Making a Hybrid of Fraktur and Helvetica

*Investigating typography’s connection to power, from a historical perspective in a contemporary context*

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Abstract

Throughout history and in today’s society, typography has been and still is without doubt a great part of communication. Behrens, an important designer from the modernist movement, believed that after architecture, typography provided “…the most characteristic picture of a period” and “…development of people”. Typography carries meaning and associations, built on the contexts and the design it is used in, that finally creates a typographic image.

The Blackletter style Fraktur, and Helvetica were born to serve a purpose connected to power. Important for this research is to understand in detail, the origin of that power and its position: Blackletter portrays features of the Gothic architecture, expressing religious emotions and civic pride, intended for effective writing, and was predominant in religious and educational contexts. This improvement of writing was a necessity for the development of the society during the medieval times; for both educational and financial reasons.

As Fraktur became a symbol of Germany, the today’s connotations towards oppression and Nazism were inevitable as the Third Reich continued to use it until it was banned in 1941. Meanwhile, the post war modernism in the 20th Century, sought objectivity, simplicity and readability in their design, to erase any carried meaning or associations that could have a misleading effect on the information. This period of time paved way for a corporate culture, with approaches towards rationalist and functionalist methods, that expresses authority and reliability. Achieving brand recognition for a wide range of products and contexts was required by the graphic designers.

Through workshops that document people’s associations and comments on the shapes and typographic images that both Helvetica and Fraktur create, and visual research made in forms of sketching and adding Fraktur features to signs of institutions and public sectors, I have investigated Fraktur’s tainted image of oppression and political sentiments with the help of Helvetica as the contemporary norm.

Keywords: Power, Typography, Fraktur, Helvetica, Type design and communication.

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Fig. 1 Documents from Nazi regime, early-mid 20th century, https://www.quora.com/Why-is-the-Gothic-font-associated-with-Nazis
Fig. 2 Helvetica, Swiss style, 1957 ce., https://visualhierarchy.co/blog/the-helvetica-font-family/
Introduction

This project reads into how typography is and has been used and for what purpose, and how it affects us. What might the reactions be if the sign at your car park, county council, university or the façade on the streets changed its appearance, sharing traits of the expressive Blackletters?

Typography has a textual and visual power that carries meaning and influences us. Our subconscious is continuously affected by our surrounding environment, reviewing typography and forming perceptions, making typographic communication a big part of our everyday lives. Not only from a standpoint of beauty, but to serve as a provider of information, where its visual appearance effects how it is and should be read.

For this project I will gather knowledge of what the history says and other’s perceptions of the visual power of the Gothic script, also known as Blackletter; Fraktur, and the neo-grotesque sans-serif Helvetica, to ultimately create a hybrid font.

Fraktur and Helvetica are both a great part of our history, but very different from each other. What could a hybrid lead to? How could that be used today, without having a tainted image of power and authority from darker parts of the history such as WWII? By positioning the hybrid in today’s society, I will investigate its relation to power, carried in the visual appearance of the hybrid and in its interfering with public signs of institutions and the public sector’s authority and credibility.

Making a hybrid out of the many centuries old Fraktur, and the six decades old Helvetica, it is important to go back to their beginning. It is easy to get stuck on the visual differences, but there’s much more to it, such as governmental, social and religious reasons, to why the types look like they do.

Starting with Fraktur, it originates from the Gothic script, which consists of many branches of styles, developed in different periods of time and in different parts of Europe. To understand the existence of the Gothic family we need to take another step back, back to its precursor; the Carolingian minuscule. (Fig. 3)

The combination of scripts from the late antique period, and the Celtic innovations of four guidelines for ascenders and descendents, were put together into a uniform script that got the name Carolingian minuscule. The calligraphic invention became a European standard in order to make the Latin alphabet easy to recognise. The invention was used by the Holy Roman Empire between the 9th and the 13th century.

During the second half of the 12th Century, the Romanesque period turned into the Gothic period, and the Carolingian minuscule became obsolete. Instead, Blackletter or black letter, also referred to as Gothic script, Gothic minuscule, Textualis Quadrata (TQ) or Textura, took its place. (Fig. 4)

TQ was considered to be a very functional script that was much quicker to write than its precursor Carolingian minuscule; with its straight, vertical lines of the word drawn first, then the pointy diamond shaped serifs, and lastly the lines needed to bind the vertical lines to form a word. Any round lines in minuscules were practically eliminated.

The condensed space between each stroke, to save space on the precious parchments, gave its dense, black texture, which is why TQ is referred to as black letters; where the blackness is overpowering the whiteness of the paper.

6 Fig.3 Ramsey Psalter, English adaptation of Carolingian minuscule, 974-966 ce., Meggs History of Graphic Design, p. 43.
7 Fig.4 Textura, British Library, 1447-1525 ce., http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_88887_f001r
The TQ was mainly written and copied by monks of the monasteries, in scriptoria until Gutenberg’s printing press came to Europe during the mid-15th century. TQ was inspired by the Gothic architecture (Fig. 5), which mainly includes sacred buildings like the cathedrals, abbeys and churches of Europe.

Characteristics of the Gothic architecture are the pointed arch, the ribbed vault and the flying buttress, as well as the tall structure; entirely and in proportion to its width. The verticality of the architecture and the script suggests an aspiration towards spiritual realms.\(^{11}\) The façades of cathedrals and great churches, were also constructed to give a strong impression on the approaching worshippers, showing both the power of God and the institution that it represents.\(^{11}\)

The powerful and aspiring features of the Gothic architecture was quite expressive compared to its precursor, the Romanesque period, and some called it rude and that it was produced by barbarians. “...the insipid taste of Gothic ornamentation, these odious monstrities of an ignorant age, produced by the torrents of barbarism...” – Molière, La Gloire 1669. Giorgio Vasari used the term “barbarous German style” in his 1550s artists’ biographies Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architetti, to describe what we today refer to as Gothic style.\(^{11}\)

During the second half of the 15th Century Fraktur (Fig. 6) evolved from TQ and lasted until WWII, which makes it one of the most used type styles to date.

Old classic type styles such as Roman, Carolingian and Uncial, became of interest during the Renaissance, in the search for something new. The result was a decrease in the use of Blackletters, while Fraktur still remained the main script in Germany until Hitler banned it and demanded all printers to use Roman based fonts.\(^{12}\) Which was the font styles used throughout the rest of Europe, for legibility reasons and its power on control, this was ordered to make an abrupt change.


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Gutenberg brought the printing press to Europe during the same century as Fraktur came to be, which is another contributing factor as to why Fraktur lasted so long. Fraktur’s main use was based on the premise of being mainly a typeface and not a calligraphic script. Finding a Fraktur written by hand is fairly impossible, except a few manuscripts for kings. The Fraktur typeface in the Gebetbuch, a book of prayers, made for the Emperor Maximilian I in 1515, is the closest we get to a classic Fraktur script.\(^ {13}\) (Fig. 6+7)

TQ could with the printing press be made much smaller, thinner and with intricate designs. This made it possible for less number of ligatures, which TQ had to have in order to make as much use of the paper as possible. Features that Fraktur have that are different from the TQ is the varied serifs, and how the stems are broken at the top and bottom which gave it its name, Fraktur, meaning fracture or broken. The overall image of Fraktur became much lighter and more legible than TQ.

The sans-serif got its name grotesque because of how it was seen as quite ugly compared to its elegant precursor, the modern serifs and the roman type style.\(^ {15}\)

The grotesque sans-serif is based on the Antiqua’s primary form, but not related to calligraphy. Stems, crossbars and loops appear in the same thickness, which makes the grotesque text image quite uniform. This type was meant for every day prints rather than larger scale body texts.

The first grotesque shapes came in the beginning of the 19th Century and started to gain popularity in the second half of the Century, but its real breakthrough wasn’t until the 1920s-1930s.\(^ {16}\) Grotesque was seen as the only functional type and became a symbol for the new era within architecture and the arts and crafts movement.

Akzidenz (trade type) Grotesk (sans-serif), was designed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, by the type foundry H. Berthold AG in 1898, and was favoured for its simplicity. It allowed the users to achieve contrast and accent within one family of typefaces, which was a great achievement and a step forward in the evolution of the unified and systematised type family. Akzidenz Grotesk became a source of inspiration for other sans-serif typefaces, with its remarkable harmony and clarity.\(^ {16}\)

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\(^ {15}\) K. Forsberg, Vandrings Bland Bokstäver, Västerås, Nordstedts Förlag AB, 1992, p. 69 + 190-203
German artist Peter Behrens has also served as a major influence on the first decades of the 20th Century graphic design. He searched for improvement within typography and became an early advocate of the sans-serif, and of using a grid system to structure space in his design layouts. Behrens believed that after architecture, typography provided “…the most characteristic picture of a period” and “…development of people”.

Behrens continued his exploration of the geometrical design by developing a sans-serif based on a square. Further on in his career as a teacher at Düsseldorf School of Arts and Crafts, Behrens turned to a more direct geometric approach in his design method. This new approach of rational architecture and geometric structure in his design, is a part of the careful beginning of constructivism in the graphic design to come.

After WWII new societal norms, political and economic orders were shaping, which played a critical role in graphic design. This period of time paved way for a corporate culture, with approaches towards rationalist and functionalist methods. Global capitalism was on the rise with an international network of communication through a universal graphic design language.

This new style is the one we refer to as The International Typographic Style, also known as Swiss Style. This new graphic design style originally emerged in the Netherlands, Germany and Russia during the 1920s and was further developed by Swiss designers during the 1950s. It remained a major force for over more than two decades and Helvetica became the hallmark of the style.

The International Typographic Style promotes simplicity, legibility and objectivity, through a scientific approach towards design. The style of this period is still a major influence on today’s graphic design, born from a desire to represent information objectively, free from the influence of associated meaning, in a universally straightforward manner.

It was not the information itself, but rather the way the information was positioned that is of importance. “Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing to remove”. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Achieving brand recognition for a wide range of products and contexts such as; a distinctive logo, a corporate identity as well as a consistent style which expressed authority and reliability, was a strategic action for effective communication. This was a way to make complex organisations seem like a single entity. (Fig. 10) Exquisite logos, signature typography and ownership of colour schemes formed a coded language to big companies like the International Paper Company, Luftahansa, UPS, British Petroleum and Ford.

![Fig.9 P. Behrens, Poster for the Anchor Linoleum exhibition pavilion, 1906 ce., Meggs’ History of Graphic Design, p. 255.](image)

![Fig.10 O. Aicher, Lufthansa identity manual, 1962 ce., http://www.historygraphicdesign.com/the-age-of-information/the-internation-al-typographic-style/172-otl-aicher](image)
Eduard Hoffmann, the director of the Haas’sche Schriftgießerei (Haas Type Foundry) in Münchenstein, Switzerland, commissioned Max Miedinger to develop a new sans-serif typeface that could compete with the successful Akzidenz Grotesk, in the Swiss market.\(^{21}\) \(^{22}\)

The font was developed in 1957 and was originally called Neue Haas Grotesk, but was later named Helvetica (Fig. 11) from the Latin traditional name of Switzerland Helvetia.

The aim was to create a neutral typeface, with no intrinsic meaning to its form, which can be used in a wide range of contexts and has great clarity.\(^{21}\) Helvetica has an excellent rhythm of positive and negative shape.\(^{23}\) Today graphic designers associate Helvetica with authority and corporate dominance.\(^{24}\)

Helvetica was a real step from the 19th century typeface... We were impressed by that because it was more neutral, and neutralism was a word that we loved. It should be neutral. It shouldn’t have a meaning in itself. The meaning is in the content of the text and not in the typeface.\(^{24}\)

**Context**

By pushing on the amount of Gothic features Helvetica can carry without losing its own important traits, but also without Fraktur’s tainted image of oppression becoming dominant; this project investigates if Fraktur and Helvetica can coexist in today’s typographic communication.

Typography is a communicative tool which can mediate power, as well as reflect the institution it represents. In order to investigate the power that typography has or can have on our influence in a public environment, I will replace or modify the fonts of public signs belonging to institutions, and governmental sectors, with my hybrid font. Where other’s reactions or non-reactions to the interference of the signs are an important reflection.

Situating my hybrid font and added thorns to public signs, I am investigating whether Fraktur and Helvetica can coexist in a contemporary context. With Fraktur’s tainted image of oppression this project experiments its Gothic features on Helvetica to push what is enough without it becoming dominant. This is carried out with today’s power holders in the form of governmental authorities such as; Landstinget, Kalmarhem, Linnaeus University, the county council and public streets.

The sheer use of typography in a public environment exercise one’s position of power, by influencing the viewers’ interpretation of information.

My hybrid consists of Helvetica as the base, where I adorn it with Gothic feature such as thorns, dramatic contrasts, broken arcs and curved, diamond, and spire shaped terminals, in a slightly restrained fashion.

From my visual research of drawing Fraktur, I have come to the conclusion that Fraktur’s sharp and curved terminals, the added thorns and the weight contrast of heavy and hairline is what characterise the font in particular. By applying these features to Helvetica, in different combinations and degrees, I create an expression associated with both the Gothic craftsmanship and the well-balanced neo-grotesque. Helvetica is a comfortable norm within typographic communication, it is used by both designers and non-designer, consciously and unconsciously. In the typographic context, Helvetica is seen practically everywhere in today’s communication, served to convey a direct message without frills.

Blackletter deserve to be appreciated again, and not for its radical and political sentiments from the past, but for its important role in its purpose of education and documentation as well as the development of the European society. The craftsmanship of Blackletter and its evolved style Fraktur, with vertical and curved features that allow

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\(^{24}\)Helvetica [dvd], Director G. Hustwit, United States, Plexifilm, 2007
This project is about creating a hybrid font from Fraktur and Helvetica, which is applicable on today’s typographic communication. One important part of the process is to learn about Fraktur’s and Helvetica’s history and purpose, in order to get the most of them without losing their traits, to ultimately create an expression that carries the strengths from both types.

Going into this project, Arina Stoenescu has been a great source of inspiration, when it comes to the typographic image and its use in the context of power. In her PhD report *Typography and politics*, Arina addresses the typographic image she encountered when she came to Sweden in the late 1980s, as a refugee from Romania, how the Swedish newspapers looked so different. Since she couldn’t read Swedish at this point it was the visual image of the text, built by the font in use, which gave it its different expression: The Swedish newspaper had a more literary tone. In this context Arina discusses the

Romanian newspapers using sans-serifs only while the Swedish newspapers use a serif as the dominant type style, investigating typography as a tool of control over the reader. This set fuel to my already existing curiosity towards Blackletter and grotesque sans-serif of the post war modernism, now from a perspective of its use in a context of power, this set the foreground of my research project.

In the process of mapping my area I have felt the need and necessity to learn about and keep in mind, the origin and purpose of the two fonts I’m using to build my hybrid. Not only for the sake of understanding their position within a context of power, but as a curiosity and respect for the authentic craft and culture.

Throughout history and in today’s society, typography has and is with no doubt a great part of communication looking at religious and political contexts, but increasingly so within the activists’ and pop culture movements such as; music, fashion, art, literature, feminism and LGBTQ+. Looking at Blackletter’s or for this context Fraktur’s use in today’s typographic communication in music, fashion and art it seems to be for the sake of giving a strong impression through provocation. Its expressive characteristics give an edgy look of originality, perhaps giving hints of a dark historical resonance. Its unusual features compared to today’s typographic standard, more similar to Helvetica, easily catches the attention of any approaching viewer.
Besides Fraktur’s decorative use within pop cultures, the Peoples Theatre, Volksbühne, in Berlin used it for the sake of provocation and visibility. Known for being a provocative, experimenting and contemporary theatre, that could explain the interest towards Blackletter. Revaluing negatively connoted words such as crisis, lie and frenzy, for no reason, Volksbühne hope to distance themselves to Blackletter’s tainted image of oppression and Nazism. They have no intention of being politically correct, and rather use Blackletters for the sake of provocation. “The Volksbühne is far away from being right-winged, so I found the posters thought-provoking rather than provoking”.26

For this project I am taking on the role as a historian, to learn about and understand the expressions and associated image behind the two type styles, a Blackletter and a neo-grotesque sans-serif, to finally act as a type designer where I imitate the shapes in a new composition. The focus is not on legibility, where it serves as a further layer on typography’s relation to power, with the excluding factor of not knowing how to read certain letter forms and what possible effect that might have on the typographic image. It’s the origin, culture and craft behind both types and the accompanied associations they might receive in their final form that is of importance.

Method

Through workshops that document peoples’ associations and comments on the shapes and typographic images that both Fraktur and Helvetica create, I will investigate how I can build on their traits in order to create a hybrid.

The workshops or investigation have been done in different stages building on the knowledge that I’m gaining throughout the process, both theoretically and visually. The first stage served as an introduction, displaying Helvetica and multiple Blackletter scripts such as Textura, Fraktur in two weights and Rotunda; to question my own perception of how others perceive them, in order to gain more knowledge.

I created a 5-page survey that I shared with the students at Visual Communication + Change year 1-3, my family and online. In the survey I displayed Textura, Fraktur in two weights, Rotunda and Helvetica. These type styles have been written in one sentence, made from a random word-generator, to avoid confusion and manipulation. The text is set in 55-60pt with a spacing at 45-50pt, depending on the typeface, in three rows. The larger size and the three rows of text allow a good view of the font, in the context of a sentence.

The rest of the information on the survey is discreet: small in size and placed in the far corners/sides, in a neutral sans-serif. Everything is in black/white and neutral to influence the participants as little as possible, with simple description, to give a notion on to what I’m asking of.


Fig. 15 The fonts used in my survey: Amador, Rotunda Pommerania, Helvetica regular, Unifraktur Maguntia and Fette classic UNZ Fraktur.
I knew from before that Textura was the earliest of the Blackletter scripts and that Rotunda came after, but none of them was in my eyes tainted with oppression. Fraktur however, is a style I associate with Germany and Nazism, since I know that it was used in Germany during the Third Reich, which has tainted the script with political sentiments of Nazi propaganda. Whereas I want to change that look on it and perhaps encourage others to use it more.

The answers received from the survey were very surprising, since they were not historically correct. This made the research increasingly interesting, all but one didn’t see Fraktur as the style connected to Nazism, but rather Textura which was not used in Germany.

Starting with Textura, this style was associated with: religion, medieval times, gothic, churches, governmental scripts, historically, the Bible, monks, archives, Shakespeare, England, Germany, which are all in some way correct but also with; Nazi Germany, pain, oppression, propaganda. My unproved theory is that these harsh connotations might be linked to how the church maintained authority and power (perhaps similar to what Nazi Germany has had) by inflicting pain through oppression and with the use of religious propaganda. Its past use within power might have equipped Textura’s visual image with a strong association.

Looking at the answers on Fraktur, which was used in Germany during the Nazi regime, this style was only associated to Nazism by one participant.

I chose to display two weights in Fraktur. This idea was born when I discussed the workshop material with my fiancé, he perceived the heavier type as much harsher than the lighter one. This was later confirmed to be a relevant perception since most participants commented the same. Fraktur’s associations in the heavier weight: Harsh, sharp, Dracula, devil, fantasy, uncomfortable, old, gothic-ish, past, fire, decorative, Lord of the Rings, evil, scary, fairy tale, rock, metal, tattoo, trendy, future, refreshing, confusing, and the one Nazi Germany comment.

Fraktur’s associations in the lighter weight: Flowers, swirly, garden, fine writing, pretty, Gothic?, decorative, old?, related to religious scripts, expressive, very gothic, Christian, not so evil, feminine, edgy, evil, scary, authority, madness, inflated ego, medieval, body text, Viking, hard to read, fresh, past.

The heavier weight of Fraktur is perceived as a more dark, scary and evil type style, while the lighter is much friendlier, still scary, but more floral and pretty. Both type styles have connotations towards fantasy and fiction, inspired by old gothic scripts but the participants are not entirely sure if they actually origin from the gothic age. In relation to the expressive Blackletter, Helvetica expectedly seemed dull, the received associations were: No personality, no spice, cold, digital, web, computer, apple, modern, clean, boring, simplicity, not the past, readable, Swiss, serious, Swiss/central European, contemporary, neutral, objective, useful, popular, serious, business, design.

Helvetica is considered to be one of the most popular fonts of the 20th century, designed during the Swiss Style-period, which has had great influence on graphic design today. Helvetica has been altered since then but is still used. It’s practically everywhere. Therefore, I’m curious to see what the Gothic shapes morphed with the contemporary design of Helvetica could do to their overall expression.

Design Process

The historical and aesthetic values of both Fraktur and Helvetica, along with their designed purpose, have been important aspects to me in my process: for educative reasons in my investigation, but also for my personal interest of the craft. The design process began with looking closer at each typographic style.

The height and width of Blackletters are usually measured with a broad pen’s width, usually 4-5 pen widths in the x-height. Fraktur’s rounded shapes and spires at the top and bottom makes this Blackletter style look taller. Compared to TQ, Fraktur also has a lighter overall picture, not as tight and more legible, though it maintains the narrow fit of TQ. Fraktur is seen as a more decorative style in the Blackletter family, combining TQ’s vertical strokes with Rotunda’s curves, with its complex variations of minuscules (lower case in calligraphy), and majuscules (uppercase in calligraphy) with a so called Elefantenrüssel (elephant’s trunk), which is similar to the S-stroke.27

The most notable accent of Fraktur is the use of curved and backward curved strokes in letters like a, b, and p to make the arches sharp and pointy and also combining it with vertical strokes. With the curved, or broken, strokes you can easily change the look of Fraktur with small tweaks to its basic structure, keeping in mind to share those same changes to all the other letters. As Fraktur was mainly used as a printed typeface, for more than five centuries, there was never set an exact calligraphic standard for how to write it.27 Because of this, Fraktur allows one to draw it in different variations in forms of adding strokes and tweaking the existing strokes. This made it important for me to set an own version which I could keep to in my process of designing a hybrid font.

Setting my own standard (Fig. 16), I have used Vinzenz Rockner’s Fraktur font, designed to look handmade, printed by Johann Schönperger for Maximilian I’s Gebetbuch in 1515. I have also taken inspiration from the contemporary calligraphers Jake Rainis (Fig. 17) and Eugene Berd (Fig. 18), to build a further understanding of the calligraphic style’s many possibilities.

In the Gebetbuch, old letters such as the long s and the curved r, are used. I found a great interest in applying these old letters to my hybrid, to further build on the historic traits but also for its possible effect on the reader. Not only is Fraktur sending connotations of a dark history and oppression, but the use of old letters makes the font more difficult to read, building on its connection to power. For this case, the power of the language, excluding those lacking knowledge about the old letters and their rules. Since the rules are varying depending on which European country, during what period of time, I have focused on the most important rules of the long s: The long s should never be used at the end of a word, directly after a short s or next to an f. The short s should be used at the end of a word, before apostrophe and hyphen (if it is not a line break), but never at the start of a word or in the middle of a word. Rules can be bent in situations when s and f are next to each other to avoid confusion; when s and f meet the short s should be used, when an f is directly after a double s they should be in the combination of long and short s before the f, as in “succesful”.28

The curved r is hard to find any rules about. From reading the Gebetbuch and looking at Eugene’s rendering of its Fraktur, I translate that it should be used directly after the curve of a letter such as; b, e, o and p.

The grotesque sans-serif does not, compared to its sibling the humanist, have a strong relationship to calligraphy.29 Helvetica consist of slightly oval shapes, a large x-height and quite a low contrast in the weight on the strokes which gives it a uniform look. The even looking strokes makes it a good partner to compile with Fraktur, where its heaviest strokes can meet Fraktur’s hairline strokes, without losing the traits of either one to the state of unrecognisable.

Rather than morphing Fraktur and Helvetica together, using Helvetica as a canvas to paint with Fraktur features seems like the best way to keep them both alive. Since Fraktur can be tweaked both in height and width, it won’t lose its visual image following the proportions of Helvetica. The opposite on the other hand will erase any traits of Helvetica, keeping to Helvetica’s proportions entirely but with calligraphic strokes only, also erases any traits of Helvetica.

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Results

From the results of my survey, questioning the associations and connotations of Blackletter styles and Helvetica. Along with research on Fraktur’s and Helvetica’s history. Their connection to power is the resulting factor of how and for what purpose they have been used: Blackletter’s use in medieval times, in religious and governmental contexts, together with Fraktur becoming a representing symbol of Germany, and later used by the Nazi regime, can be explained as the cause for their connection to power. The intercourse with Nazi propaganda has not only tainted Fraktur, which they used, but also the family of Blackletter styles, as their historic purpose is lost and unknown to majority of the population. Blackletter’s contemporary use in pop cultures are also breed on its connotations of a dark history, but merely for its striking appearance rather than oppression.

Helvetica is, on the other hand, used in a corporate and somewhat commercial context, that has achieved credibility for its functional and rationalist stand point. With the neutral appearance of the grotesque sans-serif, Helvetica communicates information without any carried meaning, more than what the information gives the reader. Some graphic designers argue that Helvetica associate corporate dominance. Therefore, Helvetica’s neutral design and trustworthy appearance is more likely to be used by far right-winged political parties, rather than Fraktur.

In Arina’s text about Typography and politics, she explains how the communist regime in Romania used sans-serifs repeatedly for headlines and body texts, leaving out any possible distraction of associated meaning that comes with varied font styles.

Noise in the form of typographic diversity, or other typographical solutions, as following the classical norms, could be a form of distraction that acted as a barrier between the message and the people by interfering, distorting and hiding the message.

The information gained from the survey and the research of Fraktur and Helvetica’s history, was then investigated through visual research. The first step of my visual research was to get familiar with how the two type styles were built. Since Fraktur allows endless of possible compositions in forms of small tweaks, I had to set my own Fraktur standard in order to decide on what repetitive shapes to carry out in my hybrid. This investigation brought me to the thorns, which are quite subtle in old manuscripts, but increasingly popular in contemporary calligraphy.

I simply added, more or less, thorns to Helvetica. This was a small adding which gave a remarkable response, still feeling Gothic though the features of Helvetica were dominant. For this hybrid version I also made use of the old letters not used today, such as; the long s, cut of r, n-looking y and the rules of how and when the s and r should be used next to other letters. This gave an increased hint of a Gothic, Blackletter script. Keeping to the shapes of Helvetica as the base. Helvetica bold, shares similarities with the blackness of Blackletter’s heavy, vertical strokes. Later on, I applied the notion of a parallel pen’s thinnest and thickest strokes to the hybrid, as seen in Fraktur, as well as changing some of the terminals to spires or curves. This made the hybrid become even more Gothic, but with the familiar traits of the neutral Helvetica. With the additional Fraktur traits, the hybrid typeface was made with and without thorns, as two different weights, with an additional light font weight.

Helvetica [dvd], Director G. Hustwit, United States, Plexifilm, 2007
A. Stoenescu, Typography & Politics: Newspaper typography in Romania and Moldova during communist period (1930-1990), Ph.D. diss., Stockholm, Pionier Press, 2015, p. 4-5.

19 My hybrid font, Helvektur Fett, lowercase.
20 My hybrid font, Helvektur Schwarz, lowercase.
Up until now I have described the lowercase letters of the hybrid. Lowercase letters has been the most used ones, when it comes to the Blackletter script, which is why they have been the most important letters in the making of my hybrid. Drawn within the frames of Helvetica, and with a few notable traits, the uppercase letters of the hybrid are kept decorative like Fraktur, with added Elefantenrüssels. In Fraktur, the uppercase letters were only used as an introductory letter in sentences.

The hybrid was given the name Helvektur – a clash of Helvetica and Fraktur – and the three weights were named Fein, Fett and Schwarz (Thin, Fat and Black). With Helvetica as a Swiss invention and Fraktur as a symbol for Germany, the names of the typeface and weights are a tribute to the two and their history.

With the findings of what the added thorns did to Helvetica – reflecting Blackletter traits in a subtle manner – I began to interfere with signs of institutions and public sectors. For this interference of signs, I added the thorns, not to Helvetica, but to other neo-grotesques in a contemporary context, where the purpose is to provide information from the authority of institutions and public sectors.

The result was subtle, and the responses were different. The interfering with the signs, that I usually take for granted and don’t pay much attention to, made me feel like a criminal. During the act of adding thorns to a car park sign in Norröden, Kalmar, Securitas passed by, showing no signs of what I did was illegal. Since the thorns are made from electrical tape, they are easy to remove, but it still felt like vandalising. Walking back to the sign, days after, the tape was still there, untouched.

It is the black tape on black letters that seems to give the best result, the white tape is not the right shade. In the area of Bremerlyckan in Kalmar, I continued to add thorns to signs. At this location, local residents were passing by, some staring, one man sat on a bench watching the act. An old man approached me, seemingly curious and positive at first. As I was introducing him to my project and investigation his attitude switched. Suddenly he became very angry, verbally, saying “Is this where our tax money goes to? [...] Idiocy!”. Not doing anything to make me stop, he walks away. The man who had sat and watched was intrigued by this response. He seemed positive towards the investigation, though wondered whether I had...
permission or not. I told him I didn’t, but that the tape was not permanent and could be taken off at any point. He stayed for a while discussing my project, showing interest towards the contemporary use of Fraktur coexisting with a neo-grotesque font. He admitted that “If I hadn’t seen the interference, I wouldn’t have questioned the thorns on the sign”, saying that it might even suit more with a Blackletter script amongst the old architecture in this area, rather than a contemporary sans-serif.

Further interference with the signs were made with the finished hybrid font, Helvektur. I created a copy of the institution’s actual sign but replaced their typeface with Helvektur. The reactions were similar to when I added the thorns, but the actual act felt much scarier since I was completely covering their signs.

Analysis and Evaluation of Contribution

In this project I am investigating the connotations to power in the visual image of the Blackletter style Fraktur and the neo-grotesk sans-serif Helvetica. As a change agent I aim to revive the old, calligraphic type style, in the contemporary context of typographic communication. With the use of Helvetica, I will explore their connection to power. Through my visual research of the tainted connotations of oppression and power in Fraktur, I investigate how much Gothic traits Helvetica, as the typographic norm, can carry for them to coexist in a contemporary context.

What impact has Fraktur, as well as Helvetica, had on the people of its era and how is it used today? Those are two questions investigated in the research of typography’s connection to power, from a historical point of view in a contemporary context. Is the impact the same, what is the source of power and how is that expressed and used in a contemporary context, and for what purpose? Since typography is a tool for communication, I will explore both the visual power and impact. This will be done by adding found traits of Fraktur, in forms of thorns, to already existing letters on signs, that share characteristics of Helvetica, as well as replacing the signs entirely with the hybrid itself, as an interference with the displayed information by governments and institutions.

With the use of Helvetica, I will explore their connection to power. Through the interference with information addressed by authorities such as institutions and public sectors, it also demonstrates how power functions in relation to the use of typography. Instead of replacing the letters on the signs with any serif of sans-serif I am reviving the Fraktur script. As Fraktur evokes political sentiments of Nazism and oppression, what affect would that have on an institution that would otherwise never be associated with what the script is connected to.

Helvetica is a subtle type style, and its neutral appearance draws little attention in itself, while the information it visualises speaks the loudest. Helvetica might in fact possess the most powerful visual image, making any user of it credible, which can be taken into account as a strategic action: you would not see Sverige Demokraterna with Fraktur, but rather Helvetica or any other grotesque font. Fraktur on the other hand, works in a different way. Since typography carries a visual image, made from how and
by whom it has been used and for what purpose, good or bad. Fraktur, or Blackletter in general, with its unforgettable and expressive characteristics, carries a tainted image of oppression, of a religious and political context. Therefore, this project investigates how much of the Fraktur features Helvetica can carry, without losing either of their important aesthetic traits, to coexist in today’s typographic communication.

To continue my interference and investigation of people’s associations to Blackletter through my hybrid, I contacted local newspapers in Kalmar to see their attitude towards my investigation. Since I have from previous courses a contact person at Barometern, it might have had the deciding factor on why they were the only ones to respond. The response was curiosity and interest, no hint of scepticism. This part of the project would continue beside this project because of the limited time, but it is a discussion I hope to engage others in, reaching a wider range of people and their associations. From the position of power, Barometern is a credible authority which many citizens of Kalmar read every day. Their reactions would be a great achievement, negative and positive, in the attempt of inviting Fraktur into today’s typographic communication, with a weight on its connection to power.

**Conclusion**

From studying Fraktur and Helvetica, I can establish that their relation to power is relevant in their use in a contemporary context in typographic communication. Fraktur’s power is louder than Helvetica, though the subtle features and disguise of any carried meaning of the grotesque sans-serif should not mislead you. The most discrete fonts could be the tip of an iceberg. Fraktur’s expressive characteristic makes it a challenge to break free from its tainted image, but with the help of Helvetica it seems possible for them to coexist in a contemporary context.

Both Fraktur and Helvetica have an interesting history, but as a change agent in collaboration with society it has been of importance to include the associations people have today – just because facts are written in the history books does not mean that it is the collective image that people have today – something to keep in mind when working with typography’s connection to power.

So can Fraktur and Helvetica coexist within typographic communication in a contemporary context? From the visual research, discussions and observations I believe that Fraktur and Helvetica can coexist in today’s typographic communication. Helvetica’s neutral and balanced for quiets the most extreme features and expressions of Fraktur’s lowercase letters, while keeping the most important traits intact, which still can draw connections to its past. The uppercase letters on the other hand are kept expressive, with slight hints of Helvetica, as a supplement which can be used to push their coexistence even further. However, I am still uncertain if their coexistence will be accepted and embraced without any negative reaction. With that in mind I hope to further push other’s tolerance and acceptance through a continued interference with its use from a position of power, such as institutions and public sectors.

The added thorns and the text replaced with Helvetiur on public signs has had, for the most part, a positive response. What I saw as a criminal act had quite a low degree of disturbance. Perhaps because of cultural reasons as to how Swedish people interact with others in a public space, or because of the trustworthiness of the act.

On a further note I hope to continue the interference, within typographic communication from the perspective of power, to engage others in the discussion reaching a wider range of people and their associations on communication within the typographic context.
Text references


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Fig.15 The fonts used in my survey: Amador, Rotunda Pommerania, Helvetica regular, Univers Maguntia and Fette classic UNZ Fraktur
Fig.16 My drawings of Fraktur, parallel pen and ink, 6mm pen width.
Fig.17 J. Rains, ‘Jakerains’, Instagram, [online photograph], https://www.instagram.com/jakerains/, (accessed 22 March 2018).
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Fig.19 My hybrid font, Helvektur Fett, lowercase.
Fig.20 My hybrid font, Helvektur Schwarz, lowercase.
Fig.21 My hybrid font, Helvektur Fett, uppercase.
Fig.22 My interference with car park sign, using thorns.
Fig.23 My interference with university sign, using thorns.
Fig.24 My interference with street sign, using thorns.
Fig.25 My interference with car park sign, using Helvektur.
Fig.26 My interference with university sign, using Helvektur.
Fig.27 My interference with street sign, using Helvektur.
Photo Documentation of Exhibition
Catching a visual image, based on its previous use and content, typography is a communicative tool that mediates power. For this project I have designed a hybrid typeface named Helvetur, built on traits from Fraktur and Helvetica; to investigate their connection to power and possibilities to corrupt. The investigation is carried out by interfering with signs from institutions and public sectors. Letters of the signs are either modified with Fraktur features or replaced entirely with Helvetica. Helvetica, a neutral typeface from the post war modernism, was designed to carry no associated meaning, making it a diverse design useful in corporate communication for a wide range of contexts. Fraktur is an erasable architectural style with a historically tainted image of opposition that was originally inspired by Gothic architecture; aimed to express religious emotions.
Carving a visual image, based on its present use and content, typographs is a communicative tool that mediates power. For this project I have designed a hybrid interface named Heinever, built on traits from Freiheit and Heinheit; to investigate their connection to power and possibility to correct. The investigation is carried out by interfering with signs from institutions and public sectors.