

WHY HELVETICA?

Experimental Jetset says: *"We are very much influenced by today's society. Reading books, wandering around in the city, watching movies, going to concerts and exhibitions, hanging out with friends. We often get ideas from the most unexpected sources: watching a documentary on Discovery Channel, misreading a sign in the street, stumbling upon a forgotten text on an obscure website. We are really gatherers of ideas, of impressions. We spend hours just thinking, watching, observing."*

The work of graphic designers unit Experimental Jetset is often associated with the use of very little amount of typefaces, especially Helvetica. Is it an easy way out typographically? Or is using Helvetica a tribute to modernism? Now, after using Helvetica intensively for over ten years, Experimental Jetset still find it an intriguing typeface. However, why Helvetica?

Experimental Jetset started using Helvetica around 1995/1996, while they were still studying at the Rietveld Academy. The first time they used it on a large scale was in 1997, when they were asked to redesign the Dutch lifestyle magazine 'Blvd', also known as 'Boulevard'. Blvd used to have this really layered, baroque style. They stripped it down completely, using only Helvetica, and tried to separate text and image as strictly as possible.

The critics hated it. They were still students, not even graduated, and already the large newspapers completely attacked the redesign, saying that Blvd now looked like a medicine packaging. (A few years later, all these newspapers had glossy weekly style supplements that looked exactly like their redesign of Blvd). At first, the reason why they used Helvetica for the redesign of Blvd was purely practical. Because Helvetica consists of such a large family (different weights, and different styles: extended, compressed, etc.), it enabled them to use all these different sorts of Helvetica for all the different sections of the magazine, while the magazine still looked consistent. (remember, this was in 1997).

The moment they first used Helvetica, felt like coming home. Nowadays, they mostly use two weights for each project. Designers became aware of the history and original ideology of Helvetica and if they weren't that would not make the use of Helvetica less valuable, honest and effective.

Ultimately, the ideology of Helvetica is an intrinsic quality of the typeface itself. Using Helvetica is enough to translate their ideas into practical and functional designs, that's all the ideology one needs. Plug and play. Helvetica has its paradoxical nature: on the one hand, it is a neutral typeface, or better said, it is perceived as such. On the other hand, it carries this very heavy ideological baggage. There is this really interesting tension between its functionality, and the meaning that it gained over the years. It is a typeface that is empty and loaded at the same time. Helvetica refers mostly to graphic design itself. And this self-preferentiality is a reason why they use Helvetica. In their work, they constantly try to underline the physical qualities of graphic design. Thus the neutrality of Helvetica, real or imagined, enables to fully focus on the design as a whole, neutralizing the typographic layer as a way to keep the concept as clear and pure as possible. There are cases, however, where for specific reasons, the concept demands a less neutral typographic layer. In those cases.

Experimental Jetset never hesitate to use other typefaces. But those cases are rare. To suggest that the way they use Helvetica is an easy way out typographically is ridiculous. The work is based on spending an enormous amount of time spacing, lining, and positioning type. The fact that they use only a small variety of typefaces demands a certain discipline, a skillful precision, and a focus on the finer details.

It's certainly not a-different-typeface-for-every-occasion attitude.

Experimental Jetset was also involved in the documentary 'Helvetica' (by Garry Hustwit) . Have a look at this fragment

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVVzbmVmxX8>

"We got some kind of problem of using Helvetica when the movie came out. We use Helvetica not to talk about typography but to especially talk more about the other stuff"

(Experimental Jetset)

Trotsky is arguing that the letter A is never equal to another letter A. Not even to itself.

Loosely interpreted, this would be a good metaphor for how Experimental Jetset sees Helvetica; as something that might look the same, but always means something different, depending on the context. It's a sort of response to critics who are afraid of Helvetica's 'uniformity', while in reality, Helvetica is never uniform; it's a typeface that has the ability to change constantly, to express great differences, and to refer to permanent transformation.

Bibliography:

<http://www.experimentaljetset.nl/>

<http://www.aisleone.net>

Lecture held by Experimental Jetset with the Walker Art Center

Documentary 'Helvetica'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2pzHa6ks0M>

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