

# HELVETICA

# Hail Helvetica!

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It's the font that became the most widely used typeface in the 20th century. A film on it was screened in Kochi recently



IN 1967, Eduard Hoffmann, a director of the Heas Type Foundry in Munchenstein, Switzerland, asked Max Miedinger, a former employee and freelance designer, to design a new font. Hoffmann wanted a sans-serif typeface that could compete with the popular Akzidenz Grotesk typeface. After a year of effort, with frequent inputs from Hoffmann, Miedinger came up with Helvetica. The word Helvetica is a derivative of Helvetia, the Latin name for Switzerland. Within a matter of years, Helvetica became the most widely used sans serif typeface of the 20th century.

In 2006, filmmaker Gary Hustwit decided to make a film on the typeface. On the web site [www.helvetica-film.com](http://www.helvetica-film.com) he gives the reasons: "Since millions of people see and use Helvetica every day, I wondered how a typeface drawn by a little-known Swiss designer became one of the most popular ways for us to communicate our words fifty years later."

Helvetica is a gripping 80-minute film on the powerful impact of the font worldwide. Shot in New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Zurich and London, it contains interviews with noted graphic designers like Erik Spiekermann, Wim Crouwel and Massimo Vignelli. Italian designer Vignelli says, "Helvetica is the king of all fonts." While designer Michael Bierut says, "Helvetica is everywhere. It's like air. You can't help breathing it in."

The film has been screened in 150 cities and last week it was shown in Kochi by Design and People and Open Eyed Dreams, an art promotion house. Sethu Dass, of Design and People, says that even though Helvetica is Europe's contribution

to typeface, it has been controversial. "Thanks to its clean and neutral look many companies like Coke, which supported the Vietnam War, used this font to give a good impression," he says. Designer Paula Scher says, "Helvetica is the font of the Vietnam War."

Some of the other companies which adopted Helvetica include Nestle, Intel, American Airlines, Lufthansa, Toyota, Microsoft and Panasonic.

In Kochi, there is a mixed crowd of graphic designers, architects, web designers and human rights activists who have come to watch the film. Mathewkutty J. Mattam who runs a graphic design shop, Blackboard, says he had heard about Helvetica during his college days. "But I really understood its impact only when I saw this film," he says.

Mathewkutty uses Helvetica often because it is a neutral font. That means it can go with any text or visual. "For example, if you put the word 'love' in Helvetica, when you look at it you experience that emotion," he says. "That is one of its strengths. It is a legible font: easy to read from close and from afar. It is good for logos and signboards."

Vinod Laxman, a lecturer in applied art at the RLV College of Music and Fine Arts, says that Helvetica is the most readable font in the world. "Fonts are the visual elements of any language," he says. "I always tell my students that whatever they write should be clear and Helvetica fits the bill perfectly."

Architect Raj Menon says the interesting part about the film was how it showed that Helvetica was accepted whole-heartedly in the sixties and seventies, but "later, there

was a negative reaction to it. Then, in the nineties, people began coming back to the spirit of Helvetica."

Menon also liked the way the history of the font was traced. "It is quite mind-boggling how something as simple as a font became such a strong character in the film and in life," he says.

The audience reaction has been strongly positive across the world and, as expected, the most intense reaction came from Switzerland. Journalist Sukhdev Sandhu in London's Daily Telegraph quotes director Gary Hustwit: "There were 800 people at the after-screening party at Zurich which went on till 6 a.m. They had a giant mirrored 'H' that was spinning above the dance floor with laser lights pointed at it. It was bizarre."

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Director Gary Hustwit