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Blackletter on Skin: Typography, Meaning and the Body

Blackletter has a bad reputation. That much I can say without having to look too far for justification. When blackletter appears in major advertising campaigns, a flurry of commentary often follows in its wake. It's legacy is long and rich, but the association with Hitler's Third Reich haunts its usage in most applications.

However, what happens when type leaves the page and appears on skin? In the past two decades, blackletter tattoos have been seen on the torsos, arms and backs of mainstream Americans from varied economic and social strata. Similarly, the same visual style of lettering is inked into the epidermis of those belonging to the American neo-nazi movement and Latino gangs. What common connotations does this style of lettering have that is desirable amongst these disparate groups? A shared meaning seems unlikely given the fundamental beliefs that each group holds. This paper argues that a common meaning can be found.

The prevalence of blackletter tattoos in the U.S. after the 1970s hints at an underlying accepted connotation of the typographic style. This paper focuses on the use of blackletter in North American tattoos as the selected embodiment of message, specifically its use by highly politicized groups that hold public views of race and class, for example, the Mara Salvatrucha and Nazi Low Riders.

The connotation and denotation issues surrounding the use of blackletter in tattoos are tied to notions of what those forms mean as a style to the culture in which they are embedded. In his article, "Typographic Meaning", Theo Van Leeuwen states that through calligraphy and typography, visual communication and writing are unified and inseparable.¹ This is nothing new for graphic designers to recognize. However, it is a more recent development that semioticians and communications experts such as Van Leeuwen are turning to typography an access point to analyze the cultural meaning through the letterforms. When letterforms are situated on the skin, the task of analysis becomes more challenging as it intersects with the notion of what it means to have the body function as a canvas for inscription.

This paper traces the historical use of blackletter and examines the cultural conditions that were in place at the time of its emergence on skin rather than paper. By examining the use of typography as a cultural product with a historical context, and by applying

means of analysis drawn from semiotics, a case for a common meaning is made in spite of the incongruent ideologies of the groups who select blackletter as a physical embodiment of connotation by situating it on their bodies.

¹ Van Leeuwen, Theo. "Typographic Meaning." *Visual Communication* 4.137 (2005): 138-143.

Keywords:

blackletter, connotation, denotation, gangs, representation, tattoo, typography, visual communication