

Helvetica



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The Meaning of Helvetica Released fifty years after the introduction of the now ubiquitous typeface known as Helvetica, the movie of the same explores the meaning, historical context, and political tensions that surround something as common as typography. Beyond the sense of content conveyed in the words we encounter, the choice of font can change the tone of the content—they “ express a mood, an atmosphere” (Poyner). Helvetica, as the modern world's most commonly used font, expresses cleanliness, order, and a general sense of modernity. It can be difficult to see Helvetica for what it is given how frequently we encounter the typeface. As Michael Bierut suggests, at this point Helvetica “ seems like air, it seems like gravity,” because the font enjoys such widespread use. From major corporations, to government agencies, to street signs and sundry other bits of information, Helvetica pervades the contemporary visual landscape. Nonetheless, and despite the banality of Helvetica, we can understand the font's appeal by comparing it to the sort of fonts that were popular before it, and as the film demonstrates these fonts were chaotic, often difficult to read, and frequently tied to outlandish staging and obviously faked ad copy. Helvetica, by contrast, cleaned off the “ crud” (Bierut) of those earlier typefaces and presented information in a manner that seemed clean, smooth, and efficient. Massimo Vignelli suggests that typography is a “ fight against ugliness,” an attempt to cure a “ visual disease” with design, and that Helvetica triumphed precisely because it offered “ better legibility,” a more “ modern type” that was “ good for everything.” In this regard, notes designer Matthew Carter, one cannot “ second guess Helvetica.” Still, if Helvetica provided a clean, efficient typeface, good for everything, inherently readable and providing seemingly unmediated access to whatever

content was being displayed, it did not do so merely because it worked. On the one hand, to be sure, Helvetica ascended because I was easy to read. Reading is, as Carter notes, the “acid test” of how a typeface performs. But on the other hand, we must understand that the communicative function of a typeface is never neutral or absent. In reality, these subtle but ubiquitous design elements are like putting “wires into our heads” (Poyner). Helvetica is clean and efficient, but it also communicates the value of a certain rounded efficiency and lack of mediation. As such, the “design is part of that need to rebuild, to reconstruct, to make things more open” (Poyner). The purpose of a font like Helvetica is to pretend that the medium is not the message, but rather the most efficient way of disappearing as a medium in order to let the message shine through. Wim Crouwel expresses this sentiment succinctly when he contends that typography “shouldn't have a meaning in itself.” But the meaning of Helvetica is the meaning of modernism, literally writ large. Modernity celebrates a sense of “order,” and uniformity. In Helvetica, every letter is meant to look as close as possible like every other letter. And yet the soft rounded edges and horizontal termination suggest a sense of gridded, compartmental authority, even as the “smoothness of the letters makes” impersonal institutions like governments and corporations “seem almost human.” In this world, deviation from the norm implies a deviation from order, and as a result, Helvetica “doesn't further individuals” (Spiekermann). It lacks the “rhythm” and “contrast” to allow the typeface to really respond and express an atmosphere related to its content. Helvetica is, in other words, the best and the worst of the modernist period. References Hustwil, G 1997 Helvetica. Swiss Dots Productions. Lupton, E 2010. Thinking with type, 2nd edition.

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