

# Clifford Galiher

## Mis-Shelved Book

We treat a wealth of knowledge in much the same way we treat material wealth: the greater our trove, the more we worry that something will go missing. In discussing the archive, many scholars use the example of the mis-shelved book to illustrate their apprehension about lost knowledge. Bowker and Starr, in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, tell readers to “try to locate a library book shelved under the wrong Library of Congress catalogue number,”<sup>1</sup> to establish the importance of hierarchies in everyday life, while James Gleick in *The Information* muses on the dilemmas of the digital age: “Too much information, and so much of it lost. An unindexed Internet site is in the same limbo as a mis-shelved library book.”<sup>2</sup> None of these authors would advocate for the dismantling of the library as an institution, yet their fixation on its inherent risks of miscategorization and unsearchability reveal fears that the archive manifests the perpetual threat of information glut, precariously held in check by the wisdom and accuracy of the system. Perversely, the archive’s very mass endangers the human knowledge that it proposes to protect.

The fear of information glut boils down to the Borgesian nightmare of the Library of Babel: an infinite repository of all possible words, with no clear organizational scheme whatsoever. The juxtaposition of two quotes, one by Augustus de Morgan (as cited by Gleick) and the other by Borges himself in an earlier essay, entitled “The Total Library,” sketches out the hopeless scenario:

“Take the library of the British Museum...what chance has a work of being known there merely because it is there? If it be wanted, it can be asked for; but to be wanted it must be known.”<sup>3</sup>

—Augustus De Morgan

“A half-dozen monkeys equipped with typewriters could easily knock out in a few eternities all the books contained in the British Museum.”<sup>4</sup>

—Jose Luis Borges

Both statements reveal the same fears underlying the apprehension toward the mis-shelved book: the scenario of true knowledge buried in an oblivious sea of irrelevant information. The more it contains, the less an archive serves its function and the more it resembles a map drawn to the scale of the world (to borrow another image from Borges): vast, detailed, uncompressed.

However, information glut is a concept nearly as old as human knowledge, stretching back before the Internet to all incarnations of the archive. To paraphrase Gleick, any use of the waterways of knowledge awakens one to the dangers of a deluge. Biblical connotations aside, at stake is the notion that the navigable could become un-navigable, that boundaries will disappear across the horizon and contours will flatten into an undifferentiable

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sea of useless (or more accurately, not useful) data. Where a bookcase of one hundred reference books would be practical and expedient, a library of ten million books would unhelpfully scatter information too sparsely: any particular desired piece of data would become a needle in a haystack. Our culture abounds with popular representations of this fact: from Rosebud in *Citizen Kane* to the Ark of the Covenant in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the diadem in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the dread of an infinite hoard conspiring to hide a single priceless secret pervades our conception of the archive.

In these representations, the very notion of the archive seems to undercut the promise of human knowledge: by exceeding the parameters of human memory and lifespan, it inevitably withholds wondrous secrets (and even knowledge thereof) from the individual. While the archive does quash the individual's hope for the acquisition of knowledge as an avenue to total understanding, it enables society, another vast and incomprehensible abstraction, to endlessly profit from an ever-expanding pool of knowledge. Whatever the extent of the actual Library of Alexandria's holdings, its destruction at some point in the late Roman Empire inarguably retarded the cultural and scientific progress of Western civilization, while the Islamic world would prosper from copies of its texts spread throughout the Middle East (copies that would eventually circle back into Western Europe by way of Umayyad Spain). Even to the extent that the actual Library was exaggerated, the myth that has grown around it conveys a clear moral of enlightenment gained and then lost with the life and death of the archive.

Moreover, it bears mentioning that such popular conceptions of the unnervingly endless archive are themselves imaginary, with the now-legendary Alexandria joining the magical and elastic realms of Hogwarts, Xanadu, or Babel. Furthermore, to the extent that these examples illustrate the concept of the mis-shelved book, they also negate it. To show Rosebud lying atop the junk heap is to reclaim it. Lost knowledge only exists as such either in the imagination or at the moment before its rediscovery, after which it rejoins the known set of knowledge that the archive strives to protect. For all of the fears of what might be hidden from view, the anxieties surrounding the archive must always be imaginary, while the gains derived from it are quite real.

Even as far as the threat of information glut is concerned, some of its aspects are benign or even beneficial. Wikipedia's famously open-source repository is protected by the sheer volume of its holdings: regardless of the Administrators' effectiveness in patrolling vandalism, the good faith (if not veracity) of any given page beyond the 1,000 most-visited is reinforced by its 4,000,000 similarly obscure siblings, any of which could equally distract the small handful of potential miscreants. Perhaps more significantly, though, the entire endeavor of archival research—to rediscover what others once knew—is fueled by an optimistic response to the very fears addressed above. In short, research is suffused by the hope of reclaiming a mis-shelved book. Whether in hopes of finding the lost plays of Shakespeare, the Lost Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw, or the Rosebud at the heart of any research question, to search is to embrace the anxieties of the archive and to cash in on the archive's real promise: the eternal (re)discovery of information.

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**Clifford James Galiher** is currently a Ph.D. student in Critical Studies at USC. His research focuses primarily on film production in classic Hollywood, including a current project on the history of pre-digital visual effects. His other interests include animation, narrative studies, and digital media history.

### End Notes

1 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 3.

2 James Gleick, *The Information: A Theory, a History, a Flood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 410.

3 Augustus de Morgan, *Arithmetical Books* (London: Taylor and Walton, 1847), quoted by Gleick, 410.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Total Library," *Sur*, August 1939.