Abstract: The Art of Design by Netflix

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A new documentary about design has the potential to propel the discipline into the pop culture firmament, but is its slickness too much to stomach for an audience keen to learn the realities of the discipline?

Photographer Platon Antoniou discusses some of his subjects, such as Barack Obama.

The final episode of *Abstract* profiles the interior and product designer Ilse Crawford.

The American film and television industry, perhaps in keeping with its taste for unlikely success stories and eccentric characters, has taken an interest in design. Influential Hollywood talent agencies are eager to represent artists and designers, with United Talent Agency (UTA) having founded its fine arts division in February 2015 to foster cross-pollination between visual creatives and film and entertainment professionals. Rem Koolhaas of OMA, Snarkitecture co-founder Daniel Arsham, and the Haas brothers are all equipped with Hollywood agents to connect them to new business opportunities in film and entertainment, and UTA recently doubled down on its investment in art and design, opening a new art space in downtown Los Angeles in September 2016 to act as a hub for design clients to network with show business collaborators.

On the surface, Hollywood's enthusiasm for contemporary art and design bodes well for the industry at large. It represents a major investment on the part of entertainment industry executives, who see a growing audience for design-focused storytelling and hold the power to push design into the pop-culture narrative – for those who struggle to explain their career at the dinner table, this may help. Design documentaries have found particular success on premium streaming services such as HBO GO and Amazon Prime: Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* (2007), *Objectified* (2009), and *Urbanized* (2011) documentaries explored graphic design, product design, and urban design and architecture respectively; *Indie Game* (2012) educated a wide audience on the struggles of game designers; *Art & Copy*

(2009) explained the ins and outs of advertising design; and *Finding Vivian Meier* (2013) told the story of a Chicago nanny whose street photography was only recognised when she failed to keep up payments on a storage space, leading to her negatives, prints and 8mm film being auctioned. It is in a similar vein that Netflix has now released *Abstract: The Art of Design*, an eight-episode series profiling influential designers from across eight different disciplines.

Created by Scott Dadich, formerly editor-in-chief at US *Wired*, *Abstract* offers a slick, highly polished image of design, not least in its own production. The first two episodes premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, followed

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by a global full-season release on Netflix less than a month later. With the help of producer Jon Kamen, CEO of the RadicalMedia production company, *Abstract* was distributed to an audience far beyond the typical reach of the design industry: Netflix does not release viewing figures, but boasts of having 93 million members in more than 190 countries. The episodes are directed by four different filmmakers, including celebrated documentarians Morgan Neville (*20 Feet From Stardom*), Brian Oakes (*The James Foley Story*), Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi (*Meru*) and Richard Press (*Bill Cunningham New York*).

The selection of featured designers are similarly all-star, at least in terms of representing a commercially viable selection of design talents: architect Bjarke Ingels, set designer Es Devlin, interior and product designer Ilse Crawford, graphic designer Paula Scher, automotive designer Ralph Gilles, shoe designer Tinker Hatfield, illustrator Christoph Niemann and photographer Platon Antoniou.

Abstract is intended to be design's pop-culture poster child and to offer viewers a window onto how the industry works. Interviews with each creative profess to offer a candid insight into the designer's life and work, but every episode of *Abstract* follows the same basic editorial formula: the designer in the spotlight shows their best work; tells the story of how they started in their field; mentions the collaborators they met along the way; and discusses challenging new projects they are currently working on, be it a new magazine cover, car design, or building. Devlin's episode, for instance, is loosely structured around a commission to produce an installation for the 2016 Belgian Stadstriennal, which will stand apart from her work as a stage designer for theatre and concerts. "There's an element of terror, because Kanye is not going to be there. Beyoncé is not going to be there," says Devlin. "I've got to make something that is worth watching on its own."

Although the directorial style varies from one episode to another, Dadich's hand seems clear throughout. During his tenure as *Wired's* creative director, and then editor-in-chief, Dadich moulded the magazine into a multi-platform brand,

All photographs taken from *Abstract*, courtesy of Netflix.

complete with an iPad app, internal creative agency, and the Wired by Design conference. Before leaving the magazine earlier this year, Dadich told readers the show "isn't *Wired* on Netflix". He did, however, announce *Abstract* in a *Wired* editor's letter, telling readers: "I can guess what you're thinking, because I have watched a lot of design documentaries. Restrained, polished, pretty – so many of them look like a moving version of a coffee-table book. You've got softly lit interviews, esoteric conversations, and subtle tracking shots of wide landscapes beneath unobtrusive music. Most of it is clean, minimal, and boring as hell. We're not doing that. My partners and fellow executive producers – Morgan Neville (who won an Oscar for *20 Feet From Stardom*) and RadicalMedia's Dave O'Connor – and I built a team of today's best-known documentarians. Every episode stands as its own film, adapting the design sensibilities of our subjects."

In one sense, Dadich has succeeded. *Abstract* is more visually compelling, and the episodes' cinematography and art direction more dynamic, than a typical coffee-table book style documentary. Each opening credits sequence, for instance, is a bespoke production for its subject: Niemann's fizzes with illustration; Hatfield's cycles through juicy, high-production publicity shots of shoes; while Scher's is a kinetic symphony of fat typography and jittering album covers. But the series' greatest strength – its ability to get a wide audience excited about design and

those behind it – is also its more glaring weakness. *Abstract's* portrayal of a life in design feels too glossy. Devlin, for instance, muses thusly: "The word 'show' suggests that you're revealing something. It doesn't suggest finding. And because I do what I do every day, I have to make sure the showing of things is in itself the seeking for things." While this and similarly gnomic comments about design abound throughout *Abstract*, there is limited discussion of the rejection, failure, or financial pressures that also form an essential part of any design practice. The Ingels episode, for instance, gamely – albeit briefly – brings up potential criticisms of its subject's work ("My nine-year-old does more interesting shit in *Minecraft*"), but Ingels' responses are presented in such as way as to seem trivial and lacking in self-reflection: "Some of the criticism has been that our buildings are too cheap.

The show goes too far to present design as aspirational and alluring. More mundane moments that might suggest a side of design that lies away from big, glossy client meetings are too few.

But that's because, honestly, they've been cheap buildings," and "If you go beyond indifferent, you will awaken a response in both extremes." Meanwhile Tinker Hatfield, Nike's vice president for design and special projects, is unlikely to be a helpful case study for understanding the financial pressures under which most

designers operate. Nike does not reveal its R&D budget, but given that its revenues for the 2016 fiscal year ran to $32.4bn, it is likely to be considerable.

Rather than grappling with the everyday realities of design, *Abstract* ducks the challenge and glamorises its subject matter: Hatfield meets with Andre Agassi and Michael Jordan, while Antoniou takes inspiring trips to Pavos in Greece and Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In each episode, the designer faces some sort of challenge, but the stakes never feel high. No designer seems to face financial risk or embarrassment if a proposed design is not successful. Hatfield, for example, is seen working on making the self-lacing shoes featured in *Back to the Future II* a reality with the help of Nike's research and development team. Despite the stress that must come from maintaining the product design quality of a brand on this scale, the viewer doesn't feel the pressure of a deadline. Instead, we see interview clips with *Back to the Future* star Michael J. Fox, and basketball player Michael Jordan reflecting on his experiences of working with Hatfield. "I never wanted heavy shoes," notes Jordan. "I always wanted to feel light on my feet." The show, it should be said, is not heavy on close analysis.

The closest *Abstract* comes to showing tension or professional struggle is in its first episode, which features the illustrator Christoph Niemann. Here, Niemann introduces his creative process in his Berlin workspace, where he sits down to draw with no distractions.

Graphic designer Paula Scher discusses typography, brand logos and her work for the Public Theater in episode six.

Berlin-based illustrator Christoph Niemann is tasked with designing a cover for *The New Yorker*.

Tasked with designing a cover for *The New Yorker* that communicates the multi-dimensional complexity of virtual reality on a simple two-dimensional magazine, Niemann reveals the frustration all designers feel. He rejects drafts, goes through old designs that his art school professor disliked, and walks around the neighbourhood to give his mind a break. "This is not, like, a coy thing to say, 'Oh, I don't believe I'm talented,'" says Niemann. "This is real. Being absolutely painfully aware of how you're not good enough to do something on command." The best moment comes when Neville encourages Niemann to reveal more, but he hesitates, telling the director: "Honestly, nobody wants authenticity." Ironically, this feels like the most authentic moment in the series as a whole.

Abstract is meant to motivate and educate its viewers ("Step inside the minds of the most innovative designers in a variety of disciplines and learn how design impacts every aspect of life," promises the trailer), but its focus on illustrious careers that are depicted as hopping from one success to another is intimidating. Rather than inspire future designers, its presentation of seemingly effortless success risks becoming discouraging. What might have proven more effective in motivating an audience are the accounts of failure that might humanise industry stars such as Ingels or Antoniou – stories that shatter the illusion that they are exceptions to the rule. We never hear, for instance, about proposals that Ingels pitched,

but which were never built. Here, *Abstract* feels less candid than Ingels' own website, where the "Idea" category of projects – those which never progressed beyond a concept – contains 45 proposals, far outweighing the smaller number of projects included within "In Progress" (26), "Under Construction" (18), or "Completed" (26). When even Ingels (whom the architecture critic Alexandra Lange memorably skewered in a column for *Dezeen*: "It's easy to make fun of Bjarke Ingels on Instagram […] His Instagram has a lot to do with the architecture of self-promotion, but little to do with actual building") provides a more honest voice on the realities of contemporary design, *Abstract* seems in serious trouble.

In part, this lack of candour flows from the decision to spotlight more traditional – and more glamorous – areas of design, and leave out emerging fields that might be more deserving of attention. Less commercially driven disciplines such as social design, speculative design or network design are conspicuously absent, and the small amount of attention given toward the future of design – Niemann creates an app, Devlin works with LED light shows, Gilles discusses self-driving cars – feels like a sop. *Abstract* fulfils its ambition of making its subject matter accessible and alluring, but in so doing it shortchanges the discipline, stripping it of complexity and nuance. And that's the problem in a nutshell. Given Netflix's backing, *Abstract* will act as an outreach programme for design, introducing the

field to many who would not otherwise engage with the discipline. In itself, this is commendable – there is nothing wrong with appealing to a mass audience and it is to be expected that *Abstract* would need to sugar the pill in order to achieve this. But the show goes too far in its efforts to present design as aspirational and alluring. More mundane moments that might suggest a side of design that lies away from big, glossy client meetings are too few and far between. It is telling then that it is one of these moments – Crawford teaching at Design Academy Eindhoven – that provides a neat assessment of design at large. "Relationships can be a bit messy," notes Crawford, speaking to her student Simón Ballen Botero about a project that saw him try to forge a working relationship with a traditional brush-maker. "You have to sort of manage through that." *Abstract* might have benefited from following Crawford's advice more closely – the best approach to messiness or complexity is not to hide it away, but to grapple with it. Season two, perhaps?

Abstract: The Art of Design premiered on Netflix in February 2017.