the 2008 Democratic and Republican conventions were actually made on-site by staffers of the respective political parties? No outside signs were allowed into the convention centers; instead, signs were made by people who were not graphic artists and handed out to delegates at appropriate times during the proceedings.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. How does a typeface create a mood, feeling or image? Can you describe an occasion when you had a particular reaction to something in print, not because of the content, but because of the typeface?
2. In HELVETICA, design writer Richard Poynor says, "The designer has an enormous responsibility" as the person who is "putting wires into our heads." What does he mean? How would you define that responsibility?
3. Think of the font you most commonly use when working on your computer. Which one is it and why do you use that one?
4. American designer David Carson says, "Don't confuse legibility with communication." What does he mean? What's the difference between them?
5. How is design an expression of the times? How does politics affect the art of design?
6. What is your reaction to the grunge style of type and design? Why do you think you respond to it that way?
7. Imagine that the post office, your local bank or other government or corporate entity whose signage is familiar to you started using a different typeface. How would that change their image or your feeling about that business or organization?
8. What might you take away from this film in terms of possible effects on your work or other aspects of your daily life?
9. What changes, if any, has this film made in how you think about print and graphic design?

Danny van den Dungen of the Experimental Jetset design collective, in Amsterdam.

Courtesy of Swiss Dots / ITVS



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as individuals and as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Organize a design fair in your community to showcase the work of local graphic and print designers and to educate the public about their work.
2. Encourage local designers and printers to adopt environmentally sound practices. Guidelines can be found at http://sustainability.aiga.org/sus_whatIs.
3. Support the American Institute of Graphic Art's (AIGA) Design for Democracy initiative by letting local election officials know about AIGA's design guidelines for ballots and polling places. Find information on the AIGA website. (See the Resources section.)
4. Promote better signage in your community. Plan a "community walk" for the purpose of assessing and evaluating the adequacy of the signage and how it fits into the overall design of the area. Invite a local designer to serve as a docent for the event.
5. Work with local art educators and graphic designers to develop a student competition to satisfy local signage needs or to create a poster for an upcoming event.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.itvs.org, the website of Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

www.helveticafilm.com – The main website of HELVETICA, the film.

www.pbs.org/independentlens/helvetica – The companion site of HELVETICA, the film. Includes Independent Lens broadcast information and Community Cinema resource materials.

www.myfonts.com – An online source listing and displaying a vast array of fonts.

www.aiga.org – Website of the American Institute of Graphic Arts; contains descriptions of the organization's social, environmental and educational initiatives.

www.silk-road.com/art/movableprt.shtml – A short essay describing the invention, in China, of the first-known movable type.

www.answers.com/topic/international-typographic-style – Provides a brief background explaining the genesis of and influences on the development of Helvetica.

www.logocities.org – Website of an ongoing project addressing the signage, branding and lettering in public space; focuses on Montreal, but the information here can provide a framework for looking at visual environments elsewhere.

<http://infosthetics.com> – Website showing examples of visual representation of data.

http://desktoppub.about.com/od/designprinciples/Principles_of_Design.htm – Provides an illustrated starting point for learning about principles of design, especially as they apply to desktop publishing.

HELVETICA WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN JANUARY, 2009. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

HELVETICA was produced by Gary Hustwit. The Emmy® Award winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy® Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema.



A scene from HELVETICA shot in London.

Courtesy of Swiss Dots / ITVS

