

Helvetica:  
Its significance and its  
impacts on our society

Several years have passed since the birth of the modernists' typeface that had revolutionised the way typography has been depicted in the last 50 years. "What has Helvetica told you today?" (Huswit, *Helvetica Trailer*, 2007) is a clever metaphor as Helvetica has and is still playing a significant role in our lives; it speaks to us on a daily basis and provides us with important information. We do not realise that Helvetica is everywhere; in fact it is right in front of you. Helvetica is not a raw typeface; the job itself was a re-design of Akzidenz-Grotesk for Max Miedinger. Eduard Hoffmann commissioned it in 1957. In the Haas Type Foundry in Munchenstein, Switzerland, Eduard Hoffmann and Max Miedinger completed the typeface. Originally the typeface was going to be named 'Neue Haas Grotesk', but it was renamed Helvetica, which is Switzerland in Latin, because the typeface was going to be used globally. Since the typeface was going to be utilized world wide, Helvetica had to adhere to different languages and thus had to include special characters, such as the German umlaut.

Helvetica was initially released in 1961 and gradually transformed into a corporate typeface. An example of its impact would be taking a Coca Cola advertisement from the 1950's (which was filled with illustrative graphics and cursive typography; it was telling you more about a story and a lifestyle rather than the actual product) and comparing it to one in the 1960's. By looking at the advertising for Coca Cola in the 1960's, one can see the clear difference. The typography is there, that is all it needs to do, but the bottle and glass of coke have to sweat to make their efforts to adhere to the properties which Helvetica depicts; modern, simple and the most effective word, refreshing. "It's the real thing. Coke." The real promotion of the advertisement is coming through the typography, which is making a clear statement as to what the reader really wants. Michael Bierut expressed this idea proficiently when explaining a redesign:

Can you imagine how braising and thrilling that was, that must feel like you were crawling through a desert with your mouth caked with filthy dust and someone's offering you a clear and refreshing distilled glass of icy water to clear away this horrible burden of history. It must have just been fantastic, and you know it was fantastic because it was done over and over again. (*Helvetica*, 2007)

This is a perfect, realistic metaphorical explanation of the impact that Helvetica has made on our lives. According to corporations, Helvetica accomplishes its job incredibly well because it gets straight to the point through the weight, shape and form of the letters. Generally, most graphic designers do not believe that it is necessary for a typeface to illustrate the word in place because the word can be depicted through the use of various colors and styles, such as Helvetica Bold Extended. Helvetica fulfills the requirements in most cases because it is so dynamic and can be applied to almost anything and thus it is commonly used. Gary Hustwit designed an independent feature length documentary film about Helvetica, which was released simultaneously with the typeface's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The documentary was incredibly informative because it was unbiased about the proliferation of Helvetica and how it affects the world around us, and everyday life. This was because Gary provided accounts of graphic designers that favored Helvetica and disdained it for various reasons. Gary Hustwit interviewed some of the most well known names in the world of design such as the firm Modernist, Massimo Vignelli, Erik Spierkermann and Michael Bierut. Watching the documentary gave the viewer a great depth on the history of what has now become a timeless typeface; it is timeless because it is still being used since its release over 50 years ago and be used continuously in the future. Rick Poyner describes Helvetica as a "rational typeface," (*Helvetica*, 2007), which makes perfect sense because the typeface can be applied to all kinds of information, from signage to corporate identity in a legible way. An example of Helvetica used in a corporate identity would be in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), that is somebody that wants to look clean and efficient. The signage

in New York also uses Helvetica; it appears on their underground train signage. Royal Mail uses Helvetica because the characteristics of the typeface depict what Royal Mail is, respectable, efficient and clear. Helvetica is also commonly used in the authoritative and instructive manner, such as warning signs, 'harmful smoking' messages and generally 'do this' or 'don't do that' signage. It is the typeface of power. Helvetica essentially re-designed the corporate identity in the 1960's, but between the 1970's and the 1980's the typeface became a little simple. This is because of the post-modernist graphic designers' such as David Carson and Neville Brody who threw out the 'instruction manual' on how to perceive typography within graphic design. It was a new generation of young designers who seemed to be indulging in their self-disciplined ways designing new solutions. Designers from the 1960's would assume that this new type of designers would think irrationally. The important question that needs to be asked is, "What is the main point of graphic design?" The answer to this is quite simple, to communicate a message. Then, why do postmodernists feel that it is essential to graphically depict typography?

Gary Hustwit made a documentary film about Helvetica is not just because of its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, but also because of the re-birth of modernism during the 1990's and 2000's. London is the origin of modern design. This is made evident by the appearances of the buildings such as the London City Hall and Canary Wharf train station. A building that has been directly influenced by the typeface and the modernist era is the London Swiss Re 'Gherkin' building, which was founded by Helvetia Insurance, one of the world's largest reinsurer. Being the world's largest reinsurer, Helvetia Insurance had a powerful image to uphold, especially in their logo; so why not use the typeface of power? They have done so by using Helvetica. To make the documentary more informative and interesting for people, who are unaware of Helvetica's greatness and significance in our society, Hustwit also interviewed designers, who did not favor Helvetica as a typeface. A great example is David

Carson, who is a strong believer in graphically descriptive typography. He believed that if the type was not visually describing the type then it was not doing its job. His important quote in the documentary was "Don't confuse legibility with communication," (Carson, 2006). Carson is saying just because some thing is legible does not mean it communicates the right message, which is a valid argument . Massimo Vignelli argued that, "In the 80's with their mind completely confused by the disease called post modernist, people were going around like a chicken without the heads" (*Helvetica*, 2007). This argument is credible because David Carson is a self-taught graphic designer, who entered the world of design during the 80's and completely discarded the 'organization' created by designers in the 60's. Neville Brody said. "When people choose Helvetica they want to fit in and look normal. They use Helvetica because they want to be a member of the efficiency club" (Brody, 2007). That seems true because people generally favor being part of popular sentiment because they would not be alienated. By using Helvetica and its variations (Neue, Extended etc.) and with the combination of a logo, a unique design is created; so that each and every company has their own identity. While there are designers who disdain the use of Helvetica, there are also various corporations, which also abstain from using Helvetica. For example, Microsoft used a typeface from Monotype, Arial, which some graphic designers would consider as a shameless imposter. All Monotype had done was loosely adapted the main characteristics and proportions of Helvetica to create Arial. Some would argue that Microsoft choose to utilize Arial in their logo because they wanted to avoid paying the costly licensing fees for what was essentially a benchmark typeface. To the naked eye the differences between the two typefaces are indistinguishable and the size at which the majority of people are going to be viewing it at isn't going to be large enough to make a significant difference; it might as well be Helvetica. Usually, people prefer to use the typeface Arial because it is the default typeface in the most popular operating

system such as Microsoft Windows. Thus, making Helvetica an unnecessary typeface to the general public.

Everyone sees Helvetica, even if they are not aware about it, but it is everywhere and people will have seen it more than ten times a day. This celebration of Helvetica will be the first of many to come; the typeface has had a strong existence in the first fifty years and there is no reason for it to not be used commonly in the future. Helvetica, the extended documentary film, has been released for about a year, but enthusiastic typographers will continue their discussion about why the typeface is perfect or why it's boring. Many people utilize Helvetica because it accomplishes the job, but several people advocate the use of a typeface, which is graphically explaining the word. Watching the documentary will give the audience some interesting comments and opinions about the use of the typeface from great contemporary graphic designers. The documentary contains various views both good and bad about the typeface Helvetica. By viewing the excellent documentary, the audience can derive their own perception of Helvetica, but there is one thing that is quite evident. Helvetica has inevitably become a significant part of our everyday life; the ubiquity of the typeface has metaphorically integrated itself into our lives through its increasing popularity. Thus, if Helvetica did not exist, our lives would be incredibly different.