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Blackletter's association with Nazi propaganda cast the type style as the black sheep of typography. But more and more brands are using the style as a way to bring an edgy vibe to their products.

BY SEAN ASHCROFT

# blackletter

Picture your name etched large in a sans serif typeface such as Helvetica. Now imagine it in a blackletter face. What does the latter say about you that the former doesn't? Look around and notice that, from Coca-Cola to RBK to Versace to handpainted street signs in Mexico, businesses and designers alike have been asking themselves the same question: What is it about blackletter that resonates with an audience, even after being around for 800 years?

## **L**ook back at blackletter

To answer this, you must go back to 13th-century France at the start of blackletter's extraordinary evolution. This is a font style that has to be seen in a historical context in order to be understood. It's made its way from Gutenberg to Napoleon, through two world wars, on to heavy metal, hip-hop and skateboarding. It's some journey, and no other font has a story that's as remotely long or rich, a fact that may explain why an increasing number of global brands are embracing blackletter as a statement of individuality.

The story begins in Europe, where four blackletter fonts originated and began a typographical revolution that's still—800 years later—alive and kicking. The

first of these four is Textura, a handwritten blackletter font that originated during the 1200s in France before spreading across Europe. Then came Rotunda, a rounded form of Textura that developed in Italy and became important in southern Europe 200 years later. In the mid-1400s, another (this time Schwabacher) emerged in southern Germany and was distinguished by its dynamic capitals.

It was around this time that Gutenberg invented his letterpress. He imitated blackletter fonts such as Textura and Rotunda, because the only way he could sell his printed books was to make them mimic handwritten books as closely as possible. "Up to that point, books were handwritten and there was resistance [to

**"Its sheer visual strength means that connections attach themselves much more. You could use *Futura* or *Gill Sans* in lots of different contexts and the usage doesn't cling to them because they're less assertive."**

SIMON LOXLEY

#### REBELLIOUS REPORT

"Why pussyfoot around?" says Marian Bantjes of her all-blackletter annual report for the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada. "This piece has total immersion. There are lots of design pieces with a little blackletter for headings. I wanted to freak people out a bit, and really it's quite pathetic how easy it is to do this."

printing] from wealthy people, who were the only ones who could afford them, explains Simon Loxley, a U.K.-based freelance designer and editor of Ultrabold, the Journal for St. Bride Library, the world's foremost printing and graphic arts library.

The fourth and final blackletter font to emerge was Fraktur (also known as German blackletter), which went on to dominate the printing industries of Germany and other European countries for several hundred years. It was commissioned by German emperor Maximilian in the late 15th century to establish a library of printed books. The success of Fraktur, though, was secured by its adoption by Martin Luther's reformation movement, and it went on to become a symbol of Protestantism and national identity in Germany, while also remaining popular in Scandinavia.

Although roman fonts replaced blackletter throughout much of Europe in the early 16th century, blackletter retained its popularity in Germany. "It was because of its nationalist associations, particularly in the time of Napoleon, who was the de facto ruler over most of Germany," Loxley explains. "Blackletter was a means of asserting some sort of national identity."

Blackletter's nationalist qualities prompted its revival in Germany during World War I and again in 1937, when the Third Reich decreed blackletter to be the true German font style. Four years later, though, it

branded blackletter "un-German" and turned instead to modernist German sans serif typefaces such as Futura. The reality behind that decision, though, was that people in occupied territories were unaccustomed to reading blackletter and struggled to read the Nazi proclamations printed in it.

## **B**lackletter's comeback

Just decades later, though, blackletter began staging a revolution of its own that's fueled its current incarnation, even though blackletter has always held a place on beer labels, newspaper nameplates and graduation certificates, it was in the 1970s that it started to get its new set of typographic teeth, as heavy metal bands like AC/DC and Motorhead embraced the style. At the time, blackletter was still laden with Nazi associations, and Loxley believes that heavy metal bands were attracted to the font, not for political reasons but for its notoriety: It epitomized being edgy and dangerous.

And it's that attitude—that independent, tough-guy personality—that has led the charge for blackletter. In the late 1990s, for example, hip-hop followed metal's lead. "It looks dangerous, which is how rappers like to see themselves," Loxley explains.

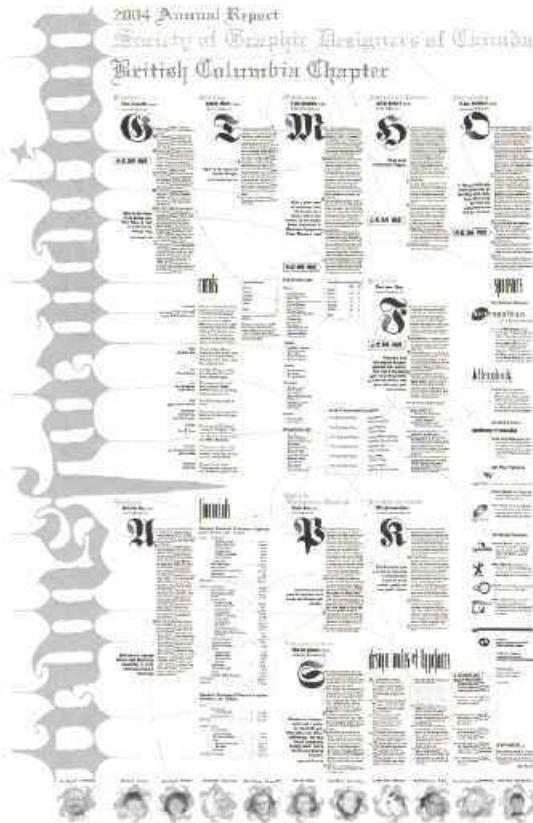
This sense of danger drew another fringe activity—skateboarding—to blackletter, and this association has proved pivotal to today's almost explosive adoption of blackletter when it comes to branding. "The root of blackletter's emergence in commercial contexts, as far as I can see, comes from skateboarding," Loxley says. "Skateboarders like to see themselves as a bit of a misunderstood, persecuted group, and blackletter lends itself well to skateboarding because of its status as an outsider typeface, through its connections with heavy metal and, before that, the Nazis."

Skateboarding may be a niche hobby, but the urban clothing market that's associated with it is big business, and major brands such as Quiksilver and Billabong routinely turn to blackletter in their branding, particularly for their T-shirts. "The amount of merchandising attached to skateboarding is huge—it's a massively commercial business and has been for a long time," Loxley points out.

Through this channel, blackletter began to reach critical mass, and it wasn't long before major fashion labels started to incorporate it into their designs—most notably Versace in its 2002 Fall collection. Pop star Gwen Stefani has also used it to brand her LAMB, fashion label.

## **B**rands embrace blackletter

Blackletter's journey from the fringes to the centerground was complete when Reebok—now known as HBK—made it the centerpiece of a \$50 million global marketing campaign launched in February 2005. The ongoing "I Am What I Am" campaign is its largest marketing effort in more than a decade, and includes personal insights into the family of RBK athletes and artists, with country-specific websites featuring celebrities familiar and popular in



The Museum for Printing Arts  
in Leipzig welcomes  
the members and delegates of  
the annual conference

# Völkischer Beobachter

Sonderabdrucke aus dem Amtlichen Teil  
„Bayerischer Regierungsanzeiger“

Nr. 23 aus Ausgabe 108/110 bis 115/117

München, den 22. April 1941

#### ORIGINAL

A specimen of metal blackletter type in the *Textura* style, cast from 15th century matrices. These were cut by Henric Letteinsreider in the Netherlands for the *Atyp1* conference in Leipzig, Germany.

#### SYMBOLIC

Blackletter was the type of choice for the Third Reich, as can be seen in this 1941 copy of the official Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, where all page elements, including text, were set in Berthold Fraktur.

# motörhead



PHOTOGRAPH BY JO EDMONDSON [www.edmondson.uk](http://www.edmondson.uk)

#### ROCKIN'

Music's relationship with blackletter began in 1976 with U.K. heavy metal band Motörhead, and the genre's love affair with blackletter remains strong today.

#### URBAN

"Urban" clothing has sprung out of activities like skateboarding, and often features blackletter, particularly on T-shirts. "Blackletter lends itself well to skateboarding because of its status as an outsider typeface," says type commentator Simon Loxley.

# Relentless<sup>TM</sup>

#### CORPORATE

Relentless is an energy drink from Coca-Cola targeted at active people. The campaign's message is "Give and you shall receive. No half measures." The idea is to focus on the struggle and sacrifice in the pursuit of a goal, and facing up to challenges.

that region. Even" site, though, showcases a number of popular RBK musicians, such as hip-hop stars 50 Cent and Jay-Z.

Upon launching the campaign, RBK chief marketing officer Dennis Baldwin said: "We think people, especially the young consumers we are after, want to define themselves. They don't want to be told to 'Just Do It.'" RBK used blackletter for the central "I Am What I Am" slogan in the multi-channel campaign.

In 2006, blackletter was confirmed as the oldest new type on the block when Coca-Cola Great Britain launched Relentless, an energy drink whose brand name and brand message—"No half measures"—is set entirely in bLackletter. The campaign focuses on standing up to challenges, something the company communicates through blackletter-set messages such as "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change and the energy to change the things I can."

For eight weeks last year, Coca-Cola unleashed a blackletter blanket bombardment in the U.K. as it promoted Relentless through viral marketing, in cinemas, at points of sale and on billboards.

Co-creator and head of marketing for Relentless, Sean Uprichard, confirmed that blackletter's rich history underpinned the decision to use it: "We compare the nonconformist artists of today (skaters, surfers,

snowboarders) with the nonconformist artists of yesterday (painters and sculptors of the Renaissance) who suffered for their own art. In this earlier time, Hraklur was commonplace. It seemed appropriate to use it to sell our brand."

Uprichard explains, "For us, it implies suffering and a right of passage. The way we use it, it conveys artistry over legibility, and the emotional over the functional."

Dismissing blackletter's negative Nazi and heavy metal associations, Uprichard says: "Rock metal is a key soundtrack to the core community, so that works. Nazi Germany is a million miles from where Relentless was created."

Loxley agrees that it's unfair to make negative associations with blackletter in commercial contexts. "Its sheer visual strength means that connections attach themselves much more. You could use Futura or Gill Sans in lots of different contexts and the usage doesn't cling to them because they're less assertive."

## Making first impressions

But Loxley also believes that neither Coca-Cola nor RBK would have risked joining the blackletter revolution without skateboarding first paving the way. "They came to blackletter once it had been well-established by the skateboarding community," Loxley says. "Smaller companies might be prepared to take a gamble to get noticed, but I can't imagine big companies like Reebok or Coca-Cola tak-

# a font fiesta



Occupied Europe may have seen blackletter's last en masse (albeit enforced) adoption, but in Mexico, handwritten blackletter signage can be seen today on bars, shops, kiosks and vehicles nationwide. The phenomenon made such an impression on Mexican graphic designer Cristina Paoli that she wrote a book on the subject last year, titled "Mexican Blackletter."

Paoli says, "I researched the history of blackletter in Europe, and how it first came to the American continent with the Spanish. Then I documented every example of blackletter I could find on the streets of Mexico City, where ordinary people copy and reinterpret the highly ornamental shapes of traditional blackletter in an effort to enhance the message they want to give. The choice of drawing a sign in blackletter is in itself a declaration to the public that the investment of time and money was greater than if drawn in roman characters."



**MEXICAN BLACKLETTER**  
Hand-drawn blackletter signs are commonplace in Mexico, something Mexican graphic designer Cristina Paoli has documented in her book "Mexican Blackletter." She believes it's popular because blackletter's "highly ornamental shapes resonate deeply with inherent qualities of Mexican culture—diversity and contrast, creativity and inventiveness."

ing a gamble with their image. It's likely they thought the waters were fairly well-tested."

Peter Bain, co-author of "Blackletter: Type and National Identity" and principal of New York City-based type-design firm Incipit, points out that blackletter allows big companies to enjoy the best of both worlds. "I think they're picking a style to move things forward," he says. "They're taking a niche sense of identity and trying to expand that in a larger sense. They're saying, This is very private, very exotic, very special, but yet it's also available to you. Where maybe the original perception of blackletter was that it was too extreme or too laden with history or too odd-looking, they're sort of turning that around and saying, Well, actually, you can have it also."

But it's not just large agencies behind global marketing campaigns that are embracing blackletter; boutique studios and freelance designers are also making increased use of it in commissions. One striking example is provided by Canadian designer Marian Bantjes, well-known for her custom typography. Bantjes set a recent annual report for the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada entirely in blackletter.

"It brought attitude, shock value and a certain beauty," Bantjes says. "The annual report is always dead boring to read. I wanted something to stir them up, and at the same time give them something they might actually keep or even hang on their wall. This piece would be nothing without blackletter; everything hinges on that."

Bantjes says her work was well received, and dismisses the complaints some board members voiced about not being able to clearly read the text. "We receive e-mails every day that say VI@gr4!, and we know damn well what they say, yet you set text in a blackletter and people think they can't read it," she says.

The final word goes to Bain, who explains blackletter's growing influence like this: "In terms of the statement that blackletter makes compared with other typefaces, I think most people are reacting to a visual statement rather than to a particular statement of meaning. They're reacting to what it looks like rather than to a specific message that they're associating with it."

"It's not the typeface of preventing global warming. It's definitely a message of fashion and individuality, a message of energy and excitement in a very youthful way."

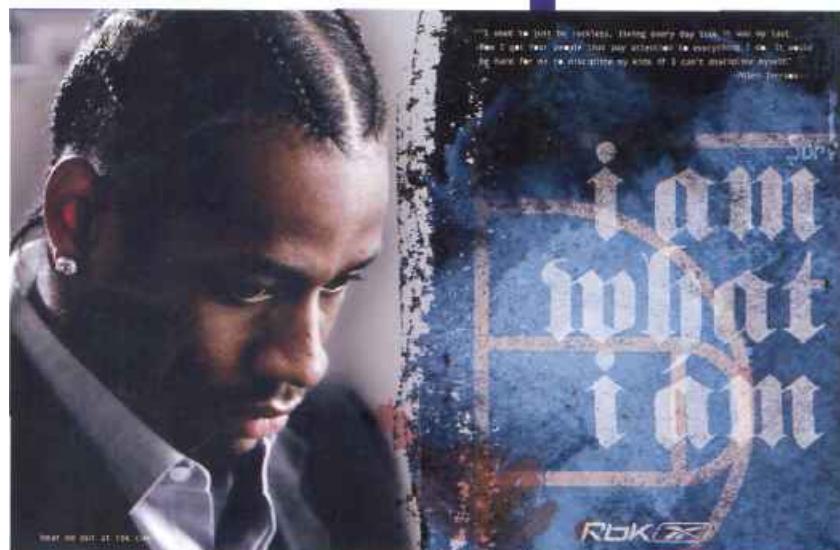
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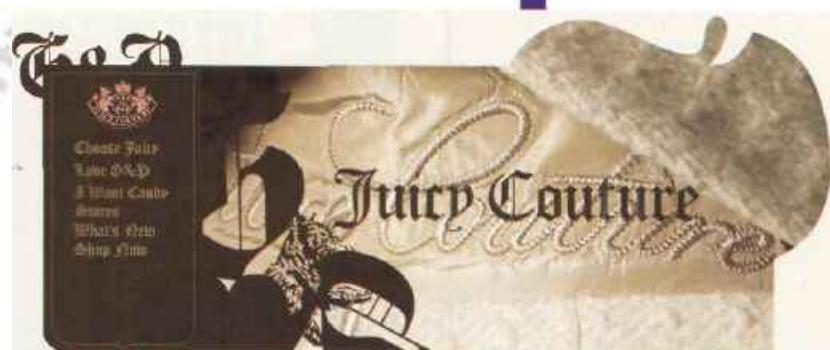
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#### SPORTING IT

These magazine ads from Reebok mark the second year of the company's \$50 million "I am what I am" multi-channel campaign. The campaign is about people who have succeeded by overcoming obstacles in life, such as NBA star Allen Iverson and Miri Ben-Ari, the Israeli Grammy Award-winning hip-hop violinist.



#### FASHION FORWARD

Fashion labels use blackletter widely, such as Juicy Couture and Gwen Stefani's L.A.M.B. line. Designer, author and type expert Peter Bain says blackletter is "trendy and it's kind of the height of fashion right now." He adds: "I think everyone would agree that it doesn't mean heavy metal."