

premises. The first is that because Shostakovich's string quartets—15 in all—flew under the radar of suffocating Soviet scrutiny, the composer was able to fill them with music that was more “pure” and “personal” than the music of his symphonies—the implication being that the quartets are *the* key to a true understanding of Shostakovich and are somehow of greater value than most of his more famous and “public” works.

This is an argument clearly based on personal preference and enthusiasm. One could easily make the case, for example, that nothing could be more personal or revealing than the manner in which an artist responds to obstacles and duress. As Igor Stravinsky once wrote, “Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.” Lesser is so wedded to her theory of the quartets’ unique status that she casually dismisses the opinion of the distinguished conductor Maxim Shostakovich, the composer’s own son, who said of his father’s work, “His quartets and his symphonies—yes, it is the same circle of feelings, just on a different scale.”

The book’s second major premise is that readers will want to be told quite specifically what “we” hear and feel in each quartet. Lesser informs us that the Seventh Quartet, for example, “is not asking for sympathy, nor is it crying tears over its own sorrow,” and that “in the Adagio fourth movement [of the Third Quartet] we are dead.” She is certainly entitled to feel and hear whatever she likes, but as converts and zealots often do, she overestimates the interest to others of her particular “good news.”

Cultural historian Jacques Barzun once wrote that the critic must not “blur in the minds of his readers . . . the difference between words and music.” To the extent that Wendy Lesser has communicated her enthusiasm and encouraged readers to delve deeply into the Shostakovich quartets, she has done the music a service. To the extent that she has imposed her own limited and limiting interpretations on the reader, she has not.

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Typical Type

Reviewed by Sara Sklaroff

HERE’S A RIDDLE: WHAT IS so ubiquitous and generic that it barely registers in the mass consciousness, and yet so objectionable to some that it’s been publicly denounced as “fascist” and, simply, “crap”?

The answer is the typeface

Helvetica. Created in 1957 by two Swiss typographers, it is both a modernist icon and a workhorse default, at once retro and still in heavy use. It’s not derided in quite the same terms as typefaces such as Papyrus (think of those hideous *Avatar* subtitles) or—heaven forbid—the goofy script of Comic Sans. Still, to some graphic designers Helvetica is emblematic of crushing conformity, or, at the very least, a pitiful lack of creativity. American Apparel, Gap, and Crate & Barrel use it to hawk their wares—it has long been a favorite of corporations trying to seem friendly or down-to-earth. To others, Helvetica is typographic perfection, infinitely flexible and exquisitely modern, with a gorgeous interplay of positive and negative space.

This tension among the typeface’s many meanings was one of the themes of Gary Hustwit’s excellent 2007 documentary *Helvetica*, which featured many shots of New York City subway signage. But as design historian Paul Shaw explains in *Helvetica and the New York Subway System*, Helvetica has not always been the face of the city’s underground rail. Shaw delves into the question of why Standard, the typeface used in the 1960s modernization of the system’s graphics, was replaced by the very similar Helvetica. The book is also a concise history of the New York subway, a visual archive of a century’s worth of underground signs (some of which are still in use), and an impressive study of the conflict between the purity of design and the messiness of the real world.

New York City’s first subway line was opened

HELVETICA AND THE NEW YORK SUBWAY SYSTEM.

The True (Maybe) Story.

By Paul Shaw.
MIT Press.
131 pp. \$39.95



After decades of visual chaos, the typeface Helvetica brought at least the illusion of order to the New York City subway system.

by a private company in 1904. It soon had a rival; neither included the other's routes on its maps. In 1940, the city bought both systems and merged them with its own. The new system inherited the visual noise of all three: painted terracotta lettering, mosaic station names, porcelain enamel directional signs, and hand-lettered service notices, with no standardization whatsoever.

In 1957, New York designer George Salomon sent the city an unsolicited proposal for an integrated (and quite fetching) signage system based on the elegant sans serif typeface Futura and some unmissable fat directional arrows. The city declined to use the overall plan, but adopted Salomon's color-coded route map, the first to show the entire subway system at once. This would be the pattern for years to come: an acknowledgment that something had to be done about the chaos, but a lack of the wherewithal (money, political weight, courage) to see a comprehensive plan through. During the 1960s, cities such as Milan, London, and Boston redesigned their airport and subway graphics, and New York attempted to follow suit by hiring the design firm Unimark International and beginning an over-

haul using the Standard typeface. But the unmanageable sprawl of the subway system—not to mention the city's financial troubles in the early 1970s—thwarted designers' best intentions. The only aesthetic constant was an altogether different kind of signage: graffiti.

By the 1990s, however, Helvetica was everywhere. Why did it eventually trump all other typefaces? In large part because it *is* the ultimate default choice. Shaw lists the various letter-making equipment catalogued in the 1989 *MTA Sign Manual*, including machines used to produce digital type, phototype, and computer-based letters and stencils. "The only typeface that was available for all of these systems and methods," he writes, "was Helvetica."

At the same time that advancing technology assured Helvetica's fate in New York, the personal computer was bringing the typeface to a far wider audience. The masses now possess the means of typographic production, but there's no guarantee that good design will follow. Helvetica can indeed be a thing of beauty, but only in the right hands.

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