

NEULAND

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN
OPQRSTUVWXYZ
0123456789

MANDARIN

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN
OPQRSTUVWXYZ
0123456789

BRUCE MIKITA

ABCDEFGHIJKLM
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
0123456789

Legende

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN
NOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
0123456789

Stereotypography: How typography is used to perpetuate cultural stereotypes

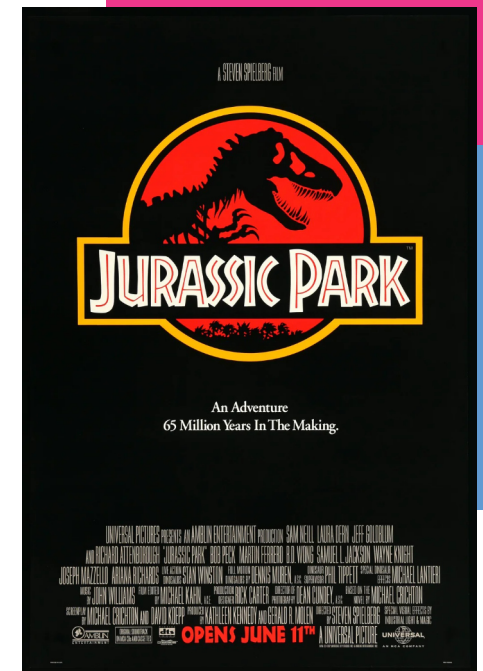
von Franziska Engel

Typography is not a neutral art form; the choice of font carries significant emotional, cultural, and historical weight. Stereotypography refers to a font that has essentially become a stand-in for a culture or identity, rather than being used as a design tool. Using a font laden with such stereotypes can have serious consequences. It can alienate your audience and flatten the histories of whole cultures into a single cliché.

Most of these stereotypical typefaces acquired their reputation at a time when Western civilization was seen as the benchmark, and everything 'other' was reduced to primitivism — either seen as fascinating or inferior. The following paragraphs will delve into the particulars of some of the fonts that came into being during this era.

Neuland

One of the most well-known examples of Stereotypography was created within this time period. Neuland, a font designed by Rudolf Koch in 1923, now often used in reference to Africa. Originally intended as a modern version of the traditional German Gothic Black Letter, the font uses the bold style and redu-



Jurassic Park original poster



© TEXACO
Anti-Japanese propaganda poster that circulated during World War II

ced spacing of Gothic while incorporating the sans-serif elements of modern typefaces.

When the typeface first appeared in the US, its original meaning and the reason for its creation were unknown. Large wooden fonts, often used in circus advertising, were considered low-end and informal since they were poorly printed compared to metal type. They were referred to as 'garbage fonts'. Due to its bold and blocky nature, Neuland was considered inelegant, ugly and difficult to handle.

At this time, the black American population did not have the means to cultivate its own graphic style and was reduced to being illus-

trated as circus freaks or in association with slavery, tobacco, and cotton. Thus, Neuland gradually took its place in US culture as a primitive font, often associated with Africa.

Well-known examples that use this font in reference to the jungle, adventure, safaris or Africa in general include film posters for Jumanji and Jurassic Park.

Chop Suey fonts

Much like its namesake, the food and fonts bear no real relation to Chinese culture. Despite this, these typefaces have been used as a reference for anything Asian, particularly Chinese, for several decades. This started with the Cleveland type foundry obtaining a patent for calligraphy-style printing type in 1883, later becoming known as the 'Mandarin' font. Variations of Chop Suey fonts are commercially distributed under names such as Wonton, Peking and Shanghai, amongst many others that appropriate Asian culture.

These fonts have been used to amplify xenophobia in Western society for over a century. The original Chop Suey font became popular in San Francisco's Chinatown district, where a poster following the 1906 earthquake led to its rise to fame. When the district was specifically rebuilt to appeal to tourists, the Asian-style font was chosen for storefronts to attract crowds.

Bruce Mikita

Created in 1866 at the Bruce Type Foundry, this font is the first known example of Stereotypography. Initially known as Novel

Open, it was used for official documents but was soon renamed Rustic Shaded in accordance with its rustic style. But in the 1950s, the font underwent another name change: Bruce Mikita, in reference to Japanese wood-working. From then on, it was used in a lot of Japanese media in the USA. An example of this can be seen on the cover of a Japanese music album released in 1963 called The Art of the Koto: Music of Japan. Interestingly, the French cover did not feature the Mikita font, but the US cover did.

Legende

Another example of a font that has lost its original meaning is Legende, which was created by Schneidler in 1937. Though originally inspired by 15th-century Burgundian and Flemish bastard script, it is now commonly used as an imitation of Arabic script. Contributing to this is the calligraphy-like nature of the font, which reinforces the stereotype of Arabic or Oriental script as calligraphy.

These sorts of fonts are offensive to the group stereotyped, but also to the viewer. We are intelligent beings with the capacity to read the intent of a sign without designers resorting to negative stereotypes.

Nichole Fernández

Closing: Our responsibility as designers

As designers, it is our responsibility to choose fonts that convey information accurately without perpetuating stereotypes. With such a wide range of diverse fonts available nowadays, it is easier than ever to find one that doesn't resort to clichés.

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Further reading:

StereoTYPES, 2015; <https://itaint-necessarilyso.square-space.com/articles/2015/11/17/stereotypes>

Tips for avoiding Stereotypography

- **Always do your research!** If your audience recognizes a stereotypical font, it sends the message that the designer was too lazy to bother investigating its origins.
- **Keep an eye out for visual clichés!** A font filled with over-the-top ornaments, tribal patterns, or any other cultural symbols is probably not a good choice.
- **Culture can be represented by more than just a font!** Rather than focusing solely on the font, consider other design elements that can convey a culture respectfully without turning it into a caricature, such as color palettes inspired by traditional textiles, layouts referencing architectural elements, or authentic photography.