

# Helvetica and ZXX: Ubiquity and Surveillance in a Democratic Nation- State

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: In his collection of essays analyzing the state of the world post-9/11, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek frames the state of our democracy with this statement: "[W]e feel free because we lack the language to articulate our unfreedom." Through writing this paper, I found the intricacies and complexities of humanity seep into even the most seemingly mundane parts of life. Subjects heavy with the discursive, such as democracy or surveillance, can be found within something as mundane as fonts. Art history can extend to all reaches of visual language, including the form that our digital texts take, and teaches us that nothing in society can escape the burden of representation of each and every complex aspect of the human condition.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: This outstanding essay is a result of Arisa's hard work, not just in the final upper-division seminar she took me with in the last quarter of her education at UC Davis, but also a clear outcome of four intense years of learning, reading, writing, and deep critical thinking. Arisa took the very first First-Year Seminar that I offered at UCD, entitled Art and Violence, during her freshman year. From then on, she continued to take other courses in art history and the cross-pollination of the arts, visual culture, the humanities with the world of politics and identity. Through a deep commitment to critical thinking and disciplined writing, Arisa developed intellectually and academically to become a skillful and nuanced writer and critical thinker. The seminar was entitled Cosmopolitanism and the Avant-garde, during which students were challenged to read primary sources such as Kant, Zizek, Spivak, and Derrida and to intensely think about the workings of the world in terms of cosmopolitan identity and post-colonial politics. That it was all happening during COVID-19 lockdown*

and the revolts of the BLM made the discussions that much more important and intense. This outstanding paper of the politics of fonts out of a historical context of cosmopolitan and globalization is Arisa's masterpiece and the articulation of four years of intense education in the humanities. I applaud her not only for this particular achievement but for her being a much needed outstanding citizen of the world.

—Talinn Grigor, Department of Art History

Fonts are a pivotal fixture of modern society. They act as couriers of information, set the tone for the words they embody, and influence us in both conscious and unconscious ways. In his book *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*, Adrian Frutiger, a Swiss typeface designer, elucidates how type and graphic design are used as worldwide mediums of communication.<sup>1</sup> Just as visual art forms reflect their time period and societal underpinnings, typography's role in modern society and its importance in our everyday lives can provide similar insight. Because they are a vehicle for information cloaked in a visual design, fonts can embody characteristics or “particularities” that make them seem human, or as embodying aspects of human culture. This societal reflection is present within fonts that participate in cultural mimicry, like the “oriental” font on Chinese take-out boxes.

Despite being an object that has become one of the most recognizable symbols of Chinese cuisine, the box itself was created by a Chicago inventor, Frederick Weeks Wilcox, in 1894. In the 1970s, an employee from Fold-Pak, a company that produces these boxes, decorated the box with a pagoda and designed a stylized to mimic Chinese calligraphy (Fold-Pak does not sell these takeout boxes in China). Even in the most mundane aspects of life, the typeface of takeout boxes, aspects of culture and the capitalist gaze can be seen and analyzed. Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher, describes the principles of democratic abstraction in his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, investigating the equalizing force of democracy present within his preamble “We The People,” which acts as the underlying demand to clear individuals of particularities (e.g., culture, sex, and race). Žižek

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1 Frutiger, Adrian. *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*. New York: van Nostrand Reinhold (1989), p. 197.

describes “national cuisines” in a contemporary megalopolis: behind every corner stand Chinese, Italian, Mexican restaurants, a fact that confirms the loss of proper ethnic roots of these cuisines.<sup>2</sup> Because of the abstraction of culture, the truth beneath becomes warped, as in the abstraction of Chinese culture into something of a caricature (the pagoda and calligraphy-like Western font).

While typefaces like the one seen on the Fold-Pak boxes are designed to mimic and exude particularities, other fonts are designed to be free of particularities. One in particular, Helvetica, has been so successful it has been dubbed by the design community as the “universal” font. Many designers have described it as being so ubiquitous, it is “like air,” and its influence can become an “unknown-known” for everyday people who see and read it every day, but are not aware of its presence. In the 1950s post-war period, designers felt the weight of responsibility to rebuild and focus on design values that bring people together.<sup>3</sup> Since its release in 1957, Helvetica has overtaken a vast majority of typographic aesthetics in the Western sphere, and has been dubbed the quintessential modern font.

## **Helvetica: A Child of Modernism & Internationalism**

Helvetica was designed by Max Miedingerv following a commission by Eduard Hoffman, the owner of the Swiss type company.<sup>4</sup> As a design project, it embodied the goals of Modernists from the era it was conceived. Within its core principles are echoes of Loos’s penchant for elimination of ornament (in this case, serifs) and Van Der Rohe’s values of minimalist design (seen in the sleekness and simplicity of the characters). The circulation Helvetica in the Western sphere is comparable to the “living machine” models that Le Corbusier once dreamed would be reproducible and built worldwide.

This sense of internationalism that pervaded International Style architecture also existed within the realm of design and typography. The Swiss International Style, as exemplified by Helvetica, emphasizes

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2 Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. (1992), p. 162.

3 Huswit, Gary, Shelby Siegel, and Luke Geissbuhler. *Helvetica: A Documentary Film* (2007).

4 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

balance between black and white; “it’s not a letter that’s bent to shape, it’s a letter that lives in a matrix of powerful surrounding space.”<sup>5</sup> This awareness of weight distribution between line and space—the tension of white space around the black letters—is put into poetry by Massimo Vignelli, an Italian designer who has studied the Swiss style. Vignelli proclaims that “like in music, it’s not the notes, it’s the space in between the notes that make the music.”<sup>6</sup> Vignelli’s influential design rhetoric has made him widely known in the field, and the poster series *Vignelli Forever* by Anthony Neil Dart has been designed in his honor (Fig. 1). To those



Figure 1. Anthony Neil Dart, *If you do it right, it will last forever*, from the *Helvetica poster series Vignelli Forever*. Published June 7, 2011.

who know of Vignelli’s love of typography, his veneration of Helvetica, and the typeface’s unprecedented success, the words, “if you do it right, it will last forever,” ring their truest in the bold curves of Helvetica itself.

Michael Bierut, a graphic designer, regales viewers with an anecdote about how corporations rebranded themselves during the 1960s, at the rise of Helvetica:

“Here’s your current stationary and all it implies, and here’s what we are proposing.” Next to the belching smokestacks, the nuptial script, and the ivory paper, they’d have a crisp, bright white piece of paper,

5 Huswit, Gary. 2007. Quote from Mike Parker, director of typographic development.

6 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

and instead of Amalgamated Widget, it would just say WIDGECO, in Helvetica Medium. Can you imagine how bracing and thrilling that was? It's like you had crawled through a desert with your mouth caked with filthy dust and someone offers you a clear, refreshing, distilled, icy glass of water to clear away this horrible burden of history.<sup>7</sup>

What Bierut described as the ice-cold splash personifies Helvetica's modernist spirit and quelling of the market's need for a sans, minimalist type. The transition from the graphic design norms prior to the 1950s to the late 1960s following Helvetica is illustrated by the two Coca-Cola advertisements from each respective time period (Figures 2-3). One, from 1941, emblemizes the characteristics described by Bierut in his anecdote, while in the other, an ad campaign post-Helvetica, the



Figure 2. Coca-Cola, Coke Belongs. *Coca-Cola Ads*, published 1941.



Figure 3. Coca-Cola, It's the Real Thing. *Coke*. *Coca-Cola Ads*, from a series published 1969–74.

7 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

entire visual structure has shifted and is anchored by a high definition photograph of the beverage with “It’s the real thing” written in Helvetica Medium. The notion of something that is contemporary— in this case, the typeface— washing away the dirt and grime of a historical burden is an absolute Modernist mode of thinking.

As a result of its reputation for legibility and seemingly clean, neutral facade, Helvetica quickly became a darling of government and corporate branding. BMW, Target, and Panasonic are only a few of the companies that use Helvetica.<sup>8</sup> It also appears in the logo of the EPA and on tax forms from the IRS.<sup>9</sup> Just as any art historical analysis of a painting of a monarch can expose political motives, Helvetica provides a similar mask for government agencies and corporations. Both entities, constantly fighting against the image of being authoritarian and inhumane, are able to appear accessible, transparent, responsible—and human. Its success continued into the 21st century with the advent of the personal computer, or PC.

## **The Hypervisible: Helvetica as MacIntosh’s Default**

German designer Erik Spiekermann explains that part of the spread of Helvetica can be attributed to the development of the PC and eventually its employment as the default font of MacIntosh, a.k.a. Apple products.<sup>10</sup> Everything that is written on texts, in notes, on the interface itself is written in Helvetica, or Helvetica Neue, a variation of the original font. Even Windows, modeling itself after Apple, at first used Helvetica and then created a lesser clone, Arial.

As it is being used on a communication device with a solid foothold in capitalist America and, of course, across the globe, Helvetica’s presence and influence has spread with Apple products. It is arguably the most seen and read font in the world, due to its permanent fixture in the iPhone, a device that possesses a quality of ubiquity equivalent to that of the font itself. In his book, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Jean-François Lyotard delineates the loss of “dimensional intersubjectivity,” or a psycho-social connection because our contemporary space is one

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8 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

9 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

10 Huswit, Gary. 2007.

rendered community-less as a result of hypervisible information.<sup>11</sup> Helvetica has become a vehicle for the digital age's hypervisibility. Its principle of legibility and reputation for being a neutral font have contributed directly to its oversaturation of the design market, be it for branding, digital interfaces, or government communications.

The loss of dimensional intersubjectivity is owed to the digital revolution, the integration of technology into our everyday lives with the expectation of making things easier, better, along with systems of bureaucracy that use automated systems as a means to distance themselves from addressing human problems plaguing their clients or constituents. What is called the "listening eye" coincides with the evolution of typography integrating into technological interfaces. Everywhere we look, our eyes are oversaturated with the hypervisibility of Helvetica; it has settled deeply into our conscious and unconscious. Its spread has become mechanical, hegemonic. If Helvetica is representative of the structural things that create and shape the Western sphere, such as government agencies and capitalist corporations, then there must be something representing the forces railing against hegemony.

## **9/11 & Snowden: The Creation of ZXX**

Just as Helvetica came at the end of World War II, another type emerged after 9/11 and the Edward Snowden leak. In 2013, the font ZXX was released as an effort to thwart NSA surveillance of digital correspondences. Its creator, Sang Mun, a former South Korean intelligence agent, conceptualized the font with the priority of creating a design focusing on the protection of individual privacy as opposed to universal legibility.

Today's digitally oriented world has been formed out of a mixture of technological progress and equally impactful trauma, 9/11 being the catalyst for the pervasiveness of surveillance today. Following this event came the destabilization of the public's trust in government because of Edward Snowden's leak. In a press conference after the Snowden leak President Obama said, "You cannot have 100% security and 100% privacy," in defense of the surveillance programs authorized by the White

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11 Flieger, Jerry Aline. "The Listening Eye: Postmodernism, Paranoia, and the Hypervisible." *Diacritics* 26, no. 1 (1996): 90-107.

House.<sup>12</sup> This point of view elucidates the complexities of the social contract in a democratic nation that have evolved since its founding. We can no longer examine the democratic nation-state as it extends to the individuals beneath its contractual obligation, but take into consideration the technological advancements and surveillance that have become another pillar of the democratic machine.

The convergence of technological advancement and the means of public control implemented by the democratic nation-state feeds into Flieger's analysis of the realm of hypervisibility. The theory that the post-digital revolution world has become engulfed within the "all-too-visible" converges between three philosophers: Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Žižek. Flieger contends the three modes of thinking question the sphericity of the world beneath the "ubiquitous eye in the sky of satellite surveillance." This cautions that perhaps philosophers may discover the world is indeed flat due to the loss of "sphericity" when everything is hypervisible, just as flat as the black mirror screens that have become pervasive in nearly every aspect of life within the American democratic state. It is in this world of surveillance, as a part of the counterculture against "the listening eye," that ZXX was born.<sup>13</sup>

## **ZXX & Selective Legibility: Cyber vs. Human Gazes**

ZXX has six different cuts (or versions): Sans, Bold, Camo, Noise, False, and Xed.<sup>14</sup> The first two cuts, Bold and Sans, are regular typefaces that are legible to text recognition softwares (Fig. 4), and they serve as the baseline, or the control factor in the disruption test. The other four cuts, Camo, False, Noise, and Xed, have been shown to disrupt recognition softwares to varying degrees in Sang Mun's ZXX sample video (Fig. 4). Camo has camouflage patterns splotted about the black letters as a leopard would have camouflage in the wild. False embeds smaller text meant for reading within the larger letters codified by the matching of a forwards and backwards alphabet (a = z, b = y, and so on.).

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12 *The New York Times*. "President Obama Defends N.S.A. Surveillance Programs," 2013.

13 Flieger, Jerry Aline. "The Listening Eye: Postmodernism, Paranoia, and the Hypervisible." (1996): 90-107.

14 Mun, Sang. ZXX Type Specimen Video. Studio Mun. 2012



Figure 4. Sang Mun, ZXX type specimen poster series, designed 2012, printed 2016.

Noise has pixels covering the letters; the amount of noise corresponds to recognizability—the more recognizable, the more noise surrounds the letter to further obscure it. Xed simply x-es out the letters and is the most successful at disruption, due to the fact that the X's placed on the letters activates all four corners of empty space surrounding the letters.<sup>15</sup> They all function similarly to CAPTCHA tests that determine whether someone online is human or a bot.

The point of ZXX's disruptive legibility does not target humans; it targets the cyber eye. It is not an illegibility; rather, it is a selective legibility, making it difficult for computers to

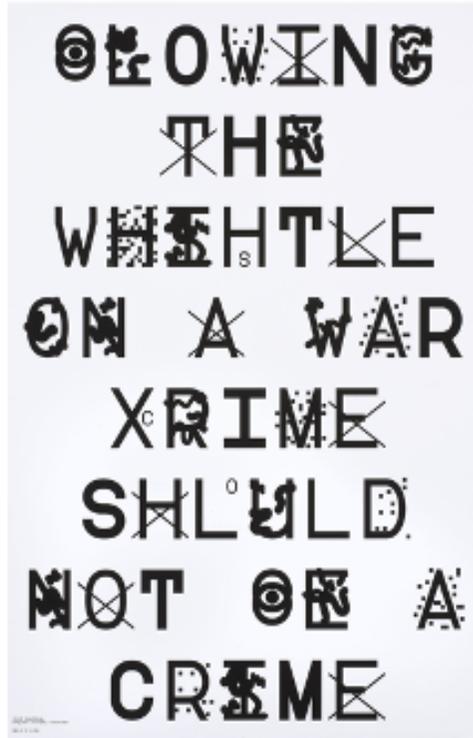
read and easy for the human eye to decipher. It is similar to art historical symbols and motifs. If the computer-user is not well versed in the motifs of the Renaissance, they may view the School of Athens as a painting filled with various men interspersed in an architectural space. The words and the sentences are there, but the meaning is not, giving a reading of meaningless combinations of symbols and letters. However, if a human who can read ZXX is versed in said motifs, they understand Raphael's painting as an homage to classical masters—they see Aristotle and Plato in the center of a room filled with philosophers, astronomers, and scholars, and the words and sentences come together and have meaning.

15 Mun, Sang. 2012.

## Helvetica & ZXX: Particularities & Privacy

Erik Spiekermann, a German designer, criticizes Helvetica's creators for designing a type where all the letters look identical; in his viewpoint, Helvetica does not represent individuals, but an army.<sup>16</sup> As a designer, he believes in designing each letter so that it is unique and interesting enough for the reader, but not all the same. In all of its strangeness of six different cuts, four of which are filled to the brim with particularities, ZXX represents a very different kind of philosophical dilemma for designers. In this case, its particularities are what safeguard us from surveillance. Thus, if we understand ZXX as a manifestation of our frustration with the lack created by democracy, then it makes sense that its particularities are what safeguards ours.

During his famous interview, Edward Snowden asked American citizens to consider that this invasion of privacy matters to them; even if they "aren't doing anything wrong," this should be something that concerns them, angers them, that they demand to change. As Foucault describes in his theory of power, in order for power relations to exist there must



*Fig. 5. Sang Mun, BLOWING THE WHISTLE ON A WAR CRIME SHOULD NOT BE A CRIME, from the ZXX type specimen poster series, designed 2012, printed 2016.*

<sup>16</sup> Huswit, Gary. 2007.

be acts of freedom.<sup>17</sup> Just as Snowden leaked the information and Mun created ZXX, both of these acts exist in order to illuminate the system of power relations. The theorization of power relations proposes that there must be a certain degree of rigidity in the system that governs, in order for something radical to come to fruition.

This, in congruence with visual literacy, adds a whole new dimension to the weight of Helvetica's legibility and what it means in relation to modern society. Its legibility becomes a piece of the puzzle of surveillance. Thus, Mun's typeface can be seen as a kind of camouflage, a natural process of evolution meant to evade the predatory gaze of surveillance programs. A poster from Mun's ZXX series during the initial release of the font states that "blowing the whistle on a war crime should not be a crime" (Fig. 5) in different cuts of ZXX, thereby exemplifying the typeface's role as a servant of whistleblowers, activists, or every day individuals who wish to keep their private thoughts their own.<sup>18</sup>

## **Helvetica & ZXX: Monotony & Disruption**

Even within its omnipresence and ability to trap designers in what seems like a positive feedback loop (when one sees Helvetica one wants to design more Helvetica) or to unconsciously rope in the public gaze and understanding of type under an umbrella of cautionary oneness, it still, as Frutiger theorized, exists as a typeface, as a universal medium for communication.<sup>19</sup> The graphic design collective Experimental Jetset optimistically theorized Helvetica can always be adapted to each individual's style, so the fear of it being the dominant, sole aesthetic is unfounded.<sup>20</sup> Within this paradox we can see reflected both the core values of Helvetica and how it is implemented by the different facets of people within a democracy, be it for capitalist gain, for government use, or for individual and artistic use, there will always be a balance of

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17 Krips, Henry. "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek." (2010): 91-102.

18 Mun, Sang. 2012. ZXX Type Specimen Video. Studio Mun. Accessed April 16, 2020.

19 Frutiger, Adrian. *Signs and Symbols: Their Design and Meaning*. New York: van Nostrand Reinhold (1989).

20 Hustwit, Gary, 2007.

abstraction of particularities and the manifestation of them. In this sense, one can argue that Helvetica can be equated to several parts of Žižek's criticism of democracy, his statement on its attempted standardization of individuals and its inept ability to do so in a complete manner.<sup>21</sup> This paradox results in the perpetual resurgence of particularities attributable to the very nature of humanity and all of its strangeness.

ZXX's incitement of optimism and universalism has a similar dependency on human interaction as Helvetica does. Its illumination comes from fascination and critique of its rate of success. Critics hinge its importance as a typeface on the surety of its disruptive ability, often becoming dismissive of the type after it has been deemed useless by those who have tested its mettle against computer softwares. However, one can deduce from the political climate when this typeface was released—and from the background of its creator—that its fundamental function as a font possesses a loftier goal than the surface level indicates. To understand Mun's intentions for this type project, we should examine his use of the word "disruption." One finds it difficult to believe that Mun, a former NSA agent, should be so naive as to think a single typeface can miraculously solve the problems of surveillance and invasion of privacy. Despite it being dismissed by some experts as a mere "art project," it does what art is meant to do: raise questions about the current human condition and analyze our state of being.

If we expand the definition of disruption beyond the fundamental function of ZXX as a typeface, we might understand he is disrupting not only NSA programs, but our perception of safety within a surveilled world, our complacency within a system where we seem content with being monitored and having our privacy invaded on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute basis. Žižek declared in his series of essays following the tragedy of 9/11, "We feel free because we lack the language to articulate our unfreedom."<sup>22</sup> ZXX alone cannot bear the brunt of the weight that comes with the title of the language of freedom, but perhaps if we heed Mun's call to become more aware and proactive within the surveilled state, we may yet stumble upon the words and sentences that

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21 Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. 1992.

22 Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London: Verso, 2012.

amount to something worth the feeling of freedom.

## Let the Eyes of Vigilance Never Be Closed

In examining of both Helvetica and ZXX through art historical, philosophical, and technocultural lenses, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse of how something as simple as a font can be used to articulate the complexities within a late capitalist, democratic, post-modern society. On one hand, Helvetica's pervasiveness in modern society leads us to the question whether or not we are already living in a world where universalism has been realized. On the other hand, ZXX's niche particularities challenges us to uncover the inner workings of systems that govern our lives, and question whether or not we are living in a caged simulation. There is the realm of Helvetica—the universal, the legible, the seemingly transparent, the abstracted commonality; and there is ZXX—the underground, the resistance, the skeptical. Democracy sits somewhere in between.

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