

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Spring 4-26-2021

The Library is Metamodern

Terra B. Jacobson

Moraine Valley Community College, terra.jacobson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Jacobson, Terra B., "The Library is Metamodern" (2021). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 5560.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/5560>

The Library is Metamodern

Terra Jacobson

Dean, Learning Resource Center

Moraine Valley Community College

9000 W. College Parkway

Palos Hills, IL 60465

Submission for: Library Philosophy and Practice

Keywords: metamodernism, postmodernism, library philosophy, organizational theory

Abstract:

This article examines the philosophical role of the library as an organization. It looks at the library's role as a modern and postmodern institution and examines the possibility that the library is neither. This article asserts that the library has moved toward a metamodern institution, looks at metamodernism perspectives, and aligns them with library examples and practices. This article asserts that the library is and may have always been a metamodern organization.

Assessments and descriptions of the postmodern library have been infrequent since the mid-1990s focusing on the shift that the library must make to be considered a postmodern institution and addressing the challenges and changes that both librarians and libraries will need to face.

Postmodernism can be so difficult to define; perhaps this is why there has been a limited discovery of this topic. Perhaps it also is because the library is classically seen as a modernist institution. The field is not entirely overlooked, and the focus of analysis is often on the archive's role in a postmodern institution.

The library itself is often referred to as a modernist institution, as Ray states in their 2011 article referring to libraries, "They embody the values of orderliness, reliability, predictability, and rationality. They are of necessity rule-bound, mechanistic, linear organizations. In fact, this has been their strength." (p. 251). The library, in its foundation, was developed to organize information and be an organization for "social good." The library as a modernist institution provided resource collection and storage as well as access to materials. The role of the modernist library is that of the expert, driven by systems and structures. Many see this authoritative modernist perspective in the traditionally perceived role of the cataloger, tied to the history of language and attempting to fit everything into a predetermined classification. The modernist library is driven by the metanarratives determined by those in "power." LeMoine (2012) describes metanarratives as tools to "classify all of lie into one grand, overarching theme... metanarratives frequently exclude 'the other'" (2012, para. 16). The modernist library put everything into a neat, digestible box that fit the "western" perspectives on religion, ethics, gender, history, caste, etc.

The postmodern library provides instruction and skills as well as access to the tools for information creation. The library's role as a postmodern institution provides the skills to challenge traditional metanarratives of the modern perspective. The emphasis of the postmodern is an ongoing critique and challenge of traditional beliefs. The pluralist perspective of the modern library is described

by LeMoine (2012) as a place to "store and disseminate knowledge as well as store knowledge and truth" (para. 22). Bergueist (1993), as cited by Ray (2011), additionally adds that "postmodern organizations possess several distinctive features such as unclear boundaries, flexible and collaborative internal structures and clear missions... with information flowing up and down and across the organization." (p. 251). This creates a system of non-traditional communication in contrast to the modernist top-down approach and opens up the library organization to new perspectives. The role of the postmodern library is to encourage investigation and provide context and information for users to explore ideas; not providing the truth but sharing facts where patrons can develop their own truth.

The postmodern library user has much more work to do than the modernist library user. As opposed to entering the library and getting an answer, the user receives information to interpret into answers. The question here is, does the user want to do the work? Are they in search of an analysis or in search of a finite answer? This is where the postmodern perspective on the library may be wrong, or at least not quite the right fit for the library as a social organization. We (librarians) are seeing fatigue from our users. Librarians ask them to do the work, but instead of challenging norms and information, as seen in the postmodern worldview, patrons are exhausted and settling for easy answers from unknown sources, those of which are often inaccurate.

Ray (2011) asserts that the library is a "hybrid" institution that pulls together "postmodern, modern and pre-modern elements and values" (p. 251). This could suggest that librarians may be moving into a new role, where librarians may again be finding users that are not only looking for an investigation but are once again looking for facts, almost similar to the modernist library of the past. Libraries, as well as news outlets and other forms of media, have provided such a vast amount of information and facts to users to analyze, and many users of these resources are left without the postmodern tools to perform beneficial critique, without information literacy and critical thinking skills in environments outside of the library's purview. The library cannot and will not reach every citizen to

teach them the skills to analyze information, as hard as we may try. The postmodern perspective is that "your truth or experience may be different from someone else's truth or experience." However, we have assumed that information users are using analysis. Now people are saying yes, "my truth is the only truth," but it is not founded on facts. The analysis step of information processing is not taking place.

A world has been created where facts no longer matter. As librarians, many of us seem shocked. Is this a result of the postmodernist exploration and culture that we have explored and pushed? Postmodernism seeks irony and doubt, parody & pastiche, skepticism, belief in the irrational, and an anti-scientific fragmented view of the world (Yousef, 2017, p.43). Postmodernism has pushed society to the edge with the polar opposites of modernism. People have been asked to actively challenge everything as a postmodern society, but does that leave users without the correct tools?

The construction that the library is a postmodern institution is limiting and selective. It defines the library as an equalizer and social activist. This library provides facts and information and asks users to do the work, but offers no solutions, just critique. The metamodern perspective looks to provide not answers but solutions. What does that mean for the library?

Information users are now looking for absolute truths again (whether they exist or not), a return to modernist needs. They do not want to do the work of analysis; perhaps they are fatigued with information overload and unable to process fully all the information they are given. Consider, for example, the revolt against the "liberal elite." Is it a push back against critique and analysis? This is the beginning of a revolt against postmodernism. So, where does that leave libraries? What are librarians on the edge of? Where does the library fit in?

It is crucial to explore the library's role as we move forward into the 21st century as a metamodern organization. Baciu et al., in their 2015 article "Metamodernism – A Conceptual Foundation," state that metamodernism approaches not with a "critique or problematization" (p. 35) of the "system" but

instead looks for solutions. Baciu et al. state that metamodernism “promotes an anticipatory and proactive thinking... a positive, meditative, reflective, logical, active and proactive thinking” (p. 35).

Metamodernism also referred to as post-postmodernism or neomodernism, is a reaction to postmodernism, just as postmodernism is a reaction to modernism. None of these concepts are mutually exclusive; they exist within or as a polarity of the other. Meta modernism attempts to be a bridge between modernism and postmodernism, as Bunnell (2015) describes. The metamodern is a “resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths” (Hashim & Puadi, 2018, p. 913). Abramson (2017) defines in his *Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism*:

1. Metamodernism is a negation between modernism and postmodernism
2. Dialogue over dialect
3. Paradox
4. Juxtaposition
5. The collapse of distances
6. Multiple Subjectivities
7. Collaboration
8. Simultaneity and generative ambiguity
9. An optimistic response to tragedy by returning, albeit cautiously, to metanarratives.
10. Interdisciplinary

These principles fit within the way current libraries operate; it may be easy to see how the library fits into the role when looking at the American Library Association's *The Library Bill of Rights*. *The Library Bill of Rights* addresses many of the concepts outlined by Abramson; the ideas of dialogue, interdisciplinary practice, collaboration, and cooperative agreements and expanded access to technology, assisting in facilitating the collapse of distances.

Metamodernism's focus on proactive thinking also fits well within how our libraries work with our communities, and the concept itself is encouraging. The library could be an organization that helps to develop solutions. As opposed to teaching how to find the problems and question the narrative, we can also teach how to problem solve; a return to the concept of innovation. Libraries do this, it is not outside of our wheelhouse to foster innovation, but a structured response may be helpful.

When considering the concept of multiple subjectivities, Abramson (2017) asserts that metamodernism celebrates diversity and differences in thoughts and ideas and differences in addition to biological, religious, and other traditional forms of diversity. The library is an institution that celebrates and facilitates multiple subjectivities by providing access to information and facilitating productive discourse and events to encourage the celebration of diverse thoughts, ideas, and differences.

Also, it is suggested that a return to the librarian as "expert," in response to the need for a return to cautiously accepted metanarratives. The creation of authority again could assist with this post-truth, postmodern problem. Expertise could be framed differently, not as an authoritative role, but as an expert guide in assistance to establish credibility. When working with students, I often turn them over to one of my reference librarians and assuring them that this person "is an expert at researching and can help you with that." I often see a sense of relief in the student's face, knowing that they will be working with an "expert." The metamodern student seems to be searching for some truths and evidence to assist them with their understanding of their perspectives.

Metamodernism, as described in Turner's 2011 "The Metamodern Manifesto," states that the most important principle of metamodernism is the "recognition that oscillation is the natural order of the world instead of the modernist 'ideological naivety' and the 'cynical insincerity' of postmodernism... Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of

disparate and elusive horizons." Turner is saying we do not have to choose one or the other; we do not need to be in a place where we choose sides, but that ideas can be in-flux. The library is an institution that now encourages our patrons to put everything in context, to consider multiple viewpoints, and to use information to create knowledge. Knowledge is ever-changing, and the metamodern perspective puts the library in the place to say "yes, and" and continue the noble pursuit of helping our users create knowledge.

This is much to unpack, but recognizing the damage of the post-truth, postmodern perspective is the first step in libraries rebuilding their work for the future. We are not and should not be postmodern institutions. The library is a metamodern organization. Our values align with the perspectives of an inclusive discourse that emphasizes sincerity, hope, authenticity, universal truths, oscillation, and openness. The library may have been a modernist institution in the past. We may have thought we were responding appropriately to the prescriptive roles in modernity by being a postmodern institution. However, the library has always been oscillating, living in the liminal space for all users, or at least we should have been, to serve all of our patrons as our values espouse in *The Library Bill of Rights*. The library is metamodern.

References

- Abramson, S. (2017). *Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism*. Retrieved December 5, 2020, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202
- American Library Association. (2020, September 25). *Library Bill of Rights*. Retrieved December 05, 2020, from <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>
- Baciu, C., Bocos, M., & Baciu-Urzica, C. (2015). Metamodernism – A conceptual foundation. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 209, 33-38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.226>
- Bunnell, N. (2015). Oscillating from a distance: A study of metamodernism in theory and practice. *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 1(1), 1-8.
- Hashim, M.E.A.H.Bin & Puadi, M. F. Bin. (2018). Defining the element of meta-modernism art: A literature review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(1), 911-917.
- LeMoine, B. (2012). Nailing jelly to the wall: Understanding postmodernism's influence on library information science. *Library Philosophy and Practice*. 701. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/701/>
- Ray, K. (2011). The postmodern library in an age of assessment. *ACRL Tenth National Conference*. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/pdf/kray.pdf>
- Turner, L. (2011). *The Metamodernist Manifesto*. Retrieved December 05, 2020, from <http://www.metamodernism.org/>
- Yousef, T. (2017). Modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism: A critique. *International Journal of Language and Literature*. 5(1). 33-43.