Works as Signs and Canons: Toward an Epistemology of The Work

Abstract: Works and items form documentary entities--packages that contain and may deliver one or more creative, communicative conceptions. At the most basic level a work is a set of ideas created and set into a document using text, with the intention of being communicated to a receiver. Works are essential vehicles for communication of information across temporal and cultural boundaries. As such, works demonstrate the characteristics of signs and symbols. Further, works may have membership in a canon. A taxonomic definition of the work is presented, which encompasses the cultural and documentary characteristics of works. This definition can be seen as a precursor to epistemological understanding of signifying documentary entities.

Works and items are joined variously to form documentary entities--packages that contain and may deliver one or more creative, communicative conceptions. At the most basic level a work is a set of ideas created and set into a document using text, with the intention of being communicated to a receiver. A work may have many texts, and may appear in many documents and even in many documentary forms.

Marco and Navarro (1993) have suggested that epistemological analysis of the paradigms of knowledge are essential for the design and implementation of cognitive strategies to guide documentary analysis. Such is the case with the understanding of the work component of the documentary entity. Marco and Navarro also assert the usefulness of taxonomy as a key element of the epistemological analysis of paradigms. Works have been variously defined in the literature of information science, knowledge organization, linguistics, musicology, and literary criticism, among others. Works are essential vehicles for communication of information across temporal and cultural boundaries. In this paper a taxonomic definition of the work is presented. This definition encompasses the cultural and documentary characteristics of works. This definition can be seen as a precursor to epistemological understanding of signifying documentary entities.

1. Documentary Entities and Bibliographic Relationships

A documentary entity is a unique instance of knowledge (e.g., a thesis, a sculpture, a research report, etc.). Each documentary entity has physical and intellectual properties. A containing relationship exists between these two properties. That is, the physical property is the package for the intellectual. Several authors--Tillett, Smiraglia, Leazer, Yee, Vellucci--have asserted the importance of the explicit linkage of relationships among bibliographic entities in the catalog. These authors employed empirical research techniques to illuminate the technical problems of bringing the objective of collocating works into primary position. Reports by IFLA and Thomas and Smiraglia have suggested new approaches to the definition of works.

Tillett (1987) sought to classify and quantify the entire range of bibliographic relationships--relationships that exist among documentary entities as comprehended from the point of view of bibliographic control. Smiraglia (1992) investigated the derivative bibliographic relationship, refining its definition to include several different categories of derivation. Leazer (1993 and 1994) described a conceptual schema for the explicit control of works in catalogs. Leazer and Smiraglia studied the presence of derivative bibliographic
relationships in the OCLC WorldCat (Smiraglia and Leazer 1995 and 1999, Leazer and Smiraglia 1996 and 1999) affirming the taxonomy of relationship types. Yee examined problems of relationships among moving image materials. Yee was concerned with the substantial problems of associating bibliographic records for varying instantiations of films. This she accomplished by demonstrating the multiplicity of entities that can occur in the bibliographic universe among moving image materials. Vellucci (1997) examined musical works and found that the categories Tillett and Smiraglia had suggested were present, and in large numbers.

A 1998 report by a study group of The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) was devoted to outlining functional requirements for bibliographic records. Representing the products of intellectual or artistic endeavor, the report suggested a group of entities works, expressions, manifestations, and items. A work was described as a distinct intellectual or artistic creation, an expression as the intellectual or artistic realization of a work. The entities work and expression reflected intellectual or artistic content. A manifestation embodied an expression of a work, which was in turn embodied by an item. The entities manifestation and item, then, reflected physical form. The report noted that a work might be realized through one or more expressions, which might be embodied in one or more manifestations, which in turn might be exemplified in one or more items (IFLA 1998, 12-13). Thomas and Smiraglia (1998) described the nature of the “musical work” as a concept in the manner of a surname for a family, around which cluster all manifestations known by that concept-name in horizontal, but explicitly described, relations.

2. Works as Vehicles for Communication

Works contain representations of recorded knowledge. Works are created deliberately to represent the thoughts, data, syntheses, knowledge, art and artifice of their creators. Works, then, serve as vehicles to communicate one or more of these aspects of new knowledge to potential consumers (readers, scholars, etc.). Consumers of works may and often do use them to inform their own new works, which likewise serve as vehicles to communicate knowledge across time and space to new consumers. In this manner, we can observe the social role of works. Therein we see works as vehicles that transport ideas along a human continuum, contributing to the advancement of human knowledge in specific ways and to the advancement of the human social condition in more general ways.

Saussure's approach to linguistics demonstrated methods for determining the general laws that are at work in all languages (1959, 6). Saussure concluded that the primary means by which we may learn about languages is through the study of recorded writings. Written texts, therefore—or instantiations of works—constitute the bulk of the evidence of even contemporary language.

Saussure described a system of the study of the life of signs in a society, which he named semiology (1959, 16). In Saussure's system a sign is represented as the pair signified and signifier. A sign "unites a concept and a sound image" (1959, 66). The signified is the concept under conveyance; the signifier is the sound-image used to convey the concept (1959, 67). The signified and the signifier are inextricably linked in the sign, which has two essential characteristics: arbitrariness and linearity (1959, 67, 70). By arbitrary he meant that there is no natural link between the signified and the signifier, which is demonstrated by the very existence of different languages. Linearity captures the nature of signifiers, the sound-images that represent concepts, which are linear utterances that take place in time and thus have measurable dimension. Language, therefore, has a natural ambiguity, which Saussure demonstrated with two properties: immutability and mutability. Signifiers are fixed in the linguistic communities that use them, and therefore have the property of immutability (1959, 71). But over time signifiers (and ultimately signs) change—mutate—and therefore linguistic signs are mutable.
Peirce and his school of semiotics also shed light on the mutability of signs and the probability of their varying perception across chronological and cultural barriers. Peirce ([1894] 1998, 5) asserted a triad of types of signs: a) likenesses, which convey ideas of the things they represent through imitation; b) indications, which show something about things by being physically connected with them; and c) symbols, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage. The meaning of a symbol is not fixed, but rather is a function of its perception.

Barthes also described reception mutability, this time in very human and earthy terms. Where Peirce called the perception of a likeness excitement of mental sensations, Barthes was concerned with the reader's total experience of a text. He suggested that readers were not concerned so much with the integrity of a text as with their own experience of it (1975, 11). For example, an individual work might be consulted for information, it might be used for recreation, or it might form the basis of a scholar's discourse. Barthes suggests that in essence a text is as though it were tissue (1975, 64).

Nattiez (1990) described a semiology of music that comprehends musical works as multi-dimensional because their realization is in sound. Goehr (1992) pointed to the human's natural tendency to take musical works for granted, enjoying their reception but without any clear understanding of the complexity of their origin or existence. Goehr posited an imaginary museum of works—imaginary to those who cannot see beyond the objectification of works of sonic art. With Nattiez and Goehr we approach the concept of mutability of works one step further. That is, we can clearly comprehend works that might have no concrete tokens—as literary works have words on paper—but which find their realization in sonic performances, each of which is uniquely created and uniquely perceived.

Poster (1990) initiated the concept that history had entered a mode of information in which cultural history is demarcated by variations in the structure of symbolic exchange. Every society makes elemental use of symbolic exchange, particularly among populations that surpass the ability to retain and disseminate all knowledge according to oral tradition. In literate society, works are required to facilitate the preservation and propagation of the culture through formal symbolic exchange.

Works then, can be seen as analogous to signs that are inescapably mutable over time. The texts of works are signifiers that are clearly immutable when first fixed, but which have other properties that are themselves very mutable indeed. Work are vehicles of culture, entities that arise from a particular cultural perspective. As such they are vehicles with certain cultural obligations—among them dissemination and propagation of the culture from which they spring. This analogy has been demonstrated graphically by Smiraglia (Forthcoming) and is reproduced in Figure 1 below.

3. Works as Elements of Canon

Each works is in some way a part of a larger body of related work. These bodies of work derives meaning from their function in culture as well as from their relations with other works and other bodies of work. Individual works derive meaning as well from their relations to those who will be their human receptors. These core bodies of work, sometimes referred to as canons, function to preserve and disseminate the parameters of a culture by inculcating cultural values through the information conveyed as a whole and in each of the works that comprise them.

Relations that are observed among works in a canon are thought to be conventional rather than natural. That is, they are functions of their roles in the culture from which they spring rather than determined by any inherent characteristics. Ultimately the work is seen as Barthe's tissue—an impermanence to be savored by its receptors, volatile according to its perception arising from the divergent purposes for which it might be consulted.
Figure 1. Works are Analogous to Signs

Eggert (1994) described a phenomenological view of works of art. He suggests that works are ongoing entities that incorporate across their chronological existence all of the reactions of those who encounter them. Works function as vehicles by which culture is continually communicated. Works have no unchanging existential anchor, no single perfect exemplar. Rather they derive much of their meaning from their reception and continuous reinterpretation in evolving cultures. Works follow the same pattern as Saussure's linguistic signs, mutating across time through the collaboration of the cultures that embrace them. Works are shaped by their audiences, and they reflect the functional requirements of those who will use them. Therefore, works are artifacts of the cultures from which they arise.

4. A Taxonomic Definition of The Work

Smiraglia (Forthcoming) has described much of the material cited above and arrived at the parameters of a theory of the work. There the concern was with the ability to make statements that might undergird further empirical research into the nature of works. For the purpose of advancing epistemological understanding of documentary entities in general and works in particular we now reformulate those theoretical parameters in the context of a taxonomic definition.

A work is a signifying, concrete set of ideational conceptions that finds realization through semantic or symbolic expression. That is, a work embraces a set of ideas that constitute both the conceptual (signified) and image (signifier) components of a sign. A work functions in society in the same manner that a sign functions in language. Works, like signs, demonstrate the characteristics of arbitrariness (the absence of a natural link between the signified and the signifier) and linearity (signifiers unfold sequentially over time). Therefore, works are subject to the natural ambiguity of signs, having both the properties of immutability (the fixed nature of a signifier in a given community) and mutability (change over time in their perception and use).
Further, a work has the characteristics of a Peircean symbol, reflecting both the physical connections of indications and the imitative ideational likenesses. Like works, Peircean symbols incorporate words or phrases that have become associated with their meanings by usage.

If a work enters a canon then its signifying texts may derive and mutate. Derivations may take one or more forms: 1) simultaneous editions; 2) successive editions; 3) amplifications; or, 4) extractions. In these categories the work derives culturally over time in successive or simultaneous editions, but ideational and semantic content do not change.

Mutations may take one or more forms as well: 1) translations; 2) adaptations; or 3) performances. In these categories the ideational and semantic content have mutated to some degree. The relations among the exemplars of a work constitute a network of related entities that has been described variously as a bibliographic family (Smiraglia 1992) or a textual identity network (Leazer and Furner 1999).

5. Conclusion

Works have heretofore been comprehended as documentary entities represented by citations (usually name and title) in bibliographic retrieval mechanisms. Understanding the social roles of works expands the boundaries of their definition. This happens because demonstrating the utility of works in three ways: 1) as communicative vehicles; 2) as signs or symbols in a culture; and 3) as members of canons. This understanding, represented here in a taxonomic definition, contributes to the epistemological perception of works as specific entities of recorded knowledge. Further, the expanded perception of works helps us understand the variety of ways in which mechanisms for their control and retrieval might better be shaped in future.

References


