

Spring 3-1-2014

The Helvetica Story

Jonathan Lyons
jel027@bucknell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_pubs



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lyons, Jonathan, "The Helvetica Story" (2014). *Other Faculty Research and Publications*. 113.
http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_pubs/113

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other Faculty Research and Publications by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

JONATHAN LYONS
The Helvetica Story

I heard about Helvetica. What a story! As a child, all the print-journalism fonts used to bully him.

“Snub nose!” they’d sneer.

Often, he would find “GET SOME SERIFS!” on typewriter paper epoxied to his school-locker door, in the telltale script of his tormentors: Times and his cousin, Times New Roman. The Times cousins often brought Courier with them to heckle Helvetica. And Courier was a good enough guy, actually, but a bit dull. They only brought him along because he took up so much room.

It was frustrating, being harassed by fonts that had been around since hot-metal typesetting; it was no secret that exposure to that much lead early in life caused learning and behavioral disorders, so what was he supposed to do? He didn’t want to get a reputation for picking on the slow kids.

The calligraphic fonts did their worst, looking askance down their lavish swoops at him, but they’re so tight-kerned you couldn’t pry a needle from their ass-cracks with a tractor.

Still, it all took its toll, chipping at Helvetica’s self-confidence day-in, day-out. Discrimination against the sans-serifed continued to plague him, leading to a mis-spent young adulthood of sex, drugs and rock & roll. He went out to nightclubs on the prowl, and he got around, littering the town with offspring he’d refuse to acknowledge — Arial, Futura, Univers — but the lineage was no secret. They were chips off the sans-serif block. Anyone could see those vertical and horizontal strokes from a mile off.

When the computer age began to dawn, the people

he was contractually bound with began demanding exorbitant licensing fees. To spite them, he renounced the name he was known by commercially. He became “the typeface formerly known as Helvetica.” He started calling himself \—/, which was irksome, because as far as anyone could tell, it was unpronounceable. “Artists,” they said, shaking their heads.

But it bore the clean lines and straightforward angles that were his calling card, and the fans still recognized him.

He went around wearing caps with bills as camouflage, and jackets with epaulettes, to blend in among the serifed. Then he went to work on his skin, tattooing on whirling tribal patterns, flowing sickles and curlicues to mask the bland, smooth lines he always found staring back at him from the mirror.

In those dark days he hung out in the clubs at night with the twin goth typefaces Morpheus and Mason. The Avant-garde fonts were part of that whole scene, and got \—/ (nee “Helvetica”) hip to new modes of expression through his art. He discovered that he had a knack for photography. His still images captured the majesty of the hot- and cold-set presses of yesteryear. These were well-received in small, bohemian galleries, but eventually he discovered that he had access to a greater range of expression that the additions of motion, sound, and lighting afforded.

And then \—/ had moment of clarity, a brilliant beam of light striking his imagination from another place: Gone were rules suggesting that a typeface must be set in stone — or in lead, or on a printed page, for that matter. His first use of the new medium was to

change the rules, conceiving of an ever-shifting, animate font. His creation would be one wherein parts of each character would be showcased separately by its own, individual lighting, rotating at its own rates and angles. In this new medium, he found harmony between the serified and sans-serifed that he had always found missing in his own life. A watchful eye would capture the transformations: At times each section of each character had its serifs, but those flourishes would fade as people watched, to cycle back again. He called the concept font Animalgam. (It even made Prototype, from the edgy Virus Fonts, jealous to have been crafted in such a static format!)

He unveiled Animalgam as a gallery installation, a high-definition, ever-shifting animation, when along came a man, a designer who would become a thief, who'd come to desperation and nearly to suicide with his own inability to inspire a client. Admittedly, this was a big client, and this job would make or break one's reputation in this business. And this client had become impatient.

The thief, whose name does not merit mention here (why give him further fame, even if it is infamy?), pilfered Animalgam to satisfy this big-ticket client. The client was a 24-hour news channel whose executives wanted to add an edgy design element. They commissioned a logo so distracting that viewers wouldn't be able to pry their eyes from it. Thus was Animalgam stolen.

Of course \—/ never saw a penny for it. And he felt robbed. He did.

But he had had the troubled youth of one bullied for being different; the days and nights spend off the map, hanging with goth and industrial types, and even those crusty-punk corroded fonts, Vintage Typewriter and the other worn-down fonts. He'd even hung out with Gill Sans, though not for long; certainly Gill Sans had been sleek and perfectly legible, even from a distance, but his unsavory paraphiliac obsessions, particu-

larly concerning his own children, found him quickly demoted to persona non grata).

While \—/ was out of the spotlight, imitators stepped up, trying to claim his spot. A boy band of look-alikes appeared with corporate sponsorship. Its lineup:

- Helv, by Microsoft;
- Monotype's CG Triumvirate;
- Paratype's version, Pragmatica;
- Bitstream's Swiss 721; and
- Nimbus Sans, from the type designer URW++.

But, like the group of look-alike / dress-alike / James-Dean-hairstyle-alike musicians hired to back Morrissey when the Smiths called it quits, the fans knew that they were not interchangeable – not quite, anyway – with \—/.

And others – always others. He saw his reflection as he walked downtown one afternoon and thought he's gained some weight, until he realized that he was only see Helvetica Rounded, just out for a stroll.

When the boy band broke up, his corporate sponsors renamed Helv MS Sans Serif; rebranded with their corporate identity and with the rise of the Web, ironically enough, MS Sans got most of the attention for a while. That was the arrival of the Internet age, and with Windows the dominant operating system, MS Sans was everywhere. But the new age brought another surprise: On-screen, the serified suddenly looked awkward. Chunky. Clumsy. Probably not very smart, and certainly not very stylish.

The new media shined a hard light on the serified, and found them pixelated and wanting.

Into this new era, \—/ awoke and, his old name now spreading, knew that it was time to reclaim his title and emerge into the spotlight once more. His re-emergence demanded a makeover that would impart sophistication, maturity, perhaps a whiff of something European. Thus did \—/'s Neue (new, in German) persona arrive.