

Library Lineages

Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History*

Battles examines the *global* history of libraries through intersecting media, cultural, and political-economic histories; he acknowledges their long-standing role as both cultural and political apparatuses that embody their societies' core values and social hierarchies (whether noble or not); and he recognizes their place as geopolitical battlegrounds (including, as Arjomand demonstrates, in Kabul).

We might ask how the Morgan and New York Public Libraries are products of their own media, cultural, and political-economic contexts; and how they, too, have served – and continue to serve – as cultural and political apparatuses.

Battles also addresses classification politics, a theme we'll discuss in a three weeks.

Shannon Mattern, “Library as Infrastructure”

Thinking back to our conversation in Week 2, what difference does a metaphor make? How does the library function as a technological, architectural, epistemological, social, and ethical infrastructure?

Today we'll see two rather rarefied libraries, but if we think about the public library system as a whole, what roles do we expect our contemporary public libraries to play? What unites these functions? Have we stretched the library's mission too far?

How might the tools and methods of media studies help us think differently about how a library works?

Morgan Library + NYPL

Our visit to these two institutions will ideally raise questions about:

- The various *values* of media collections: as financial investments, as cultural capital, as private resources, as public goods (commons), as etc.
- Who and what funds our access to knowledge?
- The politics of access to information: who has access, and how do they gain access? Who are our collections' “publics”?
- Informational logistics: how do we store, organize, secure, and/or facilitate access to information resources? We'll think more about this again next week.
- How can library architecture facilitate its informational functions and embody its values? Again, we'll talk more about these issues over the next two weeks.
- The temporality of knowledge: what are these collections' relationships to the past and to posterity; to the now and to the timeless?

Noah Arjomand, “The Struggle for Kabul’s Libraries”

We could ask all the same questions of Kabul’s libraries: who funds them, in whose interests does they serve, who are their publics, what ideologies underlie their foundation and operation, etc.?

“...a big part of the problem is cultural. At the heart of the lack of interest shown by the Ministries of Higher Education and Culture in training (and paying) librarians, according to Wiles, is that in Afghanistan information is viewed not as something people have a right to access but rather as a resource to be possessed. And so libraries are viewed as simply places where individuals’ or organizations’ collections of books are stored, and library staff enjoy a status comparable to guardians or custodians. There simply isn’t a conception of librarian as a profession. “They call everyone a librarian [kitabdar : “keeper of books”], whether they clean in the library or garden [for] the library,” Rawan told me....” (385)