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Helvetica

Helvetica created a hug impact on society at both a micro and macro scale, creating new voices, change in society and new ways of visualizing type. With its modernistic, Swedish style this typeface carries decades of controversy, but that does not take away from the impact that it has made on society. Lars Muller calls Helvetica the perfume of the city, you wouldn’t normally notice it, but you would miss if it was not there (*Helvetica*).

Understanding the formal and aesthetic decisions behind Helvetica involves a lot of unraveling. So, lets start with who made it and why? Helvetica was developed in “1957 by Swiss typeface designer Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffmann.” (Krause, Visual Design. Pg 230). Eduard Hoffmann was a boss at the Haas type foundry and wanted to create a modernized version of Akzidenz Grotesk. Working together Eduard Hoffmann and Swiss type designer Max Meidinger created Helvetica. Although Helvetica was not this typeface’s first name. Originally the type specimen was called Neue Haas Grotesk. After the typeface Neue Haas Grotesk, it was called Helvetia which is the Latin name for Switzerland. Then they had decided if they were going to sell the typeface in the United States that they should change the name to Helvetica.

A person wearing a costume

Description generated with high confidenceA picture containing table, indoor, food, sitting

Description generated with high confidence Before Helvetica was created in 1957, the early 1950’s consisted of cursive, hand type like in the Cocoa Cola ads. Taking a leap in the complete opposite direction, Helvetica was born; and designers found what they did not know what they were looking for. Unlike the cursive hand drawn type, Helvetica’s modern design was intended for maximum readability. The lack of serifs and the Swiss grid design created some of the characteristics of Helvetica.

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description generated with very high confidenceA major influence in the creation Helvetica was the post-world period, when idealism arose and as well as the emergence of the swiss style. There was an urgency for what Rick Poynor (Helvetica) calls rational typefaces. Eduard Hoffmann and Max Miedinger were both Swedish which had a major impact on the creation and design of Helvetica. Before I continue, look at the Helvetica Poster and focus on the type and think about its presence on the page. In the movie *Helvetica*, Mike Parker explains that the Swiss design payed more attention to negative space then the actual space of the type specimen; as if that space was holding the type firmly in place, living there. When we hear the word space, we associate it with emptiness. Alfred Hoffmann did a very nice job of explaining this because you can imagine the negative space around the letters to no longer be empty, but as an object with density and physicality. Now look back at the Helvetica poster and visualize the negative space holding the type in place. The Swiss design not only changed the way someone looks at negative space, but also helped to create the form Helvetica and its characteristics. Mike Parker describes that it is about the interrelationship of the negative shape, the shapes in-between letters and within letters.

The release of Helvetica emerged in “1957 and went out to shape the modern world” making a huge impact on society” written by staff co. Deigns article. It was almost a breath of fresh air for graphic designers, companies, government and even the public eye. Helvetica contributed to the idea of social responsibility by allowing versatility, intellectual and maximum responsibility. Helvetica start to pop up everywhere in magazines, ads, signage systems, corporate identities and the list goes on. Touching back on the Cocoa Cola ads, Helvetica was able to create a new voice for their brand, as well as many others. Helvetica also helped create a new, trusting voice for the government. The typeface helped to express things such as trust, efficiency, transparency and accountability. Jim Krause states that “Helvetica is one of those very rare fonts that cannot only deliver a wide range of thematic conveyances… but it can also act as an almost invisible thematic component for a layout or illustration whose other visual elements are meant to set the piece’s mood” (pg7). Meaning that Helvetica can both convey a certain theme through its type, but yet become a secondary component to visual aspects and context. It was such an enormous change from what the early 1950’s style that people were impressed that Helvetica was such a universal typeface. Helvetica was a complete change from the 19th century typeface. It had more of a manual details in it, simple, meaningless, allowing it to be used for a wide range of topics.

Helvetica has and continues to create controversy through its modernistic design and what some would call ‘lack of expressiveness’. In the movie *Helvetica*, Massimo Vignelli explains why there is so much controversy over Helvetica. Some people say that in order type to be affective, it needs to be expressive in its form. Helvetica was generated to be very clear, improve readability through its boldness and being a sans serif. This is what have led people to either think that it is either an effective or ineffective typeface. It was a very modern design for this time. Some people believe Helvetica is the best of the best and that it is good for everything. Arguing that it would be very hard to improve. Massimo Vignelli said that if he were to write ‘dog’, the type does not have to look like a dog in order to convey that it is a dog. You could write dog in any typeface and then italicize it, make it thin or bold and it would still express whatever it spells out. Massimo Vignelli jokes around saying that some people expect the typeface to bark! I personally agree with him, although sometimes it is affective to choose a typeface that suits the personality of your project. Helvetica can both be expressive in its own way, and let the context speak for itself.

Even today, well-known graphic designers either love or hate Helvetica. Designer Paula Scher does not like Helvetica because it reminds her of the Vietnam war, which was morally demand, the Reagan election. Paula Schere made a poster for the AIGA Annual *Grecrraphic Design USA,* she decided that Helvetica was a good representation of that. She made a map of people who used Helvetica during the last Reagan Election.

Helvetica, the modernistic, swiss inspired typeface caused an uproar in the late 1950’s changing the way that society functioned. It reconstructed and redesigned corporations, it created new ways of branding, signage systems through its thematic versatility. Although there is conflict about whether or not this type face is the best or worst, there is no question that Helvetica pushed society into a new modern ear full of expression and versatility.

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Swiss Helvetica Poster: source unknown.

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