Briet’s Antelope
– viewing objects from nature as documents

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Introduction

In his article “What is a ‘Document’?” (Buckland 1997), Michael Buckland gives an overview of the development of the term “document” and the thinking behind.

While some of the “documents” defined are merely extensions of traditional text-based documents, both Suzanne Briet and Paul Otlet are presented as having defined concepts of documents including also material objects of nature.

This begs the question of where the document ends and nature starts, and why and in which case natural objects may be seen as documents. In this paper, I would like to explore some of the aspects of Briet’s view of the antelope as a document.

Buckland (Buckland 1991) discusses the concepts of information and document. As I understand him, anything can be seen as information or document. But as he himself says (Buckland 1991, 356):

“This leads us to an unhelpful conclusion: If anything is, or might be, informative, then everything is, or might well be, information. In which case calling something “information” does little or nothing to define it. If everything is information, then being information is nothing special.”

He then goes on to state (Buckland 1991, 359) that “Being [i]nformation is [s]ituational”, a stance I understand him to take also with regards to the concept of document.

Niels Windfeld Lund (Lund 1999, 31) states that “Resultatet af dokumentations-prosessen er pr. definition et dokument” [The result of the process of documentation is by definition a document]. Lund’s position also seems to be that anything can be a document, depending upon the point of view.

While these positions give documentation science a wide scope, it leaves us without any operational and authoritative definition of the concept “document”. In this respect, the concept of “document” seems a close relative of the semiotic or semiological concept of “sign” – anything may be a sign. The concepts of “data” and “information” likewise – everything contains data and information, intentionally or unintentionally, at least about itself – by the data of its existence, an object informs you of its existence.

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1 My translation
2 Concepts of “Document”

Paul Otlet’s paper “The Science of Bibliography and Documentation” (Otlet and Rayward 1990, 71–86) was originally published in 1903. In this paper, he discusses the various disciplines working with documents, books and organization of knowledge. He gives the name “The Science of Bibliography” to “that science whose object of study is all the questions common to different kinds of documents” (Otlet and Rayward 1990, 86).

On p. 76, he gives an overview of categories of documents, listing “natural objects, specimens or samples of them” as kinds of documents upon which the sources of knowledge depends. However, both on p. 77, where he discusses the scope of the Science of Books, and on p. 86 where he discusses the definition of the Science of Bibliography, natural objects are not included within the scopes of these two sciences.

The paper mentioned in the preceding paragraphs is from 1903. In another paper, from 1920, “The International Organisation of Bibliography and Documentation” (Otlet and Rayward 1990, 173-203) Otlet seems to have reconsidered the status of objects. On p. 197 he includes museums in his “complete system of collections and documentary works” (p 189). He does however only seem to include collections of objects in his document concept, but in the sentence “These collections are created from items occurring in nature rather than being delineated or described in words; they are three dimensional documents.” (p 197) it is not obvious whether the last “they” refers to “these collections” or “items”. If the last is the case, which to me seems the more natural, then he states that objects, in a collection, are documents.

Suzanne Briet’s *qu’est-ce que la documentation?* (Briet 1951) contains less discussion of the concept of the document. This short treatise is more of a personal statement of programme and position than an analytical and scientific text. In a short paragraph (Briet 1951, 7), Mme. Briet distinguishes between objects and documents in this way:


[* Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But some documents are: the photographs and the...*]
catalogues of stars, stones in a museum of mineralogy, and animals that are cataloged and shown in a zoo." Translation from (Briet 2003)

She then goes on to describe the (in)famous antelope, and the documents that will be produced in conjunction with the antelope’s discovery and exhibition. An interesting sentence is “The cataloged antelope is an initial document and the other documents are secondary or derived” (Briet 2003). We see that the antelope in itself is not considered a document by Briet; it has to be catalogued in order to become a document.

This brings my thoughts to Gerard Genette’s concept of *paratext*, “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader”\(^1\) (Macksey 1997, xviii) in (Genette 1997). Of course, as Briet’s position is that the antelope in itself is not a document, this would in Genette’s terms mean we have an empty text, which by the device of epitext (cataloguing and classification) is mediated to the world and through that becomes a textual totality that informs us.\(^2\)

Buckland (Buckland 1991, 355) also discusses objects that are informative and sees no basic difference between these and documents in a more traditional sense.

Lund stresses the origins of the word document, the roots “doceo” meaning demonstrating/teaching/informing, and “-mentum” meaning means, making a document what you use to demonstrate something. While discussing modern concepts solely on a basis of their linguistic roots hardly is a certain way of making progress, in this case the roots point to a concept of document that is both inclusive and informative. In contrast to the antique roots of the word, Ranganathan’s modern concept of “document” as outlined by Buckland (1997, 806f) seems both narrow and in conflict with realities or, at least, practical needs.

What they all have in common is an insistence upon human intentionality in making an object a document; however, this intentionality has different forms. Otlet is concentrated upon collecting and collections, using objects as sources of information. Briet seems to look upon cataloguing as the liminal process defining objects as documents, while Lund seems to consider anything that you look for information from, as a document, i.e. it is the activity of re-producing that makes an object a document. Buckland also seems to look upon the user as the one who defines an object as a document, without presupposing any communicative intent upon the creator.

\(^{1}\) Italics in original

\(^{2}\) I am here using Genette’s concepts quite outside the context or scope intended by Genette
3 Objects as Representation

Buckland (Buckland 1997, 806) notes that Briet’s use of the word “indice” may be important in discussing objects as documents. This will also be my position when looking upon Briet’s antelope (and similar objects).

Briet (Briet 1951, 7) describes the antelope as being captured and placed in a zoological garden. But is this the same antelope as was originally observed? Materially or biologically, it is the same organism as was first observed. However, once captured, it changes its traits: Its surroundings change, it cannot move in its natural way, it has no need to be wary of predators but it has to get used to that new animal, man, which has so forcefully been introduced to it. Its menu change and its foraging habits disappear. Unless a number of animals are captured, its sexual drive is frustrated. By excerpting the antelope from nature, one has created a new being, the captured antelope. It has many of the same characteristics of the original animal, but some characteristics are changed.

Using concepts from semiotics, we can see the new antelope as an index of the original one. For many purposes it may be used instead of the original antelope, and will serve well to create the image of the wild antelope in the minds of the spectators.

This also holds for e.g. geological samples, they are representations of a larger whole, having the most important characteristics of the whole while being only part of the whole. What are the most important characteristic is of course a matter of situation – a geological example will be a good representation of the mineral composition of a larger piece of nature, but not of the spectacular beauty of the mountain. A picture, which shares almost no physical characteristic with the mountain, may be a much better representation of its beauty.

An important thing about Briet’s antelope – in the context of the document – is that it is a part of a structured whole. It is part of a zoological collection of animals, and it is surrounded by information: a sign on its cave identifying it by scientific name, records in the zoo’s administration, scientific texts describing it, etc. I understand Briet to say that it is these paratexts (using Genette’s concept) that transforms the antelope from being merely an antelope to becoming a document. If we came to the antelopes cave and found only the antelope, what would it tell us? Apart from informing us about the existence of a being looking like it, very little. The sign, saying this is “Briet’s antelope”, giving its Latin name and a place of origin, thus placing it in a system of animals, is what mediates the antelope to us and transforms it from data to information.
In any scientific collection of e.g. archaeological finds, geological specimens etc. the surrounding text giving place and date of find is of extreme importance in imbuing the object with information.

The zoo is a number of animals brought together with an intention of showing (documenting) something – it could be part of a scientific collection primarily gathered in order to be able to examine animals, or it could be part of a public collection primarily gathered in order to bring information about the world to the general public. In the creation of the zoo, and in the choice of animals, lies the intentionality of the document of the zoo. The same goes for e.g. museums – the intentionality of a museum lies in the theme (if not a general museum), the themes of the various expositions, the choice of items for display, the physical structure giving a limited (even if possibly large) number of possible paths through the museum. The zoo, or museum, may in itself be considered a document. Seen from this perspective, the animals (or exhibits), their caves (or cupboards), their signs and texts, may serve the function of docemes of the document, to borrow a term from Lund (2003 in press, 100).

In either instance, the zoo itself is a representation of the world of animals. In our Platonic cave of ignorance, the zoo gives us ideas that make us imagine that world which we do not know. In semiotic or semiological terms, the zoo functions as a sign, signifying (part of) the animal world.

While the antelope is an iconic representation or sign, the zoo as representation cannot be iconic, it must be indexical – we see the antelope, and imagine the herd and the savannah. The zoo only shows us a part of the world, and more often than not a part that is not representative in a statistical sense of the word. Zoos display what is spectacular and colourful, not what is common or important in the nutritional chain. Of course, showing a statistically valid representation of the animal world would mean that the complete ecosystems of each animal would have to be recreated, a feat that would be impossible.

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1 Our local zoo, The Bardu Polar Zoo, displays the four “large” carnivores of our area. In addition, it shows musk ox, a species indigenous to another part of the world, red deer – which normally is not seen so far north – and mountain fox which is an endangered species that you normally will not see in nature. The only animals shown that is representative in the sense that they exist in such numbers that you actually may come to see one in nature, are the red fox and the domesticated reindeer. An animal that exists in abundance, and is a typical animal for the region, the Norwegian lemming, is not shown. Neither are other herbivores that the carnivores depend upon for much of their existence.
4 The Effect of Representation

The zoo is a static representation of the world of animals. Its structure permits only a number of animals, living under certain conditions, viewed in a limited number of orders, i.e. different sequences.

If we accept the conclusion that a zoo is a representation, then can we think of it as one of a number of possible representations? Are there other acceptable representations of the animal world that could compete with the zoo for specific or general purposes?

A close resemblance of the caged animal is the stuffed animal. It has the same 3-dimensional structure as the live one, and therefore looks the same. It does not have the movements, the sounds or the smells of the live one; but then it does not have to be caged or fed. The need for caging makes a zoo a rigid structure. Stuffed animals may more conveniently be moved around or rearranged, so that a stuffed lion one day may be part of an exhibit of the family of Felidae, another day it may be an African carnivore and yet another day a species exterminated in Europe. It may, not simultaneously, but over time, be a member of different structures representing different aspects of the animal kingdom.

Digital representations of objects have other characteristics. Animals may be represented as moving pictures with sound, filmed in their natural habitat showing the characteristics of the wild animal. We lose the smell and the tactile experience of size and texture, but we also can do away with the cage.

Ordered in a database, a digital representation may be the member of an unlimited number of structures simultaneously. Briet’s antelope may at the same time be an antelope, a mammal, a herbivore, an animal from a specified African region, an animal belonging in a specific kind of habitat, a part of the diet of specified carnivores etc. By classifying living creatures according to different aspects, one can create – on the fly – a number of digital zoos from the same material: African mammals, animals of the savannah, antelopes of the world etc.

Few of us would hesitate to say that digital representations are documents in a modern sense Is it then meaningful to say that other representations are not documents? Is the form of the representation more important than its function?
5 Concluding Remarks

This little venture into the realms of the animal kingdom may not have brought us far. But I believe we can say that Briet’s Antelope is an animal that, somewhere along its way, crosses the threshold from being an animal to becoming a document.

We may not have an orderly and authoritative definition of what a document is – the precise nature of the document eludes us. But following Bohr (as cited in Lund (2003 in press)) we should not spend too much time trying to penetrate into the essence of things, but rather develop concepts enabling us to talk productively about phenomena. Lund (2003 in press) also discusses Bohr on the concept of complementarity, the position that phenomena may be equally well understood from a number of differing points of views, that together forms a whole picture. Instead of looking at the concepts of animal and document as two conflicting designations, we could look at them as two different designations from two different classificatory schemes, for different needs. The value and use of the concept of “document” – like “sign” and “information” – does not lie in a precise definition of what may be and what may not be allowed the epithet of “document”, but in what we need the concept to contain in a given situation.

Following this, we could say that Briet’s Antelope is at least three things simultaneously:

– an animal;
– a representation of a species of animal as it is no more the natural, wild antelope living in its natural habitat;
– and, finally, a document in the sense of Otlet and Briet (amongst others) in that it has been catalogued, classified, ordered and made available for study.

What view we choose of Briet’s Antelope will have to depend upon what our needs are. If we are visitors to the zoo, we are there in order to see animals. If we are planners or analysts of zoological gardens, terms like representation and representativity will be central to our thinking. Yet again, as scientists or curators of the zoo, the animals and their paratexts are documents to be consulted, structured or disseminated.

Seen this way, the answers to the questions of whether Briet’s Antelope is a document or not, or when it ceases to be an animal and becomes a document, are not inherent characteristics of the antelope or the concept of the document, but a result of our
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chosen view of the world. Consequently, the questions cannot be answered with a yes or no; or an exact threshold defined; it is both a document and not a document.

If one phrases the question as whether an antelope may be a document, the answer is: Yes, it might – if need be.
References


