Lights, Camera, Helvetica

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Published on September 19, 2006.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design in Off the cuff.

Helvetica is graphic designer and filmmaker Gary Hustwit's feature-length film about typography, graphic design and global visual culture. It examines the life and legend of the most universal of all the faces—Helvetica—which will celebrate its 50th birthday in 2007. The film is further an exploration of how the typeface inhabits the culture and environment. Shot in high-definition on location in the United States, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France and Belgium, the film is currently in post-production and is slated to begin screening at film festivals worldwide starting in early 2007.

Interviewees in Helvetica include some of the most illustrious and innovative names in the design world, including Erik Spiekermann, Matthew Carter, Massimo Vignelli, Wim Crouwel, Hermann Zapf, Neville Brody, Stefan Sagmeister, Michael Bierut, Jonathan Hoefler, Tobias Frere-Jones, Experimental Jetset, Michael C. Place, Norm, APFEL, Pierre Miedinger, Bruno Steinert, Otmar Hoefer, Rick Poynor, Lars Muller, and more. Here Hustwit talks about how Helvetica has been typecast for the screen. Roll the interview ?

Steven Heller: So, you're making a documentary on Helvetica? Why did you select this theme?

Gary Hustwit: In the late '80s, I got involved with book publishing and was designing book covers and interiors, which was the start of my fascination with typography. I even designed a few very bad typefaces in the mid-1990s. Then five years ago I got involved with independent filmmaking. I started producing documentaries—mostly music-related films like I Am Trying to Break Your Heart, the Wilco documentary.

I'd learned how to make films, and I was still a type fanatic, so I figured why not make a documentary about typography? Originally, I was thinking of making a film about type design, past, present and future. But I soon realized that in order to cover all of typography, and really do it justice, it would take at least five years of research and shooting. So it occurred to me it might be easier to just focus on one typeface. Helvetica's 50-year "career" also mirrors a period of dramatic change for the type trade and the design world in general. So I thought it would be a good structure through which to look at those issues.

Heller: Helvetica may be the typeface of the 20th century, but how do you make a documentary about a neutral typeface that will hold an audience's attention? For some, talking about type is like watching paint dry.

Hustwit: From the beginning I wanted the film to be engaging, both visually and emotionally. Since my background is in music documentaries, I've always thought of Helvetica as a music film about a typeface. I'm not sure what that means, but in the film you'll see Helvetica in action in major cities, people interacting with it in their daily lives. So visually, Helvetica is about urban spaces and the words that inhabit them, and using this imagery to demonstrate how we're influenced by thousands of words every day.

The conversations in the film address the creative process, how technology has affected graphic design, modernism versus postmodernism, and much more. I think those are topics that everyone, especially designers, will find compelling. The interviews also serve as mini-portraits of the type designers and graphic designers in the film. Many of these people, Wim Crouwel or Massimo Vignelli or Matthew Carter for instance, have had such amazing careers that they each deserve a full documentary devoted just to them. There hasn't been enough recognition for what they've done, so I wanted try to tell their stories in addition to Helvetica's.

Heller: Most documentarians start with a premise and find witnesses and interviewees to support this. How did you go about investigating Helvetica? And what did you learn along the way that you didn't know before?

Hustwit: I guess my initial premise for the film was one question: why? Why has a typeface designed 50 years ago by Max Miedinger, a little-known Swiss designer, become so ubiquitous? Why is it that you can walk out of your door in any city in this country and find it ? everywhere? Is it just intrinsically good or more legible than other typefaces? Or was it marketed more effectively when it was originally introduced? I got plenty of opinions about the reasons for its popularity. I talked to designers who were working at the time of Helvetica's introduction, and to people like Mike Parker, who was with Linotype USA in the early '60s and one of Helvetica's early advocates. I talked to designers who grew up with Helvetica, like the Dutch design team Experimental Jetset, who use Helvetica religiously and have a completely different view of the typeface than their American counterparts.

What did I learn along the way? I guess you'll have to see the film to find the answer to that.

Heller: Lars Muller published a book that was an ode to Helvetica. Is your film an ode, or have you discovered historical footage and/or documents that will add to the historiography?

Hustwit: It's difficult to describe, but I don't think my film is either of those things. It's an art film about urban spaces. It's a series of profiles of amazing designers. It's an introduction to typography, an art that most people take for granted. I guess the scope is wider than Lars' book, which is more of a catalog of examples of Helvetica use over the past 50 years. I think I try to get deeper into the underlying reasons for its success, and we get into the strategies and aesthetics behind the use of type by the designers in the film.

Heller: Its hard enough getting funding for documentaries on themes that have widespread appeal. Assuming for now this has limited initial appeal—though it could introduce the masses to type in the way Spellbound introduced them to spelling bees—how difficult was it for you to get backing? And who is doing the backing now?

Hustwit: I financed the film myself. It was either put a down payment on a house or make a film about Helvetica. But I've learned over the years that if I like something, there are a lot of other people out there who will like it too. So I had faith that the film would find an audience, and since we announced the film and put the [website] up, the response has been incredible. There are literally millions of graphic designers in the world, but how many great graphic design documentaries have been made and released in theaters up to now? Zero.

Heller: What has been the response to your screenings?

Hustwit: I screened a three-minute teaser of the film at TypeCon in Boston in August, and the response was phenomenal. Granted, the audience members at TypeCon are easy marks for this film. The challenge has been to try to maintain an editorial balance so that it's engaging to professional designers, yet accessible to the general public. Once we start screening the finished film at festivals in January, we'll see if it works.

Heller: You've interviewed a number of contemporary designers (some who are Helveticafiles). What has come out of these talks that you would never have scripted?

Hustwit: The thing that most surprised me was the complete lack of egos among all the designers in the film. They are all lucky enough to earn a living doing what they love, which I'm sure helps, and I think they were amused that I was actually making a film about Helvetica. Another thing I didn't realize or expect was the very sharp modernist/postmodernist divide. To see it in practice, in the work of these designers and in their philosophies, was pretty eye-opening for me, and I think it's definitely changed my personal approach to design.

Heller: Is Helvetica still the dominant face in Switzerland?

Hustwit: I think so, yes. Zurich is infested with it. But I was a little surprised by how dominant it is in Germany, almost more so than in Switzerland. But in all the cities we shot in, it was never an issue of finding Helvetica. We simply couldn't avoid it. The goal then became to find the most interesting usage. In the end, we just got lucky with a lot of the shooting. We'd be driving around in say, Berlin, and suddenly we'd see a man suspended by ropes from a huge billboard, applying 10-foot tall Helvetica letters to it. There were so many instances like that over the months we spent filming. We called them "happy accidents."

Heller: Have you had your fill of Helvetica?

Hustwit: I've had my fill of editing a film about it! And it really haunts me on the street now, I keep seeing examples of it that I wish I could've filmed. I wasn't a Helvetica freak or anything when I started this project, but I think it's become my favorite font.