The face of uniformity

Rejuvenated by the digital revolution, sans serif typefaces have become the 21st century standard—with Helvetica leading the way.

by Nick Shinn

Helvetica is back, big time. On the street, it's in campaigns for companies as different as IBM and The Gap. At the online font retailers, it tops the sales charts. In the metaculture, Getty Images uses it to express control of the visual world. It's quite shocking to look at the font sales charts, and realize that the serif genre has dropped off the map. But you know this already, because whenever you try a serif font in a layout it doesn't look right—too old fashioned. But perhaps that's the wrong term, as the sans fonts ruling the roost today are anything but contemporary, mostly dating from the mid-20th century, many from a lot earlier. Helvetica (which means "Swiss" in Latin) was designed in 1957 by Max Miedinger for The Haas Type Foundry in Basle—but it is to all intents and purposes a revival of Akzidenz Grotesk, the German face of 1898 which popularized the

name *grotesque* for this style of typeface. Akzidenz in turn is descended from certain London faces of the early 19th century. So in a sense it's hardly surprising that "Helvetica" has become the Ur-typeface of the modern era, since the modern industrial state began in Britain and was keenly felt — especially in the 1830s, which saw the passage of the Great Reform Bill and the introduction of new lifestyles with mass transit by rail and bus.

The first decades of the 19th century were a time of radical typographic modernization notable for the emergence of a spectacular variety of new type genres from the foundries of Thorne, Figgins, and William Caslon III — fat face, egyptian, 3D and their crowning achievement (although little did they know it), the sans serif. During these years the Didot or Modern style replaced the Old Styles, killing off the long "s", the "ct" and "st" ligatures, and non-lining figures. While later generations have discussed the artistic impulses and cultural theories behind typography ad nauseam, the people who invented the sans serif did so in a critical vacuum, with no explanation. Their pioneering work has generally gone unrecognized, particularly since there was no corresponding revolution in page layout. This didn't occur until the following century, which is when conventional wisdom places the modern movement in design.

Radically minimalist, the first sans faces were unicase, caps only, and usually bold. By the time of Akzidenz Grotesk, a full character set was available, its big innovation being a systematic range of weights.

Quite apart from the pre-eminence of the grotesque due to historical firstness, it could also be argued that given the criteria of a reductive, monoline, sans serif design, "Helvetica" is what you get, the Ur-typeface — a discovery, not an invention. However, with the same criteria, Paul Renner came up with a very different solution in the 1920s — Futura, which he termed "the typeface of our time".

Renner, a German intellectual and social idealist, sought to design a progressive, logical face, and Futura's severe geometric simplicity, stately proportions, and the lightness of its book weight became a key component of early 20th century modernism — international in scope, and spanning a range of styles that included Art Deco, Moderne and Neo-classical, as well as the New Typography associated with the Bauhaus.

While Futura has gone on to become a classic, it was supplanted as the dominant sans by Helvetica in the 1960s. Despite its name, Futura had become somewhat of a relic, tainted by its association with the harsh idealism of the early century — a link, however spurious, to the extremes of social engineering in national socialism and communism. The acknowledged leader of the New Typography of the 1920s, Jan Tschicold, in exile in Switzerland during the war, came to embrace traditionalism, loathing his prior role as "fuhrer" of the New Typography. "[The Third Reich] could not bear the genuine modernists who, although political opponents, were nevertheless unwittingly not so far from the

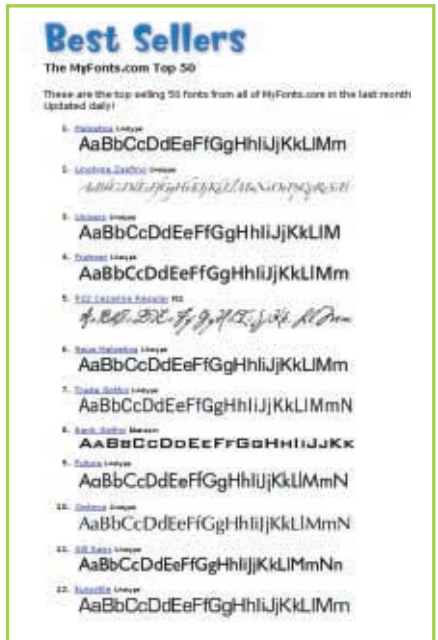
delusion of 'order' that ruled the Third Reich. The role of leader that fell to me…signified…an intellectual guardianship of 'followers' typical of dictatorial states." (Tschicold, 1946).

THE RISE OF HELVETICA

Much as the world, rebuilding after the war, embraced modernism during the 50s and 60s, it did so with reservations, the continuing appeal of traditionalism representing a wariness of the failed social experiments of communism and fascism. It was not until the mid-60s that the full-fledged International Style arrived in Canada — simple asymmetric layouts with rag right Helvetica — pioneered by designers such as Carl Brett and Arnaud Maggs.

The spartan quality of the International style was not easy to love, being an acquired taste that required an educated design profession with savvy clients. What made this possible was the emergence in the post-war years of design schools throughout the western world based on the Bauhaus model. For educators, Helvetica was the house typeface of the Swiss or International Style—with a "family system" logic that is inherently teachable and eminently applicable to corporate identity systems. For professional bodies, it's somewhat of a standard, in the heraldic sense, and carries a corporate authority that implies respectability. In Canada, the GDC has been using Helvetica as its corporate face for decades.

Helvetica found favor here and in the U.S., preferred over the truly contemporary Univers (1957). Whereas Univers was designed from scratch by Adrian Frutiger and deliv-



Today's bestsellers are mostly sans faces, with a few scripts.

LOMBARD ST.
LOMBARD ST.

THE ORIGIN OF "HELVETICA" **In this ad from Punch magazine (London, 1843), compare the words "Lombard St." with a setting in Neue Helvetica. The stress, the contrast, the proportions and the curve shapes are all identical. In particular note the R, a signature letter of Helvetica: the fullness of the bowl's curve, its narrowing at the leg joint, the thinner central horizontal stem, the slight angle of the leg, and the flick at its foot. This is a bundle of instances of the main themes that define the typeface now known as Helvetica. (For an accurate comparison, the Helvetica sample has been made from a scan of 13pt laser output.)**

ered as a complete package of interrelated weights and scalings, with new TV screen shaped curves, Helvetica was a careful Swiss revival, with a family that grew gradually to meet demands.

Within five years of its introduction, Helvetica had become the hip modern face. Typically, it gave a corporate consistency to modern international businesses such as Lufthansa or American Airlines, which used it comprehensively for everything from in-house documents to airplane graphics and advertising, where it was favored by art directors such as Madison Avenue superstar George Lois.

THE DESKTOP REVIVAL

The look of late 60s typography was very, very tight, and this way of setting has become intimately associated with Helvetica. Helvetica Bold, tight but not touching, flush left, with negative line space — that's the "style sheet" that persists, and it's been going strong in Britain's Guardian newspaper for decades (*www.guardian.co.uk*). When the very light weights were added to the Helvetica family in 1970, they were given the tight fit of the time, and that's what you get when you use Neue Helvetica today.

But I'm getting ahead of the story. Let's get back to the backlash. After Modernism came Post-modernism, and by the mid-70s Helvetica was seen as deadly dull. During the swan song flowering of professional typography in the 70s and 80s, the mantra was "anything but Helvetica", and serifs were the order of the day.

There you have it, Helvetica, expressive of the 1830s, the 1890s, and the 1960s, fallen from grace by 1975 — so how come it's back again in the 21st Century, masquerading as the typeface of our time?

Digital expediency.

The digitization of typesetting in the mid-1980s proceeded with the mass adoption of the setup comprising the Macintosh, the Laserwriter and Aldus PageMaker. Its rapid success wouldn't have been possible without a standard package of free PostScript fonts, bundled with the Laserwriter. Times and Helvetica, licensed from Linotype in 1985, added legitimacy to the upstart technology. Adobe's first original PostScript typeface, Sumner Stone's Stone (1987), was a little slow off the mark and was not distributed free.

Adobe continued the free old fonts strategy, supplying a tawdry collection on its Illustrator CDs in the early 90s, adding value to this big-ticket product, but in the process poisoning the market for new fonts.

Again, in the mid-90s, the typographic functionality of the Internet was dependent on the massive free distribution of the Microsoft Core Web Truetype fonts, bundled with Explorer. Times and Helvetica were again front and centre.

I am not ungrateful to Adobe and globalization. Without PostScript, the Mac, QuarkXPress and the Internet, I would not be able to design and manufacture typefaces, and market them internationally. At the same time, my efforts (and those of every independent content creator) are undermined. Economics favor size, and digital culture has come to be dominated by a few companies — the arbiters of taste — that rely on a handful of creatives for their content, which they spread worldwide at low margin. Individual purchasers are disinclined to commission local photographers or illustrators when they can get stock for far less. And why buy a contemporary typeface family when you can get Neue Helvetica, 51 fonts, for US$300? Not to mention all the free fonts that come with OS X.

Helvetica's large family, in particular the very light weights, gives it digital appeal. The ease with which a high res workflow

handles fine detail (blow it up on screen for a good look, and print it laser-sharp) has sparked interest in ultra-light type. Had Verdana, designed by Matthew Carter for Microsoft as a monitor face, been marketed with a full range family for print and display, it would have challenged Helvetica, for its provenance makes it more worthy to be the typeface of this time. Never mind print, web designers could certainly use a light sans.

CONFORMITY REIGNS

Well into its second digital decade, the typographic scene has settled into a dull routine. Sans faces, led by Helvetica, are everywhere. The movement is away from the traditional print-based aesthetic of fine typography. The key feature of printed type is the finesse of letterspacing — but the trend in sans faces is towards styles derived from non-print technologies with far cruder spacing — in particular Officina, with the open look of typewriter type; DIN, derived from stencil and signage lettering; Interstate, from highway signage, and Verdana and Trebuchet, designed for computer monitors.

LIVING IN THE PAST **Mythically modern, the popular sans serif faces of today were mostly designed long ago.**

Akzidenz Grotesk, 1898
Franklin Gothic, 1904
News Gothic, 1908
Futura, 1923
Gill Sans, 1929
DIN, 1936
Bell Gothic, 1937
Trade Gothic, 1948
Helvetica, 1957
Univers, 1957
Interstate, 1966
Frutiger, 1976
Arial, 1982
Meta, 1985

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abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789

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SPOT THE DIFF **In 1982, Monotype's Robin Nicholas designed Arial, which became a mainstay of the Windows operating system. The letters that differ most significantly from Helvetica are the "a" (no tail), the "t" (angled top of vertical stem), "G" (No spur at bottom right) and "R" (straight leg).**

With the demise of the typesetting trade, and the demands on graphic designers to master all kinds of new media, the focus of interest in typography has changed. There has been a loosening of the old-school, conventional standards, and typographers today are more likely to invest their attention in the cornucopia of type treatments — scaling, tracking, baseline and size play, and dimensionalization, transparency, and faux effects — than concerning themselves with the choice of a contemporary typeface.

Creative strategy has changed, too. Branding in the global corporate era eschews the slightest quirk. Everyone wants to come across as MegaCorp Inc, category leader, last man standing, all things to all people. For this reason, Neue Helvetica is marketed as "timeless and neutral", appealing to art directors who would rather not use typeface to differentiate their clients in the marketplace.

For all these reasons, the legacy sans faces — and Helvetica in particular — have come to dominate the typographic landscape. They are popular not because they are appropriate to the task at hand but because they pander to the authority of mass fashion.

There is no better example of the way that vogue defies logic than the present typography of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, which is set in Bell Gothic. Bell Gothic was designed in 1937 by Chauncey Griffith for setting the small text of telephone directories. To counteract the unforgiving nature of low quality printing, it was given large, crude features. Now we are subjected to this industrial ugliness at display size, advertising a product line of sleek 19th century romanticism.

Today, the preferred fonts are traditional, conformist, utilitarian, boring and banal — in short, a fascist aesthetic. What dupes we have become, to believe that "timeless and neutral" is a virtue in a typeface! It is time to retire Helvetica and its cohorts, designed long ago and far away, and once again make typography expressive of local culture, here and now. It's not as if type designers aren't doing original work—but a discussion of new faces must wait for a future issue.

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