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The Third Mind Classification System (Lightning Talk)

Abstract or Résumé:

Is it possible to remove the inherent bias of the Library of Congress Classification System? The organisation structures that dictate how knowledge is presented in the library carry a degree of power in how library patrons perceive knowledge about themselves and one another, but these systems carry inherent biases which can cause harm to patrons. Through a synthesis of the reparative goals of Critical classification and traditions of experimental Avant grade literature this experimental classification schema attempts to challenge the biases of conscious input from cataloguing by creating a Cut-Up method classification system governed by the principle of chance.

1. Introduction: The Problem

“ There are NO boundaries in any form. It has NOT all been done before, and that which has can still bear valid reinterpretation. These possibilities remain endless.¹”

Libraries endeavor to provide their patrons with safe, supportive environments, and diverse, inclusive collections, yet the structures that dictate how materials are organised in libraries are themselves biased and exclusionary. How knowledge is presented in the library has implications for how patrons are able to learn about themselves and one another, since the placement of materials show what is considered normal vs. abnormal (Deng & Davidian, 2021). It is acknowledged that cataloguers, whose decisions affect where materials should be included in the library, hold a degree of power, and with that power comes a capacity to cause harm (Martin, 2021). Classification creates connections between subjects, and these connections are a conscious decision that is indicative of the mindset of their creator. The Library of Congress Classification (LCC) was constructed to reflect very specific ideas concerning control, access, and order (Adler, 2020) and as a result has consistently marginalized those who do not adhere to these ideas. Critical Classification attempts to address these issues through education, research, challenges to the existing structures, and the creation of alternatives. As Adler states “there must always be movement, a constant questioning, an unmaking and remaking” (2017, 160).

¹ COUM Transmissions Manifesto (1974), quoted in Ford, S. (1999), *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle*, Black Dog Publishing.

2. The experiment

Approaching classification from this place of destruction and creation, this experiment, *The Third Mind Classification System*, aims to unite the critical and reparative goals of Critical Classification with the traditions of avant-garde art and literature through application of the Cut-Up technique to specific sections of the LCC. The fundamental premise of the Cut-Up method (pioneered by the Dadaist art movement of the 1920's, but refined and ultimately popularized by the 'Beat Generation' author William S. Burroughs and his collaborators) is to create new texts by physically cutting at least two existing texts and randomly reconstructing the fragments into a new composite document. Seeing structured language as a powerful tool of control, Burroughs sought to break down this control system through the destruction and rearrangement of it, presenting a methodology intended to be accessible to everyone and as an attack on conventional structures (Robinson, 2011).

Using William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's suggested methodology for creating cut-up texts (Burroughs & Gysin, 1978), the notoriously problematic LCC sub sections HQ (the family, marriage, and women) and HV (social and public welfare, social pathology, and criminology) are systematically cut into pieces and then reassembled into a single classification schema in which knowledge is organised by the principle of chance. Because this will likely create no logical connections between subjects, The resulting text is expected to have no functional value to library patrons so far as providing access to resources. However, this is not the goal of the experiment. Instead, the newly created connections between subjects- formed without conscious input from the cataloguer- and the original subsections are subjected to a comparative analysis for their capacity to cause harm, based on a systematic definition by Adler and Tennis (2013). This analysis uses factors such as the intention behind connections, the implications that each connection potentially raises, what groups participate in the creation of the system, and who is affected by what has been produced (individuals, communities, or nations) (Adler and Tennis, 2013, 14). If a system created entirely by chance is found to be intrinsically less harmful than one developed with intention, then this will raise questions on the implicit bias of knowledge organisation. Conversely, If the results show the opposite, then this will raise further questions concerning the nature of harm in cataloguing.

References

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