

13 ways of

looking at a

Typeface

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Typeface

Michael Bierut

FOR THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF MY CAREER, I worked for Massimo Vignelli, a designer who is legendary for using a very limited number of typefaces. Between 1980 and 1990, most of my projects were set in five fonts: Helvetica (naturally), Futura, Garamond No. 3, Century Expanded, and, of course, Bodoni.

Helvetica Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh

Futura Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh

Garamond No. 3 Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh

Century Expanded Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh

Bodoni Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh

For Massimo, this was an ideological choice, an ethical imperative. “In the new computer age,” he once wrote, “the proliferation of typefaces and type manipulations represents a new level of visual pollution threatening our culture. Out of thousands of typefaces, all we need are a few basic ones, and trash the rest.” For me, it became a time-saving device. Why spend hours choosing between Bembo, Sabon and Garamond No. 3 every time you needed a Venetian Roman? For most people — my mom, for instance — these were distinctions without differences. Why not just commit to Garamond No. 3 and never think about it again? My Catholic school education must have well prepared me for this kind of moral clarity. I accepted it gratefully.

Then, after a decade, I left my first job. Suddenly I could use any typeface I wanted, and I went nuts. On one of my first projects, I used 37 different fonts on 16 pages. My wife, who had attended

Catholic school herself, found this all too familiar. She remembered classmates who had switched to public school after eight years under the nuns: freed at last from demure plaid uniforms, they wore the shortest skirts they could find. “Jesus,” she said, looking at one of my multiple font demolition derbies. “You’ve become a real slut, haven’t you?”

It was true. Liberated from monogamy, I became typographically promiscuous. I have since, I think, learned to modulate my behavior — like any substance abuser, I learned that binges are time-consuming, costly, and ultimately counterproductive — but I’ve never gone back to five-typeface sobriety. Those thousands of typefaces are still out there, but my recovery has required that I become more discriminating and come up with some answers to this seemingly simple question: why choose a particular typeface? Here are thirteen reasons.

1.

Because it works

Some typefaces are just perfect for certain things. I've specified exotic fonts for identity programs that work beautifully in headlines and even in text, but sooner or later you have to set that really tiny type at the bottom of the business reply card. This is what Franklin Gothic is for. Careful, though: some typefaces work too well. Frutiger has been used so much for signage programs in hospitals and airports that seeing it now makes me feel that I'm about to get diagnosed with a brain tumor or miss the 7:00 to O'Hare.



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Helvetica is a typeface that has been used quite broadly, especially for logos, and these are just part of them — from local brand to worldwide brand, it's really hard to escape without winking their eyes on any Helvetica fonts.



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Why do people use Helvetica a lot? Because it just works quite well. The geometric shapes give it a bold, but clear look. Its meaningless characteristics makes Helvetica a universal typeface for any design projects.

2.

Because you like its history

I've heard of several projects where the designer found a font that was created the same year the client's organization was founded. This must give the recommendation an aura of manifest destiny that is positively irresistible. I haven't had that luck yet, but still try to find the same kind of evocative alignment. For instance, I was never a fan of Aldo Novarese's Eurostyle, but I came to love it while working on a monograph on Eero Saarinen: they both share an expressiveness peculiar to the postwar optimism of the 1950's.



The first version of Helvetica was developed in 1957. The 1950s was a period that most parts of the world have recovered from World War II and people could spend more time on their daily life aspects like technology, arts and so on.

The 1950s was known as the golden age of television, so new platform requires new fonts, and abstract expressionism also became the most influential art movements in that period.

*A TV was built by
Mr F. D. Straford
in 1957.*

*The Rothko
No. 14 hangs at
SF-MoMA.*

3.

Because you like its name

Once I saw a project in a student portfolio that undertook the dubious challenge of redesigning the Tiffany's identity. I particularly disliked the font that was used, and I politely asked what it was. "Oh," came the enthusiastic response, "that's the best part! It's called Tiffany!" On the other hand, Bruce Mau designed Spectacle, the book he created with David Rockwell, using the typeface Rockwell. I thought this was funny.

Initially, Helvetica was named Neue Haas Grotesk. In order to make this font more international, its name was changed to Helvetica in 1960, which means Swiss in Latin. And yes, Helvetica was born in Switzerland.

~~Neue Haas Grotesk~~

Helvetica

4.

Because of who designed it

Once I was working on a project where the client group included some very strong-minded architects. I picked Cheltenham, an idiosyncratic typeface that was not only well-suited to the project's requirements, but was one of the few I know that was designed by an architect, Bertram Goodhue. Recently, I designed a publications program for a girls' school. I used a typeface that was designed by a woman and named after another, Zuzana Licko's Mrs. Eaves. In both cases, my clients knew that the public would be completely unaware of the story behind the font selection, but took some comfort in it nonetheless. I did too.

Helvetica was designed by Max Miedinger (left) and Eduard Hoffmann (right). Miedinger was a typesetter, typographer and freelance graphic designer. And he had got more than 30 years' design experience when he was designing Helvetica with Hoffmann, the man who founded the Haas Typefoundry.



5.

Because it was there

Sometimes a typeface is already living on the premises when you show up, and it just seems mean to evict it. “We use Baskerville and Univers 65 on all our materials, but feel free to make an alternate suggestion.” Really? Why bother? It’s like one of those shows where the amateur chef is given a turnip, a bag of flour, a leg of lamb and some maple syrup and told to make a dish out of it. Sometimes it’s something you’ve never used before, which makes it even more fun.

THERE ARE MANY REASONS

WHY

Helvetica is so

WIDESPREAD.

THE MOST OBVIOUS BEING THAT

a few weights

HAVE BEEN BUNDLED WITH

THE MAC OS FOR YEARS.

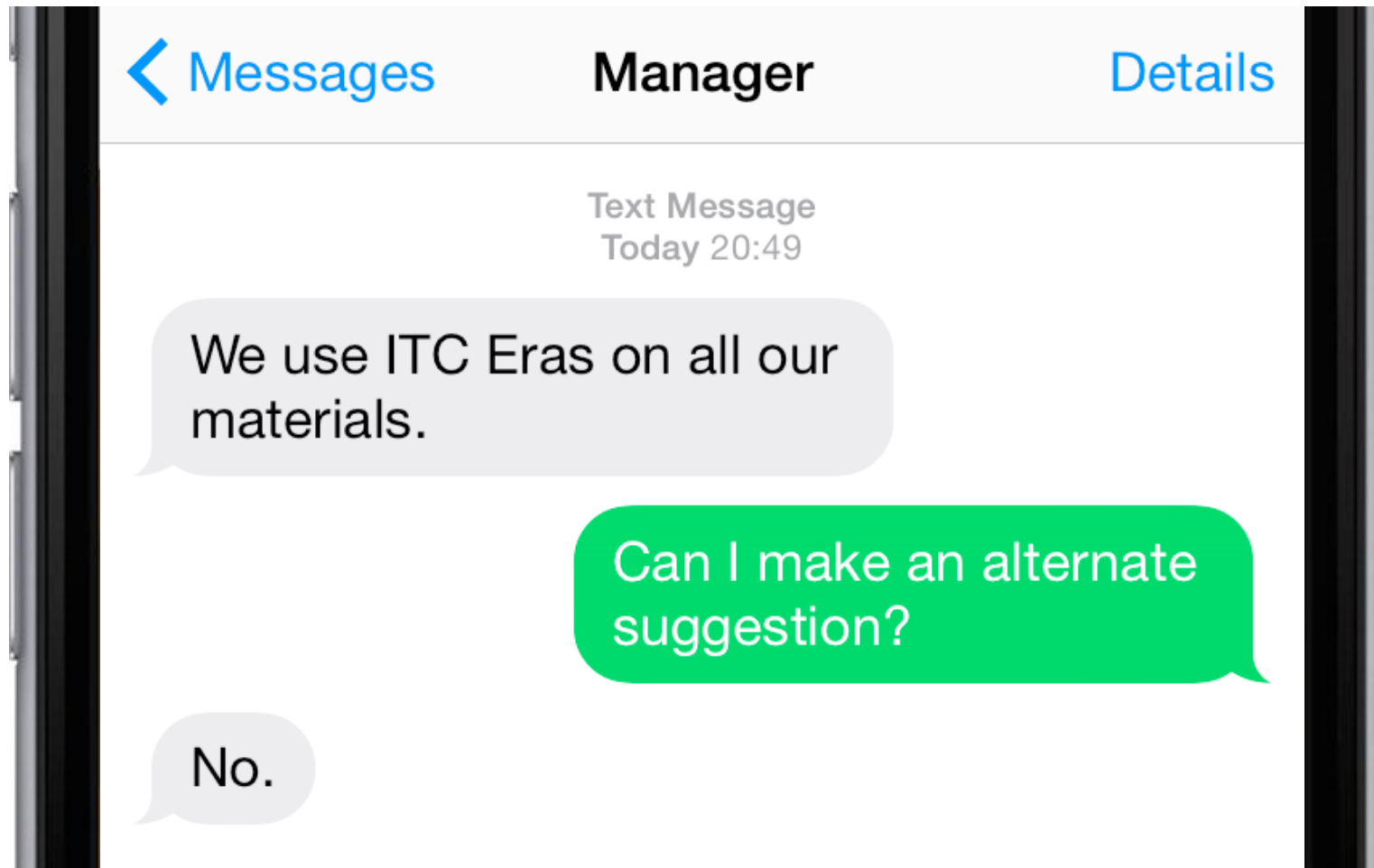
BY

Stephen Coles

6.

Because they made you

And sometimes it's something you've never used before, for good reason.



This is when blind embossing comes in handy.

7.

Because it reminds you
of something

Whenever I want to make words look straightforward, conversational, and smart, I frequently consider Futura, upper and lower case. Why? Not because Paul Renner was straightforward, conversational, and smart, although he might have been. No, it's because 45 years ago, Helmut Krone decided to use Futura in Doyle Dane Bernbach's advertising for Volkswagen, and they still use it today. One warning, however: what reminds you of something may remind someone else of something else.

Meet the cast:

A B C D
E F G H I J K
L M N O P
Q R S T U V
W X Y Z

Now see the movie:

Helvetica

A documentary film by Gary Hustwit

[illegible]

8.

Because it's beautiful

The beauty of Helvetica is more discoverable when you compare it with its competitors such as Arial.

When you pay attention to the letter "G", "Q" and "R", then you can tell how beautiful Helvetica is.

Cyrus Highsmith's Novia is now commercially available. He originally designed it for the headlines in Martha Stewart Weddings. Resistance is futile, at least mine is.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

• Helvetica

• Arial

9.

Because it's ugly

About 10 years ago, I was asked to redesign the logo for New York magazine. Milton Glaser had based the logo on Bookman Swash Italic, a typeface I found unimaginably dated and ugly. But Glaser's logo had replaced an earlier one by Peter Palazzo that was based on Caslon Italic. I proposed we return to Caslon, and distinctly remember saying, "Bookman Swash Italic is always going to look ugly." The other day, I saw something in the office that really caught my eye. It was set in Bookman Swash Italic, and it looked great. Ugly, but great.




Helvetica is ugly, but it's ugly enough to be great.

10.

Because it's boring

Tibor Kalman was fascinated with boring typefaces. “No, this one is too clever, this one is too interesting,” he kept saying when showed him the fonts I was proposing for his monograph. Anything but a boring typeface, he felt, got in the way of the ideas. We settled on Trade Gothic.

As a typeface which has been overused for a long time, Helvetica is described as one of the most boring typefaces in someone's eyes. So these people began to find some alternatives for Helvetica. And here's a very good resource of them: <https://typekit.com/lists/alternatives-to-helvetica>

 Adobe Typekit

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Alternatives to Helvetica

Slake your thirst for neutral typefaces with these unique takes on the classic sans serif.

Text from *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

Covered his eyes

Nimbus Sans
by URW++
An attempt to “avoid some of the mistakes with the old Helvetica,” in the words of URW cofounder Peter Karow.

Lift his head better

Pragmatica Web
by ParaType
Inspired by Neue Haas Grotesk, Pragmatica has been carefully hinted for screen rendering.

It was getting

Runda
by ps Type
Classic and simple, with weights running from light to black.

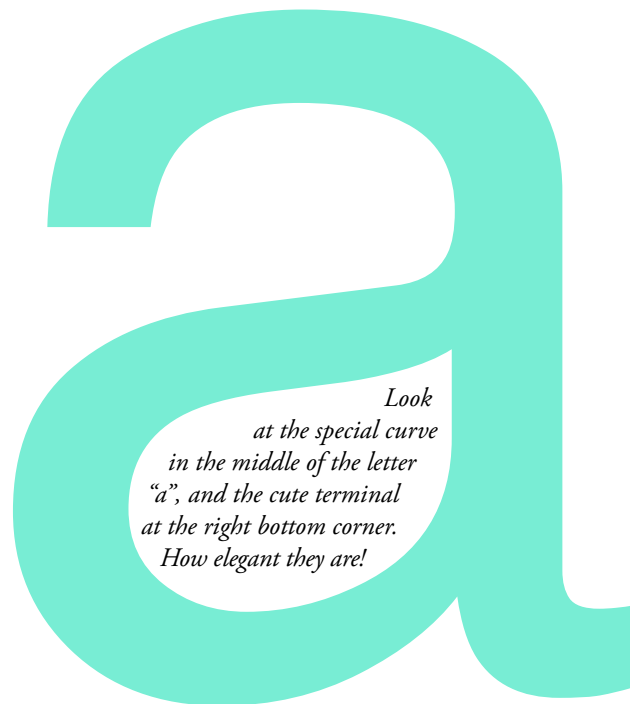
Light from the electric

FF Dagny Pro
by FontFont
More open counters and a slightly narrower width make FF Dagny less predictable and more readable.


11.

Because it's special

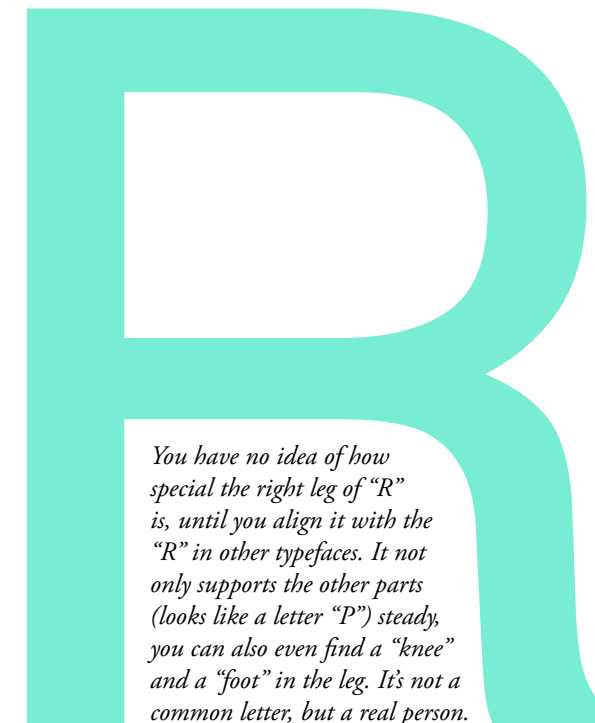
In design as in fashion, nothing beats bespoke tailoring. I've commissioned custom typefaces from Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones and Joe Finocchiario, and we're currently working with Matthew Carter and Chester. It is the ultimate indulgence, but well worth the extra effort. Is this proliferation? I say bring it on.



*Look
at the special curve
in the middle of the letter
“a”, and the cute terminal
at the right bottom corner.
How elegant they are!*



*K
is to
a typeface,
what king is to a
kingdom. The three
stright lines constitute
a quite steady structure,
and the stright cut of the
terminal make the whole
letter very clean but powerful.*



*You have no idea of how
special the right leg of “R”
is, until you align it with the
“R” in other typefaces. It not
only supports the other parts
(looks like a letter “P”) steady,
you can also even find a “knee”
and a “foot” in the leg. It's not a
common letter, but a real person.*

12.

Because you believe in it

Sometimes I think that Massimo Vignelli may be using too many typefaces, not too few. A true fundamentalist requires a monotheistic worldview: one world, one typeface. The designers at Experimental Jetset have made the case for Helvetica. My partner Abbott Miller had a period of life he calls “The Scala Years” when he used that typeface almost exclusively. When the time is right, I might make that kind of commitment myself.



13.

Because you can't not

Princeton Architectural Press is about to publish a collection of essays I've written, many of which first appeared here on Design Observer. I wanted it to feel like a real book for readers — it has no pictures — so I asked Abbott to design it. He suggested we set each one of the 79 pieces in a different typeface. I loved this idea, but wasn't sure how far he'd want to go with it. "What about the one called 'I Hate ITC Garamond?'" I asked him. "Would we set it in ITC Garamond?" He looked at me as if I was crazy. "Of course," he said.



The book is beautiful, by the way, and not the least bit slutty.

Reference

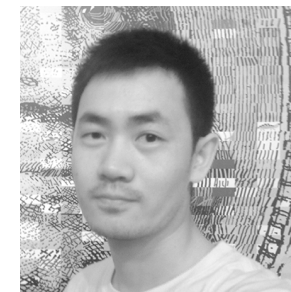
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Author



Michael Bierut studied graphic design at the University of Cincinnati, and has been a partner in the New York office of Pentagram since 1990. Michael is a Senior Critic in Graphic Design at the Yale School of Art.^[10]

Editor



Hongru Hou is an MFA graduate student of interaction design at California College of the Arts. He got his MS's degree of Computer Technology from Beijing Institute of Technology, and was a front-end engineer at Baidu.