

Reviled FONts

When designers say they hate a typeface, can they tell you why? And can they suggest a suitable substitute for it? An investigative report.

By Joe Clark

After you, the typophile, learn to instantly recognize hundreds of typefaces despite continuous hazing by peers, you find yourself with a solid basis for one-upmanship: Unlike those type-ignorant proles, *you* are able to tell the difference between Univers and Helvetica! But as you learn to identify more and more fonts, you come to realize that you have also learned to spot fonts you don't particularly like. Fonts you hate, in fact.

You may talk about design relativism—"There's no such thing as a bad font, merely a font badly used"—but, in more reflective moments, you have to admit to yourself that there really are fonts you abhor and wish could be banished from the earth. It's well and good to have an opinion on the subject, but can you support it? Instead of viscerally and inexplicably hating a font, can you explain *why* you hate it? Can you turn the concept of reviled fonts from hate to debate? And as long as you're that smart about it, can you nominate a font that could replace the one you revile?

To explore these pressing questions for *PRINT*, I engaged in some Woodward and Bernstein-like investigative reporting. (Gumshoe, you might call me—and that's a good name for a font, come to think of it.) I rang up selected luminaries in typography and graphic design—not always the usual suspects, either—and essentially told them, "OK, spill your venom!" Then I told them to justify their hate.

Surprising, from the standpoint of human psychology, were the designers who had to sit back and ponder the question; one even said he would flip through some specimen books and call me back. My hard-and-fast attitude was: If, when asked to name the font you hate the most, you do not immediately burst like Krakatoa with years of pent-up frustration, then you're not much of a "hata" at all. You barely qualify as a "playa hata." And you're just too nice and polite to be of much use to this survey.

After all my contacting and questioning, I came away with five individuals who met my criterion of stating at once, without any prodding from me, which font they hated and which font they would like to substitute for it. Their critiques appear below.

Adam Twardoch

Type consultant (Twardoch.com) · *The* fount of knowledge when it comes to "CE" (Central European) typography (Don't know what an ogonek is? Let Adam handle it for you!) · Polish

What font do you hate? "There is one typeface that is quite recent and that I wholeheartedly hate—Fago from FontShop. It is just hilariously ugly. And the black cuts are especially ugly. To me, it looks like a Verdana rip off with, you know, some characters sort of designed [so as to] not make it too similar. Like the *g* in Verdana is two-story and the *g* in Fago is three-story—but that's more or less it. Fago sort of extends the idea [of Verdana] and extends the very basic set of weights that Verdana offers, but this artificially pushed the huge number of styles, weights, and widths that Fago actually contains—it just doesn't work.

"The extra-bold styles and the wide styles are really ugly because they look extrapolated. And you clearly see that the arithmetical extrapolation didn't really work out because there's something bad going on there; there's too much weight in some places, and it really isn't optically well-balanced."¹

HATES

Fago

Reiner Script

Rotis

Helvetica

Univers

Chicago

DIN

RATES

News Gothic ²

Helvetica Neue ³

Kosmik ⁴

Walker ⁵

What rates? “Probably something like a News Gothic. I would start with a Multiple Master version of News Gothic if I really needed a sans serif with a large set of weights. I really like the structure of News Gothic and think there hasn’t been anything really very good since then, except possibly for Thesis, the sprawling typeface family by Luc(as) de Groot.²

“And if I really wanted a grotesk or a sans serif for the multilingual jobs that I sometimes do, I would use the new Helvetica Linotype because it’s been greatly reworked for language coverage—and in this outfit the Helvetica letterforms get a new glamour or glory that I never thought they would.” (Twardoch notes that he did free consulting work for Linotype on CE variants of that Helvetica remix.)³

Gerard Unger

Designer (GerardUnger.com) of dozens of faces, including Swift, Gulliver, Flora, and Amerigo · Expertise in engineered fonts for newspapers · Dutch

What font do you hate? “Actually, there are not many fonts I hate and the basis of this is that I am a very curious person. But there is a font (I recall) from my youth, Reiner Script. It’s one of the oddest fonts there is. It’s from the 50s—a beautiful period piece. Imre Reiner was a Hungarian and was a very idiosyncratic designer. Because I was going through life at the time with pimples, I associate it with pimples, and that’s why I hate it, though not very much.⁴

“There is nothing I love to hate. There is one font I hate to hate, because every time I see that it’s not very well designed—it’s too inconsistent. That font is Rotis, and I’m not the only one who hates it. The problem with Rotis is that some of the characters—like the e, for example—don’t belong there. [Also] the c. They fall over backwards. And I do not understand why there are so many designers who like this face and use it. I know, for example, that the Japanese, who don’t know much about Roman typefaces on the whole, see it as being different, and for that reason, interesting. But I think that’s the wrong reason [to use it].”⁵

What rates? “I would *design* a font to the [necessary] specifications—though I must say I’m not much into this whole fad of doing a serif and a sans serif and something in-between. This has become such a big preference. When I started out in the profession, it was something brand new, [though] it had been done before in the ’30s. But it was new for mass-produced fonts to have coordinated designs for sans serif and serif faces, as was later done by [type designer] Sumner Stone.”

Joe Treacy

Type designer (Forever Sans, Neue Neuland) and art director (TreacyFaces.com) · American

What font do you hate? “Helvetica is one for me that seems to have no redeeming social value. It’s one of those designs that, as perfectly constructed as it seems to be, when you actually try to set with the traditional normal or open tracking, it becomes completely uninvolving and vanilla and hard to read. And if you set it tight, the design of the characters [is such that] because [they are] so internally oriented, one character doesn’t propel you to the next character to start knitting words together effectively. I find it to be very static.⁶ Univers is the same. As interestingly clean as it is, it just seems to me to be very uninvolving.”⁷

What rates? “I wouldn’t recommend one of my faces for something like this, although Forever sets much better. I actually prefer News Gothic. It’s a wonderful design. Terminals on the s or the c—maybe they could be a little bit different—but by and large, it’s a wonderful face, better than any cut of Franklin Gothic.”²

Petr van Blokland

Petr van Blokland (Petr.com) is not in fact his brother Erik van Blokland (of LettError) and also not Frank Blokland (of Dutch Type Foundry) · Designer of “heavy-duty” fonts Productus and Proforma for use in forms design · Dutch

What font do you hate? “I think Chicago. It was a good font when it was in the original Mac or original bitmap size, but the problem is that they made an outline of it, and by itself it’s still no problem, but people start using it especially large, and it’s even more a non-font than Helvetica is. And there’s all kinds of mismatching in weights that comes from enlarging a rough bitmap, which I love to fix.

“But still, as a typographer and type designer, you have to make yourself insensitive to anything you see in the outside world; otherwise, you keep being irritated. [Chicago’s] characteristics really come from the capabilities that you have when you have a small pixel font...like the curves going out of a stem leading into a triangle, which is typical of an N or a U—they’ve completely disappeared [in Chicago].⁸

“All the other ‘fun fonts’ are fun [like Kosmik by LettError]. They are meant that way and they have some kind of joke [within them]. But if you enlarge a small pixel size and do the rounding off and enlarge it, it’s just wrong, because you could make it *better* than it is and it could look convincing, but now it is generated from something that is supposed to look a certain way [only] when it’s small.”⁹

What rates? “With [Mac OS X], the anti-aliasing is so good that I think the system fonts are fairly good now, and in combination with the flat screens of Mac, it gets to a point where you hardly notice differences with the printed page. It *gets* there; there’s a long way to go, but since there is such a clean match between the hardware and the software that Apple has, you know for sure that this is what it’s going to be.”

Jean-François Porchez

Designer (Typofonderie.com) of Parisine, Apolline, Angie, and a range of custom fonts for newspapers and signage · French

What font do you hate? “DIN! It is difficult to not like a typeface itself. Generally it is more the use of the typeface than the typeface itself. But in the case of DIN, it seems to be both, because it’s used everywhere from perfume to products for babies to petroleum companies to movies. Everything! [In terms of] cultural stuff, it is the new typeface [representing] the Centre Georges Pompidou.

“There is no reason to use this font, because if you look at the background of the typeface, it is a typeface designed not by type designers but by engineers. [DIN stands for Deutsches Institut für Normung, or German Standards Institute.] So when you begin to use this kind of typeface for cultural work, the effect is the reverse [of knowing] the story of the typeface—because DIN is not normally the system used by graphic designers but by engineers. It’s very straight, with no feelings—not human at all.¹⁰

What rates? “IT’S DIFFICULT TO GIVE A GENERAL FEELING ON THE CHOICE OF THE TYPEFACE. YOU NEED TO [PROCEED] WITH NO PERSONAL MOTIVATION. A TYPEFACE IS A CULTURAL THING, SO WHEN YOU BEGIN TO USE A TYPEFACE, THE CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS ARE VERY IMPORTANT. TAKE THE CENTRE GEORGES POMPIDOU. WALKER [BY MATTHEW CARTER FOR THE WALKER ART CENTER IN MINNEAPOLIS] IS A GOOD COUNTER EXAMPLE TO DIN IN FRANCE, BECAUSE IT SEEMS THAT THE BUILDINGS ARE QUITE SIMILAR TO THE CENTRE GEORGES POMPIDOU’S. WITH THIS NEW TYPEFACE—[IT’S ACTUALLY] QUITE OLD NOW—WE ARE GIVEN ALL THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF THE INSTITUTION, THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS, LA VARIÉTÉ AS WE SAY IN FRANCE.¹¹

“But not DIN! Not DIN, please! DIN is in some way like Helvetica or Times; there is no choice in DIN. The typeface expresses nothing in particular.”

Toronto journalist Joe Clark (joelark.org/design/) once wrote a book that was criticized by readers for its use of ct and st ligatures in 8.5-point Serif Sans type.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Fago ¹

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

News Gothic ²

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Helvetica Neue ³

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Reiner Script ⁴

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Rotis Serif ⁵

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Helvetica ⁶

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Univers ⁷

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Chicago ⁸

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Kosmik ⁹

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

DIN ¹⁰

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

1234567890!?

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Walker ¹¹

1234567890!?