

Welcome to the panel on Literature, Graphic Design, and Literacy. I'm delighted to be here with Dmitri Siegel and Julia Lupton. My name is Susan Yelavich and I'm an Assistant Professor in Art and Design Studies at Parsons The New School for Design.

Briefly, by way of introduction, Julia Reinhard Lupton is Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of three books, one of which I have read--*Afterlives of the Saints: Hagiography, Typology, and Renaissance Literature*-- and the author of numerous articles on Shakespeare. With her twin sister, AIGA Gold Medalist Ellen Lupton, she is also the co-author of *D.I.Y. Kids* and a contributor to *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself* and a regular voice on the blog of the same name.

Dmitri Siegel is a designer and writer, who's based in Philadelphia. He's currently creative director for Urban Outfitters online. He is also creative director of *Ante* an independent publishing venture with sculptor Nicholas Herman and he's the art director for *Anathema* magazine. His writing has appeared in *Dot, Dot, Dot*, *Emigre*, *Adbusters*, and *Design* issues. He is also a contributing writer for *Design Observer*, which is

“where” we met and I first learned of his work with Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*. He lectures at University of the Arts in Philadelphia and right here at Art Center in the graduate program in criticism and theory.

Of the three of us, only Dmitri teaches in the context of the studio. Julia and I work in the realm of the word, though we both occasionally pair writing assignments with studio-related projects. What Julia and Dmitri share that I don’t is that they’ve both been using literature in their teaching for some time now, and I’m just about to launch my own experiment at Parsons, for the full range of studio practices (including communication design) next fall.

So I was serious when I wrote in our call for papers that I’m looking for:

- --Models for the integration of literature into studio practice.
- --Models that explore the relationship of prose style to form language.
- --Examples of literary anthologies developed specifically for designers.
- --Strategies for dealing with the difficulties inherent in introducing literary forms to students who are largely unversed in history, literature, and writing.
- --and perhaps most importantly, conceptual frameworks that make sense of the relationships between the issues of contemporary practice and literature.

Hopefully, my panelists, and all of you, can offer some much needed counsel here.

Now, since we only have two panelists, I'm going offer a few prefatory thoughts of my own, to start the conversation. Earlier this week, I was scanning some of the books I've accumulated as contenders for my own, as yet untested, course on Design Fictions. Scavenging through the piles, I found something that I think encapsulates the spirit and intent of this panel.

In the introduction to José Saramago's book, *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy: A Novel*, Giovanni Pontiero quotes from a treatise on rhetoric by the first century Roman Quintilianus who wrote that:

“the orator (or writer) should not simply master the distribution of words but in his own hand he should be able to trace out the pattern...this is why great artists are referred to as men of letters.”

Well, apart from his omission of the word “women,” I think Quintilianus could also be describing our students--since the work of communication designers, of graphic designers, and from my perspective, all designers, is

ultimately pattern seeking and pattern creation, and much of the time through the media of letters and words.

The particular patterns that I want to direct their attention to, and our attention to today, are those that exist between literature and design. What do I mean by patterns? I mean parallels that can be found between the craft and the narratives of writing and the larger project of designing.

To begin with, there are correspondences of style and structure. As the historian Peter Gay writes in his book *Style in History*, style “opens windows on both truth and beauty a bewildering double vista.” (Gay, p. 6) “To unriddle the style...is to unriddle the man.” (Gay, p. 7) Again, “the man.” But no matter. The “truth” he refers to is the author’s value system--a system that is revealed by the cadence and structure of prose.

In reading Nicholson Baker’s *Mezzanine* students not only become alert to the world of minutia and the workings of the mind of an obsessive compulsive, they also can see the footnote as a structural device--one that opens up a world of graphic parallels. For a more conceptual and less instrumental discussion of style, there is Orhan Pamuk’s novel *My Name is*

Red. This mystery about 16th-century Turkish illustrators is essentially a debate about the respective values of realism and abstraction. One of its chapters is narrated by a tree drawn on a page of a book that has fallen into a gutter. This tree is bemoaning his fate, now that his page has been forever separated from the book. He's been rained on and trampled, but he's grateful for one thing, and that's that he's a Turkish tree. Had he been drawn by Venetian, conceived through a Western sensibility, he'd have been rendered as a beech or a pine or an oak, and so accurately that by now some dog would have pissed on him. He thanks Allah that he's not been drawn with such intent, saying "I don't want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning." (Pamuk, p. 51) Beyond the aesthetic distinctions he draws, Pamuk also offers a richer understanding of the cultural imperatives at work, an understanding that goes beyond (or, at least, behind) matters often treated solely in terms of religious strictures of representation.

Beyond style and culture, literature also offers correspondences to the debates going on in the profession about craft and authorship. Parallels can be found in fables like Hans Christian Anderson's "The Pen and the Inkwell." In it, the two protagonists--said inkwell and pen--argue about which of them is the true author of verse. Certainly, it couldn't be the poet.

Apart from considering the roles and expanded capacities of their instruments--be it computer software, film or even plain old ink--what graphic designer doesn't dream of being credited as an author, or at least as a co-author?

But of all the possibilities to be teased out of literature, the one that fascinates me most are the parallels and adjacencies to be found in narrative: Narratives that reveal the life of design when it enters the world; narratives that reveal the emotional resonance and the inherent sociability of design. Through a selection of carefully-curated novels, poems and essays -- more accurately, from *excerpts* of novels, poems and essays -- students can witness the affective nature of their work. In these narratives the subjects and objects of design take on the role of actor--or better, character. The inherently performative interactive nature of design becomes more vivid.

For example, Simon Schama's "The Hunt for Germania" in *Landscape and Memory* compellingly tells the cultural history of a nation's iconography. It's a tale of the oak tree as a kind of common-law logo, accrued over tragedy and time. It's a tale in which graphic iconography becomes a protagonist so powerful that, in 1943, Hitler sent an SS detachment to Italy

to capture a 15th-century copy of Tacitus's first century manuscript *Germania: or, On the Origin and Situation of the Germans*--the original catalyst for the myth of the purity of the Aryan race. That the SS failed to find it is inconsequential; the point I make is about the power of story and image.

And while we're here to talk about graphic designers, they too might profit from other narratives of communication. In her novel, *The Transit of Venus*, Shirley Hazzard describes how a callow young suitor reacts to the room he's received in by his future fiancé. This is how she describes it:

The room itself appeared unawed by him--not from any disorder but from very naturalness. A room where there had been expectation would have conveyed the fact--by a tension of plumped cushions and placed magazines, a vacancy from unseemly objects bundled out of sight; by suspense slowly dwindling in the curtains. This room was without such anxiety. On its upholstery, the nap of the usual was undisturbed. No tribute of preparation had been paid him here, unless perhaps the flowers, which were fresh, and which he himself [would have brought] if he had only thought. (Hazzard, p. 21)

This passage not only describes “the very naturalness” that every interior designer says they want to achieve (and never does). It also offers a narrative of resistance to pressure from clients (or teachers) with preconceived agendas. It also points their attention to the challenge and fragility of the everyday--something they tend to freeze in the act of creating at the same time they are searching for tactics to rescue it (the illusive everyday) from the ice box of design.

The power dynamic between designers and their audiences is something that Italo Calvino, very beautifully, extends to the realm of the city itself. In his story of Tamara, in *Invisible Cities*, Calvino writes:

...The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer’s house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer’s. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something--who knows what?--has as its sign a lion or a dolphin, or a tower or a star... Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think...” (Calvino, p. 13)

In other words, design is a kind of mind control.

Just as the unplumbed cushions told the young man in Shirley Hazzard's story that his future wife was "uncommonly self-possessed," the signs of the city--Calvino's Venice--are waiting to be read. They are surrogates here for all the different signs that our students must learn to read carefully if they are going to translate and transform them effectively. And it's my experience that students, at least undergraduates, aren't especially skilled readers of design. It's my hope that narratives, like Hazzard's and Calvino's, can offer less abstract and more visceral pathways into the meaning of their work.

I also believe that in introducing literature from various moments of time past we can effectively demonstrate the availability of the past and make the case for the value of history--not as a stock house of visual clichés but as a stock house of memories and experiences that offer resonances to our own. Literature offers a 'meta' perspective that perhaps is more expansive and fulsome than traditional design pedagogy. As a corollary to Peter Gay's assertion that style is a 'window onto truth and beauty,' I would argue that poetry, fiction and essays offer a window onto the fictions created by design.