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1 A grotesk typeface from the KHIO Publishing Workshop, labeled “Bred Engelsk Steinskrift”.

The dominant letterform of the 20th and 21st century is the *sans serif* – from the French, meaning “without serifs”. Its unadorned monolinear appearance captures at once future-facing optimism and the skeletal essence of ancient writing. Attributed to the sans serif, and in particular to its most influential sub genre: the post-war Neo Grotesks, are qualities such as timelessness, neutrality, universality and rationality.

Emerging out of 1950s and 60s Swiss International Style, the Neo Grotesk systematized and simplified the late 1800s German jobbing types. *Akzidenz Grotesk*, in particular, had proved highly popular with Swiss graphic designers, and served as an important reference point for developing the new style.<sup>2</sup>

A Grotesk is always a *sans serif*, but the opposite is not always the case. The Vox-ATypI classification system<sup>3</sup> discerns between four major types of “Lineals”: the *grotesk* – also spelled “grotesque” –, the *neo-grotesk*, the *geometric* and the *humanist*. The distinction is not in their styling, but describes their skeletal form. Despite its shortcomings, Maximilien Vox’s definition of the Grotesk is thoroughly established in the typographic vocabulary.<sup>4</sup>

The Grotesk sans serif is derived from Neoclassical typefaces like *Didot* and *Bodoni*, only with their serifs removed. The construction is symmetrical around a vertical contrast axis, with the thinnest parts at the very top and bottom. In the Grotesk, the contrast between thick and thin is normally reduced. Changing the contrast has no effect on the skeletal structure. A Grotesk does not presume even stroke thickness. The arches of a lowercase /n/ or /b/ trace a slightly squared off half circle, branching out parallel with the stem. The same construction makes open letters like /c/ close in on themselves, leaving only small apertures. The capitals tend towards uniform widths, contrasting with the dramatic proportions of Classical Roman capitals.

<sup>1</sup> *Bred Engelsk Steinskrift* [Typeface].

<sup>2</sup> *Akzidenz Grotesk*. (1988). H. Berthold AG.

<sup>3</sup> Vox, M. (1962). *Vox-ATypI* [classification system]. Verona. (Original work published 1954).

<sup>4</sup> ATypI de-adopts the Vox-ATypI typeface classification system. (2022, Aug 31). ATypI. <https://atypi.org/2022/08/31/atypi-de-adopted-the-vox-atypi-typeface-classification-system/>

Where the old Grotesks were often unruly and haphazardly organized, the Modernist Neo Grotesk conceded to rules and grids. Quirks were ironed out, and the contrast between thicks and thins minimized. The lowercase was enlarged to avoid any noticeable difference in thickness with the capital letters, which also rendered small caps and oldstyle figures obsolete. The letter as a graphic unit was reinforced by regularized character widths, closed apertures and mirror symmetry. Any fluid movement of writing was eschewed for a “rational” construction; obliques over cursives – static restraint over dynamic tension.

The *new* Grotesk should have great clarity, no intrinsic meaning in its form, and be suited for use in a wide variety of applications.<sup>5</sup> What by many is considered the penultimate example of the genre, and its most successful iteration, by far, is *Die Neue Haas Grotesk*.<sup>6</sup>

First presented by the Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei at the Graphik 57 trade fair in Lausanne, the *Neue Haas Grotesk* is known to history mostly by the name it acquired a few years later, when international distribution prompted a rebrand. The chosen name was *Helvetica*, alluding to the Latin name for Switzerland – *Helvetia*.

Coinciding with the advertising boom of the 1950s and 60s, Helvetica quickly established itself as the face of Swiss International Style. Not only did Helvetica see widespread use in advertising campaigns, visual identities and commercial brands, it has also been the topic of exhibitions, books and feature-length documentaries.

Its immense popularity spawned numerous copy-cats. In the years following its release, many type foundries released similar-looking typefaces. Some extended their preexisting sans serifs with alternate Helvetica-like characters in an attempt to catch its tailwind. In the 1980s, Monotype even went so far as to redraw their *Monotype Grotesque* series to match the exact widths of Helvetica.<sup>7</sup>

Championed by the legends of Swiss International Style, most prominently Massimo Vignelli, Josef Müller-Brockmann and Armin Hofmann, Helvetica became a phenomenon of graphic design.

### The Neo Grotesk in contemporary design

The contemporary approach to the Neo Grotesk is twofold. While some purists insist on upholding its mythical position as the most authentic, authoritative, iteration of Modern type design, the majority of designers adopted a more pluralist outlook. The term Neo Grotesk has become widely understood as describing any “modern looking” sans serif.

As digital tools democratized font production, graphic designers turned from admirers and users, into self-made type designers. The act of drawing your own typeface is the ultimate expression of Neo-liberal design ideology. It is liberated from client briefs, generates passive income from license sales and its success is solely dependent on the designer's personal taste.

<sup>5</sup> Hustwit, G. (Producer, Director). (2007). *Helvetica* [Documentary film]. Swiss dots/Veer.

<sup>6</sup> Miedinger, M., Hoffman, E. (1957). *Neue Haas Grotesk* [Typeface]. Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei.

<sup>7</sup> Simonson, M. (2001, Feb 21). *The Scourge of Arial*. Mark Simonson Studio. <https://www.marksimonson.com/notebook/view/the-scurge-of-arial>

Aa aBbCcDdEe  
Ff fGgGgHhIiJj  
Kk kLlMmNnOoPp  
Qq QqRrRrSsTtUuVv  
Ww WwXxYyyZz  
00 112345667899

The Neo Neo Grotesk plays perfectly into what Wolfgang Fritz Haug calls the “ever-changing disguises of protean capital” (Haug, 1986, p. 92). Its neutrality becomes a blank canvas for personal expression, easily malleable to the current zeitgeist. It has no allegiance to history, and certainly claims no responsibility for pillaging it.

It is hard to untangle contemporary type design from the proliferation of social media. Designers, previously tasked with promoting the agenda of clients, are now primarily occupied with promoting themselves. Social media’s demand for brief content, digestible in an instant, has pushed graphic design towards the spectacle. In “The Designer as Phenomenon” the anonymous author precisely diagnoses the contemporary condition: “The Designer doesn’t design, he designs himself designing.”<sup>9</sup>

To the purist, the Neo Grotesk is inextricably linked with hierarchy. There are type-faces released for the sole reason that a famous designer once sketched some letters in the margin of his (always his, never hers) notebook. No new Neo Grotesk is complete without a reference to a strong white man who may or may not be the protagonist of an Ayn Rand novel.

<sup>8</sup> Pompadura, A. (2021). *Autaut Grotesk* [Typeface]. Due Studio.

<sup>9</sup> n/a. (2013). *The Designer As Phenomenon*. Critical Graphic Design. <https://criticalgraphicdesign.tumblr.com/post/51961889505/the-designer-as-phenomenon>



Sans serif sommeliers revive and reinterpret Neo Grotesks with increasingly granular discernment. The perfection of craft in a strictly defined framework becomes a display of the self, an extension of the person. Paraphrasing Jeff Keedy, Peiran Tan argues that the x-ray-like transparency of grids reflects the designer's "narcissistic yearn for viewers to appreciate their form-giving processes".<sup>10</sup>

In clamoring for an aura lost to mechanical reproduction, the Neo Grotesk is meticulously staged and curated – every reference and handshake vetted to uphold the pretense of cult value. This reliance on external justification leans heavily on the Western canon of art and existing power structures. It has little to do with the design itself, and everything to do with its context.

What characterizes both approaches is the centering of the designer as the real motif of their work, and the fetishization of the *type object*. Any recognition of this extreme disconnect from the origins of the Neo Grotesk is conspicuously missing in the critical design discourse. The ideological ambition once present in the Neo Grotesk was effectively neutralized at the very moment of its introduction.

The sans serif in the early Modern world

In England in the late 1700s, Neo Classical architects were incorporating elements of Greek and Roman style in their work. The architectural lettering of John Soane, modeled on Classical inscriptions in the Temple of Vesta – a style of Roman Capitals with very minimal serifs – is considered by type historian James Mosley the earliest example of sans serif letters. The new style was variously known as "old Roman" or "Egyptian", due to its resemblance with the blocky architecture of Ancient Egypt, which was all the rage in England at the time.<sup>11,12</sup>

The surprisingly unadorned style became popular among advertisers and sign painters seeking striking visuals to entice customers. It was equally detested by critics with a Classical bent, who labeled the tabloid abomination "Grotesque".

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<sup>10</sup> Tan, P. (2020). *Transparency, Asepsis, and Purity: Modernist Design's Obsession for Order*. The Type. <https://thetype.medium.com/transparency-asepsis-purity-modernist-design-obsession-for-order-c6ee0d25632e>

<sup>11</sup> Mosley, J. (1999). *The Nymph and the Grot, The revival of the sanserif letter*. London.

<sup>12</sup> Mosley, J. (2007, Jan 6). *The Nymph and the Grot, an update*. Typefoundry. <http://typefoundry.blogspot.com/2007/01/nymph-and-grot-update.html>

<sup>13</sup> Rappo, F. (2022). *Antique Legacy* [Typeface]. Optimo.



13 *Antique Legacy*, François Rappo's digital reinterpretation of Helvetica.

It would be some time before the sans serif made the jump from lettering to printing types. The English typefounder William Caslon IV shows the *Two Lines English Egyptian* – a capital-only alphabet of unadorned letters in his type catalog of 1816.<sup>14</sup> Caslon's sans serif did not see much use after this publication, leading to historians speculating that the types were never made available for the retail market, but rather developed as a one-off solution for a client. In 1832, however, Vincent Figgins published a set of sans serif poster types labeled *Two-Line Great Primer*.<sup>15</sup> Figgins' condensed and heavy typeface, still only available in capital letters, proved highly popular among advertisers. Following suit two years later, William Thorowgood published the first sans serif with a lowercase: the *Seven Line Grotesque*.<sup>16</sup>

From England, the sans serif spread to the continent and across the Atlantic. Towards the end of the 19th century, sans serifs had become a mainstay of typographic printing. Almost every type foundry carried a variant of the new letter, variously labeled Gothic, Lineale, Antique, Steinschrift, Grotesque, Grotesk or Sans Serif.

### A new style for a new world

At the turn of the 20th century, industrial developments had completely revolutionized Modern life. The invention of steam power and effective steel manufacturing processes had enabled construction of railways, bridges and steamboats that connected the big cities. People moved into the urban centers, settling in electrically heated apartments and working in factories mass-producing goods for the growing market of commerce.

Despite the new possibilities offered by technological innovation, architecture and design was still reproducing images of the past. A new world required a new style, and the response from designers is known today as Modernist Design. The sans serif would take central role in the Modern style.

### The letter of the future

The first book typeset in a sans serif, *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst: Eine Betrachtung des Theaters als Höchsten Kultursymbols*, was designed by Peter Behrens in 1900.<sup>18</sup> Behrens co-founded the Deutscher Werkbund – a German craftsmans association of artists, architects, designers and industrialists.

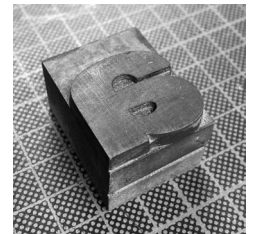
The Deutscher Werkbund grew out of the Arts & Crafts movement, which considered the designer an all-encompassing creative genius, capable of shaping every aspect of life. Behrens practiced in a wide range of fields, including type design, graphic design, architecture and industrial design. During his time at AEG, Behrens employed a suite of talented designers that would go on to shape the Modern world – among them Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and a young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, better known under the moniker Le Corbusier.

In 1923, Ludwig & Mayer had published *Phosphor*, an inline all-cap alphabet based on the visual language of industrial machines.<sup>19</sup> Its designer, Jacob Erbar, expanded on the idea in his eponymous *Erbar Grotesk* (1926),<sup>20</sup> only to be outshined by the massive success of Paul Renner's *Futura* the following year.<sup>21</sup> Renner was another

<sup>14</sup> Caslon IV, W. (1816). *Two Lines English Egyptian* [Typeface]. Caslon Type Foundry.

<sup>15</sup> Figgins, V. (1832). *Two-Line Great Primer* [Typeface]. Figgins.

<sup>16</sup> Thorowgood, W. (1834). *Seven Line Grotesque* [Typeface]. Thorowgood Foundry.



<sup>17</sup> Lowercase /a/ from Paul Renner's *Plak* from the KHiO Publishing Workshop.

<sup>18</sup> Behrens, P. (1900). *Feste des Lebens und der Kunst: eine Betrachtung des Theaters als höchsten Kultursymbols*. Leipzig.

<sup>19</sup> Erbar, J. (1923). *Phosphor* [Typeface]. Ludwig & Mayer.

<sup>20</sup> Erbar, J. (1926). *Erbar Grotesk* [Typeface]. Ludwig & Mayer.

<sup>21</sup> Renner, P. (1927). *Futura* [Typeface]. Bauersche Gießerei.

prominent member of the Deutscher Werkbund. Renner relied on the basic geometric shapes – square, circle and triangle – to reimagine the Latin alphabet in the machine age.

Attempting to merge upper and lower case into one form, Herbert Bayer, the typography workshop master at the Bauhaus school, presented his *Universal Alphabet* the same year.<sup>22</sup> In fact, sans serifs were an essential part of graphic design at the Bauhaus. After visiting the school, the German typographer and book designer Jan Tschichold was thoroughly converted from his traditionalist views. In 1928 he published his influential book, *Die neue Typografie*. Tschichold's "elementary typography" argued for the use of grids, standardized paper sizes and, most importantly, established the Grotesk as the typeface of the future.<sup>23</sup>

Two mechanical sans serifs released before WWII serve as important precursors to the Neo Grotesk. Paul Renner's lesser known second typeface, *Plak*, was published in 1928.<sup>24</sup> The German type historian and archivist Hans Reichard suggests *Plak* is a display companion to Wilhelm Pischner's then in-progress *Neuzeit Grotesk* (Stempel, 1932). *Plak* was produced as wood types in one weight and three widths. The open forms are terminated perfectly horizontal or vertical and the vertices are flat and wide, owing to the compactness of the design. Three years later, the Deutsches Institut für Normung published their DIN 1451 standard, normalizing the Prussian railway lettering for reproduction with compass and ruler.<sup>25</sup>

#### Käch and the new grotesk

The principles that laid the foundation for the Neo Grotesk were first formulated by Walter Käch, a Swiss designer and teacher at the Zurich Kunstgewerbeschule, in the trilingual compendium *Schriften Lettering Écritures* from 1949.<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps no surprise that the birthplace of the "neutral" sans serif, following the second world war, is Switzerland – the landlocked isle of central Europe that had remained nonpartisan through both great wars.

Rather than the crude geometry of the early Modern attempts, Käch revisited the 1800s Grotesks that had found recent popularity among Swiss graphic designers. Käch's sans serifs lettering alphabets, entitled *Rauchwaren*<sup>27</sup> and *Röntgen Therapie*<sup>28</sup>, were systematically filtered through the Modernist grid, each decision grounded in logical reasoning and historical predecessors.

Käch made subtle adjustments for optical effects and historical broad-nib writing pattern, looking to the 4th and 5th century Half-Uncial for their vertical axis and horizontal termination of strokes. The apertures line up across characters, referencing the alignment of the vertical serifs in traditional Antiqua models. Extrapolating from historical writing, Käch employed a reversed s-spined /a/ and a diagonally sliced /t/. Vertexes, spacing, and diagonal angles were unified, and the characters constructed symmetrically around a center point. The resulting formal characteristics are all found separately in earlier models, but had never before come together as a holistic approach to type design.

<sup>22</sup> Bayer, H. (1927). *Universal Alphabet* [Lettering]. Bauhaus.

<sup>23</sup> Tschichold, J. (1928). *Die neue Typographie. Ein Handbuch für zeitgemäß Schaffende*. Berlin.

<sup>24</sup> Renner, P. (1928). *Plak* [Typeface]. Bauersche Gießerei.

<sup>25</sup> DIN 1451 [Lettering instructions]. (1931). Deutsches Institut für Normung.

<sup>26</sup> Käch, W. (1949). *Schriften / Lettering / Écritures – geschriebene und gezeichnete Grundformen / The principle types of running hand and drawn characters / Principales famille d'écritures courantes et de lettres dessinées*. Zürich.

<sup>27</sup> Käch, W. (1949). *Rauchwaren* [Lettering guide].

<sup>28</sup> Käch, W. (1949). *Röntgen Therapie* [Lettering guide].



### Graphik 57

The year 1957 is the defining year of the Neo Grotesk. At the Graphik 57 trade fair in Zürich, two groundbreaking sans serifs, that would forever change the direction of typography, were presented to the world.<sup>29</sup>

The “new Haas sans serif” – *Neue Haas Grotesk* – was design by Max Miedinger, a 47 year old Zürich-native freelance designer, under the lead of the Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei's new director, Edouard Hoffmann who was 65 at the time. Hoffmann hired Miedinger as a freelancer, having collaborated successfully with him on previous projects.

Their junior competitor was a fresh graduate from the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, only 29 years old. *Univers* was the work of talented young designer Adrian Frutiger, produced with the help of a large team of designers at the French Peignot & Deberny type foundry.<sup>30</sup>

### Univers

A student of Käch's, Adrian Frutiger had recognized the potential for implementation of Käch's principles in all variations of a typeface family – across width, weight and posture. *Univers* was conceived as family from the outset, with unified proportions across the spectrum (Osterer & Stamm, 2021, p. 92).

Frutiger's ambitions were total – *Univers* set out to be the only typeface a graphic designer would ever need. The comprehensive system of weights and widths had no comparable prior example. Before *Univers*, typeface families had grown organically from initially successful styles, developed in response to popular demand.

The brilliance of Frutiger's design was not lost on the Swiss graphic artist Emil O. Biemann, who wrote in *Print* magazine that “the entire series of 21 variants was worked out to the last detail before a single matrix was cut. It was created by one type designer, and a single team of craftsmen executed the master plan”, in stark contrast to its competition.<sup>31</sup>

In *Univers* all the styles share the same x-height (a slight increase in contrast helps enlarge the heaviest counters), and the width of a stem remains consistent throughout the widths. *Univers* show only minute differences in set width between the various weights (Osterer & Stamm, 2021, p. 93). This subservience to the

<sup>29</sup> For clarity purposes, a third Neo Grotesk typeface presented alongside Helvetica and Univers at Graphik 57 is left out of this essay: *Folio* by Konrad Bauer and Walter Baum.

<sup>30</sup> Frutiger, A. (1957). *Univers* [Typeface]. Fonderie Deberny et Peignot.

<sup>31</sup> Biemann, E.O. (1961). *Univers: A New Concept in European Type Design*. *Print Magazine*, 32–36.



typographic system is expressed all the way down to the numbering system that organizes the family. The designer should always be able to trust the numbers to deliver what they say, and all elements should be compatible with each other – and with the grid (Osterer & Stamm, 2021, p. 95).

The influence of Frutiger's other teacher, calligrapher Alfred Willmann, is evident in Univers. Käch's lettering is somewhat lumpy and awkward, but Univers is executed with a delicate understanding of calligraphic principles. Where Univers leans into written forms, the motive is readability and clarity. Frutiger preferred an open form of the question mark to differentiate it from the numeral /2/, a less rigid /ß/, and a horizontal attachment of the /a/ bowl to the stem. Later on, Frutiger would conceptualize the idea of a "neutral" letter by superimposing characters from common typefaces, arriving at their essential constructions (Frutiger, 1980, p. 64).

Univers does away with the ornamental "beards and tails" of the old grotesks, reducing all elements to their minimal appearance.<sup>32</sup> Frutiger was encouraged by his friend and mentor, Emil Ruder, to refrain from overly personal touches and to work towards purity (Osterer & Stamm, 2021, p. 23). The /&/ in Univers is characteristic of Frutiger's dedication to neutrality. The ornamental ligature passed through a number of trials before arriving at its final form, only to be redesigned a few years later because it was deemed too radical. (Osterer & Stamm, 2021, p. 97).

<sup>32</sup> Coles, S. (2007, Jan 6). *Helvetica and Alternatives to Helvetica*. Fontfeed. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170604075105/http://fontfeed.com/archives/helvetica-and-alternatives-to-helvetica>

<sup>33</sup> American Type Founders. (ca. 1965). *The Developing Univers* [Type specimen].



33 Type specimen from American Type Founders, showing the range of Adrian Frutiger's *Univers* typeface.



34 Josef Müller-Brockmann's ring-bound loose-leaf system for Helvetica.

Univers' most dramatic departure from Käch is in the spacing. Frutiger resisted the compact rhythm Käch advised, arguing that readability was reliant on an even distance between stems. Rather ironically, the one advice Frutiger dismissed outright would become imperative in his competitor's success.

### Helvetica

Unlike Univers, Helvetica was not planned as a consistent family from the start (Müller & Malsy, 2008, p. 29). The original release is a single *Halbfett* variant, with the larger family developed over the coming years. Hoffmann insisted that the work should focus on the *Halbfett* style, which was completed just in time to present alongside Univers at Graphik 57.

The explosive demand for Helvetica among printers led to some styles being quickly cobbled together from modified versions of loosely related designs. The Extended and Condensed styles, for example, are adapted from *Normal Grotesk Bold Expanded* and *Commercial Grotesk* respectively (Müller & Malsy, 2008, p. 58). The original Helvetica family was not nearly as coherent as Univers, a short-coming that has been remedied in later digital versions.

Helvetica owes a great deal to Walter Käch, but perhaps more so to Eduard Hoffmann's keen finger on the pulse of Swiss graphic design. Hoffmann and Meidinger's correspondence reveals the in-vogue *Akzidenz* and *Normal Grotesks*

<sup>34</sup> Müller-Brockmann, J. (1960). *Die neue Haas Grotesk* [Loose-leaf ring binder system type specimen]. Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei.

as references, and a close familiarity with the competitors “Ours will be better”, Hoffmann wrote in a letter to Meidinger dated March 22, 1957 (Müller & Malsy, 2008, p. 30).

The single most revolutionary trait of Helvetica was its compact spacing. Instead of following the traditional rule of sidebearings equal to the counters of lowercase /m/, Miedinger argued that the “unified visual impression of a word” required less space between the letters, as was the style of wood type preferred by Swiss designers (Müller & Malsy, 2008, p. 30). This gives Helvetica its most important quality: No matter what you write, Helvetica seems to instantly turn it into a striking logotype.

### The Modern aesthetics

Comparing single weights of Helvetica and Univers side by side, the difference is negligible to all but professional designers. Although details differ, the overall impression is similar. It is first when applied in context that their stylistic differences come to light.

Helvetica’s domain is clearly headlines. The compact spacing gives text a graphic quality when set large. At text sizes, the result is less ideal. Helvetica’s stylized details figure like art pieces on a monotonous gallery wall, drawing attention to itself and comfortably playing the lead role.

Univers, on the other hand, shines in text. The delicate optical adjustments, Frutiger’s deep reverence for calligraphic principles and his generous spacing produces a smooth texture at reading sizes. Deberny & Peignot’s type specimens highlight the possibilities inherent in the new system: a granularity of weights and widths that lends itself to grid-based designs, with predictable stem widths and consistent dimensions.

### The Modern ideology

The Neo Grotesk is a collectivistic project, drawn from the system and in. It is subservient to the content and the larger design system. By democratizing the process, and by basing each decision on logical reasoning and historical examples, Käch and Frutiger attempt to remove the designer’s ego from his work.

This echoes the ideas put forth by Hannes Meyer, the second director of Bauhaus. Meyer detested the hero-driven, top-down ideology that he inherited from Walter Gropius. He insisted on working collectively, drafting modest architecture for everyday people. In a lecture at the San Carlos academy in Mexico in 1938 Meyer proclaimed: “we should [...] condemn that type of architect for whom the building of a house is merely an opportunity to parade personal formal preferences for all the street to see.”<sup>35</sup>

In Helvetica, a very different perspective comes to light. Helvetica is designed from the desired style and out. It is an individualistic project, aiming to beat its competition, to draw attention to itself.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer, H. (1938, Sep 13). *Education of the Architect*. San Carlos academy, Mexico.

All this is to say, viewing the Neo Grotesk solely as a *style* misses the point entirely. It was Käch's formulation of a set of abstract principles for the construction of letters, and Frutiger's implementation of them across a large family of related variants that constituted the "new" in the Neo Grotesk, and these aspects can not be disconnected from the ideology that inspired them.

Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, the story of Univers and Helvetica is a tug of war between the politicization of aesthetics and the aestheticization of politics.<sup>36</sup> It is largely the latter perspective that has risen to dominance in contemporary design culture.

"In the beginning, when modernism was young, it was a radical idea that positioned itself in opposition to a more conservative traditionalism. As time went on, the modernist ideology spread into all areas of cultural production, eventually becoming the dominant aesthetic ideology."

Jeff Keedy<sup>37</sup>

#### Problematic aspects of the Modern ideology

The world in which Modernist ideology was formulated was built on colonial exploitation. At the start of the 19th century, Europeans controlled at least 35 % of the globe. By the 20th century, that number had risen to 84 % (Hoffman, 2013, pp. 2–3). Pillaged resources and slavery was the foundation of Western wealth that the Industrial Revolution rested upon, and the hidden narratives and implicit assumptions that upheld Colonialism seeped into many aspects of Modern society.

When the Modernists speak of "rational" design, the irrational other always looms in the background. In one of Modernism's key manifestos, *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1908), Adolf Loos argues that ornamentation is the language of the primitive and criminals, that "what is natural for a Papuan and a child, is degenerate for modern man".<sup>38</sup>

In the wake of Modernism defining a "neutral" style on behalf of the globe, lies the rubbles of indigenous and local cultural expressions. There is a Helvetica Arabic, Greek, Cyrillic, etc, but never a Helvetica Latin. Under Modernism, whiteness is the invisible default.

This cultural imperialism does not only play out across borders and ethnicities, but also trickles down through the social strata. It goes all the way back to the very idea of the "designer", defined in opposition to the working class printers that had been doing actual design work for ages before the term was coined.<sup>39</sup> In retrospect, it is hard to read even a character like Frutiger as a spokesperson for the common man. Univers has become too much of a highbrow cultural object, reinforced by its relative obscurity in contemporary digital culture.

"Commodity aesthetics stands in a parasitical relation to all art, in fact to all symbolic forms in general, and to all 'ideological powers' (Engels). By living off of them, it devours their possibility."

Wolfgang Fritz Haug<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, W. (1969). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [H. Zohn, Trans. H. Arendt, ed.]. New York. (Original work published 1935).

<sup>37</sup> Keedy, J. (1995). *Zombie Modernism. It Lives! Emigre*, 34, pp. 17–23.

<sup>38</sup> Loos, A. (1913). *Ornament und Verbrechen* [Essay]. Vienna.

<sup>39</sup> Jury, D. (2012). *Graphic Design Before Graphic Designers: The Printer As Designer And Craftsman 1700–1914*. London.

<sup>40</sup> Fritz Haug, W. (2006, Jan/Feb). "Commodity aesthetics revisited: Exchange relations as the source of antagonistic aestheticization". *Radical Philosophy* 135. p. 22.



Uncoupled from its ideological roots, Univers still left a lasting impression on type design. Käch and Frutiger's ideas are incorporated in the design process and production tools, even in the very font formats used to deliver typography to billions of readers across the globe.

The Neo Grotesk is certainly not the only example of Modernist art that lingers on as a mere stylistic shell of the ideas that inspired them. This is also the plight of Brutalist architecture, declared deceased by its own historian, Reyner Banham, well before he managed to adapt the original 1995 essay, "The New Brutalism",<sup>41</sup> into the book of the same title.<sup>42</sup> In the 2009 documentary *Krautrock – The Rebirth of Germany*, the pioneers of the musical genre that sought to redefine European rock as a political movement laments its renaissance as cool art rock.<sup>43</sup>

In a schoolbook example of Capitalism's ability to define, neutralize and assimilate any revolutionary impulse, the Haas Foundry acquired the rights to all Peignot & Deberny typefaces in 1972. From then on, Helvetica and Univers were owned by the same company.

### The cult lives on

Frutiger's systematic approach to Univers was revisited in 1964 in *Gerstner Programm*, a reworking of Akzidenz Grotesk by Basel duo Karl Gerstner and Christian Mengelt.<sup>44</sup> In 1980, Mengelt approached the Neo Grotesk again, this time in collaboration with André Gürtler and Erich Gschwind as Team'77. Their *Unica* is both an amalgam – and a portmanteau – of *Univers* and *Helvetica*.<sup>45</sup>

Gerstner Programm and Unica were developed for phototypesetting, a technology that enjoyed a short-lived success in the transition from metal type to desktop publishing, before dwindling to obscurity along with its typefaces.

The digital revival of Unica makes for a poignant example of what the Neo Grotesk has come to represent in our age. An early digital version published by Scangraphic was taken off market in 2008 due to legal claims from the Mergenthaler Linotype Company to the copyrights of the now defunct Haas Foundry. The myth of the lost typeface lived on in internet forums<sup>46</sup> and trade magazines<sup>47</sup>, with designers praising its promotional material and rational approach.

Finally, in 2014, a teaser style for the upcoming *Neue Haas Unica* was released by Monotype Inc., having previously acquired the Linotype collection.<sup>48</sup> In March of 2015 the Swiss foundry Lineto released *LL Unica 77*, stressing its authenticity: "LL Unica 77 is the only digital revival of Haas Unica (1980) authorized by the typeface's original designers, Team'77. It was re-mastered by team member Christian Mengelt from their own drawings."<sup>49</sup> Eleven days later, Monotype responded by releasing the additional styles of *Neue Haas Unica*.<sup>50</sup>

Cultured graphic designers wouldn't be caught dead using the wrong Unica. If one disregards the cultural capital that put Lineto in the position to collaborate with Team'77, their resistance to industry behemoths Monotype could almost be construed as anti-capitalism. But it doesn't change the fact that the primary motivating factor for all actors in this story is the cult value.

<sup>41</sup> Banham, R. (1955, Dec). "The New Brutalism". *The Architectural Review*. 118 / 708. p. 359.

<sup>42</sup> Banham, R. (1966). *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*. New York.

<sup>43</sup> Whalley, B. (Director). (2009). *Krautrock – The Rebirth of Germany* [Documentary film]. BBC4.

<sup>44</sup> Gerstner, K., Mengelt, C. (1964). *Gerstner Programm* [Typeface]. H. Berthold AG.

<sup>45</sup> Gürtler, A., Christian Mengelt, C., Gschwind, E. (1980). *Unica* [Typeface]. Haas Type Foundry.

<sup>46</sup> Sorkin, E. [ebensorkin]. (2007, May 19). "... I have to admit it is pretty outrageously compelling stuff. Unica is an amazing improvement on Helvetica." [Online forum post]. Typophile. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150311183515/http://www.typophile.com/node/18387>

<sup>47</sup> Holms, C. (2007). *Grafik Magazine*.

<sup>48</sup> *Neue Haas Unica* was digitized by staff designer Toshi Omagari from the original drawings found in the Monotype archives. <https://www.monotype.com/fonts/neue-haas-unica>

<sup>49</sup> Lineto. (2015, Mar 7). *LL Unica 77*. <https://lineto.com/typefaces/unica77>

<sup>50</sup> Fontsinuse. *Haas Unica*. <https://fontsinuse.com/typefaces/10661/haas-unica>

## Post scriptum

Prior to, and during my studies, I have been tinkering with a type design project of my own.<sup>51</sup> It is a Neo Grotesk sans serif that takes as its departure Walter Käch's lettering manual, walking in the footsteps of Adrian Frutiger, while also diverging in some aspects. The alphabet is a conversation between Käch, Frutiger and myself. I have made it a point to include other designers in the process. I have built a team with a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. The group includes a Chinese type designer currently located in Australia and a young German type designer from Berlin. The typeface has developed slowly with input from all parties. My plan is to include a third person in the process – an older designer that is less attuned to contemporary taste. It is an important point for me to bridge the gap between generations.

I resisted designing a Neo Grotesk for a very long time. I associated the genre with everything I considered wrong in graphic design: privileged men wanting to be the center of attention, the hagiography, the designer as motif, the designer as auteur, and the nostalgia for a glorious past. I felt the last thing the world needed was another parade of cultural capital.

As I immersed myself in the ideological landscape inherent in these letterforms, it became clear to me that there was an untold story in the material. I became convinced the best way of telling it was to combine writing and designing, each informing the other.

Motorik is a work-in-progress, a modest sans serif that stresses horizontal alignments and systematic ordering. It is almost a shame to reveal it, given the fact you have been reading it all along.

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<sup>51</sup> Helland, F., Plönnigs, I., Huang, W. (unreleased). *Motorik* [Typeface]. Oslo.