

*Looking for a font that's as clean and clear as Helvetica but not quite so cliché? Check out these Helvetica-with-a-twist alternatives.*

BY STEPHEN COLES

# beyond HELVETICA >

*Helvetica is classic.*

*Helvetica is played.*

Each of these statements is true, to an extent. On its 50th birthday, the world's most recognizable typeface starred in a film that documents both its timelessness and its omnipresence. The movie is filled with salient quotes from the design cognoscenti who either praise Helvetica's perfection of design or deem it as pervasive and empty as air. Soon after Matthew Carter says that Helvetica can't be improved, Erik Spiekermann, when asked why the typeface is so popular, quips, "Why is bad taste ubiquitous?"

Few topics inspire such diverging opinions among designers, yet no one would argue with Helvetica's storied place in design history. Helvetica was released at a time when advertisers and corporations were eager for a clean, modern alternative to the happy-go-lucky type that was so prevalent in the first half of the century. In 1957, Max Miedinger, under the direction of Eduard Hoffmann, drew Neue Haas Grotesk. After leading type foundry Linotype changed its name to Helvetica, it became an instant hit—the most popular metal typeface by far—and was emulated by all Linotype's competitors. By the phototype era, nearly every foundry had its own version of Helvetica with names like Triumvirate, Helios or Megaron.

Helvetica's dominance continued into the digital era. It's always been instantly available to graphic designers, pre-installed on every Mac and a staple of the desktop-publishing toolset since the dawn of PostScript, when Adobe included the font with every PostScript interpreter.

Bundled software is often considered worthless, but Helvetica is arguably the most respectable of the "default" fonts. It's a safe, neutral choice—and that can be a good thing. For many, typography is more about content than style. Fans of typographer and critic Beatrice Yvard will tell you (hat type should communicate without distraction. Helvetica, with its simple, unadorned forms, is the perfect crystal goblet: pure and clear. Even its ubiquity contributes to its neutrality—letters so common they become invisible.

Still, invisibility isn't always appropriate, particularly in advertising or branding where individuality is the prime objective. With that in mind, consider the following alternatives. Most share Helvetica's pedigree but offer something different—whether it's style, warmth or typographic features like small caps or a broader range of weights and widths.

COOL,  
CRISP,  
CLEAN

The first sans serifs, released in the early 1800s, were called grotesques because they were considered awkward by those accustomed to the traditional serif. Helvetica is often classified as a "neo-grotesque," borrowing the streamlined finish found in geometric typefaces like Futura, but maintaining the general structure and proportions of the first grotesques. Much of Helvetica's appeal comes from this cold, almost clinical modernity, but there are other, less obvious, sans serif typefaces in the neo-grot category. ▾

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 234567890

Light, Roman, Bold, Black, Extra Black  
Roman, Bold, Black, Extra Black

Light Ultra Cnd, Ultra Cnd, Light Cnd, Cnd, Bold Cnd  
Ext, Bid Ext, Bick Ext, Extra BlcU Ext  
Light Cnd, Cnd, Bold Cnd, Ext, Bold Ext

## UNIVERS

PUBLISHED BY LINOTYPE -

Univers is the masterpiece of one of type design's masters, Adrian Frutiger. Its 27 styles go from Ultra Condensed Thin to *Extra Extended Black*, but still give an impression of steadiness and homogeneity when combined.

Why it's not **Helvetica**: Univers boasts better uniformity among styles because Frutiger drew all the weights and widths at the same time. In some ways, Univers is more spare than Helvetica, containing none of the elements which might be considered **Helvetica's** affectations, such as the tail on the 'a' or beard on the 'G.' Univers' stroke endings are slightly angled rather than horizontal.

FF SCHULBUCH >  
PUBLISHED BY FONTFONT

# Groteska

Just van Hossums *tr* Schulbuch is a font set based on the historical textbook types used in Germany and Bavaria. You can see it put to line use by the Design Museum of London at [www.designmuseum.org](http://www.designmuseum.org).

Why it's not **Helvetica**: Vintage Deutsch cachet. The Xord (North) variant is the closest relative of Helvetica, but sports a single-story 'a' and tailed '!' Moving further afield, the stricter FF Schulbuch Sued includes some unique forms.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 234567890

Normal, Fett

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 234567890

Book, Book Heavy

< NEUZEIT S  
PUBLISHED BY LINOTYPE

Wilhelm C. Pischner's geometric Neuzeit Grotesk preceded Helvetica by more than 30 years. As an alternative for large bodies of text, the more humanist Neuzeit S was introduced by Linotype-Hell AG in 1966.

Why it's **not Helvetica**: Neuzeit has a gentle, almost Avenir-ish geometry. Sadly, there are only two weights.

HELDUSTRY >  
PUBLISHED BY URW

In 1978, prolific phototype designer Phil Martin added "just the right touch of Eurostile's squareness" to Helvetica and created a new typeface for a cable television news network.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** You've probably never seen it—With its boxy build, Heldustry makes a good pairing with a squarish serif like Melior,

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 234567890

Regular, Medium, **Demi**, **Bold**

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 234567890

Leicht, Normal, **Fett**  
*Light*, *Regular*, **Bold**

< AKKURAT  
PUBLISHED BY LINETO

Laurenz Brtinner's pragmatic take on the text sans serif is solid and reliable. Released in 2004, it's still obscure in the U.S., but it has a loyal following in Europe—especially in Lineto's home country where the foundry is a mainstay of contemporary Swiss typography.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** Akkurat's strokes modulate less than Helvetica's, meaning there are fewer thicks and thins, giving it a very even tone throughout each letterform. The distinctive italic has a very subtle slope and features a single-story 'a.' Other characteristic glyphs include a straight-legged 'r,' a double-story 'g' and a tailed 'j.'

PARALUCENT >  
PUBLISHED BY DEVICE FONTS

Rian Hughes is known for his stylized display faces. Paralucent is his first text sans, but it still shows signs of his distinctive touch, from the large round 'i' dots and wedge terminals to the daring lowercase 'g.' Paralucent is a very modern take on the grotesque, designed to be more consistent than Helvetica, but certainly not sterile. It's elegant enough for headlines and sufficiently robust for text.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** Where do we start? Paralucent is more square than round, with an extra large x-height and extra tight spacing (we recommend you loosen it up for small copy). Special attention was paid to the negative space between characters to give Paralucent a more even color. A stencil version is available.

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890

Thin, Ext Light, Light, **Medium**, **DemiBold**, **Bold**, **Heavy**  
*Thin*, *Ext Light*, *Light*, **Medium**, **DemiBold**, **Bold**, **Heavy**  
Thin, Ext Light, Light, **Medium**, **DemiBold**, **Bold**, **Heavy** Condensed  
Extra Light, **Medium**, **Heavy** Stencil

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
12345678901234567890

Light, Book, Medium, **Bold**, **Heavy**  
Light, Book, *Medium*, **Bold**, **Heavy**

< GALAXIE POLARIS  
PUBLISHED BY VILLAGE

If there's a model for a contemporary approach to neutrality, it would be Galaxie Polaris. Mastered in multilingual OpenType with a full set of numerals, case-sensitive punctuation, and a multitude of dingbats and symbols, it's a workhorse sans with the modern designer in mind.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** Galaxie Polaris exudes a 21st century modernism, rather than that of the 1950s and '60s. The weight iteration is more even than Helvetica's, and there's a much larger complement of glyphs.

## GETTING WARMER

Following the slick sterility of the Helvetica era, there's a new movement to return to type's roots. Here are some older grotesques marked by idiosyncrasies and irregularities. They feel warmer and less manufactured, well-suited for delivering a subject matter that calls for a handcrafted spirit. ▾

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz 1234567890

Light, Roman, Bold, **Black**  
Light, Roman, Bold, **Black**

## < BASIC COMMERCIAL PUBLISHED BY LINOTYPE

Appearing in hot metal at the turn of the 20th century, Basic Commercial (like Akzidenz-Grotesk) is based on designs that influenced all the modern grotesques that followed. Basic Commercial was distributed for many years in the U.S. under the name Standard Series, which is seen most notably in Massimo Vignelli's signac for the New York City subway.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** Basic Commercial's angled stroke endings ('S,"C,"e') open up the counters (interior white space) and add life. Its taller ascenders lend an elegance-

## FF BAU > A FONTFONT, PUBLISHED BY FSI

Helvetica is cold and calculated, but its roots lie in much quirkier material. Its earliest direct ancestor, known simply as Grotesk, was introduced around 1880. Christian Schwartz updated the family for contemporary needs without rationalizing away the spirit and warmth of the original. FF Bau is named for The Bauhaus school, which chose Grotesk as the main workhorse for its printing shop, and used it for the vast majority of the designers' classic experiments in asymmetrical typography.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** FF Bau simply feels older with its optional text figures, its double-story 'g,' and a lowercase 'a' that keeps its tail in the heavy weights.

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
12345678901234567890

Regular, **Medium, Bold, Super**  
Regular, **Medium, Bold, Super**

# Groteska

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz1234567890

Light, Regular, **Bold, Black**  
ExtraCond,Light Cond, Condensed, **Bold Ext**

## < MONOTYPE GROTESQUE PUBLISHED BY MONOTYPE

A British family from the 1900s, MT Grotesque's 10 very different styles read like a timeline of typefaces that would arrive many years later—Bell Gothic, Trade Gothic, Helvetica—but none of those match its warmth and character. Set it big, and you'll get what we mean.

**Why it's not Helvetica:** Delightfully irregular, MT Grotesque is a type that shows signs of imperfectly cut metal.

ARS REGION >  
PUBLISHED BY ARS TYPE  
(AVAILABLE AT FONTSHOP)

# Groteska

A new release from Dutch designer Angus R. Shamal, Region was inspired by the early types of the prolific American typesetter Robert Hunter Middleton. Shamal calls it the "sum of everything I've always liked and appreciated in a 'workhorse' sans serif."

Why it's not Helvetica: Region would be cold and crisp if it weren't for the unusual, soft stroke connections on letters like the 'G,' V and 'k.' It also has a lowercase 'g' that takes FF Meta's lead. Unlike most grotesques, this family includes small caps.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz  
12345678901234567890

Regular, Bold  
REGULAR, BOLD

# Groteska

< FIGGINS  
PUBLISHED BY SHINNTYPE

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz!234567890

Roman, *Italic*, Semibold, **Bold**

Figgins is also brand new, but comes from the oldest of sources. Nick Shinn based this sans on a sample from an 1836 specimen book that displayed one of the earliest known examples of a sans serif typeface. Figgins is unique in that its finish is very clean, but its bones are based on an antique concept of what a sans should be. This makes for some unexpected letterforms, like the audacious 'Q,' saggy-bellied 'a' and quirky italics.

Why it's not Helvetica: Figgins comes with six figure styles, small caps and a coordinated serif family: Scotch Modern.

FB TITLING GOTHIC >  
PUBLISHED BY THE FONT BUREAU

# Groteska

Designed by David Berlow as a custom family for publications like GQ, Titling Gothic was just recently unleashed to the public. The family is an extremely versatile series of nearly 50 styles inspired by an old wood type called Railroad Gothic.

Why it's not Helvetica: Titling Gothic is made specifically for headlines. Every possible width you could need is included, from towering Skyline Thin to a hefty Extended Black. Titling Gothic achieves an antique, American flavor without feeling maudlin.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz1234567890

Thin, Light, Regular, Standard, Med, **Bid**, **Blk**  
Stylte, Compressed, Condensed, Narrow, Normal, Wide, Ext

# Groteska

THE TIMELESS CLASSIC  
< NEUE HELVETICA  
PUBLISHED BY LINOTYPE

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz1234567890

Ultra Light, Thin, Light, Roman, **Bold**, **Heavy**, **Black**  
Ultra Light, *Thin*, *Light*, Roman, **Bold**, **Heavy**, **Black**  
Ultra Light, Thin, Light, Roman, **Bold**, **Heavy**, **Black**, **Extra Black**  
Ultra Light, Thin, Light, Roman, **Bld**, **Hvy**, **Black**

Despite all the substitutes, sometimes the old reliable is still the best bet. Neue Helvetica (German for "New") is the most complete and usable set of Helvetica fonts. Over the years, the Helvetica family was expanded to include many different weights, but these were not very well coordinated. In 1983, D. Stempel AG redesigned and digitized Neue Helvetica for Linotype and made it a self-contained font family.

# >> Q&A WITH GARY HUSTWIT

During TypeCon2007, writer Stephen Coles chatted with "Helvetica" film creator Gary Hustwit about designers, movies and typefaces.



Your initial concept for the film came from walking around the streets of New York, listening to music and looking at type. I think you succeeded in delivering that experience to the audience. Was it difficult to translate those visuals to film? How do you shoot letters, which are essentially static, and make them feel alive?

It was important for us to show those letters in the context of how people interact with them and try to capture the movement of urban life. If you notice in the film, there's usually plenty of "action" surrounding the words we focus on. You see words on the sides of trucks or on doors being opened or the roof of a bus. And even if the type is stationary, there are usually people moving around it, walking in front of it, or through their motions revealing the type in some way.

For many, the film is as much a tribute to graphic design in general as it is to Helvetica specifically, and a great way to introduce design to those outside the field. Do you get the same feeling? Do you think there is enough interest from a general audience to give "Helvetica" a wider release?

I made the film for an audience of one, really: me. I personally wanted to know more about Helvetica, more about the people who design type and the graphic designers who use it. I think that I probably could've made a film which appealed to a larger audience, if that's what I'd wanted to do. But I didn't. And once you finish a film, the rest is sort of out of your hands, in terms of the way it's received, the audience it finds. I'd rather have a film that naturally finds the audience that fits it, rather than "go mainstream," which usually entails throwing a ton of marketing money behind a film.

You've worked with a lot of musicians in this film and your other films. How do you think musicians compare with designers?

Designers are a little more organized, but they're both similar in a lot of ways. A lot of the designers I've met are either in bands or they DJ, or music packaging design

has been a big part of their careers. And most musicians I've met also have a strong design sense; they care about expressing their music visually. When I told Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth that I was doing a film about Helvetica, he looked a little nonplussed and said, "Yeah, well, I've always rocked the CJaramond."

Fontmakers often say they never know what will be a hit. The film talks about how Helvetica just seemed to arrive at the right time. Does marketing play much of a role in what fonts people use, or is it all about what works for "this moment" in design?

When the Haas Type Foundry created Neue Haas Grotesk (the original name of Helvetica), they were simply trying to compete in the Swiss market with Akzidenz-Grotesk, the German typeface marketed by Berthold. They didn't have aspirations of world domination; they simply wanted to create a typeface to compete in their own backyard, a homegrown Swiss design for Swiss designers. It wasn't until German companies like Stempel and Linotype changed the name to Helvetica and started marketing it globally in the '60s that it took off. Swiss design was trendy, and they capitalized on that. So I think it was a combination of timing and marketing efforts that led to its initial success, along with distribution through the dominant technologies of the day, like the Linotype machine.

In "Helvetica" we get to meet some design superstars many of us know only from books. What surprised you about their personalities? Who among them would you most likely have a drink with?

Well, I've already had quite a few drinks with Michael C. Place of Build, and Erwin, Marieke and Danny of Experimental Jetset, and the Norm guys, and of course David Carson. But one thing I noticed is that when we went to the designers' homes and studios to film the interviews, the older generation, like Vignelli, Crouwel and Carter, were much better hosts! They made us espresso, baked cookies, brought out sandwiches, wine—really! The younger designers were like, "Uh ... there's some water over there if you want it"

Has Times New Roman's agent called asking when you'll do a film about him? He considers himself much more dynamic and storied.

I've discovered that Mike Parker, legendary type figure and former director of development at Mergenthaler Linotype, is Times New Roman's agent. He pulled me aside at TypeConzooy in Seattle and pitched me on a film about Times' story. After he glanced both ways to make sure no one overheard him, he said, "There's a murder involved. ..."



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