

A Recaptured Production

Introduction Peter Kapos Photographs Matthew Williams

Gary Hustwit has a new film out. Focusing on the approach of the seminal industrial designer Dieter Rams, *Rams* adds to the filmmaker's trilogy of design documentaries: *Helvetica* (2007), *Objectified* (2009) and *Urbanized* (2011). Although the film is presented as a portrait, Rams's preoccupations – the entwining of industrial design and consumerism, questions of sustainability and the future of industrial design itself – open the film to more general and far-reaching issues.





Gary Hustwit's first design documentary, *Helvetica*, was released in 2007.

I recently spoke with Hustwit about the new film and was struck by the connection between its making and his interest in 1960s design. As for many who take design seriously, the period's appeal to Hustwit lies in its openness to possibility. In part, this has to do with a certain utopianism – a general agreement among designers that they were designing for the future. But related to this, as a negative condition, is the fact that marketing's influence was yet to constrain designers in their relation to clients to the extent that it would in the following decades.

For Hustwit, the positivity and creative freedom of the 1960s are not sources of nostalgia so much as models. He makes films to his own brief, completing them to his satisfaction in as much time as they take to be done properly. *Rams* has been a year in editing, an unusually extended and open process allowing for continual feedback between the developing edit and what still remains to be shot. A similar pattern can be found in Hustwit's method of production through crowdfunding, which circumvents established

models, with all the limitations and compromises those entail, and thereby allows him to engage and build audiences directly.

Hustwit's practice of "punk" film-making, as he calls it, completes the critique of contemporary consumer society offered by Rams's reflections on design. The restless object world produced by the cult of novelty has resulted in alienation and ecological catastrophe. But since the 1970s, alternative practices, whether they be in industrial design or industrialised culture, have struggled to find viable forms. Presenting Rams's diagnosis of industrial design's complicity with consumer culture, Hustwit's film – in the agility of its production and craft – suggests another, better way of getting stuff done. What would design look like if practitioners took Rams's views seriously? It might look something like Hustwit's film.

Peter Kapos Is there a process that you follow in your films? Can you characterise the way you work?

Gary Hustwit With all the films, it usually just comes

down to "I can't believe the film doesn't already exist." I'm somebody who wants to watch films about design, and so with *Helvetica*, I couldn't believe there wasn't already a feature-length documentary about typography and graphic design. I self-funded that film, and friends and family helped out, because I wasn't going to go into a boardroom and try to get broadcasters on board for a film of 80 minutes talking about kerning. But it showed that there was an audience other than me for films about design.

Peter It's odd, isn't it? Because there's no shortage of publications on design, but there really aren't many films. Why do you think that is? Your films have proved that there is a market and that people are very happy to watch them.

Gary Since *Helvetica* came out in 2007, there have been around 30 documentaries and series, so I think it's changed slightly now. But in 2005, when I started working on *Helvetica*, I couldn't believe it. When I contacted people like Massimo Vignelli, Matthew Carter and the other designers in that film, no-one had asked them to be in a documentary before. Even with *Rams*, I expected that someone would be making a feature-length film about Dieter, particularly after the high-profile exhibits and the 2011 Phaidon book. But in this case, it was more Dieter's reluctance to be the subject of a documentary that was the reason it hadn't been done. I felt that all the books are amazing, but film can reach a different audience, and tell a different story about him and his philosophy of design and living. So I pitched to him on that and he semi-reluctantly agreed. That was three years ago.

Peter I was wondering whether you have a particular audience in mind for your films. Because, from the way you're describing them, it seems that you're the audience.

Gary Definitely. That's how I see it. I'm trying to make a film that can be enjoyed by people who have no idea who Dieter is, but which is hopefully also engaging for people who design for a living. But it's impossible to try to tailor something to a specific audience. Everybody has their own idea of what a film about Dieter Rams should be. I don't think about that while I'm making the film, as it's impossible to predict what people's expectations are.

Peter One of the things that it seems all your films share is a conversational aspect. I get the feeling, from the way your subjects talk, that they feel comfortable with you and that they maybe even know you. There's

a particular register, which feels very straightforward, direct and honest.

Gary Well, I'm really interested in them and what they do. And, you know, these projects are self-initiated. I'm not on assignment from the BBC to go interview this designer. I've flown half-way around the world to be there for an afternoon and I really want to know this stuff. I spend a lot of time in the conversations just getting the subjects to forget they're being filmed. The conversations can go on for hours, but we'll only use two or three minutes. It's funny – people tend to

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bad-mouth the “talking head” documentary, but I love watching people talk about things they're passionate about. I could watch that all day long.

Peter This conversational aspect of the films is also reflected in their structure.

Gary Yeah and that's a good thing. If I already knew what the conversation was going to be and knew everything about the subject matter, that would be the most boring film ever.

Peter So when you're making a film, you allow for that kind of openness of where it's going to end up?

Gary Oh, definitely. It changes with every conversation we have and every shoot we do. I don't start out with some sort of rigid structure and screenplay for the documentary. A documentary is really made from editing all that footage together and it's in the editing that the story comes out. A lot of times, we're overlapping the editing and interviews. So in this case, with *Rams*, once we're six months into editing, you start to see the gaps. You start to see, “Oh, wouldn't it be nice to have another designer come in right about now with the T3 radio and tell us exactly why, from a designer's standpoint, this thing was revolutionary?” And so I get on a plane and go to Tokyo.



Peter I feel that you can sense that in the films. That openness, which is ultimately aimed towards a kind of narrowing or defining, is similar to the process of design itself. Or more precisely, it's similar to the design process in the 1960s. The 1960s seem to recur in your films, both in *Helvetica* and with your interest in industrial design. What is it about that decade?

Gary I don't know. There's sometimes a fascination with the decade in which you were born – the music, design, popular culture and fashion of the 1960s are all things I come back to. But it's not a conscious decision.

Peter But what you've done in your filmmaking, in a way, is recover something of 1960s production. You've found a singular way of working, which releases you from the constraints that would ordinarily come to bear on this kind of production. If you think about Rams's career at Braun in the 60s, before the Gillette acquisition, there was an enormous amount of freedom in the studio. If you wanted to design something and put it into production, you only had to convince two people and you were off. It was completely speculative, open-ended and incredible. And Rams's role from the 70s to the 90s was about shielding the studio from increasingly destructive pressures.

Gary But if we look back at Rams's most iconic objects, which are now in design books and being auctioned off as masterpieces, they weren't wildly successful at the time. That is probably the reason for their scarcity now. These are things Braun didn't make that many of because consumers weren't ready, at least not on a mass level. Dieter had the freedom to help bring these things to life even if they didn't sell. And that's



a pretty unique situation. But they had certain products that were wildly successful and those subsidised the more esoteric products or hi-fi systems.

Peter That cross-subsidy is interesting: this idea that it's good business to have a whole section of your programme that is losing money and fund that with more successful lines. So shavers and photographic flashlights were paying for all the audio equipment in the 60s, which was actually losing the company money – and that made good business sense for them.

Gary I don't know. Did it?

Peter It did! Because I think they were totally committed to the idea of building a brand and having a programme. From that standpoint, it was good business but it wasn't good business from the point of view of Gillette, which thought that good business was about maximising profits. It's just different concepts of good business. I think that what you're doing with spending a year in the editing, in a way, is good business and in another way, it's horrendous business.

Gary True!

Peter That's a kind of utopian business and maybe people are coming back around to the realisation that actually, the bottom line isn't really what it's all about. That's something that a young designer could think about. I had a conversation with a young designer who told me that a good design was a design that stayed in production and sold. He wasn't interested in what it looked like, how it functioned, or any of the considerations that I think about when I think of good design. It's purely, "How pleased is the manufacturer?"

Gary It's the same thing in filmmaking too – on Netflix or the BBC there is one methodology and goal in the process. What I love about documentary as a medium is that it can be wildly diverse. If you look at how the technology has become more accessible in terms of cameras, editing systems and even distribution, you can make a documentary today for what you can put on your credit card. Filmmakers now have that ability to do it themselves and not be constrained by what would've been the situation 15 to 20 years ago.

Peter You funded *Rams* through Kickstarter, which is a different way of getting funding.

Gary Yeah, a portion of it. My background is in music and the first film projects I did were music documentaries. In those cases, it was very much about a relationship to the audience. You know, you had fans dying to see the films, and they wanted to buy the poster and T-shirt, and come to a screening and



support the process. So even before Kickstarter, we were doing something along those lines. The funding part is obviously necessary but when you put a project out there on Kickstarter all these possibilities open up that wouldn't if I were locked in the studio making this thing with no input from the audience. I'm not the world's foremost expert on Dieter Rams, so I want help and input.

Peter There's a beautiful symmetry of allowing the audience to become part of the production and also, in doing that, there's the opportunity for them to become part of the content of the film. But it's odd thinking about these different kinds of making in relation to the current situation of design. It feels like mass manufacturers don't have that kind of agility. There are constraints that bear upon the design process. That affects industrial design but also the way that visual communication generally now exists in the world. The considerations in marketing now are so horrendously constraining that they end up with this kind of very diluted result, trying to please the largest number of people all of the time. I think there's a connection between your interest in the 1960s and what you've created: the contemporary conditions of making which are very different from those in the 60s, obviously, but which have allowed for a similar kind of freedom.

Gary I would put it down more to the punk-rock DIY ethos and practice. At least in terms of my experience, which came out of working at punk-rock record labels and just building the companies, the events and the projects that we wanted to see, and that we couldn't get from corporate culture. So, for me, the Dieter Rams film is totally punk rock.

Peter How do you understand *Rams* in relation to your other films? Does it belong within a set, or is it doing something different?

Gary Formally it's doing something different. It doesn't, I think, look or feel like the other films. But it does have a lot in common with *Objectified*: some of the things we were talking about 10 years ago in that film are still unresolved. When it comes to issues like sustainability, I'm in some ways shocked that so little has changed. So some of the questions are the same, but obviously, Dieter has his own interpretation of them. It's the first time that I've been able to go into one person's story for 80 minutes. And so, by definition, it's going to be different from the other films. Working with Brian Eno also made it a much different process. There's some sort of commonality between his and Dieter's ideas about simplicity and complexity. When I finally got Brian to be part of the project, his music totally changed the way that

“For an 86-year-old who spends most of his time trimming bonsais, Dieter Rams's ideas are still incredibly relevant.”

I structured the film. A lot of his music is rhythmic but there's not a hard, percussive rhythm to it. So, when you put it together with visuals or multiple shots, you're not locked into a rhythmic editing style that's dictated by the music. A scene can be four seconds or it can be 40 seconds. There's no constraint. I think Brian's score freed me up to let the shots go on as long as they want, and simplify a lot of the scenes and areas of the film that needed clarity. In a sense, I'm also channelling Rams's principles into the making of the film. I don't think I could make a messy, cluttered film about Dieter Rams.

Peter Is there a particular aspect of design or industrial design that the film focuses on or is drawing attention to?

Gary I'd say it's more focused on Dieter's ideas and philosophy than it is a history of Braun or Vitsoe. Those companies are obviously hugely important parts of his life and I'm interested in the work that



Hustwit in his Brooklyn studio, where he is currently editing his new film, *Rams*.

he's done for them, but I'm also interested in exploring this relationship that we as consumers of products have with the creators of them. I knew all these products in the 60s and 70s when I was a kid and my family wasn't design-conscious – just an average southern-Californian family. I have memories of my alarm clock and the juicer that we had on the counter. My mom just sent me that juicer and it still works perfectly. We've somehow accepted that the objects we buy are not going to work after a few years, which is a false construct.

Peter Is there an element of anti-design in some of what Rams is now thinking about industrial design?

Gary I think so. It's just the basic question of, "Should this product exist?" which I think still needs to be asked. It's definitely a big part of the film's narrative because of Dieter's whole philosophy of "Less, but better." What's hard is that we're in an economic system that relies on constant consumption and anyone who says "consume less" is demonised. But I think it's valid, not just on a personal level, but also

on a planetary, sustainability level. It's important to talk about. And I think 99 per cent of people don't think about it. They don't consider what their purchases facilitate and the impact that they have. What do we really need to live on this planet at this point in time? We've seen these tidying-up trends recently, which encourage people to get rid of excess clutter and just live with what they need. I think it's a conversation that increasingly needs to be had.

Peter It seems that it's quite unusual these days for designers to comment and certainly to be critical.

Gary Dieter is from that generation of designers that did call out bad design. People got into fights over whether a design was good or bad and designers spoke their mind. Now there is a little bit of a culture of politeness within the design world.

Peter I wonder if it's because there doesn't seem to be so much at stake. Because the connection between design and maybe not politics, but some more social kind of activity seems to have been broken. Maybe it's generational.

Gary What's generational is also just the time. Post-Second World War, there was the reconstruction and optimism about what the world could be. Designers were asking if there was a way of making the world more democratic through design. It was a time of a lot of change but, in some ways, we're also going through a time of technological and social change now. It's one of the reasons I thought that a film about Dieter's ideas was timely. For someone who does not have a computer or a phone, he's incredibly well-read on current events. He's constantly talking about US politics, Trump and so on. For an 86-year-old who spends most of his time trimming bonsais in his backyard outside Frankfurt, I think his ideas are still incredibly relevant to everyone.

Peter Because I'm interested in the history of Braun design, it's led me to researching the [German post-war industrial design school] Ulm HfG and I was really surprised to learn that what I'd first thought was the work of a genius was actually something much more distributed between a whole group of people working in similar ways. What Braun did in the 60s in the way that they promoted Dieter Rams was partly a publicity effort. I think of him almost as an umbrella that covers a huge amount of other stuff.

Gary Definitely. Those are both things that we go into in the film: both the influence and participation of the Ulm school, and the collaborations that Braun had with the designers and students there, and also this idea of Dieter being put forth as an avatar for the new modern German design aesthetic. He looks back at it and wishes there had been more of an acknowledgement of the design team. Braun's promotion of Dieter really foreshadowed today's era of star designers. That's why people call him Mr Braun. The company put him forth as the personification of their design ethos and Dieter was made for the part.

Peter For a long time, to the public, Braun's design credits were only to Dieter Rams. Some of the designs that weren't by him were actually wrongly attributed to him. There were occasional credits to the "Design Department" but none of the other designers were named. The attribution to individual designers other than Dieter was the result of efforts on the part of other department members, culminating in a lawsuit in 1996. The question that I guess I'm working up towards is: why did you give the film the title of the name of just one person rather than that of an approach?

Gary It seemed the simplest solution to the design challenge. But you know, I get what you're saying. It's the collective versus the individual. And that can play out on both sides of design. And it's hard because it is political. Design is political.

Peter Equally, design history is political – how you frame it, what you emphasise, what you suppress.

Gary Oh, definitely. But with a film about someone like Dieter, there are people and companies and products and whole decades that we're just not going to be able to cover in any kind of an encyclopaedic way. Sometimes in order to tell a story, 99 per cent of that story has to be left out. It's never going to be all-encompassing.

Peter It sounds like part of the content of the film is a kind of self-critique of the myth, though.

Gary Half the time in the film we're just hanging out with Dieter as he does things like talk to design students in Munich, or work with Vitsoe in London to redesign the 601 chair. Just spending that time with Dieter and showing all that stuff does defuse the myth a little bit. He is someone who has an objective view of the 21st century from the standpoint of having rejected and refused to participate in the digital revolution. It's an interesting viewpoint to see someone who was so involved with consumer technology, who has watched it change human behaviour, and who is now just looking at it in horror. **END**

The UK premiere of Gary Hustwit's Rams is on 5 November 2018.

