

Introduction

Graphic Design, Hermeneutics, & Theopoetics

*Kate Common**

To design is to transform prose into poetry.
Design broadens perception, magnifies experience, and enhances vision.

-Paul Rand ¹

When principles of design replicate principles of thought,
the act of arranging information becomes an act of insight.

-Edward Tufte²

I come to *theopoetics* by way of graphic design. My matriculation into academic theology arrived after an undergraduate degree in visual communication design followed by a career specializing in the design of corporate identity systems. This entails the development and design of complex symbol systems that poetically communicate corporate stories—what are commonly known as *brands*. After ten-years I departed design to pursue what I perceived as a call to parish ministry. I left my corporate career behind, excited to begin a new course of study, not yet realizing that my design experience was an invaluable *theopoetic* tool that would guide my future theological work.

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¹ Paul Rand, *Design Form and Chaos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3. Bold mine.

² Edward R. Tufte, *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1997), 9. Bold mine.

This realization began to emerge during two integral classes taken my first semester in seminary: *3 Modernist Poets: Rilke, Stevens, and Eliot* and *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*.³ During *3 Modernist Poets* I discovered metaphor theory and for the first time engaged with theoretical discourse regarding the *poetics* of a symbol and how it generates meaning. Though I knew this intuitively after years of working with visual symbols—*logos*—I never before discussed it theoretically. Neither my undergraduate studies or corporate design career focused on this. My study of metaphor theory and poetics suddenly shifted my perspective on my past vocation—I recognized graphic design as a *poetic* practice. This realization sparked a surge of integrative and creative energy within me. I felt a profound synthesis between the two vocations of theology and graphic design. While the synthesis felt personally affirming and noteworthy I did not yet see how it would contribute to my theological studies.

Clarity came during my *Introduction to Hebrew Bible* course when graphic design became an unexpected interdisciplinary partner in helping me shape a hermeneutical approach for reading a series of ironic stories in the Hebrew Bible. As the class studied these stories I began to notice each one shimmering with a hidden meaning that directly correlated to a specific set of sociopolitical events found within the ancient Hebrew tradition. These disparate stories appeared to interact with one another across narratives through a set of common symbols. I imagined the author as a sophisticated brand designer, developing an overarching meta-story, told through a shared symbol system spread across several seemingly disconnected stories. This initial fascination prompted a research project in order to discover whether this interpretation merely reflected an anachronistic projection of a 21st century graphic designer or if it could find support within existing biblical scholarship. My research

³ Both courses taught Fall 2008 at Andover Newton Theological School: *3 Modernist Poets: Rilke, Stevens, and Eliot* taught by Mark S. Burrows; *Introduction to Hebrew Bible* taught by Gregory Mobley

began to uproot evidence that dissuaded an easy dismissal of the hermeneutic as only anachronistic. The project continued to grow, eventually becoming the focus of my master's degree and continuing doctoral studies.

My work depends upon a hermeneutical perspective generated from the poetic practice of designing symbol systems to communicate across disparate media channels in order to narrate a unified story. While a hermeneutic for ancient ironic biblical stories may sound like a surprising consequence of graphic design practice, such a consequence is imaginable when one considers design as more than an aesthetic flourish but a poetic practice. Two epigraphs begin this essay. The first from revolutionary mid-twentieth century designer Paul Rand and the second from contemporary informational design theorist Edward Tufte. Both articulate that design does much more than rearrange information—it enhances vision and generates insight. As such design is an epistemological practice—*poesis*.

Theopoetics enables me to situate my work in dialogue with others who emphasize the *poetic* as an important epistemological avenue. *Theopoetics* connects diverse researchers and practitioners alike, drawing connections across both disciplinary and vocational borders. I understand my work as *theopoetic* because it emphasizes imaginative poetic practices as both communicative and epistemological. *Theopoetics* enables me to comfortably identify myself within academic theology as both a graphic designer and feminist practical theologian developing work at the epistemological intersection of these disciplines.

I share this story to help highlight the diverse paths that many of us find our way to *theopoetics* as the topic continues to develop. To reiterate Callid Keefe-Perry's discussion found in the inaugural editorial of *THEOPOETICS* 1.1:

Our hope for the journal is to have it serve as the container for the intersection of several fields of exploration. The intent is to have the content here reside somewhere in the mix of a theological conversation with aesthetics, literature, embodiment, creativity studies, and the philosophy of imagination. It is – in the words of Melanie Duguid-May – an invitation “to participate in an ongoing process of naming, clarifying, and loosing again: to honor *Poesis* as making and remaking without ceasing.”⁴

This edition of the journal continues to highlight intersections of fields and approaches gathered within *theopoetics*. In light of atrocities such as the Sandy Hook school shooting, Ashely Theuring asks, “What language can theology speak to these tragedies?” For her, Rebecca Chopp’s theopoetic of witness can “help us to stand in resistance to suffering and locates the Divine in what remains through the trauma.” In addition, the language of *theopoetics* can help build bridges across interreligious communities and can enlarge communities of support and resistance in the face of tragedy. In Andrew Tripp’s “Pastoral Theopoetic Care in the Presence of Inscribed Bodies,” he explores the way *theopoetics* opens caregivers to the very bodies they care for, allowing those bodies to speak and not the prejudicial scripts of the dominant culture. Marginalized and subjugated bodies then become “sites for theopoetic resistance to the powers that cause violent inscriptions.” Only when the bodies themselves speak can dignity be reclaimed. Jordan E. Miller’s “Secular Theology, Political Poetics, and ACT UP: On Meaning-making and Resistance,” details a variety of ways that The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) expresses a secular political theopoetics. He argues that the political and theological are always intertwined. Using Charles E. Winquist’s desiring theology, José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, and Mark L. Taylor’s theo-

⁴ Melanie May, *A Body Knows: A Theopoetics of Death and Resurrection*, 25.

poetic hauntology, he demonstrates “a variety of ways in which ACT UP is expressive of a secular political theopoetics.”

Examining Ruben Alves’ 1977 article focused on pastoral care under liberation theology and the use of Magic Realism in literature and religion, Bruno J. Linhares suggests that “theopoetry can be a truly Latin American proposal for Pastoral Care.” Literary works of Magic Realism distorts temporality and space, blurs the line between the physical and astral, the real world and dream world, “magic is real, and reality is magic.” Linhares suggests that because the barrier between the living and the dead does not exist in Magic Realism it can aid in pastoral counseling practices especially in relationships that carry emotional content across generations. Magic Realism may provide a fruitful path of dialogue in these situations because it can offer a free setting to reframe a world and life visions. Rod Dixon’s fictional piece, “The Whisky Maker’s Catechism: The New Gnostic Gospel of Lester Caudill” expresses the contours of Magic Realism. In this piece we meet the gnostic theology of the deceased Lester Caudill as his theologically pondering nephew finds a journal of Caudill’s theological notes. In his notes, Caudill transcribed an inner dialogue of question and answers posed at traditional doctrines of Christianity. He is not alone in his dialogue but speaks with the mysterious, ethereal Antipas, described as a “disembodied head in a robe, the train of which seemed seven miles long.” Through Caudill’s notes and Dixon’s introductory commentary the real and unreal distort, inviting venue the reader to ponder their own metaphysical questions.

We hope this issue prompts your continued reflection and poetic action. Please consider submitting articles, reviews, poems, or short fiction. We would love to know how you come to *theopoetics* and what approaches you bring. Enjoy the journal!