

## FANTASIES OF THE LIBRARY

Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin, eds.  
MIT Press, 2016

## DEF

Craig Dworkin  
Information as material, 2018

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**PERHAPS, STILL, JORGE LUIS BORGES'S** succinct and haunting story remains the ur-scene of the library for many of us. In his 1944 “The Library of Babel,” the world of potential knowledge, “whose circumference is unattainable,” retains an elusive promise of finding meaning somewhere in its innumerable stacks of all possible combinations of characters; why else read? But the Borgesian library is also traumatic, its all-encompassing nature stifling its trapped inhabitants, who tend to lose all sense of perspective.

*Fantasies of the Library*, edited by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin, takes up this Borgesian problematic of the library and reframes it as potential. The book, whose title and guiding concept are born from the inaugural issue of the journal *Intercalations*, “Fantasies of the Library,” simultaneously integrates the possibility of calculated interpolation with fantasy. If Borges’s library, and by extension our own, is built on calculations, these fantasies are built on intercalations, insertions, and gradual layerings of interrogation into what we already know or think we know.

Here, intercalations take the forms of interviews, interpolations, and intertextual discussions. Through its evolving collection and presentation, *Fantasies* poses a critique that resounds with Borges’s readers: the Enlightenment dream of total knowledge is impossible, and information, after all, isn’t meaning. “Why are we so focused on completism?” asks Rick Prelinger, of San Francisco’s Prelinger Library, in the book’s first interview. Rather than “the ambition for a correct and complete ordering of knowledge,” the book sketches a space, a “virtual domain of possibilities” for the library. These possibilities are set next to one another in different typefaces on the page, suggesting a browse through a shelf or a walk through a gallery and framing intertextuality as intermedia. Interviews with Rick and Megan Prelinger; with the head of Asia Art Archive, Hammad Nasar; and with theorist Joanna Zylinka sit side by side on the spread with Anna-Sophie Springer’s long essay, “Melancholies of the Paginated Mind: The Library as Curatorial Space.” Among others, interjected in the middle of the book is a full-color visual essay, presenting a plethora of different interpretations of the library, like Wafaa Bilal’s contemporary project *168:01*, which aims to restore books to the decimated University of Baghdad library; the *xylothèque*, a collection of codices formed from trees; and the bookwheel, a Renaissance contraption that allows many books to be displayed at once. Interspersed with this material are artist Andrew Norman Wilson’s *ScanOps*, images from Google Books that capture accidents and errors, including the workers’ hands that scan.

Springer’s essay guides the collection, serving not only as a history of structure and organization but as a history of thought. It includes discussions of library touchstones like Dewey and Warburg, as well as Borges, Robert Musil, Walter Benjamin, and Alain Resnais.



But questions of the archive, and of history, have also moved beyond Borges—recall that Google’s parent company, mentioned in the introduction, is named Alphabet. Who owns the library, and who decides what goes into the archive? *Fantasies* attempts to engage with these monumental questions directly through Nasar’s interview, which tackles geographical and racial bias in archive practices, and through Zylinska’s consideration of “printed matter in the Anthropocene.” Also reproduced is a letter from Charles Stankievec to the Superior Court of Quebec defending the open-source academic website Arg.org. I suppose it is already assumed, given *Fantasies*’s attitudes toward completion, that these interviews and discussions are by no means comprehensive. They instead encourage the reader to follow their signs pointing to other, more in-depth readings—to wander the library stacks with a critical eye.

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Near the end of “The Library of Babel,” a footnote appears on the possibility of the infinite library:

Strictly speaking, all that is required is a single volume, of the common size, printed in nine- or ten-point type, that would consist of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. . . .

As the size of the impossible library is radically scaled down, Borges offers a single (albeit equally impossible) book. Maybe even a sentence would do. Take this one, by the philosopher of language Gottlob Frege, in the late eighteenth century:

On the introduction of a name for something simple, a definition is not possible; there is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the words as is intended.

Like Borges’s librarian, Frege is obsessed with cataloguing; this sentence has a twinge of anguish around attempting to find the simple names for objects, the atoms of language. Elsewhere, Frege draws a distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, or sense and reference. If reference, *Bedeutung*, also indicates meaning, we are definitely (and definitively) in the library.

Frege’s sentence provides the impetus for Craig Dworkin’s book-length conceptual work, *Def*. Formatted like the dictionaries to which it is indebted (specifically, the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster’s 1806 first edition), *Def*, according to Dworkin’s endnote, is an example of Oulipo writer Raymond Queneau’s “definitional literature.” Every word is replaced by its definition, each word of which is replaced by its definition in turn, and so on. From the seed of Frege’s sentence, *Def* branches ten times over, marking the occasions with red-print “by which I mean” and prompting an astonishing flowering from its dry original sentence.

As with Dworkin’s other works, which fill in the missing chapter of *Tristram Shandy* or parse the entirety of a book about parsing sentences, the enjoyment is divided between the cleverness of the concept and a kind of delicious absurdity at inuring the concept in a book-object we can hold. *Def* is difficult to read straight through, but who reads a dictionary straight through? Pick it up and turn to a random page instead, revealing dreamy pleasures and curiosities about its process of construction. For all its apparent insularity,

**def·i·ni·tion** (def’ə-nish’ən), *n.*  
[OFr. *definicion*; L. *definitio* < pp. of *definire*; see DEFINE],  
1. a defining or being defined.  
2. a statement of what a thing is.  
3. a statement or explanation of what a word or phrase means or has meant.  
4. a putting or being in clear, sharp outline.  
5. the power of a lens to show (an object) in clear, sharp outline.  
6. the degree of distinctness of a photograph, etc.  
7. in radio & television, the degree of accuracy with which sounds or images are reproduced. Abbreviated **def**.

*Def* is remarkably wide-ranging. Using two dictionaries subtly reminds us that definitions change as language changes over time. It's one thing to know this and another to be confronted with strange bedfellows of meanings. Consider:

Periodic sexual excitement in other animals, especially hooved mammals, or, namely: the watching (*especially* by night) of relatives and friends beside the body of a dead person. . . .

Or again:

A narrow pass between mountains, in plain English: wine made from raisins. . . .

These juxtapositions make it impossible to keep the original concept in your mind as you read. What looks like a tree turns out to be a forest; better to let go entirely and be carried from branch to shifting branch by the wild animal of language.

Of course, humans are (by nature) map makers. It is impossible to resist seeking potentially paranoid harmonies and conspiracies. Do animals come up more often than they should? Or sex? Or, strangely, milk? Should we look for mentions of art, or “an essential sundry poetry”? And why should repetition lend, or lead to, meaning? After all, *Def* puts repetition itself into doubt. We can attempt to repeat, using different words—to explain—but words are stubborn and will stray, leaving us with messy iterations instead of precise definitions.

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From two different genres come these two books about how we structure language and knowledge, as well as derive meaning and enjoyment from them, whether in the larger space of the library or the smaller space of a sentence. But both point to the potential benefits in what Borges might have seen as the library's shortcomings. These books do more than remind us that capital-M Meaning is provisional. They stress, and provide examples of, how our inevitable and diverse searches for it are causes for celebration rather than despair. Whatever else the library is, it is no longer a prison. ■