viewpoint

How critical can librarians be?

Critical librarianship has become embedded into the epistemological structure of the LIS profession. Those working in art libraries and the *Art Libraries Journal* have played no small role in this, fostering progressive discussions around issues of social injustice that orbit the library and its functions. Nevertheless, the kernel of critical theory that developed out of the Frankfurt School centred upon class and economics. Librarianship, especially art librarianship, continues to be a middle-class career requiring an expensive higher qualification to enter. This requirement indicates the contradictions operating within and around the sector. As the commodification of education continues to creep in, class and economics are urgent topics that demand to be addressed by the critical librarianship movement. Yet those who practice critical librarianship remain employees of this very system and as such, the question posed is, what, if anything, can librarians do about their role within the education system to disrupt the commodification of education? The proposal is offered that librarians and artworks have more in common than seems possible. This idea is explained by briefly introducing artwork as a monad, concluding that art and perhaps librarians reflect the society that created them but cannot change it. Nevertheless, the very existence of art reflects the possibilities of such change, and maybe this is its role.

Critical librarianship and critical theory

Critical librarianship is now an established practice within the LIS profession, the evolution of which can be traced back to the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) activist movement formed in New York in 1990. The theme of critical librarianship appears in scholarly articles, special journal issues, and conferences dedicated to the subject; as such, it is becoming part of the epistemological element of the profession[1]. The fraction within LIS influenced by critical theory uses its position to destabilise discourses and authoritarian pedagogies to strive for a more inclusive and critical approach to challenge social injustice and power. Activities such as critiquing historical hegemonic classification systems, developing collections to include alternative material types such as zines, decolonising the curriculum to represent diverse and marginalised voices, and teaching critical literacy are commendable developments the approach has achieved.

The contemporary practice of critical librarianship is an example of how the traditional role of librarianship has had to evolve in reaction to the changing demands made of the library. A significant driver of these changes has been instigated by the commodification of education and its consequences. State-funded education is a social responsibility, which was relinquished when governments took a neoliberalist approach to remove grants and public funding, so universities have little option, but to adopt a market ideology and consumerist approach and compete on the free market for revenue in the form of tuition fees. Institutions need to appeal to a wide range of 'customers' by representing distinction, and the impact on libraries is directly affected by this commodification. They have had to converge, redefine and integrate their services, support teaching, research, a higher number of students and their evolving needs, all while competing for resources, demonstrating value and supporting university corporate strategies. Effectually under the rubric of late capitalism, these developments have produced tensions that have transformed the social value of education into a commercial service of 'academic capitalism' competing in the

1. ALJ dedicated a special issue to the subject in 2019 (vol 44 issue 2), the ARLIS conference was on Neutrality Bristol UK, 2022, UAL conference Towards a critical (art) librarianship in London, UK in May 2018. #critlib hashtag, NA Critical Librarianship Special Interest Group in 2018

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information marketplace. In this commercial landscape, students have become consumers of education and information, which in turn has been transformed into a commodity that the university factory sells for a profit.

There are significant consequences for libraries at the nexus of this commodification. Evident budget cuts have caused managers to pursue strategies of implementing consumer business models and seeking funding opportunities and partnerships. Libraries must measure impact and justify their existence by demonstrating quantifiable worth in an environment where job security depends on flexible, poorly paid staff and hierarchical working practices.

> Additionally, librarians' success was often coached in terms of efficiency, and library training and education were designed to be practical and to create efficient, pragmatic workers, who were often underpaid (undervalued) women[2].

As pressure on the library continues, and profit driven corporate publishers push costs to spiral, managers must implement a consumer business model to measure impact and efficiently justify the library's existence by demonstrating quantifiable worth. As scholarly output becomes quantified in economic units, equality of access to knowledge is troubled, and the library as a reflection of the society that forms it finds itself in flux. It is logical, then, that some librarians have since turned to critical theory to interpret the socio-political effects of society on their function, and the institutional system in which they are based beyond the library's physical space.

Critical theory developed out of the Institute of Social Research in the Frankfurt School led by Max Horkheimer and other significant philosophers who critiqued the way power ideologies govern society, culture, economics, reason, history and class structures. Their interpretations of Marxist theory privileged dialectics as a possible approach to changing the ideological structures of capitalism that permeated all aspects of life. Such an approach examined where pattern changes and tensions exist within hegemonic ideology society, as spaces for potential change. The philosophers involved had varying arguments and conflicting interpretations, and analogous to critical librarianship, there is no overarching manifesto.

For Marx and the critical theorists, all aspects of historical developments are structured through the exploitations of the material conditions of society, which reproduces itself. Thus, there is no neutrality, according to Popwich: 'The idea of neutrality – political, social, or economic- is a good way to think about Marxism's relevance for critical librarianship[3].' Knowledge is a social product of paradoxes between the material world and theory, historically conditioned and expressed through narratives[4]. The structures inherent in librarianship contribute to these narratives, which, through a critical theory lens, must come to encompass critical self-reflection.

The library as an institution of change

The evolution of libraries and the profession as an institution has experienced various chapters from the 16th century onwards. Progressing from the ecclesiastical keeper and protector of books to educational institutions and the rise of the public library and philanthropic activities produced a paternalistic paradigm within the public sphere of democratic societies [5]. The modern library was conceived out of the tradition of Western Enlightenment that witnessed the reproduction of a disciplined society trained towards holding up the swelling of industrialisation and class structures. The library as an instrument of ideology from the founding of the ALA onwards is parallel to this condition of modernity that the Enlightenment brought forth, exemplified in Dewey's famous quote that expresses a corporate efficiency of exchange value measuring quantity and the cost to reading[6]. The library's early aims of improving people's lives became entwined in power structures and contradictions.

Libraries might contribute to creating and sharing knowledge, but external forces, which drive change and control how knowledge is produced and discovered, also mediate them. Technology is a historical development that mediates libraries like no other. Once a printed copy of the catalogue was made available to the readers, the librarian's custodian power was re-distributed. From computer automation to MARC bibliographic records, Web 2.0, patron-driven acquisition, mass digitisation, software apps, social media, algorithms, AI and ChatGPT,

2. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, "In Resistance to a Capitalist Past: Emerging Practices of Critical Librarianship in *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship,* ed. Nicholson, K., & Seale, Maura (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018), 25

3. Sam Popowich, "Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists": Marxism, Technology, and Library work, in *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship,* ed. Nicholson, K., & Seale, Maura (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018), 46.

4. Jameson, F. 2007. *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*. London: Verso.

5. Buschman, John. "Education, the Public Sphere, and Neoliberalism: Libraries' Contexts." *The Library Quarterly* 90 (2020): 154.

6. 'The best reading for the largest number at the least cost.' Wiegand, Wayne A. *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876–1917*. Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science; No. 56. New York; London: Greenwood Press, 1986. Preface 1

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technological advances have contributed to the production and distribution of knowledge, have arguably democratised access to information, and disrupted the power dynamic between universities, libraries and users. Sam Popwich equates the political effects of the digital revolution on the profession with the commodity fetish in that the immaterial labour of historical and social relations has been extracted and hidden. 'To use Marxist language, the exchange-value of technology is all that matters: use-value must never be too deeply interrogated'[7]. In this shifting landscape, the traditional roles of librarians are disrupted, which is where critical librarianship finds traction, concisely summarised by Drabinski 2019:

> Critical librarianship must grapple with librarianship's relationship to time, to a past accumulation that represents an ordering of only certain kinds of things, reflective of only specific dominant modes of seeing and making the world[8].

Hines and Ketchum stated (2020) that critical theory has become used for various debates and subjects, which is reductive of the essence of being critical. However, they point out that the very function of providing free access to information is in and of itself a potentially critical practice[9].

7. Sam Popowich, "Ruthless Criticism of All that Exists": Marxism, Technology, and Library work, in *The politics of theory and the practice of critical librarianship,* ed. Nicholson, K., & Seale, Maura (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018), 49.

8. Drabinski, Emily (2019). What is critical about critical librarianship? *Art Libraries Journal, 44*, 49.

9. Hines, S., & Ketchum, David, editors (2020). *Critical librarianship.* United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2020.

Contradictions and self-critique

Crilly argues that critical librarianship is becoming institutionalised, which simultaneously legitimates its power to make changes[11]. However, the contradiction of critical librarianship and the profession are analogues to the tensions in society, and resistance and complicity reflect the discontinuity between praxis and theory. 'We are complicit in the ideological reproduction of capitalist society through our work and the policies we uphold[10].' For instance, such questions as intellectual freedom versus ethical issues and the access to knowledge compared to the instrumental use of it as a tool of domination and control. However, the dialectical position between these irreconcilable contradictions produces a hiatus where change can happen. The contradiction is attempting to critique the institution while being complicit in it, therefore reflection and understanding of our own identities as socially constructed is implicit.

11. Crilly, J. (2019). A reflexive lens: Critical librarianship at UAL. *Art Libraries Journal, 44*(2), 83–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2019.9 89

10. Popowich, Sam. *Confronting the democratic discourse of librarianship: a Marxist approach. (*Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2019). 33

In the UK, the profession of librarianship is a culturally homogeneous socioeconomic group of white middle-class individuals. In the profession, a systemic demand for a higher qualification remains, which requires financial and time commitments[12]. To gain the qualification, graduates become in debt to enter an existing over-qualified job market where competition is high and entry-level jobs demand experience often expected to be gained voluntarily, especially in any areas of the arts, including art librarianship. If there were more apprentice schemes or experience valued over expensive qualifications, it would encourage more diversity in the sector from a broader socioeconomic background instead of maintaining class barriers.

12. This is a much wider and deeper conversation beyond the realms of the topic of this article. It deserves to be treated as a much bigger debate by the LIS profession.

The sector's structure supports the system of academia and capitalist exploitation that critical librarians want to critique. Indeed, class is rarely discussed but should be an imminent motive for self-reflection. Critical librarians may want to disrupt the status quo, but we all remain employees, part of a profession where power structures operate, and as such, limit the interventions and critiques of it. Critical librarianship does provide a theoretical approach which can open up conversations and ideas that once may not have seemed relevant to librarians, especially within the commercial realms of education. Thus, a critical approach should be ready to move out of the library and return to the geneses of critical theory by exposing the economic and class restraints within the institution and its own profession by a critical self-reflective turn.

Self-reflection would link to further institutional mythologies on how the sector sees itself as an altruistic, sacrificing role working for the greater good with quasi-religious overtones. Fobazi Ettarh succinctly analysed it as 'vocational awe', which affects the unspoken aspects of librarianship.

> "Vocational awe" refers to librarians' ideas, values, and assumptions about themselves and the profession. This image results in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred and, therefore, beyond critique[13].

Critical librarians have realised their role holds power and can be used to activate changes; and much valuable work has come out of the discussion to date.

13. Fobazi Ettarh, *"Vocational awe and librarianship: the lies we tell ourselves", In the Library with the Lead Pipe: an open access, open peer-reviewed journal. 10/1/2018*

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Conversely, power dynamics happen not just in the collection or stacks but also on the job at the everyday level, where macroaggressions and power can be played out. If critical librarianship is to remain relevant and not be subsumed into a self-referential echo chamber for the privileged, it must also be self-critical. Colleagues at all levels, especially front-line lower-paid staff, should be included in discussions and alliances outside the institution and library space can be formed to create solidarity. This year saw institutions across the country strike for better pay and conditions, this was a practical example of joining forces where those on picket lines were no longer seen by their job title or skill set but simply as comrades in a shared fight to improve recognition.

Librarians and monads

What relevance might be specific to art libraries and critical theory in its adaptation by librarians? Appleton (2019) suggests that art libraries are ideal sites for fostering critical librarianship; '…there might be something about the art library environment that enables and encourages a greater, or different, level of critical librarianship[14].' He questions what it is about art that makes the art library a space for such critical practices. In conclusion, the artist's practice is emancipatory (at least that is the ambition), which is within and a reflection of society. In other words, art is critical of society within its very existence. Thus, art libraries can forge solidarity with artists who may actively challenge the oppressive social structure of inequality through their work.

In considering critical theory and art (libraries), it is vital to touch on the work of Adorno, the leading philosopher at the Frankfurt School and one of the most influential art theorists of the 20th century. For Adorno, an artwork contains the contradiction of society and its form and reflects this social production, *but* is powerless to change it[15]. This understanding he formulated via the reinvention of Leibniz's doctrine of the monad[16].

The rationale of the monad conceives of art as a windowless result of the subject-object dialectic, at once both autonomous and *reflective,* distanced from the social context yet simultaneously an object of this very social context. The mere existence of an artwork is hermetically closed to each other and is thus a paradox *and* praxis. The time, space, and the materials of which it exists contextualise art, and it inevitably reflects the tensions within society.

For Adorno, the 'truth content' of a work of art affirmed the conditions in which it was produced but within the contradictions that transcended from its memetic position. If art serves a political purpose, it loses its significance and autonomy; instead, it is in its functionlessness that its critical element exists. Put another way, art must exist for no reason other than itself; by being social and historical, its autonomy creates an awareness of the contradictions. Nevertheless, the work carries a guilt for its abstraction and commodity form, which remains powerless to change. By appearing to have a life of their own, works of art call into question a society where nothing is allowed to be itself and everything is subject to the exchange principle. By appearing detached from the conditions of economic production, works of art acquire an ability to suggest changed conditions. Furthermore, by appearing to be useless, works of art recall the human purposes of production that instrumental rationality has forgotten[17].

For Meeks (2019), artists' work can teach us to deepen our perceptions and help us to analyse and reflect on society and the world around us. Some parallels can be drawn between the expectation of art and the role of librarianship. Ettarh's reflection on librarianship could very easily be applied to artworks: 'The assumption within librarianship is that libraries create an educated, enlightened populace, bringing about a better society'[18]. Like the artist, the labour, and indeed the emotional labour of the librarian, is invisible, and it does not produce an outcome, a commodity or sell anything. Polarities occur in artworks and librarianship; both carry an assumption that they contain the potential to change society for the better. Indeed, this is an ambition of critical librarianship. Nonetheless, just as art is a windowless monad that cannot change its position, the question is posed: Just how critical can librarians be, given that they work within and contribute to the very matrix of power structures they wish to overthrow?

We should never stop striving to overthrow these power structures to pursue a fairer society. The more librarians can help their readers work towards

14. Appleton, Leo. 2019. "Viewpoint: Is Critical Art Librarianship Actually a Thing?" *Art Libraries Journal* 44 (2): 94. doi:10.1017/alj.2019.10.

15. See Adorno, Theodor W., Adorno, Gretel, and Tiedemann, Rolf. *Aesthetic Theory.* London: Continuum, 2004.

16. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, and Strickland, Lloyd. *Leibniz's Monadology: A New Translation and Guide.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

17. Peters, M. (2020). The Windowless Monad. In: *Popular Music, Critique and Manic Street Preachers*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43100-6_3 64

18. Fobazi Ettarh, 2018.

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emancipation, the better, but maybe librarians have more in common with artworks than, at first glance, seems realistic. For if artworks have similarities to librarians, in that they might help others interpret the world, the point remains to change it. At least Marx used the library with this ambitious supposition[19].

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19. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *The German Ideology. Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx's 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy.* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970.

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