THE MAGIC OF THE LIBRARY

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This paper examines the use of magic as heuristic metaphor or new understanding for practice in the library field, particularly as it has recently arisen in the professional literature in response to the challenges of the digital library. Drawing on concepts from anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, and critical theory, various types of library magic are illuminated. Ultimately, magic itself is seen to be emerging as a medial symbol to denote the ineffable qualities of the library that we experience but cannot readily or rationally explain. A magical consciousness implies new models for both the library institution and the profession of librarianship, and perhaps wholly new understandings of how library professionals might even conceive of thought and practice.

Headings:

Information Theory

Librarianship – Philosophical Aspects

Librarianship as a Profession
We live in a society dominated by discursive formations springing from what Jurgen Habermas terms the "technical sphere." In other words, the truth claims of modern society have been transferred to the various realms of instrumentality, where we rely on so-called "experts" and their technical know-how to make our decisions for us, whether these experts be medical professionals, lawyers, career politicians, scientists, or engineers. Habermas advocates relocating much of what has been lost to instrumental concerns to its proper province within the "public sphere" of open discussion and debate, a mission vital to democratic practice, and one much respected by those within that particular democratic institution called the library. Much of the tension within our profession, indeed, within librarians themselves, likely stems from the delicate balance between striving to empower individuals to be self-sufficient information-seekers and attempting to legitimate librarianship as a profession upon the technical and instrumental grounds necessary (at least at present) for its very survival.

One answer to this dilemma has been to re-envision the librarian as a variety of educator, one who uses acquired skills and training to teach users (or, alternatively, to provide users with an opportunity to learn) methods of information-seeking, source evaluation and so forth. The profession thus
partakes of the technical legitimacy claims of the larger education profession.
Librarians thereby cast their lot with the teachers who, in primary and secondary schools, generally only reservedly grant them equal footing, and the professors who, in colleges and universities, rarely consider librarians as real "faculty," regardless of any such official designation. While an understanding of librarian as educator is helpful and important in many aspects of the library professional’s work, and has led to some fresh perspectives especially in reference services, the model doesn’t go far enough towards capturing the full role of librarians and what that role needs to be.

There exists a related tension in librarianship, a dialectic more implicit in the language of librarianship than found in the self-consciousness of its theorists and practitioners: the problem of freedom and control. If there is one value to which all librarians attain, it is equal access to information. The fact that the particulars of this ideal’s implementations are much debated only serves to illustrate its power. And perhaps due to its singular stature in this very democratic institution, its opposite number, control, seldom creeps into the space of professional discourse other than as a pejorative, that is, as something the censors seek to impose, or in the almost antiseptically technical sense in which it refers to the “realities” of good cataloging practice, where librarians allow themselves the guilty pleasure of exercising “bibliographic” and “authority control.”
In the rhetoric of today’s library professionals, “control” should be in the hands of the individual user. Trained to help their service populations locate information without asking for what that information is to be used, librarians have been lauded in at least one peer study for not questioning or acting beyond this core responsibility, even when users exhibited highly suspect, ostensibly illegal and unethical intentions. (Dowd)\(^2\) When the individuals involved are minors, the librarian abdicates control no less. Monitoring of children’s Internet use is the sole responsibility of parents and guardians, and students’ poor research strategies are corrected as any teacher would correct bad grammar, gently but firmly, and with little personal sense of enforcing any agenda other than that of “best practice.”

I do not mean to say that these views are wrong-headed, only that they are illustrative of the particular angst of a profession that has yet to define itself clearly with regard to its goals and its purview. This angst has resulted in part, I believe, from the failure of librarians to fully comprehend the magic of the space which they inhabit.\(^3\)

As the library world transforms more and more into a digital realm, discussion grows in the literature of the profession concerning such things as locus, the library as place, as a sacred space which informs and enables democracy. Many writers now play with notions of the magic of the library, a magic found both in the physical institution - in its particular sights, smells, tactilities, and abilities to evoke intangible feelings - as well as in the seemingly
indescribable powers of emerging electronic media to elicit primitivistic experiences of awe and wonder. As I shall suggest, magic has now arisen as a medial symbol, a means of denoting that which we - at least at present - have no clear terms or means to express.\textsuperscript{1} The magics are both old and new, and good and bad, and spring from common founts within the human consciousness. For although notions of the magical have been largely crushed beneath the weight of the scientific in the modern world, the human way of thinking mirrors the mode of the magical at least as much as it does the rational and technical modes that predominate in our current discourses within Western society. With the advent of the new media especially of the Twentieth-Century, we perhaps stand upon the cusp of an historic turn from the almost strictly linear and rationalistic narratives of a print society to some new way of seeing, a way almost certainly related to the magical consciousness.

That these magics are being recognized at this time is no accident, and indeed it is vital that the library profession now comes to understand them. Ours is a moment of danger, a time when the library suffers assaults not just to its fiscal but to its physical aspects, and perhaps most significantly, faces the threat of becoming irrelevant in the new information order. We can and do bring facts and figures to bear on these issues, of course, couching our arguments in the very best methods of social science and management theory, and heartily embracing the new technologies by advocating the inevitable reality of the “electronic library.” Again, such moves are important and perhaps
necessary for institutional survival. Yet, the self-understanding of most library practitioners is not that of the social scientist. We are ultimately uncomfortable with mere cost-benefit analyses and user studies, and we ought to be, for something is lost when we define ourselves and our institutions instrumentally, and that something may very well be the soul of the library.

**Magic in the vernacular**

In our culture, when a person speaks of "magic," one of four general understandings is usually implied. Firstly, magic as *purposeful illusion* includes not only stage magic, but also the "magic" of various media, such as animation or film. Secondly, the term "magic" is used colloquially to refer to *what one does not personally understand*, say, the inner workings of a computer. The implication is that what one does not understand may just as well be magic, a metaphorical sense no doubt, but one that demonstrates rational self-consciousness of an individual’s inability to function in a mental world devoid of assumed first principles (such as, the sun will rise each morning or, if I flip this switch, the light will turn on). Thirdly, and the meaning likely most often ascribed to magic by one of our culture upon reflection, is that magic is simply *that which science has not yet explained*. It is surely this sense that Arthur C. Clarke evokes in his famous Third Law that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” (Clarke, 36) This understanding inscribes logico-scientific rationalism with ultimate authority, and conveniently assimilates into
it any phenomena that are not understood by means of an almost religious faith in the immanence of scientific method.

The final understanding of magic stands in stark contrast to the other three types, which are, after all, not really magic, but rather magics of appearances, in the contexts of sensory perception in the first case, individual experience in the second, and historical-cultural perspective in the third. The fourth understanding of magic in our culture is that which would be considered "true" magic; namely, it is the ultimately unexplainable, or at least that which scientific rationalism can never explain. This understanding of magic is perhaps most commonly applied to interpersonal and especially romantic relationships, where people are said to connect on a spiritual level, or to "not need words." Ironically, terms usually associated with the physical sciences are quite often employed to describe that which cannot be explained in these close relationships, people are "on the same wavelength" or may have "electricity" or "chemistry" between them. Belief in this type of magic may arise from nothing more than a tacit and ego-protecting stance against a sort of Skinner-esque scientific determinism, yet it is a genuine aspect of the mundane existence of each of us.

Now that I have introduced our culture’s understanding of magic in each of its four senses, however, I must note that frequently these different senses of the word are blurred together in the term’s use, in a sort of magical obfuscation of rational meaning. To some extent, the various magics we encounter in our
culture can be teased out and explained (or at least understood) rationally, yet our explanations and interpretations will always lack that ephemeral "something more" that is to be found in the magical consciousness, just as one may offer for a deep love all of one’s reasons both rational (my lover is financially stable, we share common interests) and understandable (I enjoy our time together, my lover’s body excites me) yet still feel as if an important (perhaps the most important) piece of one’s sentiment has not been expressed. Even as our individual and social cognitive worlds have become increasingly informed by the scientific, we must cling to our "irrational" faith in the magical perhaps more strongly than ever, because it may very well define us better as human beings than science ever can.

The simple whys

We live as divided selves in our culture, conceiving of sharp distinctions between such things as thought and action, activities which do not differ nearly so much as we generally believe, and do not necessarily bear a cause-and-effect relationship. Considering this dualism, we should not be surprised to find gaps between the understandings of magic that we in our culture rationally describe and the understandings that we enact in our workaday lives. Having already explored the general ways in which we conceive of magic upon reflection, I submit that, in addition, we consistently act as if we believed in the fourth variety, that is, "true" magic.
Why do we use magic in our society? Primarily, I would say, we employ magic for either or both of two purposes: instrumentality and satisfaction. The practice of dowsing provides probably the best example of magical instrumentalism in our contemporary culture. Certain individuals are capable of detecting sources of underground water, usually with the aid of only one or two bent sticks, and often in locations where water has eluded seasoned well-drillers. Dowsers offer various explanations for their "gift," ranging from a heightened sense of electromagnetism to abilities to converse with spirits of the dead. Scientists have examined the phenomenon, yet so far offered little more than conjectures. Yet, every major drilling company regularly hires dowsers as consultants on difficult cases. Such a proven method requires no scientific explanation. In a more familiar example, sports players frequently engage in personal rituals, carrying charms or enacting self-conscious superstitions. The brim of his lucky cap inclined at just that special angle, the major league pitcher would likely, when pressed, describe his superstitions as providing merely a mental advantage, yet he will not dwell on that rationalization lest the magics lose their efficacy.

Magic employed for reasons of satisfying deep human needs appears much more everyday. We (hopefully) hit pillows rather than people, yet the act helps alleviate our anger. As Ludwig Wittgenstein remarks, "Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at
some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied." [emphases in original] (4e) To put all of this simply, we use magic because it works and we are practitioners of magic because that is what we are.

**Magic in the library**

In library circles, "magic" is spoken of in several specific contexts, and each corresponds to one or more of the four general understandings I have already outlined. Most readily associated with children’s literature and librarianship, magic often serves as a tired and unreflected-upon metaphor in these areas (e.g., Davis, 458). Equating magic with the creative operation of children’s minds as stirred by books and stories, librarians and others often speak of such things as "the magic of imagining," (Mitchell, 15) and focus on the ways in which folkloristic motifs strongly parallel and influence children's perceptions and world views (see, for example, Zingher, 31-37).

We should most likely construe the magics herein as magics of appearances, for the labels "magic" arise from adult explications of presumed views through child eyes. Often, people attribute such artless and primordial sentiments to their own "remembered" child-selves, like so: "The library of my childhood was THE magic place in my life, a place of excitement and wonder." (Myers-Canfield, 9) Furthermore, such common reminiscences imply not beliefs in real magic, but in the power held by various perceptions of the library over
the child-like imagination. In the case of the above writer, we are told that the sheer abundance of books played forcefully upon the imagination of a child from an economically disadvantaged family. In addition to these magics within contexts of individual experiences, those active in children’s librarianship and literature frequently recognize magics of appearances within contexts of sensory perception as well, and thus do many speak of such things as the magic of storytelling, the magic of reading aloud to children, (Mazzoco, 312-314) and the magic of various techniques of children’s literature and illustration. (Elleman, 58-61 ; Williams, 38-39).

The capacity of literary works to elicit strong emotional, creative, and psychological responses in adults as well has prompted the development of an entire corpus of belief in the so-called "magic of books." The phrase is a commonplace, as evinced by both its constant presence in the professional literature (e.g., "No child" ; Taylor) and its frequent use as a major theme for library-related programs. For example, "The Magic of Books" was the theme of the New York State Alliance for Arts Education's 1989-90 Imagination Celebration. (Anderson, 53) By means resembling magical contagion, libraries as repositories of books become themselves imbued with magic. In 1990, the journal Bookmark devoted a special issue to "Imagination and the Magic of Libraries" (Manion) and the Canadian Library Association's forty-fifth annual conference in Ottawa sported the theme "Libraries: Exploring the Myth, Rediscovering the Magic." (Horrocks, 51) The American Library Association
entitled their 1994 National Reading Program, "Reading is a Magic Trip."
("Reading," 588)

The magics that books entail are, I believe, of all of the four kinds delineated above. In the first sense, that reading may act on one bodily became clear to me as a high school student, as I caught myself rubbing my knuckles to relieve the ache felt by Hemingway’s title character as he worked his fishing line in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The impression of many that writers work "magic" through their craft or style illustrates the second understanding. Finally, the third and fourth, again, are distinguished only by the particular faith of the individual; there is no serious debate whether literary works impact the minds of readers, merely the question of whether scientific rationalism can ever explain with certainty how.

Just as the notion of books as magic comes to the library world with an already strong cultural heritage, so too does the idea of technology as magic. Much of anthropological literature focuses on the magical interpretations that more traditional peoples impose upon new and foreign technologies. In library settings, the technology as magic metaphor pervades. Librarians and library users frequently speak of the magic of computer databases, (Bjorner) online catalogs, automated circulation systems, and the Internet. (Adams) Most adopt a perspective towards the magic of technology akin to that of Arthur C. Clarke, and see the magic as merely a gap between the technical expertise of the one perceiving it and a proper scientific understanding of the technology itself.
Thus, two recent writers confidently parallel the roles of modern librarians with those of computer programmer "wizards" and "gurus," reducing the magic of libraries almost utterly to their computer-assisted abilities to deliver mind-bogglingly swift and accurate results in response to inquiries. (LaGuardia and Boisse, 10)

In similar fashion, many recognize the magic of libraries not simply as a new phenomenon springing from technology’s incorporation into library institutions, but as already inherent in the type of specialized skills exhibited by librarians themselves. A public librarian in New Jersey recorded the spontaneous reaction of a satisfied user following her successfully answered inquiry: "Wow! This librarian and these librarians are magic!" (Charton) Patrons who ask more obscure reference questions may witness the often ostensibly preternatural capacities of some reference librarians to locate information through processes that comprise at least as much intuitive as logical reasoning. Library professionals publicly prefer using terms such as "artful practice" to describe their own supra- or non-rational judgements, and, indeed, the long intellectual tradition of the concept of artfulness in diagnosis and reasoning (dating back at least to Aristotle’s discussion of *phronesis* in his *Rhetoric*) gives a certain legitimacy to this idea that magic simply lacks in contemporary society.

Yet, the notions differ less than one writer on collection development would have us believe. Discussing the "Science, Art, and Magic" of this library function, (Metz, 232c) he embraces as vital to successful practice an "art" of
selection that "evades definition" and expresses itself in terms that only make "more sense the more one appreciates the subjectivity and judgment required in collection development work." In contrast, he vilifies his straw man, "magic," as that which "inhabit[s] the void that rational understanding cannot fill." The contest is patently unfair: intuitive or subjective judgments that are "good" are said to spring from art, and those that seem not to work well (in the eyes of later scientific findings) are said to proceed from the ignorance of ritual. That the writer is motivated by a fear of losing professional control is made abundantly clear by his assertion that "When we believe that outcomes have causes beyond our control, or that we have some control but do not understand how it works, we enter the world of magic." (232d) The distinction here, such as it is, ultimately comes down to the same as that between the third and fourth understandings of magic: namely, a matter of belief. The above writer clearly privileges scientific rationality and is accepting of other approaches only to the extent that they prove instrumentally valuable once selectors have reached the practical limits of quantitative approaches. (232c) Scientific rationalism remains the touchstone, and true magic simply does not exist.

To a small extent, I have here selected my own straw man; the article above was published in 1987, a time when such a dismissive stance towards magical practice in librarianship was not only the norm, but a perspective so easily assumed that it likely seemed hardly worth articulating. In fact, the writer’s entire discussion of magic may readily be understood as purely
heuristic, intended as mere metaphor for sloppy praxis. The situation has since changed, with libraries experiencing both new challenges from shifts in technology and information culture, as well as an exponential acceleration with regard to older ones.

In this new climate, particularly in the face of the new and serious problems birthed by the advent of the Web, writers on the magic of the library today express an earnestness that seems to transcend simply metaphorical interpretations. One gets the sense that these few pioneers are attempting to fend off demons with sticks that they insist are magic wands. A rational and scientifically-buttressed "objective" perspective may be asserted that frames these writers in unflattering terms, and one may easily imagine the rhetorical likelihood and power of such labels as "Luddite," which the library professional hears frequently though seldom sees in print. I personally prefer a more humble and open attitude, one that allows for the questions that I am proposing: Is there something real in notions of the library’s magic? What might these magics be and how do they work?

Scholarly conceptions of magic

Sir James George Frazer first published the monumental and since-classic The Golden Bough, a treatise on primitive magic and religion, in 1890. In it, he sets out magical belief as a sort of proto-science, useful only to the extent that it achieves concrete results. Furthermore, he divides magic into two types:
sympathetic magic, which has to do with things appearing to be similar, and contagious magic, which relies on prior physical contact between persons, creatures, or objects. His critics have justly chastised Frazer for lacking a sense of his own historical boundedness (his unbridled revelry in the immanence of scientific method exceeds that of nearly any other), as well as for separating magic into two exclusive categories that, while helpful conceptually, upon scrutiny prove far less than self-evidently discrete.

The work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, a father figure in late-Twentieth Century anthropology, implies an important corrective to Frazer's conception of magic. Whereas Frazer views magical belief as an archaic mode of scientific reasoning (and thereby, at least preferable to the irrationality of religious belief), Evans-Pritchard divorces magic from reasoned belief. In Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande, he notes that "Witchcraft is to Azande an ordinary and not an extraordinary, . . . a normal, and not an abnormal happening." (30) What to us would be supernatural events and cause for reflection and discussion merely constitute everyday life for them, and thus the "Zande actualizes these beliefs rather than intellectualizes them," (31) he embodies his understandings rather than bears them in mind, and thus such "ideas are imprisoned in action." (32) The magic "found" among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard seems to hint, springs from Western perceptions of the Azande, particularly ethnocentric speculation on why these people enact (what are only in the eyes of an outsider) "unusual" rituals. Much of contemporary anthropology, as present-day
humanistic inquiry in general, is theoretically informed by philosophical approaches to just this general problem of the extent to which all study of an other is self-reflexive.

The very best of current perspectives on magic implicitly or explicitly locate it in the space between the self and the other, or the self and the world. Anthropologist Michael Taussig more or less equates the allure and power of magic with what critical theorist Walter Benjamin termed the "mimetic faculty," the human tendency to imitate, to act out, to embody aspects of one’s environment or sensory world. The mimetic impulse manifests itself through, among many other things, rituals, art, dance, drama, and ceremony, not to mention through narrative, social relations, and historical consciousness. Taussig’s work focuses on interactions among European colonialists and native peoples, by which he seeks to more clearly understand the self-perceptions of Western culture. He describes his enterprise as "the study of the primitive Other in modern Western notions of the mimetic faculty and of the place of wildness in sentience." (Taussig, *Mimesis*, 72)

What I find most pertinent in Taussig’s work for my present concern, the magic of the library, is this notion of otherness within the self. I believe, and shortly I shall illustrate, that, just as we might apply the name “magic” to certain unusual or irrational acts by those of a culture such as the Azande, so too do we attach it to the unusual and irrational within our own culture, especially when that which we are describing is our own experience of the indescribable.
Some of the library’s magics more deeply

In a 1992 address, Michael Taussig drew a connection between sympathetic magic and Benjamin’s concept of the "optical unconscious,” (Taussig, "Sympathetic Magic,” 2) a mode of human sensation brought to the fore by the new technology of the photographic lens. (3) Significantly, the two main characteristics of the "optical unconscious" are tactility and distraction. (4) The tactility of the products of such mechanical reproduction reflects the ability of the human eye to scan an object, to examine its particular facets one at a time, to turn it over and scrutinize it in a way much as though one were physically handling it. In the digital environment created by the technology new to today’s library, the on-screen pointer one controls by means of a mouse virtually embodies this ability (it is also, to my mind, an extension of self fully within Marshall McLuhan’s meaning of the phrase, to the extent that it is often represented as a tiny cartoon hand - but more on this shortly). The tendency towards distraction in the digital environment scarcely needs mentioning, as critics of the Internet have already had much to say.

A large part of the library’s magic resides in its sensory elements. Countless writers over the years have described the feel of the books or, as one university provost, "the way they [libraries] smell . . . and the peace and quiet that libraries contain." (McCombs, 296) Yet, only recently has the concept of "library as place" enjoyed strong attention. Often one quickly gathers from
discussing the idea with library directors, staff, or users a sense of genuine reverence in their tones, a notion that these halls are somehow hallowed. To preserve this sense of awe in cyberspace, according to some recent writers, requires imbuing the library with a mimicked physicality, measures to which they refer as "providing comfortable digital chairs." (Homan, 207)

Our experience of a magical sense of place may coincide with a particular disconnect between our sensually perceived and rationally articulated worlds. In other words, the depth of our sensory experience of the library exceeds our rational mind’s ability to describe it, and thus flashes before our consciousness the medial symbol of magic, a non-rational but understandable means of resolving the dissonance. And what produces this dissonance other than the gulf of unknowing between the self with which we are rationally familiar and an "other" self whose full sensual experience of the world transcends our very words?

Another key aspect of the magic of the library is its capacity to spontaneously inspire. A recent writer on the topic cites award-winning poet Anne Carson’s weekly trip to the public library for "accidental inspiration." (McCombs, 297) Another describes this quality as helping users to move their thinking "not simply in logical progressions but in serendipitous, non-linear ways." (Scherer) Here we see a positive possibility of distraction; furthermore, the juxtaposition of (apparently) unrelated elements perhaps best parallels the inner activity of the human mind, which establishes patterns only after the fact,
so to speak, reviewing disparate elements and then assigning patterns of connectivity to them. As Frank Smith bluntly puts it, "All texture and meaningfulness that we perceive in the world around us are put there by the brain, order imposed on chaos." (46)13 This feature of physical libraries, its very origins perhaps even accidental, now figures as an important part of the magic that must be carried over to the new digital libraries. (Homan, 207) One cannot miss the irony of the call to foster distractive elements in the virtual environment.

Again, a sense of otherness within oneself likely births the magic herein. In how many and varied ways have humans conceived of the apparatus of creativity or inspiration? Magic may serve as appropriately and naturally here as any other etiology. In fact, as I was pondering this very idea, a colleague remarked to me, offhandedly and unprovoked, that he needed to "conjure up" an idea for a paper. I presume that he did not intend to hover over a boiling cauldron of macabre ingredients, but I would be surprised if he did not enact his own sorts of rituals for inspiration, much as Anne Carson makes her regular pilgrimage to the public library. Our creativity, while a part of our selves, also possesses a secret life of its own, and try as we may to tame it, yet it persists as a wild thing, cavorting about just within and just beyond the borders of sentience.

The last of the library’s many magics that I shall note at present relates to the theme of the library as a particular extension of self, namely its role in memory. The library’s traditional image as "the repository of the cultural and
historical data that represents the heart, mind, and soul of a civilization" (Scherer) works powerfully on the imaginations of library practitioners, who envision themselves as involved in nothing less than the preservation of human cultural heritage. The reverence held for libraries by public and professionals alike arises from a sense not just of the sacredness of the physical space, as above, but of the sanctity of the institution as an ideal or concept.

Like long-term memory, libraries hold that which we as people (and also, as a people) wish to remember, but that we do not presently keep in mind. Thus, like personal memories, which feel somehow close and somehow distant, the information in libraries seems both a part of us and, at the same time, somehow foreign. Memory, personal as well as cultural, inhabits the space of magic, a region somewhere between the present self and its past alters.

Paths to follow

In the present study, I pursue modest goals. I have only attempted to outline the most visible surfaces of the library’s magic and to penetrate deeply in a very few places. Much more will need be said about both other magics to be found in the library and how these may contribute to fuller understandings of and within the library and librarianship. I have not delineated, for example, the magical arts of indexing and abstracting, nor the mystical ways in which such a "copy that is not a copy" (Taussig on Frazer in Mimesis, 52) often becomes transformed in use to a sort of voodoo substitute for the fuller work, and I have
not mentioned the contagious enchantments at play not only in the rooms of manuscripts and special collections, where one might expect, but also in the very essences of such activities as deselection and citation analysis.

What I have found that intrigues me most is strong support for the idea that magic is arising from librarianship itself as a medial symbol to denote the ineffable mystery requisite for a full and satisfying understanding of the institution. Certainly I have emphasized the ways in which this symbol is serving as a means of preserving the spirit of the old library and its newly perceived benefits. Yet, I could just as easily have focused on the ways in which the new technologies are enacting their own peculiar magics, heightening not just our awareness but our experience of many other parts of the library, and spawning new, unanticipated, and often unnoticed changes in how people use - and even conceive - information.

This observation implies a new role for library professionals, one that I am not the first to advocate. As I remarked early on, most librarians do not operate perfectly comfortably in the mode of social science. They have viewed themselves in other ways but lacked terminology that would encompass these. They have been hobbled as well by the demands of a technically-oriented society and by the (rightly or wrongly) presumed necessity of expressing their responsibilities and activities within the language of the cult of "profession." In the library literature, writers now call for magic-oriented praxis in such areas as marketing (DeCandido, 8) and hypersystems. (Billings, 52) The “new roles”
demanded of tomorrow’s librarian sound more than a little shamanistic:

“integrator,” “collaborator,” “colleague,” “access engineer,” and “leader.”
(Ferguson, 309)

One might, of course, wonder "Why magic?" To this question, I see several possible answers. To begin with, our culture as a whole is impoverished of medial symbols. It is only with great difficulty that we recognize that "lines of demarcation come in many kinds, including . . . the fuzzy kind, the kind that both separates and connects." (Evens, 28) Magic is one of a very few such symbols available to us, and likely one of the more rhetorically potent at present (not even religion would suffice anymore, I think, due to Fundamentalism's agenda and public perception of claiming absolutist certitude; indeed, religion may no longer even qualify for most as a medial symbol). As I have already mentioned, magic connects with long-standing mythologies of libraries, books, and writing. Furthermore, in a commonplace sort of mythic reversal, the theme of our cultural epics of the war between science and supernatural belief (exemplified by such stories as Galileo's stand against the Roman Catholic church, Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, and the Scopes Monkey Trial) is perhaps being turned on its head as our faith in Science grows more delicate.

The above constitute etiological reasons for magic’s new role in librarianship. Origins interest us so very much, however, that we usually neglect other possible modes of explanation. "Why magic?" Because it works - an
instrumental judgment of its symbolic capacities, to be sure, but something about the notion best expresses that which we seek to express. It simply fits.

Finally, and most importantly, I cannot overstate the historical arbitrariness of this symbol. To illustrate what I mean, I cite Taussig’s paraphrase of Benjamin in the latter’s "likening of thinking to the setting of sails in the winds of world history:"

The sails as images (read mimesis) develop into concepts according to how they are set. Here is the space for human agency and shrewdness, the setting of the sail within the buffeting of history. This is the decisive factor, setting the sail’s edge tensed so the image billows into the driving concept... Benjamin’s philosophy of the image... is bound to a specific philosophy of history arching toward the flash of recognition of the past in an image that surfaces unexpectedly - that is to say, at a moment of danger... to achieve a type of mimetic remembrance of the past in the face of the erosion of experience in modern times. (Taussig, Mimesis, 71)

Magic’s unexpected surfacing reminds us that our roles as librarians and the roles of libraries within our cultural and individual lives transcend our present models. Not only this, it presents us with a glimmer of hope in this time of peril, if we act to set our sails so that this new/old wind may drive us.

I believe a magical consciousness not only will but should drive us for a time, especially for these times - a period of rapid technological and cultural change in which many historians of the institution claim the library is undergoing its largest evolution in well over a century, to a new and different form. (Cf., Miksa) The new magical consciousness brings with it a revelation, but its revelatory truth is not propositional in nature but attitudinal, bearing (to use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s term) "the truth of a corrective." (xxxvii) There is an
openness in it, a humility, an acknowledgement of the myriad workings of the most apparently mundane, and a respect for the fullness of human experience and growth. The magic of the library can be not just metaphor but a lived way of librarianship, giving our profession not just a new heuristic to contemplate and use, but transforming the very nature of our engagement with thought and practice.
NOTES

1 Since Habermas predetermines his theories on economic foundations (a foundation often forgotten by others when citing his work), "instrumentality" here refers to usefulness within a capitalist framework, that is, for the attainment of wealth and power. The term as I shall use it later when discussing the instrumental purposes of magic should be understood more broadly.

2 Asked for precise information concerning how to freebase cocaine by a suspicious-acting individual, librarians did not hesitate in offering assistance, and assistance only. The results of this experiment paralleled an earlier, similar experiment involving information-seeking regarding bomb making, although the earlier writer drew very different ethical conclusions. (Hauptman)

3 What I mean by magic will hopefully become clear through the pages that follow. By not offering here, or indeed anywhere herein, a complete and formal definition of magic, I am not seeking to be obtuse, nor to shirk my responsibility as a clear thinker and writer. Rather, I am convinced that a truly magical understanding has everything to do with approaches to comprehending reality that are themselves unscientific and alien to our Western reason.

4 I am here indebted to conversations with Dr. Terence Evens, especially his thoughts concerning images that are "betwixt and between" in contexts other than that of the library.

5 I hesitate to use such a loaded term as "soul." I wish to denote here an intangible yet nonetheless essential quality, without being necessarily religiously evocative. Unfortunately, there are few such words in our cultural lexicon.

6 One cannot forget, of course, the complicity of the audience in much of this type of illusion.

7 Years ago, a telephone repairman came to my workplace and I accompanied him as he made his repairs. In trying to trace the problem, he explained the path that the wires took, including entering a box where they underwent a process called "PFM." He told me he hoped that the problem wasn’t there, since he himself was not able to fix, but only replace, this special component. I asked him what "PFM" stood for. "Oh," he replied with a grin. "That stands for 'pure
fucking magic.” His very language tightly kept the lid on a compartment of knowledge with which he should not be concerned in performing his job.

8 Obviously, one could consider anything that leads to satisfaction to be necessarily instrumental. The type of satisfaction that I mean here, however, is of a deeper sort; concisely put, it is satisfaction rather than satisfaction of a particular appetite.

9 See, for example, Taussig on "Reverse Contact," whereby native peoples not only portray but also magically manipulate representations of Western colonizers. ("Sympathetic Magic," 7)

10 Aristotle recognized the capacity of early "professionals" such as doctors to accurately diagnose various ailments despite having never previously seen exactly the same patient or symptoms. He termed the ability to make this type of skillful judgement phronesis, distinguishing it from other, more ultimately certain ways of discerning truths.

11 Benjamin’s seminal "On the Mimetic Faculty" only begins to explain this idea that figures implicitly and significantly in much of his work. Taussig develops the concept much further, of course.

12 Many psychologists certainly study the differences between people’s perceived and cognitive worlds. Soon I hope to pursue this dynamic more fully, and their in-depth observations will hopefully increase my understanding.

13 The art of montage, another of Benjamin’s emergent filmic concepts, relies on this innate characteristic.
Works Cited


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