



# The Symbolic Meaning of Libraries in a Digital Age

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**abstract:** As an increasingly virtual society anticipates the decline of print, it looks to the keepers of the written record to maintain continuity with its past. Libraries cannot formulate intelligent collection and preservation policies without taking into account current perceptions of the fragility of historical memory. Understanding the symbolic role they play in the cultural imaginary will help libraries to map a future that addresses public concerns about the preservation of the historical record.

**I**n the past few years we have witnessed evidence of increasing anxiety about whether libraries are living up to their obligations as cultural conservators. The intensity of the responses to Nicholson Baker's critiques of library weeding and microfilming practices are symptoms of a larger concern with the fate of the historical record in a digital age. As libraries chart their future course, it is important to take into account why certain issues resonate at this particular moment in time and how concerns within the library profession fit into larger contemporary discourses about technology, history, and culture. It will serve libraries well if they can build on broader cultural concerns and interests as they advocate for such things as intellectual property rights, privacy, digital archiving standards, and support for preservation.

One significant theme in both popular and scholarly writing of the past decade has been a concern with our ability to secure the past. The rapid growth of information technologies and the ubiquity of mass media have both contributed to fears about a loss of historical consciousness. Millennial, not to say Internet

fever, has raised the specter of cultural and historical amnesia. Globalization and the homogenization of cultures have caused the nation state, and with it, national cultures

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and histories to be marginalized, lost, or erased. Vast decentered information networks have undermined our rootedness in time and space and fostered new longings for connection and continuity. This in turn has inspired a variety of attempts to shore up the past.

Many contemporary critics claim that secular culture has become obsessed with history and memory. Scholars in a variety of disciplines have been exploring the social and cultural role of memory, the relation of memory to historical narrative, and the question of what it means to remember. But there is also a much broader popular interest in these issues. Theorist Andreas Huyssen identifies a culture of memory that has proliferated in Western societies since the late 1970s and he sees this trend in striking contrast to the celebration of the future, which was characteristic of the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Evidence for an obsession with the past can be found in the tremendous growth of museums, historical theme parks, the creation of fake 19<sup>th</sup> century towns like Disney's Celebration, historical documentaries (and an entire history channel), the upsurge of interest in historical memorabilia (especially on eBay), the popularity of costume dramas, period pieces and historical recreations ("Titanic," "Pearl Harbor," Masterpiece Theater, films of classic works by E.M. Forster, Henry James, Jane Austen, etc.), the boom in memoirs and autobiographical writing, the fascination with genealogy and family history, and the rage for retro fashion and retro décor.

These examples illustrate what Huyssen describes as "an increasingly successful marketing of memory by the Western culture industry."<sup>2</sup> Many others have noted this phenomenon. For example, Adam Goodheart, in "The Way We Live Now" section of the Sunday *New York Times* recently reported on several historical theme parks and, in particular, a new attraction in Orlando, Florida, called the Holy Land Experience.<sup>3</sup> For \$17 a ticket tourists make a pilgrimage to ancient Jerusalem. According to its designers, the park is "archaeologically faithful, down to the camel-hoof prints."<sup>4</sup> Goodheart describes several other theme parks, including one in Prague that provides a view of the city through the eyes of Franz Kafka and another in South Africa that offers a luxury train trip meant to be a historical recreation of an Edwardian rail safari. Goodheart interprets this demand for synthetic history in terms not unlike Huyssen. Goodheart claims that "the faster time moves in the present, the more eager people are to visit places where it's always 1776 or always 100 B.C."<sup>5</sup> This historical nostalgia is omnipresent, visible even in the growing number of Las Vegas hotels reprising historical monuments such as the temple of Luxor, the Eiffel Tower, the Doge's Palace and a soon-to-be-built casino featuring a Big Ben and Tower Bridge.

Although the public seems to have an insatiable appetite for historical recreations and synthetic history, it also craves contact with something more authentic. As evidenced by the tremendous growth in the number of museums as well as the volume of museum attendance, there is also a hunger for contact with actual historical artifacts. This reverence for the surviving objects of our cultural past is part of the reason for the recent outcry against the destruction of Buddhist statues in Afghanistan. For many, the depredations of the Taliban represent an assault on history. Over a period of years there have been numerous failed attempts to save objects and collections from this war torn country. The press has been unanimous in its determination that the failure to save these objects constitutes an immeasurable loss. In our speed-obsessed culture, the artifacts of earlier eras have taken on an almost talisman-like quality.

As both scholars and the public turn toward the past, there is growing interest in setting the historical record straight. Major projects are under way to unearth suppressed histories of the twentieth century. These include the excavation of the details of the Third Reich and the holocaust, of Eastern Europe before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, of East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, of South Africa before the end of apartheid, of Japanese atrocities (e.g., the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the story of the comfort women) and of the fate of the disappeared of Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Alternative or revisionist histories have been a project of major social movements for several decades. Scholars are concerned to unearth the local knowledge of indigenous societies that were erased by colonial rule. Postcolonial and subaltern studies have blossomed as an attempt to redress the distortions of imperial history. Literary scholars have brought to light scores of previously unknown or ignored materials in order to address omissions in the literary canon and to create a fuller and more inclusive picture of the past.

All of this activity suggests an urgent need to establish and to preserve the historical record. As libraries are understood to play a major role in maintaining and sustaining that record, it is no wonder that they are currently the focus of widespread anxieties about their ability to do so. Nicholson Baker's allegations about library preservation policies and practices appear to have tapped into this broader cultural concern. Clearly this is a moment when a surprising number of people have taken to brooding over the fate of the historical record.

Baker's essays on libraries in the *New Yorker* and his new volume *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* have received an extraordinary amount of attention.<sup>7</sup> These scathing critiques have taken the profession by surprise. Writing about the British Library in a recent *New Yorker*, for example, Baker contends that "bombs spared the American [news]papers but recent managerial policy has not."<sup>8</sup> The subtitle of the essay, "the author's desperate bid to save America's past," provides a key metaphor for understanding the Baker phenomenon. Baker argues that libraries are literally and figuratively destroying our collective history; and journalists and reviewers are apparently prepared to believe him.

According to David Gates, reviewing *Double Fold* for the *New York Times Book Review*, libraries "may be trashing – literally – the heritage they're pledged to protect."<sup>9</sup> Katherine A. Powers, reviewing the book for the *Boston Globe*, claims that there is "a rage for destruction . . . in the hearts of the people who formulate collection policies" and that "hundreds of irreplaceable, historically vital volumes" have already "been tossed out, with hundreds more slated for extinction."<sup>10</sup> This intensity of response to Baker's allegations and the denunciations of libraries he has

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inspired suggest more might be at issue than is immediately apparent. According to these critics, librarians have become vandals and barbarians plundering the stacks, destroying books, assaulting paper, stripmining culture, and ultimately failing to cherish

our collective histories. Michael Dirda goes so far as to call it a “cultural holocaust.”<sup>11</sup> The hyperbolic language of the critique and the note of cultural panic that these writers sound is surely a clue that there is some projection occurring – that people are experiencing this perceived failure of libraries to preserve the paper record as a personal betrayal.

Baker has certainly encouraged his readers to interpret library preservation policies in these terms. He describes the “slow betrayal of an unknowing nation” by the Library of Congress and accuses American libraries in general of not “doing the job we trusted that they were doing.”<sup>12</sup> Professor Henry Woudhuysen’s essay in response to Baker in the *Times Literary Supplement*, claims that “to get rid of, sell off, or destroy [news]papers is to betray a trust.”<sup>13</sup> Michael Dirda expresses a similar sentiment in his review of *Double Fold* for the *Washington Post*. Dirda is horrified that “like parents sacrificing their children to Moloch, trusted administrators disbound, chopped up and then sold or sent to landfills a significant portion of our American heritage.”<sup>14</sup> The infanticide metaphor here, like Powers’ “extinction” metaphor above, suggests that Baker has incited these reviewers to his own fevered pitch. But is “our American heritage” really at stake? As the historian, Robert Darnton points out in his review of *Double Fold*, “history should not be equated with its sources.”<sup>15</sup> Discarding books and newspapers, however serious a problem, is not itself the destruction of history.

Nicholson Baker is not alone in his critique of contemporary libraries. Public libraries as well as academic and research libraries have become the object of impassioned scrutiny and the concerns are not limited to issues of preservation. Sallie Tisdale, writing in *Harper’s*, in an essay called “Silence Please: The Public Library as Entertainment Center,” declares herself to be “deeply discouraged” by the library of today.<sup>16</sup> She criticizes the rush to be wired, the hypervaluation of Internet access, the devaluation of books and the move toward providing new forms of (noisy) entertainment. Plainly Tisdale also feels that she has been betrayed and it is important that we understand that she is articulating sentiments shared by others in the culture at large. At one extreme, there are those who believe everything will be digital in ten years and that libraries will no longer be needed. And, at the other, there are those who fervently believe that libraries contribute something of paramount importance to American culture that is being allowed to slip away.

Tisdale’s essay lays out the emotional stakes involved in the transformation of public libraries into information and entertainment centers. She describes her childhood reverence for public libraries. She is concerned to show how these sacred places are becoming extinct, having largely abandoned their interest in the book for “shiny exhibits and chirping screens.” She urges us to recognize the importance of the traditional role of libraries, “both as a physical place in a community and as a symbol of . . . American cultural aspiration.”<sup>17</sup> The point is not only this very explicit acknowledgement of the symbolic value of libraries, but also the emotional weight that they bear. At this historical moment, the changes that libraries are undergoing make them appear to be complicit with other contemporary forces that are eroding access to history and unraveling the connections of past and future generations. Libraries will have to confront these perceptions.

Scholars as well as journalists have taken to expressing their apprehensions about the fate of public libraries. Ruth Perry, a specialist in eighteenth century studies, describes the loss to the historical record, as large public libraries raise funds by selling



old and out-of-print volumes.<sup>18</sup> Perry, writing to her colleagues in the Modern Language Association, declares that libraries “represent our literary future as well as our literary heritage” and that it is crucial that scholars be more vigilant about “the erosion of this public resource.” According to Perry, “our art and our politics depend on the fullest possible access to the cultural record.”<sup>19</sup> Perry’s essay is part of a collection of nine pieces, all detailing their authors’ concerns about the preservation of primary source materials – both for teaching and research.<sup>20</sup> Collectively these essays indicate that scholars are becoming exquisitely sensitive to the fate of material in library collections.

What precisely is at stake here? Why have both the scholarly and popular press recently taken this sudden interest in libraries? Why this concern for the historical record? Perhaps it will shed some light to look at a parallel development in the world of museums. Because museums also exist to preserve our cultural heritage, they have been on the receiving end of similar kinds of invective. Museums, like libraries, are adapting to transformations in the larger culture. Mass audiences and corporate sponsorship have become their primary engines of growth and survival. Museums and libraries both are wrestling with the need to democratize and to expand their audiences and to find new sources of funding. Both are exploiting new technologies to transform their internal operations and the nature of the materials and services they provide.

And museums, like libraries, are being accused of betraying their mission. Roberta Smith, recently reviewing three major art exhibitions in the *New York Times*, accuses museums of precisely the kinds of behaviors many find objectionable in libraries. First she accuses them of wanting “to be anything but art museums.”<sup>21</sup> According to Smith, museums are transforming themselves into entertainment centers, not to mention computer centers, cafes, and places to shop. Whereas libraries are said to show insufficient reverence for the book, museums are showing too little reverence for art. Although Smith is reviewing three specific exhibitions, she uses them as exemplars of what is currently wrong with art museums in general.

One exhibit she describes is representative of “the failure, for one reason or another, simply to let art be art, to honor its specialness and mysteries and allow it to work its effect. One gets the feeling that for many people in charge of museums and exhibitions these days, art is not enough.”<sup>22</sup> This sounds remarkably like the claims that librarians no longer value the book, prefer technology, and would rather be information specialists than librarians. Smith declares that “since a majority of Americans don’t like art, the logic seems to run, it must be the museum’s job to give them something else.”<sup>23</sup> This is the criticism that Tisdale and others make of public libraries – that they will stoop to video games and cappuccinos to bring people uninterested in books into the library. It is difficult not to read these complaints as a desire to recreate the cultural institutions of the past. Libraries should be quiet places where books are the highest priority and art museums should focus only on the sanctity of their collections.

The concern to somehow police or regulate these institutions grows out of fears about cultural change and loss. If museums and libraries do not take seriously the transmission of our cultural legacy, who will? Even if these institutions are not disposing of books or cultural artifacts, many fear the loss of the culture of the book and the sanctity of the work of art. Smith writes, “we’re not talking about actions so grave as the deaccessioning of artworks. Yet something essential is being sold off, an institutional

integrity, if you will."<sup>24</sup> Loss of institutional integrity is surely at the heart of critiques by Baker, Tisdale, and their fellow critics. For this reason it may not be useful to mount a defense of libraries by, for example, answering Nicholson Baker's allegations point by point. It is not primarily about the deficiencies of microfilm or the relative merits of paper versus online catalogs, or the misguided decision making of the San Francisco Public Library that are so eloquently described by Baker. Libraries must consider the larger cultural context in which so many are so easily convinced by Baker of the shocking betrayals he alleges. Robert Darnton, in his review of Baker's *Double Fold*, poses an interesting question:

Americans have been told that the sky is falling, the ocean rising, the earth quaking, the economy recessing, the presidency degrading, and the family disappearing, while the cosmos is running out of time. How can they work up a lather about old newspapers and books?<sup>25</sup>

How indeed?

One contemporary theorist whose work provides an interesting perspective on this question is Arthur Kroker. For the past decade Kroker has attempted to map what he calls the speed culture of hypermodernity—the overturning of time and space by the digital. Kroker describes “the profound paradox of ultramodern technologies as simultaneously a prison-house and a pleasure palace.”<sup>26</sup> Kroker has tended to emphasize the Orwellian as opposed to the utopian aspect of the technological experience. He explores cultural anxieties about a relentless scientific spirit working to blur the human machine boundary and a future where computers are embedded in everything. Admittedly, many are prepared to celebrate the arrival of a time when computers will be largely invisible, operating on the periphery of our consciousness - part of our clothes, walls, and household devices. But for Kroker and for those who share his sensibilities, this constitutes a nightmare future, an invasive attempt to colonize and reconstitute human perception. Certainly there is a great deal of cultural ambivalence about the notion of the human body as digital interface.

Kroker is only one of many concerned with what he calls “the triumph of corporate science and technology.”<sup>27</sup> The popular press is rife with reports of the potential threat of new technological devices and dozens of scholarly works are appearing on the

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personal and political stakes of new technologies. Newspapers and magazines are filled with articles about such things as new digital tracking systems with the potential to obliterate privacy, about invasive new reproductive technologies, about genetically engineered food whose long term effects are unknown, and about the potential to clone human beings. A new academic field, green studies, is challenging the notion of

the intrinsic value of technological progress. Scholars in many disciplines are concerned with the negative social and cultural impacts of new technologies. And the move by the public to embrace and revere the physical artifact is also a form of resistance to the technological imperative.



Kroker provides some interesting ways to think about these issues. He points out, for example, the importance of who gets to frame the questions about new technologies. Is it pharmaceutical companies and multinationals who cast these issues primarily as economic or trade issues or, is it those who see these as moral, ethical, religious, or psychological questions? In a recent *New York Times* article about "how biotechnology food went from the laboratory to a debacle," Robert Shapiro, who oversaw Monsanto's strategy for biotechnology, is quoted as saying "it was natural for us to see this as a scientific issue. We didn't listen very well to people who insisted that there were relevant ethical, religious, cultural, social and economic issues as well."<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, it is important for libraries to make the case, for example, that intellectual property rights in the electronic environment are as much social, cultural, and intellectual issues as economic ones. Those in the library community lobbying for or against current legislation are aware that one of the most important things they do is to insist that the arguments not be framed entirely by publishers or commercial bodies.

The current five-year campaign mounted by the American Library Association called @your library is in fact such an undertaking. It is an attempt to shape public opinion about the role of libraries. According to the ALA website, "The Campaign for America's Libraries will educate consumers that libraries are dynamic, modern community centers for learning, information and entertainment."<sup>29</sup> My question is whether the emphasis on libraries as trendy information and entertainment centers will merely confirm the fears of Tisdale, Baker and others. I would suggest that given the cultural climate right now, it is crucial for libraries to address the issues underlying current concerns that they are betraying their historical mission and that this is at least as important as the argument that they are wired for the future. Of course, the difficulty here is the question of whether these two arguments will be seen as mutually exclusive. But libraries do not have to abandon books in order to provide high quality electronic access. They will, however, need the resources and support to provide both. This is the case that must be made.

There is a certain irony to the fact that libraries are currently being criticized for their failure to safeguard the paper record at a moment when they are confronting the massive new challenges of maintaining the digital record. At least until the explosion of concern about preservation sparked by Nicholson Baker, librarians believed that they had slowly evolved sensible and reasonably effective policies and practices to deal with print material. And for the past decade they have been devoting significant resources to developing new systems of bibliographic control, of access to and preservation of electronic material. If librarians have been concerned about their abilities to maintain their role as cultural conservators, it has been because the electronic record is no easy thing to conserve. The general public and most of the scholarly community are aware in an abstract sort of way of the difficulties in providing long term access to electronic files as hardware and software are routinely superseded. However, few have thought deeply about the fact that a piece of the electronic record is lost every day as material cycles on and off thousands of websites, including scholarly and academic ones, without being archived.

And no one, other than librarians, seems to be much concerned about the tremendous threat to the historical record posed by current developments in the

distribution of electronic information. One of the gravest threats of all is the newly evolved electronic marketplace. The consolidation of the publishing industry as well as the limited number of vendors selling database packages to libraries are both undermining seriously the ability of libraries to own, let alone preserve the scholarly record. Because, in many instances, libraries may only lease access to information rather than purchase it outright, they cannot preserve, archive, or guarantee future access. Even interlibrary loan is being restricted by new licensing agreements. As I have described elsewhere, libraries have less control than ever over increasingly expensive, unstable, and restricted electronic information products. And these products will constitute the historical record of tomorrow, if only someone manages to archive them.<sup>30</sup>

But, although the popular press has been quick to pick up on arguments that libraries have failed to maintain the print record, it has not shown much interest in the much graver problem of the complexities of maintaining the electronic record. Given the current state of affairs, the most effective way to guarantee the longevity of an electronic document is to print it out and save the paper. But most of those who profess outrage at the dire state of the print record, seem to be relatively unconcerned about the fate of the vast amount of electronic information that will be lost forever. Surely if there is a crisis in the library community it is less about the loss of historical newspaper runs (though admittedly this is unfortunate) and more about the race to develop systems to archive, organize, and provide access to the growing body of material available only in electronic form. The complexity, for example, of archiving constantly changing websites or database packages cries out for the eloquence of a Nicholson Baker to inspire sufficient outrage to build support for library initiatives.

So why isn't there anyone in the popular press beating his or her breast over the failure to solve the problems of longterm digital archiving? Certainly it represents as severe a threat to the historical record as the disposal of print material. Why are the debates on electronic archiving primarily of professional interest to those in the library and information fields? It is difficult not to conclude that there must be a psychological reason for the intensity of the lament for the fate of the print record and the seeming

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indifference, or at least, lack of concern, for the electronic one. The difference would seem to be about an emotional investment in print and the print record as well as an attachment to the physical artifact in the face of the proliferation of bits and bytes. The reality of an ever growing body of material available only in electronic form has made people more aware that the culture of the book and the book itself are losing their

centrality. The realization of how quickly electronic culture has taken hold may help account for the angst underlying the recent criticism of library policies. Baker and Powers may argue that it is space hungry librarians who threaten the book with annihilation, but the elephant in the room is surely digital technology. Baker and Powers may claim to be perfectly content to use technology in ways they deem convenient and appropriate, but this doesn't mean that they, like others in the culture at large, do not also experience a sense of loss at the prospect of the increasing marginalization of the book. Libraries





may be a handy scapegoat, but they are hardly the primary promulgators of the digital revolution. That revolution does loom large and has undoubtedly fed nostalgia for print culture that surely intensifies public concern about library management of the printed word. Now, more than ever, people look to libraries to help preserve culture, tradition, and connection with an ancestral past seemingly imperiled by technology and globalization.

If libraries are to formulate strategies for convincing the public of their commitment to maintaining the historical record, they need a better sense of the meaning and context of the current outcry. And libraries must learn to reframe these debates in their own terms. Addressing Baker's concerns one by one is surely not an effective strategy. Libraries must develop a more nuanced understanding of contemporary cultural anxiety and the way it plays out in both the popular and scholarly press.

One of the places to look for insight into the forces behind cultural angst is popular fiction. The recently evolved genre of cyberpunk fiction provides a window onto concerns about history and memory beneath the utopian rhetoric of cyberspace. Frequently works of cyberfiction follow a group of characters who inhabit a culture where technology is used to police and manipulate through such things as brain implants, cloning, or genetic engineering. The protagonists live on the edge of these systems and harness their advanced technology to subvert the state. As Dani Cavallaro has recently argued, cyberfiction presents a nightmare future, where both memory and history are unreliable.<sup>31</sup> In these future worlds, history is often a massive databank liable to alteration and manipulation. Cyberfiction articulates fears that contemporary cultural conditions threaten both memory and history and thus also imperil our individual and collective identities.

It is precisely this fear of the fragility and vulnerability of memory and history that have given such resonance to Nicholson Baker's critiques. In the cultural imaginary, the library stands as a bulwark of history, culture, and memory. Jeremiads such as those launched by Baker may be an emotionally appropriate response to a perceived abandonment of this traditional role. On the one hand, computers are seen as the ultimate memory tool capable of providing access to everything ever written. On the other hand, the digital record is liable to manipulation, distortion or erasure. In such an environment, we cling to our libraries and our artifacts even as we dream of ever more encompassing virtual collections. How do libraries enmeshed in this mythology of computer as both threat and savior chart a rational course for the future?

Surely one requirement is to take into account their symbolic value. Libraries both house and represent the historical record. They provide real architectural spaces when so much else is virtual. Both libraries and library buildings have come to embody tradition and historical continuity at a moment when these appear to be at risk. Libraries and library buildings provide an assurance of solidity and objectivity to a culture awash in postmodern skepticism. Part of what is so troubling to library critics is that the growth of electronic collections suggests that libraries may be more interested in looking forward at a moment when the culture also needs them to look back. Eileen de los Reyes, a professor of education at Harvard, makes the case that at this cultural moment, libraries are needed more than ever precisely because they are "magical spaces" where "time moves slower than the accelerated and dehumanizing speed characteristic of our

institutions and of society."<sup>32</sup> She implores librarians to protect these fragile embattled spaces:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century I place my hope in librarians, creators of pockets of hope, and in libraries, the protective, loving and caring places where students can learn to live in their world and dream about a healthy and human future.<sup>33</sup>

That is about as explicit a statement of the cultural burdens and privileges of libraries as we are likely to find. If libraries do serve these psychological needs, it should be no surprise that a perceived change in priorities would elicit intense reaction. Libraries represent one of the last best hopes for maintaining the continuity of past, present, and future.

If libraries are to successfully navigate this moment when Nicholson Baker is riding the cultural zeitgeist, they must learn to map the forces that have allowed his critique to fall on such fertile ground. Perhaps there is a need for an ongoing project to chart cultural sensibilities and to explore the way library debates and issues are shaped or framed by broader social and cultural matters. At the very least, librarians need to step back from the pressing demands of the electronic environment and look at the big picture. This is not the kind of work typically found in the library literature. But if the angry mob gathering at the door misunderstands library policies, it is of paramount importance that their misconceptions be addressed. It is also crucial that librarians recognize that their professional debates and discussions are inevitably bound up with contemporary discourses about memory, history, and technology.

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## Notes

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