

Who should answer the question "What is a Work?"

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Abstract: This article covers some of the answers that has received the question: What is a work?, from the Information Science[1], and from other disciplines. While it is an issue that has always been present in all these areas, it is from the arrival of IFLA FRBR model that the need for a clear answer has been pressing both to resolve practical problems -the cataloging of works- as theoretical also, i.e., the definition of *work*. We start with the definitions given by IFLA and other authors who have analyzed the FRBR model to demonstrate certain theoretical limitations in light of some texts produced from other knowledges such as sociology of art, semiotics, aesthetics of receptions and culture history. The article concludes that it is necessary to address a multidisciplinary study of the problem, in order to avoid errors in both theory and practice resulting from the application of the new model.

Works and Documents

Since 1997 IFLA presented his model FRBR [2], Information Science have been faced with a series of theoretical and practical problems arising from some of the concepts set out in this model. One of the most important distinctions is the IFLA proposal to separate the work of its various manifestations [3]: the work is the common referent of all these manifestations. In a first approximation, the work-manifestation distinction is quite intuitive: clearly, the millions of copies of *Don Quijote*, its hundreds of translations, their textual variants, adaptations, critical editions, etc., all them refer in some way to what we mean when we say "Don Quijote." The same applies, for example, the relationship between the Six Suites for Cello by JS Bach and their ways of accessing: live performance or sound recording (and in the latter case, the different types of physical objects with which we access the work: tapes, records, CDs, etc.). The list of examples could continue to cover various forms of art, literary or scientific expressions, different modes of access, multi-media materials, etc., but they all reveal as a common factor the relationship between something we call work and other physical objects that refer to it. We talk about Picasso's *Guernica*, to which we may know only through a reproduction, we discuss the theory of evolution, having read a specific copy of *The Origin of Species* which is not likely to be the original edition, but one of a long chain of editions. To further clarify these concepts the terminology used by Elaine Svenonius in *The Intellectual Foundation of Information Organization*, one of the key works of the discipline, may serve us. Using two common terms from the Information Science, the author refers to these two entities as work and documents; the documents are defined pragmatically as carriers of information that are worth being preserved and, in fact, is what libraries, information centers, archives, and museums collect. The landmark document that has been the privileged object of the discipline since its beginning is obviously the book.

The work-document distinction is implicitly present in book catalogs at the time of Antonio Panizzi (mid-nineteenth century) by indented representation of the various versions and editions of the same work. Those old catalogs consisted of lists of works in which the data of the various editions of each work were placed under, leaving a certain margin, while the various reprints were placed on another line, increasing the margin further. This hierarchical

display was only possible to maintain in small collections, with little growth and in which the acquisition of new versions of existing works was not stimulated. It was abandoned with the advent of card catalogs, which allow greater growth. The editorial blast of the twentieth century, the rise of translations, extended editions, critical editions, etc., made such catalogs impossible to maintain. The computer age has not yet recovered the distinction between work, edition and copy that was present in those old catalogs, as anyone who is accustomed to search the Internet or automated catalogs knows: look for an author who is known to have written one or two dozens of works can show hundreds or thousands of hits. We don't recover works, we just recover documents. A search in any catalog, including the Web, of *Don Quijote*, should not throw thousands of hits, or thousands, or tens: just one.

The modern cataloging tradition has been to infer an issue, that is, the simultaneous existence of multiple copies produced at the same time and place, and by the same people, from the object on hand: the document. Consequently, it has always prioritized the information produced by the publishing industry that, as an industry, share their methodologies with other modes of production of the capitalist system: a document from this perspective is not qualitatively different from any other goods produced in series. Among many other practices, we can mention the importance given on the catalogs to the date of publication of a document, which is never lacking in any description, over the original edition data, even if it is present in the title page or in the cover, which is not usually transcribed to the cards or the bibliographic citations. But for many readers, perhaps most of them, the date on which the work was conceived is a far more relevant piece of information than the date of production of a good. It is plausible to think that anyone reading a book is more interested in the time that the text of the book was originally produced and broadcast, as this data serves to relate the work to other texts, expressions or events, than in the date of production of the object she have on hand.

Instead, the different contributions of intellectual and physical work that result in the document are subject to conceptual frameworks that are not those of the authors nor the readers. The work, which is the object of interest of these other actors, is hidden by the proliferation of versions, editions, reprints, which now have to add digital documents. Since FRBR -and considering that documentation is no longer a lonely and isolated task as far as the practice of shared cataloging and the multiplication of other kind of repositories in Internet continues - cataloging of works, and not just documents is the challenge facing catalogers. Besides the organizational need to impose a more focused interest in the work, the other challenge for the discipline is to enhance dialogue with other knowledge to which the work-document question is not foreign. The aim of this paper is to show that librarian knowledge is not enough to define the work.

Indeed, the work-document relationship is far from being exclusive of Information Science: it is implicit in almost any text. A citation refers to the work, and usually to the pair work-author, it point to ideas, or at least to subtexts, which are supposed to be present in the work, and therefore, in all its manifestations. Although it makes present by a reference to a particular issue, which is not nothing but a copy owned by the author, that is, a document, the quotation aims to transcend this event in order to be valid for any other manifestation of the work. A claim that can be challenged by the game of distorting mirrors of translations, editor cuts, censored

versions, reduced or enlarged, interpretations, in the case of performing arts, etc. but they are not enough to put into question the very existence of the work; instead, they placed the work in a complex existential level.

But the citation is only the modern, ordered and systematic way of a long tradition which, through parodies, plagiarisms, comments, *res facta*, etc..., repeats the same scheme: a document that implies a work, which refers to another work which was accessed through a document.

Work according to IFLA

The IFLA-FRBR conceptual model includes many other entities and relationships, but the work-document is the one that brings more definitional problems, especially when trying to leave the extensional definition of the concept *work*, which do not present so many problems from an operational standpoint, but is elusive when attempting an intensional definition.

The first definition given by IFLA is::

(1) "An intellectual or artistic creation" (IFLA-1997).

Other tries to define more precisely the concept:

(2) "A distinct intellectual resource considered as a noumenal, rather than a material entity" (Abrams-2002).

4) "A work is a signifying, concrete set of ideational conceptions that finds realization through semantic or symbolic expression" (Smiraglia-2001).

(5) "A work is the set of all documents that are copies of (equivalent to) a particular document" (Svenonius-2001).

(6) [A work is] "The set of all documents sharing essentially the same information" (Svenonius-2001).

(7) "A Work is the coherent evolution of a distinct intellectual conception into one or more expressions that are dominated by the conception" (IFLA-2004).

(8) "Works are just thoughts that have not yet been materialized" (Antelman-2004).

(9) "[The class 'Work'] comprises the sum of concepts which appear in the course of the coherent evolution of an original idea into one or more expressions that are dominated by the original idea. The substance of Work is concepts" (IFLA-2006).

Work as a support for ideas

The objections can be made to these definitions are legion. We just exemplify some to make clear the need for further analysis.

Definitions (1), (2), (3), (7), (8), (9) speak of "intellectual work", "concepts", "thoughts," "ideas." Any artistic creation is always intellectual? If so, should not thereby be considered that way expressions as the exquisite corpses of the Surrealist, the pure theatrical or musical improvisations, the performances, etc..., all attempts to skip the intellectual aspect of artistic creation.

On the definition (9), which synthesizes many other texts which tries to make objective the creative process that results in the work, the documentary Alyson Carlyle has objected: "[Bibliographic entities] are often described as being created from a process that begins with the work entity and then moves to the other entities. The argument for this view begins with work as an idea in a creator's head. However this interpretation of the model may be dangerous, in part because cataloging something that happens before an item is produced

is not possible". But this definition is not only objectionable from the practical problems for catalogers: the question of how come some "ideas" in the mind of an author -if the work consists of "ideas" - is a matter for psychology and not for Information Science. The testimonies of those who have created works can not presume one only way of being of the creative process. From Mozart, who hears his work "not as a sequence of things, as they will appear, but as a whole", to Strauss, who comes up with a two-bar phrase, which then will develop slowly, all variants are possible.

In general, all the definitions given by IFLA's cataloguers proposed the work as a self-identical substance that exists independently of social and historical processes.

That is not the case of Richard Smiraglia, author of what is perhaps the only book devoted entirely to the problem of the work, *The nature of "a work": Implications for the organization of Knowledge*. The fourth chapter of this book is devoted to reviewing some texts that somehow address the problem of the work from linguistics, semiotics and philosophy. Smiraglia admits that the work is a socially constructed product, but do not call this point of view to make his formal definition of work (4), which clearly looks at the work from the semiotic. In a later article he acknowledges that "It is critical to understand that any given text of a work, or any given documentary instantiation of a work, is a cultural product that has been shaped by technological, economic and social forces."

Roger Chartier's words about the subject are the best criticism can be made to the substantialist conception of the work: "It is vain the wish to distinguish the essential substance of the work, considered as always identical to itself, and the accidental variations of the text, considered irrelevant to its meaning. (...) Recently, David Kasta called 'platonian' that perspective in which a work transcends all possible materials embodiments, and 'pragmatic' the one which states that no text exists outside the material issues given for reading or hearing. (...) The confrontation between 'platonism' and 'pragmatism' depends certainly on a false dispute or on a bad conceived question. Indeed, a work is always given to read or to hear in one of their particular states. (...) But always, too, there are multiple devices (philosophical, aesthetic, legal) that strive to reduce this diversity, when postulating the existence of an identical work in itself, regardless of its form. In the West, Neoplatonism, Kantian aesthetics and the definition of intellectual property helped to build that ideal text that readers will recognize in each of their states. Rather than attempting, in one way or another, to discard or resolve this irreducible tension, what matters is to identify the way it [the work] is built in each historical moment. "

The work as a sequence of signs

The philosophical substrate on which IFLA definitions sits can be found in several texts by American scholars, although most of them are dedicated to the ontological question about particular kinds of works: *What is a work of art?* (Margolis, Wolterstoff, Thomasson), *What is a musical work?* (Levinson), *What is a poem?* (Stevenson). It is within this line of thought in which the analysis of the work that consider the work can be defined in terms of fixed sequences of signs received its most significant criticism. Howell, in *Ontology and the nature of the literary work*, said that this type of fixed sequences are unique to the tradition of modern printed literature (or written tonal Western music), but it is the case of oral poetry, traditional stories,

musical improvisation, etc. This cut, like all nineteenth-century Eurocentrism, leaves out most of the phenomena and thus invalidates any definition attempt.

Smiraglia, following Nattiez, supports the objective differences in the various interpretations of a musical work: two interpretations can produce sounds with different frequencies and durations.

Remaining inside the limits of Western academic music one must have in mind that an interpretation of a piece of music is always an interpretation of an interpretation; the musicians perform what has been printed in a score, which has passed through the hands of an editor.

Two performances of a work can be, then, interpretations from different scores, which may have significant differences. But even if the players use the same edition of the score may have notes (ie, frequency and duration) different. The medieval and Renaissance practice known as *musica ficta* implies for the performer a knowledge of certain rules to interpret which has been originally written and then produce one sound or another. In genres in which the performer has more freedom, the differences can be huge; think of the Keith Jarrett versions of jazz standards as *Over the Rainbow*, in which is not easy to recognize the original melody.

In the unlikely extreme of the absolute identity between the sequences of signs of two works, the *Pierre Menard, autor de El Quijote*, by Jorge Luis Borges, demonstrates with a *reduction ad absurdum* that the work is not in the text, but in its readings .

The work as an information support

From the traditional library science approach, that follows Paul Otlet and Henri Lafontaine, *work* could be defined from the user's information needs: a user is defined abstractly and the information is defined as a lack; the work would, then, that meets that need . But not only the abstract mode of conceiving the subject is inadequate, but even admitting this approach it is an inadequate answer to the question "What is a work?" Because it is not "work" that satisfies that lack, but one of its manifestations. This approach does not require the work entity to ensure its completeness, only the document and the user are needed. To include the work would suffice to postulate that the document carries the same information as the work. But while it is easy to hold this position when consider the information that carries, for example, a copy of a manual of chemistry, even if it's not in the original language of the work, it is not so easy in the case of a poem that uses a sociolect within a given language and its translation into another.

This is not the most extreme example: a theory based on the work as quantifiable information should explain works in which there is no *ur-text* that serves as a root from which the versions grow, but either a sedimentary process in which is not possible to identify a primary layer and other derivatives. The information carried by each of these layers, whatever the definition of information used, will obviously be similar but not identical to the others. This is the case of oral literature and traditional or folk music. This scheme is sustainable only if we think the information in terms of encyclopedic knowledge that exists a priori and that must be acquired, but can not be maintained when it comes to other kinds of knowledge, or even worse, when there's no knowledge at all but rather the aesthetic delight. Can we talk about a lack when consider the re-reading a novel or a new hearing of a musical work?

The work and its reception

The Information Science can not fail to take account of the user, i.e. the receiver, but not as an abstraction defined by the lack of a measurable entity but as a subject shaped by defined

theories and practices. You can not conceive documents existence, and therefore, works, without including the recipient of these documents, but you can not think this receiver without considering the ways he uses the documents, and through them, the various readings of the works.

Smiraglia, despite its definition focused on the sign, referring *The Pleasure of the text* by Roland Barthes, says: "Readers are not concerned with the integrity of a text but rather with their own experience. It is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives". How many readers are bored with the descriptive parts of a novel, how many are distracted on the development section of a sonata and reconnect in the recapitulation, how many give primacy to the lyrics of a song, how many see the music as pure music? Maybe the aesthetics of reception is thus a much more fertile ground for thinking the question of the work if we want to see the subject in a less mechanical way. Let's take as an example the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer on the subject: "The identity of the work is not guaranteed by a determination either classical or formal, but is effective by the way we take charge of the construction of the work itself as a task. "

But as we accept complicate the relationship between the subject and the work we are faced with the subject as social actor. "The boundaries [of work], like all human made, are defined by the fact that it constitutes a significant structure founded on the existence of a coherent mental structure produced by a collective subject." These words of Lucien Goldman, in response to the Foucault's conference *What is an Author?*, refer again to the problem of the author. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this article, it is impossible to separate it completely from the problem of the work. Both Foucault in the text above and in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as Roger Chartier in *Working with Foucault: Outline of a genealogy of the "author function"*, describing the ways in which it was setting the figure of the author in our culture, implicitly also define different ways of conceiving the work: the historicity of the author lead us to the historicity of the work, and this, to the historicity of its readings.

To this cut by a diachronic axis we must add the synchronic axis of the different scientific and artistic disciplines and their practices around the works. Is it possible to think the work outside each of the techniques that produce them? That is, is it possible to think, for example, the "musical work", the "literary work", the "scientific work" as *work*, or is it the "family resemblances" of Wittgenstein? Perhaps we use the name *work* for different phenomena that tend to cluster for some reason, both in physical space (libraries), as in symbolic spaces (the style or the spirit of the times)? In the days of the Internet almost every work can be passed to digital media and thus grouped with other very different works by the common property of consist of all zeroes and ones, but also other things that we do not call works are digitized, and so both are grouped with them. The Library of Congress of the United States recently announced it is collecting Twitter messages. Should we consider each tweet of 140 characters a work?

The limits of the work

At least considering them from the Information Science, the limits of the work are not the same as in other disciplines. For the history of literature, *Le Livre de Mallarmé* is a work as it shows

revolutionary aesthetic procedures that influenced the later literature, but as work without document is not relevant to the Information Science. There could'nt be a user requesting a document representing this work. For music, 4'33 ", a work by John Cage consisting of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence, is a work, -a work that questions the very idea of work- and it is impossible to produce a direct material record, i.e., a document, it is not relevant to the Information Science.

Similar problems raises the question of the unity of the work. The literature can be considered that *Los siete locos* and *Los Lanzallamas*, both by Roberto Arlt, forms a play in two parts, because even with two titles, the second is explicitly the continuation of the first. In any case, it is true for any reader. However, while there is not an editorial clarification that states, for example, "second part of *Los siete locos*", for Information Science has always been two different works.

Perhaps this example, considering the above regarding the relationship between traditional cataloging and publishing, will serve not only to discuss the question of the limits of knowledge regarding the problem of the work but also to challenge some of the criteria of Information Science.

Conclusion

"The theory of the work does not exist, and who naively proposed to publish works dont have this theory and his empirical work would soon be stoned," says Foucault in the aforementioned conference. If we replace *publish* with *catalog* the dilemma that the issue of the work carries for Information Science becomes apparent. The practical problem of improving the ways users access to works will inevitably find that lack of a theory and this theory can not be considered in isolation from other disciplines; it can not define *work* with its own resources. Concepts such as document and information are insufficient. If Information Science does not turn to other areas such as aesthetics, ontology, sociology, semiotics and history, as well as technical and theoretical knowledge of the various arts, practical solutions will be apparent solutions, because they will not taken into account that the idea of *work* that may have the various users of the catalog is also framed by all that knowledges.

Notes

[1] I refer to the discipline known as *Ciencia de la Documentación* in our country, also called *Bibliotecología*, *Biblioteconomía* in Spain, and Library and Information Sciences in the Anglo-American world.

[2] FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) is a conceptual model developed by IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) from 1997, which is presented as a paradigm shift for Information Science, to the point that is the theoretical basis for the new cataloging rules RDA (Resource Description and Access).

[3] I use the term *manifestation* in its colloquial meaning and not in the technical sense that is given by IFLA in FRBR, as this article does not address the problem of this entity. Neither addresses the entity *expression* or any of the entities in groups 2 and 3 of the FRBR model.

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