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Bibliographic classification: From mimetic representation to isomorphic documentality

Review of Hansson, J. (2025). *Bibliographic classification: From mimetic representation to isomorphic documentality*. MIT Press. DOI:

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Document theory and documentation – or neo-documentation as it is sometimes referred to in its contemporary incarnation – has revitalised multiple areas of information science research during the past two or so decades. Joacim Hansson’s (2025) new volume on bibliographic classification systems provides an interesting and insightful addition to this trajectory of work. The allure of the volume is, however, not only in its treatment of bibliographic classification systems but rather in how conceptualising knowledge organisation systems – and in broader terms any information systems – as tools “for organizing documents by means of their content in library catalogs or bibliographies” from the outset of their documentality can advance our understanding of them, their underpinnings and implications in very practical terms.

Hansson is interested in the *documentality* of bibliographic classification systems – how they acquire social significance as documents through the links between them as documents, their institutional context and the social processes. Documents are in Hansson’s view socially constructed and culturally dependent and further, rather than framed as (mimetic) representations, how they are construed as “inscribed reifications of social acts” (p. 33) with informative potential valuable in an institutional context. The book asks “[h]ow do bibliographic classification systems, seen as autonomous documents, (re)present social and cultural norms, values and processes beyond their immediate use as information retrieval tools?” By asking this very question and directing attention to their documentary agency, Hansson switches perspective from approaching classification systems as representational to conceptualising them as presentational. Even if information science research has acknowledged the social and institutional embeddedness and generative nature of classification systems, such remarks remain regularly as excuses to their imperfections rather than as something that ends up in the focus of research. Hansson’s switch of perspective allows both to understand the nature of such embeddings – conventionally termed contextual factors – but also their specific implications to the classification of both literature and knowledge.

The empirical work underpinning the discussion in the volume is historical in how it analyses three major universal classification systems developed during the period from the later half of the 19th century to the mid-20th century as a part of what is termed the modern project. The systems are Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) initiated by Paul Otlet in the first years 20th century, the Swedish library classification system – Klassifikationssystem för svenska bibliotek, in Sweden commonly known as the SAB system – and thirdly, a set of classification systems used by Jewish librarians and bibliographers to organise Judaica, and in Hansson’s discussion, in particular how the different Jewish classification systems incorporate Holocaust in their structure. Hansson has written and referred to different extents on the systems in his earlier

production (incl. Hansson 1997; Hansson 1999, 2022b, 2022a) but brings them together in this book to enquire into them from a new perspective. The analysis is contextualised in the development of librarianship during the period that provides a necessary backdrop for understanding the development of classificatory ideas and their documentary implications.

In the chapters Hansson discusses classification systems as documents from the outset of classification theory and documentalist concepts including document, documentary agency, and documentality to understand their social and cultural underpinnings and influences. He argues for a hermeneutic methodology to address the tension between mimetic representation and isomorphic change in bibliographic classification systems – with implications to both classification research and the practice of knowledge organisation. The methodology to study bibliographic classification systems draws from Ricoeur's three-phase analysis of mimesis (Ricoeur 1983a, 1984, 1983b). Through *prefiguration*, Hansson renders visible the context and conditions of specific classification systems, through *configuration* focuses on the classification system itself and its semantic structure in relation to subject representation, and finally through *refiguration*, provides synthesis of the previous two. As he suggests, analysing the properties of a particular type of document, how it enacts informative potential, and consequentially generates institutional value, facilitates understanding the functioning of documents and what they do. In this regard, expanding on Maurizio Ferraris ** conceptualisation, documentality extends beyond being a mere qualifier of a thing's documental status, to subsume its potential to instigate change.

Regarding its treatment of documentality, besides providing new insight into the bibliographic classification systems both in general and in particular to the three cases discussed in more detail, Hansson's enquiry advances document theory and the practical understanding of documents and documentality in the context of documentation studies. In comparison to how enquiring into – insert here your favourite thing, anything from rubber ducks to an esoteric concept – as document sometimes appears to lack a clear motivation beyond writing one more paper, in Hansson's case, the shift of perspective serves a clearly articulated purpose, with a potential of functioning, as he suggests, as a model of how to enquire into the documentality of not only classification systems but also many other types of documents. He shows how the cultural influences on and from bibliographic classification systems are reciprocal and vast in scale. What Hansson terms institutional isomorphism – drawing on DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) work on organisational isomorphism – helps to articulate how classification systems are formed from the outset of their contextual conditions and how they form knowledge organisatory practice. For UDC, the keyword was a pursuit towards universalism and its problem the multiplicity rather than universality of world views. In parallel, Hansson's analysis of Swedish and Jewish classification systems exemplify tensions and struggles between catering for the ideals of emerging international professional bibliographic practice and local cultural norms.

In spite of its theoretical and contextual depth, Hansson's volume is pleasantly approachable and readable, if not necessarily for a general reader, for researchers and advanced students across the information field. It is also exemplary in how it ties together different all too often distanced branches of information science from documentation to knowledge organisation, information practices and information retrieval offering plenty of food for thought for all of them and bringing them together in a productive manner. Isomorphic documentality and the informative potential and institutional value of documents as treated by Hansson open up a clearly fruitful way forward to not only acknowledging that no information system is neutral but bringing together and articulating the premises and consequences of their contextualities on the systems and the repercussions the systems have on information practices and the society at large.

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