

11e Colloque international d'ISKO-France
Epistemological and theoretical foundations of Information –
Documentation science: a tribute to francophone pioneers

Reflections on Suzanne Briet

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Dead birds as documents

1988: Writing a unifying perspective on archives, libraries and museums, what is the status of museum objects?

e.g. specimens of dead birds in Berkeley's natural history museum.

Same purpose as books on library shelves. They *function as* documents.

Dead bird specimens as documents!

Then Boyd Rayward showed me the antelope-as-document in Briet's *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (1951).

My idea! -- but 37 years earlier.

Briet's antelope changed my life

Publications, using antelope not dead birds:

Information and information systems. 1991.

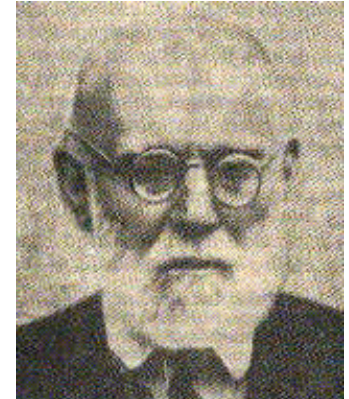
Information as thing. *JASIS* 1991

What is a 'document'? *JASIS* 1997

Explored European documentation before 1945.

Like finding a forgotten civilization!

Comments on *Briet* and *Paul Otlet*.



Emanuel Goldberg, 1881-1970:
search engine in late 1920s, Dresden.

Lodewyk Bendikson, 1875-1953:
photographic techniques in
documentation, California.

The sources of ideas in Otlet and Briet

Otlet's major works *Traité de documentation* (1934) and *Monde* (1935) are declarative: little argument and few cited sources.

The *selection, arrangement* and *presentation* of ideas may be new, but perhaps the *ideas themselves* are not.

Bibliographer-style rhetoric!

Old wines mixed in new bottles?

So, to understand Otlet better, we should study him less and study his sources and context more.

So maybe the same strategy with Briet . . .

Suzanne Briet's writings

>100 books and articles:

- conventional writings on bibliography, documentation, libraries
- literature & history: Arthur Rimbaud and the Ardennes region.

Three exceptional books:

- *Entre Aisne et Marne ... et au delà*. 1976. Autobiographical notes.
- *Direction concorde* [Toward harmony], 1979. Meditations on life, religion, society, and the future.
- *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* 1951. A manifesto on documents, documentation, and documentalists. Also personal, e.g. Sections, each dedicated to her superiors: *Julien Cain*, head of the Bibliothèque nationale. *Louis Ragey*, head of CNAM, site of her documentation program. *Charles Le Maistre*, president of FID. Briet was vice-president.

Problems with Briet's sources

These three personal books often give no source,
e.g. *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* First paragraph:
“*Un document est une preuve à l'appui d'un fait.*”

Source? “*Une bibliographe contemporaine soucieuse de clarté.*”

Direction concorde: Many quotations, only surname of source.
e.g. Footnotes on p 64 are typical:

- (1) Imitation
- (2) Rimbaud
- (3) R. Ménard
- (4) Saint-Paul
- (5) Pagès
- (6) Ch. de Gaulle.

Entre Aisne: Cryptic use of first name or initials,
e.g. note headed « H. A. K. ». Not explained explicitly, about
German librarian Hugo Andres Krüss who protected French
libraries during Occupation.

Methodology: Identify / imagine source author, imagine source
document, find specific passage of text. Simple, but slow.

Briet's Meditations: *Direction concorde*

Catholic, but an impersonal God, more generic theist. Does not expect guidance from God or the church but does believe in meditation / introspection.

Guide: social psychologist *Robert Pagès*:

Itinéraire du seul; essai. 1962.

Construction of meaning.

L'exigence: Roman. 1964.

Pierre is comfortable, but wants a purpose in life; meets a charismatic guru Melchisédec; then Pierre's wife, Lucile, begins her personal search . . .

Conservative, feminist, optimist

Sense of community.

Equity but not equality.

Abortion, contraception, homosexuality, women with short hair, and men with long hair are threats to the race.

Optimism.

Pierre Perrier, colleague, cataloger, BN.

1924. *Artiste ou philosophe: étude sur le rôle opposé de l'art et de la philosophie dans la civilisation.*

1931. *L'unité humaine: Histoire de la civilisation et de l'esprit humain.* Denunciation of human atrocities.

1948. L'unification humaine. *Revue de synthèse.*

Crosscultural contacts beneficial, now increased by telecommunications and Unesco. So future harmony!

Raymond Ruyer

Philosopher interested in the origins of life, systems theory, imaginations of German Romantic writers, etc.

Combines realism (independent material world) with idealism (reality as we know it is mentally constructed). Panpsychism.

To increase acceptance of his ideas, Ruyer says they are not his ideas but were developed by scientists in the USA!

1974. *La Gnose de Princeton : des savants à la recherche d'une religion*. Best-seller!

1977. *Les cent prochains siècles : le destin historique de l'homme selon la nouvelle gnose américaine*.

1978. *L'Art d'être toujours content : introduction à la vie gnostique*.

Briet does not know of the deception. She likes these ideas.

A Comment on Bibliography

Not simple progress from Gesner's *Bibliotheca universalis* (1545) onwards.

1892

Founding of the Bibliographical Society, London, for both Intellectual Bibliography and Material Bibliography.

Paul Otlet "Un peu de bibliographie": UDC, RBU, etc.

1907 Victor Chapot: "La bibliographie est une science assez récente."

Briet inherited this renaissance.

Briet on documents

“Une étoile est-elle un document? Un galet roulé par un torrent est-il un document? Un animal vivant est-il un document? Non. Mais sont des documents les photographies et les catalogues d'étoiles, les pierres d'un musée de minéralogie, les animaux catalogués et exposés dans un Zoo.”

A radical departure from the customary emphasis on texts.

“L'antilope cataloguée est un document initial et les autres documents [about the antelope] sont des documents dérivés.”

Distinction found in anglophone textual studies but I had not seen it in anglophone documentation / information science.

What precedent(s) for these ideas?

Back to Robert Pagès

Before becoming a social psychologist, Pagès was a clandestine anarchist activist, a militant, named “Rodion”.

Also from 1946 a student in the UFOD documentation program at CNAM organized by Suzanne Briet and Jean Clemandière.

1947 Thesis “*Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel.*”

Published 1948 in FID *Revue de documentation* 15 (3) : 53-64.

Same ideas as Briet! Explained. **Tiger in cage as a document!**

Graphic documents are *about* something and so secondary.

A specimen (non-graphic) is about itself, “auto-document”, primary.

Pagès known in KO for his indexing language: *L'analyse codée* (“CODOC”): Limited vocabulary, complex syntax, very concise notation (*Chiffres* 1959; Demailly 1992).

Document origins

Two types: Documents by *creation* and documents by *attribution* (Meyriat 1978).

But two kinds of attribution: Attributed by *source* and attributed by *interpretant*. So, total, three types (Buckland 2017):

Briet's examples

Made as a document

Photograph of star

Made into a document

Stone presented in museum

Regarded as a document

Living animal

Beyond Graphic Documents

Traditional: Documents are texts.

Graphic: Any graphic expression (images, sculpture): Meyriat, Shera.

Semiotic / phenomenological: Anything regarded as signifying: Pagès, Briet, Gardin.

Primary / secondary document distinction becomes problematic when all documents graphic. Then every primary document is also a secondary document.

Significant intellectual advances in SIC are rare: The move from *graphic* to *semiotic* is fundamental. Among the most important developments in SIC in our time.

Detachment and Context

SIC (bibliography, communication, documentation, KO, librarianship) dominated by notions of *sameness* and *transmission*. Triumph of preservation of message / meaning through space and time.

Briet's examples suggest the opposite:

- Photograph *taken*, immediately obsolete, irreversible.
- Stone is *removed*, *prepared* for presentation in new context.
- Antelope *transported from* habitat, *dépaysée*.

Detachment from context = placing in a new context.
“*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Jacques Derrida 1967).

But meaning depends on context (L. Fleck 1935; A. Giddens 1981). A central, fundamental problem neglected.
(Exception: B. Frohmann 2012).

After Briet

The rich world of Briet, Gardin, de Grolier, Malclès, Pagès, et al., dissipated. New emphasis on writing and the political compromise of SIC (Palermi & Polity 2002; Ibekwe-SanJuan 2012). One may regret that there was not more emphasis on Knowledge Organization!