HELVETICA, THE FILM AND THE FACE IN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Little historic context is generally provided regarding design phenomena; ideas, names, events and relationships are disregarded in design's typical superficial coverage; it is as though design exists in a vacuum. This paper seeks to put Helvetica, the face, the font and the movie into context by exploring its relationship to Swiss Design philosophically and practically. The infiltration of Helvetica, the font, into American design practices is also explored, along with some variation on typographic education from both a formal and informal perspective.

The King has been dismissed.

Long live the Commoner or
long live the next king
(and the next prevalent fad).

Most likely, anything useful about "Helvetica," the film, has been said already. The individual designers who were interviewed during the documentary process framed some of the reasons for its success, as they perceived it. I personally had hoped for a very lively insightful debate on Helvetica's aesthetics, but was left without hearing a philosophical defense or reasons why Helvetica is considered a "better" typeface than Brush, Hobo or Cooper Black or as a matter of fact, Univers. If anything, the film declared Helvetica a very safe social convention, with its pros and cons recognized by a variety of practitioners, very much like Kleenex—everybody uses it, but usually outside of awareness of social and cultural consequences. That should set the public at ease, because among reader-tests of a fairly large sample of CEOs and decision-makers, most were unaware of font differences and could not distinguish between serif and san-serif types. It is also interesting that the film deals mostly with environmental graphics—posters, super-graphics, signage, short verbal statements and directives. Maybe one of the major reasons is that in this documentary style, it is easier to stay with Helvetica in display sizes to avoid having to camera-zoom in and out of the much smaller page environments—not at all like E. F. Schumacher, who thought that "small makes beautiful economics, especially when people matter—and not just the ego, élan and showmanship of designers. Big seems still more beautiful, even though the monumental *Bauhaus* book, a 1969 MIT Press door-stop, cannot be read in leisure or with reading pleasure, even though it is composed in Helvetica. What the film did not do, especially for younger generations of designers, is set the complex stage that made the typeface successful. The film reminds us of the many design history accounts that present the subject in heroic terms, tiptoeing through a vast political minefield, leaving the reality of the competing contexts unexplored.

The film is also not very insightful in that it does not recognize the long history of Swiss cultural aesthetics; Swiss Design did not as easily walk off an assembly line as its not culture-referenced interpretation did in the US. It was diligently grounded in Swiss cultural traditions, and, even more importantly, in the indigenous visual language of drawing, printmaking and painting. Unlike American designers, the Swiss gladly acknowledged their roots in the arts, celebrated them and never attempted to forget them or get away from them. Also, Swiss Design was not just about systemic and modular typography but much more about sophisticated aesthetic form in the development of letters, graphics and photographics. Ingenious form was the hallmark of Swiss design. This was practiced by few in the US then, and exists no longer.

Let's face it, when Walter Herdeg introduced the new generation of Swiss designers in *Graphis* magazine during the fifties, it stood on a solid and culturally supported platform. The list of competent predecessors is extremely long. It includes the early group of Otto

Baumberger, Augustino Giacometti or Burkhard Mangold, which begets Fritz Bühler, Donald Brun, Hans Erni, Hans Falk, Herbert Leupin, Niklaus Stoeklin, from which emerge those designers that create the Swiss Design phenomenon, and among many others such as Max Bill, Karl Gerstner, Hans Hartmann, Armin Hofmann, Gottfried Honegger and Warja Honegger-Lavater, Richard Paul Lohse, Thérèse Moll, Ruth Näpflin, Hans Neuburg, Siegfried Odermatt, Emil Ruder, Nelly Rudin, Max Schmid, Anton Stankowski, Peter van Arx, Carlo Vivarelli, and Kurt Wirth.

The European design community became instantaneously aware of the enormous shift in conceptual design attitudes toward a more responsible, precise and nearly scientifically correct "New Objectivity" (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), which never had come to fruition before 1945, interrupted by the deceptive and loud propaganda of war. For this particular generation, design was a philosophy of positivism, a commitment to a specific modern form interest, not modish or faddish, but encapsulating a constructive worldview (*Weltanschauung*) leading into a future of direct response to the phenomena provided by contents and contexts. It was about extending the arts into new areas of minimalism, abstract-objective and nonobjective concrete art (*Kalte Kunst* or *cold/cool art*), kinetics and metamorphosis. The movement included artists, colorists, illustrators, designers and typographers as equals, based on concepts of integrity, clarity, precision, accuracy, thoroughness and refinement, backed by the knowledge accrued by the intellectually active printing guild and a deep professional reverence for skill and craft and investment in controlled experimentation for the sake of better understanding. At that time in Switzerland, most studios were small, and those who worked there, were truly committed, highly skilled practitioners. Looking at their repertoires, they were able to perform eloquently in a variety of quality visual languages, from objective super-realism to abstract expressionism and concrete Suprematism.

Another fact eludes the film, namely the long timeframe it took during that period to assemble pertinent design examples of the new language for publication and dissemination within Switzerland as well as from the outside world. The design audience was rather small and the publication venues were very few. The journal *Neue Grafik/New Graphic Design/Graphisme actuel*, edited by Richard Paul Lohse, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Hans Neuburg and Carlo Vivarelli, presented subjects on design theory and practice. Books like *Publicity and Graphic Design in the Chemical Industry* by Hans Neuburg and by Josef Müller-Brockmann, Karl Gerstner, Emil Ruder and Armin Hofmann, showed professional and student work, completed decades earlier. Nothing happened over night. However, these texts became the bibles for the American interpretation of "Swiss Design."

Also, one cannot forget the unique and successful corporate image of J. R. Geigy Ltd, the leading chemical and pharmaceutical company. Working at that time at Chemie Grünenthal in Germany, an emerging German competitor, one became aware of the distinct and striking visual presentation differences between Geigy and Eli Lilly, American Cyanamid or Lederle in America or BASF Baden Aniline and Soda Factory, Hoechst or Beyer in Germany. Without overstating, Max Schmid shaped one of the first commercially successful and totally integrated corporate identities, both in text and image, at Geigy, which became the model for other international corporations, copied even by Unimark. Interestingly, the Swiss designers of that time, did not use Helvetica, but were totally vested in Haas Akzidenz Grotesk. By the time Helvetica was accepted world-wide, the minimalist design phase in Switzerland was over, succeeded by Weingart's more self-expressive work, which again was copied by American designers; it greatly influenced Carson's work.

Also, until the seventies, there doesn't exist deep design curricula in the US. The curricular thinness is exposed by the very limiting thirty-two credit MFA requirements at most schools. At Basel, Armin Hofmann and Emil Ruder developed the Advanced Class for Graphic Design, meant to deepen the design studio experience especially for designers who had completed their education at US design programs. It began to shape the next generation of design educators at nearly all US schools through curricular contributions by Basel alumni moving or returning to the US to work and teach, among them Dan Friedman, April Greiman and Ken Hiebert. They joined Inge Druckrey, Steff Geissbuhler and Willi Kunz, who had received official Swiss federal diplomas in design and were practicing design in the US.

In the US, Swiss Design was nothing more than a style, a quick opportunity for direct plagiarism by the not so well skill-trained typographers and designers. It was new to most citizens and its aesthetics had to be learned before they became elitist conventions and later were considered a common language. US designers were short-changed by education in printmaking and painting, lacking typography, letterform and concentrations on form development. Their urge was to escape the stigma attached to the label of applied arts and to move up a parallel ladder to the corporate and institutional administrative structure, from commoner (commercial artist) to the interface with middle management. This allowed them to sever ties with the traditional commercial hierarchy in which advertising agencies controlled most of the communication territories, while concentrating on lucrative contracts of space-advertising and production of TV-commercials and at the same time outsourcing other assignments, like information graphics, corporate and institutional publications and corporate identities to freelance graphic designers.

Copying the work of Swiss designers, made it possible for new studio specializations to evolve, like design for corporate identities and branding, focusing on exhibition and package

design and then later, energized early by Peter van Arx at Basel, design for moving graphics and animated type. Until the dawning of the Internet, New York designers relied heavily on income from studio specializations in design for corporate identities and annual reports. This set the stage for unsavory present-day attitudes; the unfortunate disdain by most designers toward art, illustration, marketing and advertising, and the skills necessary to succeed in these areas. The digital design world further emphasized typography to the point that there are many more typographers than designers that are able to competently shape graphic images. Unlike in Switzerland where designers held themselves to the standards and conduct of the age-old guilds, in the US the designers developed a sense of entitlement and self-importance. The field now has an abundance of design talkers, who posture about the importance of design, but in truth don't have the variety of skills held by the Swiss. In American design education many more teachers never practice in the field, or have the skill and knowledge to visually craft eloquent images.

Two major theses accompanied the introduction of Swiss typography. One was Karl Gerstner's *Designing Programmes*, while Josef Müller-Brockmann's *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* followed a few years later. It is interesting to recognize how more quickly Josef Müller-Brockmann's book, a very deterministic text on dividing two-dimensional planes into typographic and proportional grids was adopted in the US. It is totally a logical, mathematical process. His text dispels any contextual concerns and eliminates any randomness. Müller-Brockmann's approach is very passive and seems to resemble the boilerplate arrangements of present-day design application programs in the parameter instructions and requests for page size, margins, gutters, columns and uniform subdivisions. It unfortunately recommends that the practitioner respond very passively to the contents or the context as well as technical conditions. Pages break down in relationship to frozen formulas, even if they can be based on specific proportional ratios.

Corporations, institutions and governmental agencies easily adopted Brockmann's pigeonhole-approach. It was perfect for single page items and boilerplate formats for a series of publications, predetermined long before contexts and contents were revealed. Boilerplate formats rarely deal with physical, emotional or ergonomic conditions—where and when the thumb or fingers interfere with reading or obliterate the view of the page. They also are usually unaware of formal etiquettes of introducing readers to the document environment, helping them to leave the noise of the outside world behind. On this level, even in Brockmann inspired modernist books, one falls directly into the intellectual fracas. There is no time to take off one's coat at the door and adjust. There are none of the transitional concerns that courts of law, churches, temples and the theater observe. In the boilerplate theater the curtain is always up.

ARIAL
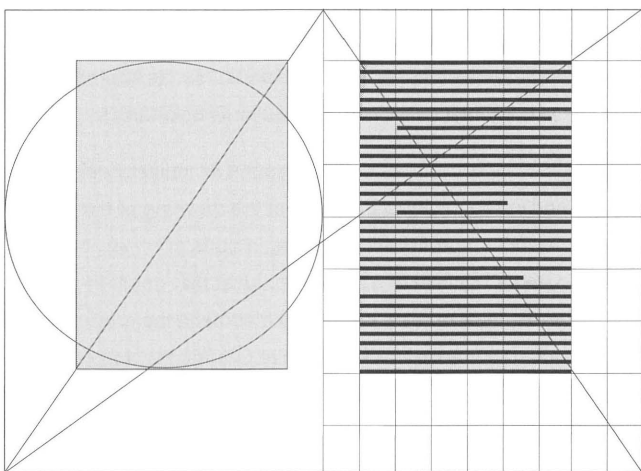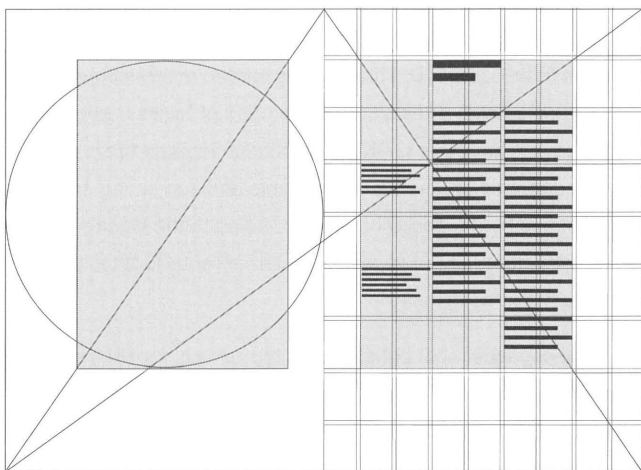
Not so with Gerstner's *Designing Programmes*, which makes clear that the underlying system is not just a mathematical or proportional exercise, but is geared to reflect the quality and construction of the context in relationship to the subject. In Gerstner's design, the content provides the form and rhythm for the simple, complex or progressive proportional system of typographical structures; for him the document is an environmental space to be traversed. This fact has eluded most designers, including those who are now praised as high priests and interpreters of Swiss Design. Inventing an individual and appropriate structure is very time-consuming and that stands against New York élan. It either depends on forcing the contents and subjecting it to an enslaving structure imposed by the designer, or responding to the signals revealed by the quality and hidden structures of the contents. Gerstner requires intelligence and progressive logic, not just geometric skills.

On the other hand, what escapes most critical purist typophiles, for whom Jan Tschichold is the intuitive anti-system hero, is that they don't understand that Tschichold's "Divine Typographical Proportions" coincide and support both Karl Gerstner's *Designing Programmes* and Müller-Brockmann's *Grid Systems*. Jan Tschichold prepared his in the architectural tradition, while Gerstner and Müller-Brockmann make use of proportional gutter spaces between text-carrying spatial units. Tschichold's renaissance system would function and very much resemble the grid, because it is also void of context and content relationships. His, as interesting as it is, is still one system that fits all contents, very much like Müller-Brockmann's.

In the final analysis, the film is a grave marker for a bygone American design epoch, because Swiss Design had come to closure already at the dawning of the early nineteen-sixties, even if American professional nostalgia buffs don't want it to ebb that early. In Switzerland, the major minimalist work was done at that point. In the US the Swiss "*Neue Sachlichkeit*" or "new objectivity," found a home in the corporate sector and at intelligence-starved art schools, helping them to change the nomenclature from common "commercial art" to special "graphic design". The public stayed unaware, even if designers felt that Helvetica took on different communication qualities. After asking neighbors about Helvetica, and after lots of trials to involve them in complex analyses, they claimed they were not able to distinguish it from other typefaces, serif or san serif, but they were able to read it.

In truth, for the American public-relations conscious market, the nineteenth century version of Helvetica, Akzidenz Grotesk, was improperly named. Who in the US would dare to convince a client to use a typeface with a name laden with foreboding,

superstition and calamity and with misshapen and disturbing qualities? The faulty translation of terms from German into English engendered very negative coronations. In German, "*akzidenz*" means simply the concept of where the sun is setting (occident, the western hemisphere in contrast to orient, the countries of eastern Asia), and "*grotesk*" means that the typeface is gothic, a square-cut typeface without serifs or hairlines. Still, who would hop on an airline with an identity shaped by a grotesque typeface, which evokes visions of accidents and calamities? The name metamorphosis from Haas Akzidenz Grotesk to Haas Neue Grotesk to Helvetica changed that. But it did not change the attitudes of American designers, who with very few exceptions, did not see Swiss Design as a philosophical analysis, experimentation with logic, Spartan or Calvinist philosophies, or even as a social approach for equalizing visual communication between diverse groups of citizens.

Even in the early seventies, excellently trained and disciplined Basel graduates, returning to the US to be integrated into design practice were unable to find positions, because their Basel certificate was not yet considered equal to an US MFA or BFA in Design. This was reversed a lot later, when Paul Rand and Armin Hofmann fostered tighter relationships between Yale and Basel. In cities like Boston, the concept of ideal and highly focused simplicity, reducing complexity without losing or distorting contents and context, was quickly overlooked by the imposition of Yankee expediency, allotting little time for figuring out what the ideal line length or configuration for a certain type size or line spacing should be. After all, it was assumed that everybody could learn the Basel system quickly by just buying the books. The thorough process and self-discipline was not understood. It was considered dilettantish, too self-absorbing and not time efficient.

The major problem lay in the extraordinary cost of anything to do with handset or machine-set typography. Typography budgets for the design practitioner were always lean. If mistakes happened and changes were made, type for a poster or book jacket could bankrupt the budget. The true quality of the process lay in the hands of highly qualified, skilled and literate type-composers. Graphic designers or art directors only marginally controlled quality. Usually, it was declared by the limits of the budget and lack of type experience.

In design education, the operation and maintenance of an art/design school typeshop, fully simulating a professional typesetting experience, was so outrageously expensive that only schools like Rochester Institute of Technology or Yale University, the latter on a much more abbreviated scale, could provide. All others had very rudimentary equipment, facilities and type assortments, unlike European schools in which composers for type houses were trained together with graphic designers. Also, all the way into the sixties, European designers had to apprentice in professional printing and typesetting plants before

certification. There may have been some schools in New York or Chicago that had state of the art typography facilities, but most type-shops were undernourished.

Even the technical teaching literature was very sparse. In contrast, in Switzerland, continuously since 1933, *Typographic Monatsblätter*, a journal of typography, writing and visual communication, instructed professional designers. In Germany, *Der Druckspiegel* and its archive of many years, referenced the work of prominent European designers before some of the professional design journals did. Both journals were available to students. The fact is, that until the introduction of photo and digital typesetting, there were no earth-shaking typography-instructions delivered at US art/design schools. The programs dealing with letterform used standard texts from the holdings of bibliophiles or of disciplines like calligraphy, lettering and type rendering. Editor and historian Max Hall writes in *Harvard University Press: A History* of three courses in printing and publishing, given by the Harvard Business School intermittently from 1910 to 1920, organized with the help of The Society of Printers, depending on distinguished lecturers like D.B. Updike, Bruce Rogers and William A. Dwiggins. There was nothing equivalent at art/design schools. US designers of that period learned the use of type on the job in agencies and studios. Dwiggins died in 1956. In 1960, Harvard was still considered a center for typography, not so much for practice, but for the extensive library holding of documents of typographical history; likewise, the Anne Mary Brown Memorial Library at Brown University with an extensive collection of the Incunabula.

It is odd to think that the credit for Swiss Design or Helvetica should go to Americans or anybody of another nationality. The true contribution to the field cannot lie in active plagiarizing or copying the inventive work of Swiss designers. Even though Unimark and Container Corporation of America should be credited with popularizing Helvetica, most American designers of that time had little notion of the arduous discipline of modular typography. Swiss designers did not see the process as completed. There was always the need to push investigations further. For example, Thérèse Moll brought the new disciplined design methods to MIT in 1958, invited by John Mattill, then director of the Office of Publication, to instruct his untrained design staff by direct example. Ms. Moll designed a series of recruitment folders for MIT's budding Summer Session Program, which was distinctly recognizable because of its highly integrated design quality. However, she had to substitute another gothic typeface for Akzidenz Grotesk, because none of the type houses in Boston carried it, and New York houses dealing mostly with advertising agencies were too expensive and the mail-process too slow.

Even then, it took a long time for systemic typography to find sure footing. Muriel Cooper, an art education major, and Jacqueline Casey, graduating with a fashion design/illustration

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degree, were not even trained in any traditional design techniques. Their typographic knowledge was very sparse. Both would travel to the Mead Library of Ideas in New York to procure quality design examples. They then would take tear sheets of typographical arrangements they liked and attach them to manuscripts as style guides for typesetters to follow. Although untrained in design, they were quick understudies; both were enthusiastic design autodidacts, learning quickly from Thérèse Moll as well as Paul Talmann, a Swiss minimalist artist, and George Teltscher, a former student of the Bauhaus, who also were in the office.

The designer who was more instrumental in fostering minimalist typography and design was Ralph Coburn, very much overlooked by American professional design history. While enrolled at MIT in the School of Architecture, through his studies alone, he was introduced in depth to work by Mondrian and de Stijl, and exposed to work by Max Bill, Karl Gerstner, Josef Müller-Brockmann as well as Joseph Albers. He also worked in the MIT Office of Publications, first part-time then fulltime. Ralph Coburn insisted that the use of Helvetica should not be seen as a style fad. He backed up his arguments with his own visual work as a minimalist artist. Coburn began a lifelong friendship with Ellsworth Kelly, the minimalist painter, who had been a student at the Museum School in Boston. He and Kelly discussed, explored and collaborated on numerous concepts hoping to resolve them into a "concrete" language. Ralph Coburn did not just adopt Swiss Design. He explored and expanded it, melding what he had learned into a very personal approach. The many visits by Müller-Brockmann, Hofmann and Gerstner to the office, the MIT Press and later to the Media Lab, strengthened the understanding and commitment to structural graphic design. For several decades Helvetica became the identity of the university, because most other institutions mimicked the classical style of Harvard.

The world is always confusing for the uncommitted. For them design is not linked to any specific philosophy of life. It is much more like picking a winner—out of context. When the King gets demoted to Commoner, what happens to the camp followers?

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