

Slavoj Žižek, Rex Libris, and the Traumatic Real

Modern comic
book series

Representations of the library and the librarian in a modern comic book series

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to use the work of philosopher Slavoj Žižek to gain insights into representations of the librarian and the library in contemporary popular culture.

Design/methodology/approach – A psycho-analytic reading of the comic book series *Rex Libris* using Slavoj Žižek's treatment of Jacques Lacan.

Findings – Žižek's approach can provide novel and previously unconsidered insights into the understanding of librarian stereotypes in particular and representations of the library in general.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is limited to the representations of the librarian and the library in one comic book series. Its findings need to be generalized to representations in other forms of popular culture.

Originality/value – As far as the authors know, this is the only paper that has applied the work of Žižek in the library and information science (LIS) literature. As such, not only are the insights into the representations of librarians and libraries important, this paper also acts as a valuable introduction to the work of Žižek for the LIS community of scholars.

Keywords Libraries, Philosophy, Librarians, Comic books, *Rex Libris*, Slavoj Žižek

Paper type Conceptual paper

To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world (Eco, 1994, p. 87).

Hmm [...] what would Dewey do in a spot like this [...]

[...] he'd kick their ass (*Rex Libris* in Turner, 2009, p. 70).

Meet Rex Libris, librarian at the Middleton Public Library. Rex is the title character of the comic book series by James Turner (2007a, 2009)[1] which tells the "tumultuous tale of librarian *Rex Libris* and his unending battle against the forces of ignorant evil" (Turner, 2007a, p. 33)[2]. But Rex is no ordinary librarian: "Born in ancient Greece, he has worked to preserve knowledge and wisdom for thousands of years against all forms of perfidy, from book-bashing boogeymen to moaning undead legions who



ignore the ‘Quiet Please’ sign” (p. 33). The comic book series claims that it will, for the first time, reveal the “secret world of librarians and their daily struggle to protect civilization” (p. 33). The first volume of *Rex Libris*, entitled *I, Librarian*, depicts Rex on the cover, barrel chested, with soda bottle glasses, in a dull black and white suit, standing upon a library’s checkout desk (see Figure 1). With a book in one hand, a gun in the other, sporting what appears to be a First World War aviator helmet and goggles, he is shooting at an octopod monster that is attacking the library. Here the framework for the ensuing narrative is set. The library is wrought with dangers from beyond, but Rex is there, armed and dangerous, and ready to protect the library at all costs. The image that introduces chapter 1 shows a similar scene of Rex, gun in one hand and *The Really Big Dictionary* in the other, standing atop wreckage, and surrounded by chaos and flying pieces of paper unleashed from their order (see Figure 1). He is represented as a man of both knowledge and violence, there to impose order, or perhaps to enact retribution.

The story of *Rex Libris* brings the action-adventure genre to a person and place unlikely to be associated with it: a librarian and a library. *Rex Libris* is ostensibly a lighthearted romp through noir, playing havoc with stereotypes of librarians as being meek and mild-mannered[3]. However, seen through the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, *Rex Libris* becomes something more. Žižek’s perspective addresses a unique integration of the psycho-analytic theory of Jacques Lacan with the narratives of popular culture forms, especially film (Žižek, 1991, 2006a). Žižek’s purpose, however, is not to conduct a literary or cultural criticism of the text itself, but to probe more deeply. Žižek claims that “Cinema is the art of appearances, it tells us something about

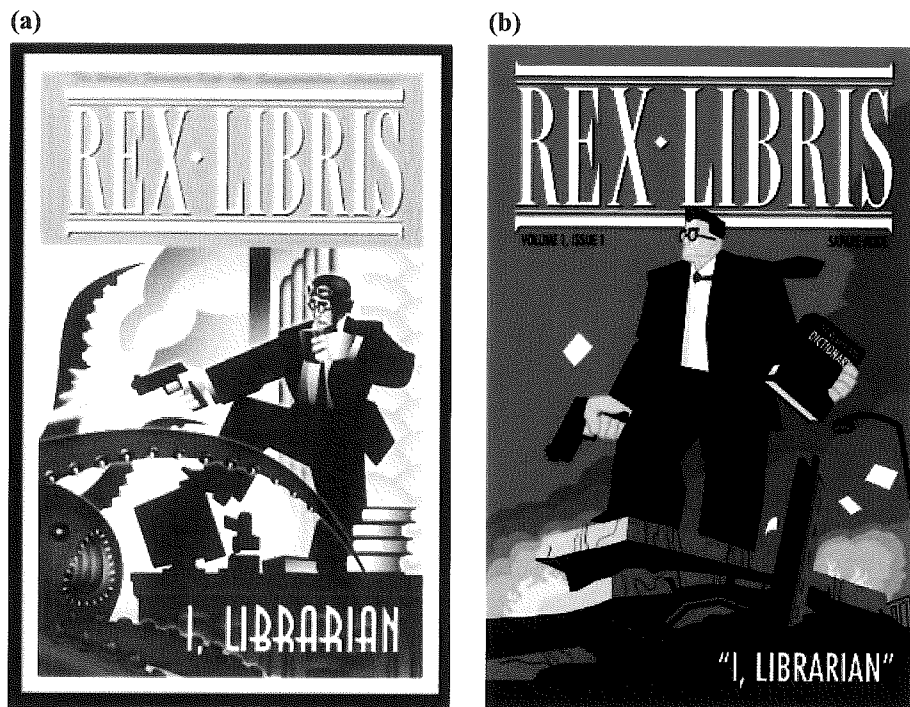


Figure 1.
Title pages of “Rex
Libris: I, Librarian”

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Source: Turner (2007a), front cover and p. 1

reality itself. It tells us something about how reality constitutes itself" (The Pervert's Guide to Cinema, 2006). Žižek writes about films as diverse as *Alien* (1979), *The Birds* (1963), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), and *The Matrix* (1999) (see Žižek, 1991, 1992, 1999, 2002a, b, 2006a, 2010) in order to understand the means by which people and cultures cope with the contradictions and anxieties that make up their realities, much in the same way that the latent content of the repressed unconscious becomes the manifest content of the dream (see Freud, 1980).

Drawing upon the theories of Lacan, Žižek offers an interesting twist on Freud's distinction between the latent and the manifest. Instead of seeing the dream as being the "fantasy" which enables the subject to deal with a "real" underlying psychological trauma in the unconscious, Žižek (2006a) writes that "it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real" (with a capital R): "it is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure [...] their dreams" (p. 57). Likewise, the narratives and images of popular culture become the sites where the inconsistencies, fears, and the traumas of life can be expressed as fantasies in all of their potential magnitude. In popular culture, one can experience the horror of the alien, the trauma of heartbreak and loss, or the fear of being exposed to unfamiliar people and places. Reality then becomes that place to which people can safely retreat when they leave the movie theater, safe in the knowledge that they have confronted the traumatic Real and can now return to the normal world where everything is known and safe.

According to Žižek (1991), the images and narratives of cinema have much to tell us about the world that our conscious everyday life works to conceal and repress so that the appearance of normality can be maintained. For example, the horror of Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) is not so much about an anxiety of literally being attacked by birds. The movie is expressing a much deeper anxiety about the normality of our world falling apart, and where the mundane and everyday (the birds in the trees) become unpredictable and terrifying (see Noys, 2010; Žižek, 1991). The experience of our everyday reality becomes the means by which we can escape from and endure the traumas of our imagination, and not the other way around. We feel security and safety in the knowledge that the birds will not attack us and that our reality does not fall apart. As Žižek and Daly (2004) note, "Every form of (symbolic/imaginary) reality exists as an impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another" (p. 7).

This paper examines the narrative of the comic book series, *Rex Libris*, in the same manner that Žižek considers other narratives of popular culture, including film. Comics have been underrated as an art form, often relegated to the realm of the trashy or to a status below that of pulp fiction: "The traditional image of a comic in most peoples' minds is a cheap, throw away periodical for children" (Sabin, 1993, p. 1). Fundamentally, although not universally, a comic is a book or magazine that includes basic conventions of graphics, often broken down into panels, which serves to segment action into more understandable components and emphasize drama, as well as text of narratives, dialogues/monologues/thoughts, and sound effects (see Babic, 2014; Barker, 1990; Eisner, 1985; Groensteen, 2007; McCloud, 1993; Sabin, 1993). According to Sabin (1993), "these conventions constitute an abbreviated style or shorthand that allows the reader to fill the gaps using his or her imagination" (pp. 5-6).

The images that introduce Rex to the reader (see Figure 1) depict scenes of violence and destruction, and they suggest disorder and chaos in a setting that one typically associates with order and quiet reflection. Is *Rex Libris* an expression of the traumatic Real that we can then escape from in the fantasy that is our everyday lives?

Like Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), the tale of *Rex Libris* seems to be about the mundane run amok. Few settings could be more peaceful and ordered than the quiet confines of the library, with its respectful library users and its wise librarians. But the images on the cover of Turner's graphic novel betray such a scene. They depict a library in chaos, with books torn asunder, their pages flying in the air and burning in the fire, and the library being attacked by a creature reminiscent of a 1950s horror film. What does such a contradiction tell us about our experience of the library and of the librarian?

The fantasy and the Real

The ideas and concepts that are packed into Lacan's term "the Real" are complex. The term itself, especially with its capitalization, invokes the idea of something objectively real; i.e., something that is different from and independent of our representations and interpretations. Should we cease to represent and perceive, the Real would still be there, as it is, unaffected by our absence. As Žižek (2006b) explains, in this view, "the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly" (p. 26). This is only part of the story of the Real, as shall be revealed in the discussion that follows. However, it is a good starting point from which to begin this examination of the role of the Real in the narrative of *Rex Libris*.

As is his style, Žižek turns to a narrative from popular culture to articulate the "impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly" understanding of the Real, in this case through Robert Heinlein's (1976) novella, *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag*. The conclusion of Heinlein's story involves a detective, Randall, and his wife, Cyn, driving to New York in their car. When they stop to talk to a policeman en route, they roll down the car window and something very strange happens. Heinlein (1976) writes:

A few blocks later Randall saw a patrolman standing on the sidewalk, warming himself in the sun, and watching some boys playing sand-lot football. He pulled up to the curb beside him. "Run down the window, Cyn."

She complied, then gave a sharp intake of breath and swallowed a scream. He did not scream, but he wanted to.

Outside the open window was no sunlight, no cops, no kids-nothing. Nothing but a gray and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. They could see nothing of the city through it, not because it was too dense but because it was-empty. No sound came out of it; no movement showed in it.

It merged with the frame of the window and began to drift inside. Randall shouted, "Roll up the window!" She tried to obey, but her hands were nerveless; he reached across her and cranked it up himself, jamming it hard into its seat.

The sunny scene was restored; through the glass they saw the patrolman, the boisterous game, the sidewalk, and the city beyond. Cynthia put a hand on his arm. "Drive on, Teddy!"

"Wait a minute," he said tensely, and turned to the window beside him. Very cautiously he rolled it down-just a crack, less than an inch. It was enough. The formless gray flux was out there, too; through the glass the city traffic and sunny street were plain, through the opening-nothing.

"Drive on, Teddy-please!"

She need not have urged him; he was already gunning the car ahead with a jerk (pp. 119-120).

When the car window is rolled back up, the sunny scene is restored. The implication of this episode is that what is seen through the car windows when inside the car, for example, the trees, blue sky, cars, people, and so on, is an illusion. What is really outside, once the barrier of the window is removed, is formless gray flux, the Real. This depiction may seem like the stuff of science fiction, but it is remarkably similar to the picture of the world one holds when flying at 35,000 feet on an airplane. Imagine the scene: you are inside the plane, and all is well. You are reading a book, or watching a movie on the seat-back monitor. What could be more comfortable and safe, especially if you are lucky enough to be in first class with a nice glass of wine? But what we do not like to think about is what is just outside the window, just a matter of inches and the width of the pane of plastic. Beyond that window are screaming 500 mph winds, sub-zero temperatures, and a 35,000 foot drop back to earth. On the airplane, one exists in a tiny tube of normality utterly surrounded by complete emptiness and potential terror. One's experience in the airplane is the fantasy that holds back one's recognition of the Real. As Žižek (2006a) notes, "fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real" (p. 57). The world outside the airplane is the Real, while the world inside is fantasy. Žižek (1991) writes: "We perceive external reality, the world outside the car [or the airplane], as 'another reality,' another mode of reality, not immediately continuous with the reality inside the car" (p. 15). Heinlein's novella presents us with a hypothetical situation not available to us on the plane. Randall can roll down the window and experience the Real that is outside. Heinlein is able to describe the "uneasy feeling that overwhelms us when we suddenly roll down the windowpane and allow external reality to strike us with the proximity of its material presence" (Žižek, 1991, p. 15). This feeling of uneasiness also consists in the realization of "how close really is what the windowpane, serving as a kind of protective screen, kept at a safe distance" (p. 15).

How does this concept of the Real relate to our experience of the library? One way is that our experience of the library stacks, at least as expressed in popular culture representations, can be similar to the experience of Randall and Cyn in their car, or the person flying at 35,000 feet on an airplane. We stand in the physical space of the library, but are also acutely aware that so much more remains hidden from us in the labyrinth that is the library stacks. This is the gray formless flux of Heinlein's novella. It is that place evoked by the novelist Stephen King in his recollections of the library as a young boy. King (1990) writes:

I had loved the library as a kid – why not? It was the only place a relatively poor kid like me could get all the books he wanted – but as I continued to write, I became reacquainted with *a deeper truth* [italics added]: I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks. I feared being forgotten in a dark corner of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night (pp. 386-387).

The dark stacks of King's imagination are given graphic form in the *Rex Libris* story[4]. One of Rex's roles is to help patrons navigate the labyrinthine library stacks. Rex notes that patrons are generally ignorant and that "an ordinary mortal" would not be able to navigate "though a labyrinth of bookcases" (Turner, 2007a, p. 23). Turner portrays Rex and a stereotypical old lady library patron surrounded by towering shelves of books that continue beyond the frame, perhaps on to infinity. She remarks, "Dear me! I had no idea how vast this labyrinth of literature had become" (Turner, 2007a, p. 52). Rex describes fanciful navigation

systems that have been introduced to allow patrons to find their way back out of the stacks:

Yeah, we used to hand out bread crumbs to people heading into the stacks. You can imagine how that worked out. We got a real rodent problem before very long and had to discontinue the program. We tried plastic pellets after that, only patrons grew concerned about 'em being non-biodegradable. After that we used string [...] The library got so wrapped with yarn going every which way ya couldn't even move. We're working on some new options, global positioning systems, that sort of thing (Turner, 2007a, p. 52).

However, these systems are frequently unsuccessful. Not only do patrons become lost in the library's labyrinthine stacks, they have also died as a result. This is the fear of the library expressed so explicitly by Stephen King (1990) and also by semiotician, Umberto Eco, a self-professed lover of libraries and librarians:

It was actually in Yale's Sterling Library that I had the idea for the murder in the library in *The Name of the Rose*. I used to work there in the evening, on the mezzanine floor, and it felt as if anything could happen. There wasn't a lift up to the mezzanine, so you felt that once you were sitting at your table working, nobody would be able to come to your assistance. Your corpse might be found days after the crime, stuffed under a bookshelf (Carriere and Eco, 2011, p. 306).

Indeed, there is at least one such corpse to be found in Rex's library.

In Figure 2, the old lady notices a skeleton propped up against the stacks. She asks "Is that a dead body over there?" (Turner, 2007a, p. 49). Rex's immediate reaction is embarrassment rather than a concern for the user. He replies, "Crap! Unh, noticed that did you?" (Turner, 2007a, p. 49). Rex identifies the body as "Mr Jenkins" who "used to come in everyday back in the twenties, then one day he just stopped. Always wondered what happened to him" (Turner, 2007a, p. 49). The lesson Rex draws from this discovery and offers to the patron is: "Always, always check in with the library circulation desk before you go off into the stacks on your own. That way we know to send out a search party if you don't come out by closing time" followed by "Remember Dat!" The woman responds: "Saints alive! Oh, how foolish I have been! I'll check in with you librarians first from now on!" (Turner, 2007a, p. 50).

The exchange between Rex and the older woman exposes the potential trauma that underlies the most mundane statements of library policy. The library policy to "always check in with the library circulation desk before you go off into the stacks on your own" is the flimsy window that keeps the patron in the safe, orderly world of the library, and away from the traumatic Real that is the reality of the dark stacks and its potentially horrific consequences. What is worse, it is clear from Rex's dialogue that no one at the library misses a lost patron. Even when the corpse of Mr Jenkins is found, his skeleton is more of an embarrassment and an inconvenience for the librarian than the remains of a person to be mourned and grieved over. Indeed, Rex remarks, "Have to clean that up [...] He's looking a little gnarly [...]" (Turner, 2007a, p. 49). Once you enter the gray, formless flux of the stacks, you not only become lost bodily, but also as a person. You simply cease to exist. These are the fears that King (1990) alludes to in his "deeper truth" about the library: the dark and perhaps infinite labyrinth of stacks into which one can disappear and die and no one will care. Or, in Žižek's (2006a) terms, this is the fantasy through which we attempt to make sense of the traumatic Real of the library.

But there is more to the Middleton Public Library than its labyrinthine stacks. The library user rescued by Rex recounts her feelings of being in the stacks: "I thought I saw [...] a scarecrow, a tin man, a girl, and a dog hopping down an aisle. Like right out



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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 49)

Figure 2.
The discovery of
Mr Jenkins in the
library stacks

of that book! And before that I could have sworn I saw a man [...] the very embodiment of Sherlock Holmes [...] dash between the shelves after some malevolent gentleman in a top hat and cloak [...] sheer madness!" (Turner, 2007a, p. 47). The woman concludes, "I've only been lost a few hours and I feel like I'm losing my mind!" (p. 47). Rex explains that the Middleton Public Library sits upon a ley point, "an energy hub, for the telluric currents that flow in the ether embedded in the eighth dimension" (p. 48). The result of this placement is that fictional characters can literally escape the confines of their books and roam the stacks. Rex explains that most of the characters are benign and harmless. However, he advises that one should be careful to "stay out of the way of nasty types, like oh, Morlocks, or fire-breathing dragons, or Cerebrus, or man-eating cannibals" (p. 48). Rex also carries snacks for the dragon. Here we can see the Real that is fictional irrupting into the fantasy that is reality. The outside to this library – the

Real – is a realm that constantly irrupts into our carefully constructed social reality. One of Rex’s roles is to constantly respond to these intrusions and maintain the order and sanctity of that reality. This idea becomes a plot point later in the comic series where the manifestations from the book collection threaten to overwhelm reality (see Turner, 2009). Rex explains:

Those books have completely *metastasized* [...] their contents have woven into the very fabric of reality, erecting solid, permanent, *physical* manifestations. That means the environments, main characters, and their *entire* support cast. They can eat, drink, sleep, and, if provoked, *kill*. And they aren’t going to just fade away into fiction. *Ever*. What we have here, my fellow librarians, is a crisis of *inconceivable proportions* (Turner, 2009, p. 90).

Hypatia’s reaction in Figure 3 is priceless for its playful allusion to the dogma of the professional librarian’s credential, the Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS)!

Rex not only has to deal with the reference questions of everyday patrons, but also with: “Gods, Undead, Alien Warlords, Vampires, Time Travelers from the past [...] and the future” (Turner, 2007a, p. 16). Indeed, Rex has faced patrons “so terrible, so horrific, that they cannot be described here without the risk of driving readers mad” (Turner, 2007a, p. 3).

These characters intrude in the library because they recognize the library collection as a source of great power. One of the library’s most invaluable books is entitled *Evil Made Easy* and is coveted by demonic and megalomaniac beings. The beginning of the *Rex Libris* saga recounts an encounter with an other-worldly patron who seeks to acquire this book for his own nefarious ends, namely, the conquest of the universe. The first panel in the story is of Rex behind the library’s checkout desk (see Figure 4). Rex is seen from the patron’s point of view with his arms surrounding the tome labeled *Evil Made Easy*. He speaks: “So. Lemme get dis straight. You wanna take out this book. But you ain’t got a library card. Right?” (Turner, 2007a, p. 3).

The next page reveals the patron to be a demon spirit samurai in full battle dress (see Figure 5). However, the power of the book is contrasted with the mundaneness of the barrier separating the demon from acquiring it. The demon has no library card, and this would seem to be the only barrier preventing Rex from giving the Demon the book. It is the arrogance of the Demon that will be his downfall. He says, “Puny mortal! I am

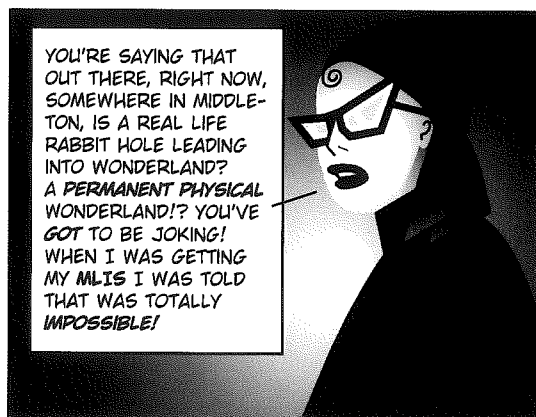


Figure 3.
Hypatia

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Source: Turner (2009, p. 91)

REX • LIBRIS

THE LIBRARIAN

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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 3)

Figure 4.
Rex Libris at the
checkout desk

Kurui-No-Oni, Demon Spirit Samurai! I need no card! I take what I wish!" (Turner, 2007a, p. 4). Rex replies, "Listen bucko, the Branch Administrator sez nobody, but nobody, takes out a book here without getting a card and signing for it, and that includes you, buster" (Turner, 2007a, p. 4). The fight that will follow, then, is not motivated by saving the universe, but upholding the lending policy of the library! What is central to Rex's attitude and motivations is the maintenance of order in the library.

This theme is played out in Rex's battle with the Samurai Demon that follows this exchange. Rex knows that in order to defeat the Demon, he must locate the book in which the information necessary to do that can be found. So he rushes into the stacks, and finds the relevant section. Rex reports: "I made it! Now let me see 'Dangerous Dragons' [...] 'Demon Armies and their Armour' [...] not quite it [...] 'Demon Holidays' [...] no [...] 'Demon Taxonomy' [...] er [...] 'Demon Samurai and How to Defeat Them.' Paydirt!" (Turner, 2007a, p. 8). Rex's location of the book takes place within the story of his battle with the Demon. But within this narrative, Rex's obsession with maintenance of order is constantly intruding and erupting into the story. Rex follows his discovery of the book with this: "And damn if someone didn't misfile it on the shelf! It should be before Demon Taxonomy, not after! Sheesh!" And finally, "How many times do I have to tell people not to reshelve freaking books??" (Turner, 2007a, p. 8). These statements about

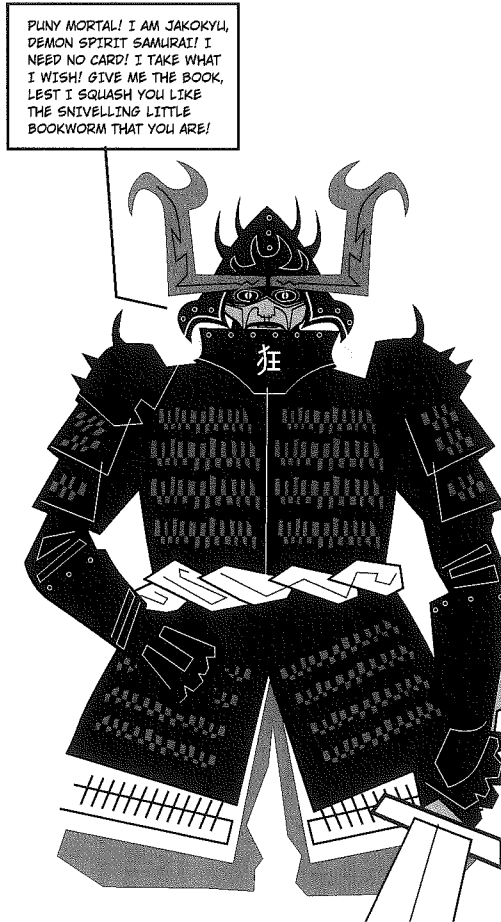


Figure 5.
Jakokyu, Demon
Spirit Samurai

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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 4)

mis-shelved books and library policy clearly have no place in a narrative recounting a titanic struggle with a Demon from another dimension, but it is these dramatic swings from the extremely fantastic to the extremely mundane which powers the narrative and makes it interesting, and not just the theme of Rex as the fantasy which holds back the traumatic Real. This will be addressed in the following section using Žižek's treatment of the Symbolic and the Imaginary and their relationship with the Real.

The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real

If there is a notion of the Real, it is extremely complex and, because of this, incomprehensible (Žižek, 2006a, p. 65).

It has long been supposed that the librarian is a quiet and docile member of society whose function is to do little more than reshelv books. Librarians are often depicted as old maids, as if

the library were a repository for unmarried women. This, of course, is exactly what they want you to think (The Orda Bibliotheca – The Secret International Order of Librarians – Turner, 2007a, p. 163).

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There is more to Lacan's concept of the Real than just a contrast of a reality/fantasy (i.e. the order of the library) with an independent Real irrupting into that reality (the Demons, etc.). Let us return to the example of one's experience on an airplane. Žižek considers "reality" (with a small "r," e.g., our experience within the plane) to be the illusion or fantasy that enables us to cope with the trauma of the Real (with a capital "R," e.g., the roaring nothingness just inches beyond the window). The main difference between reality and the Real is that our experience on the plane has a certain structure to it. We know and can articulate what is going on (we are on a journey from A to B). We understand the semiotics of the space we are residing in (e.g. the design of the cabin, the signs, the uniforms of the flight attendants, and the time we get our in-flight meal). We not only reside in the physical dimensions of the space (we are literally sitting inside a metal tube hurtling through space), but in the social dimensions of what that space means (we are aboard flight UA27 to Birmingham, UK). There is a Symbolic component (the rules by which we know and understand the signs that surround us) and an Imaginary component (the story we tell to understand, to make sense of our being in that space) to our experience that enables us to create and live within our reality/fantasy. We must take these two components into account as we attempt to understand the *Rex Libris* narrative from Žižek's perspective.

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According to Johnston (2008), the Real is not something that stands outside the Symbolic-Imaginary. It is made possible by it. This throws up a contradiction since the Real, which defies representation and eludes symbolization, is always posited from within the framework of the Symbolic-Imaginary. In other words, the Real is the product of our ways of talking and making sense. According to Žižek (2006b), "this very hard core is purely virtual, actually non-existent, an X which can be reconstructed only retroactively, from the multitude of symbolic formations which are 'all there really is'" (p. 26). The Real resides in this strange position of being both transcendent (it is that which exists outside and beyond the Symbolic-Imaginary) and immanent (it is that which exists by virtue of the Symbolic-Imaginary's power to articulate such a region). We are able to posit a realm beyond our ability to represent it (the gray, formless void, perhaps) within our ability to represent (the Real only exists for us because we can talk about it). Žižek grapples with this paradox as follows, "Although you cannot pinpoint a moment which is pure nature, which is not yet mediated by culture, in spite of this you must not draw the conclusion that everything is culture. Otherwise you fall into 'discursive idealism'" (Žižek and Salecl, 1996, p. 41). Although the distinction between nature and culture is internal to culture (only culture can posit a distinction), that does not mean that there is no such thing as nature. Similarly, the fact that the distinction between the Real and Symbolic-Imaginary reality can only be posited from within the Symbolic-Imaginary does not mean that there is no such thing as the Real that exists independently of Symbolic-Imaginary reality.

Žižek (2006a) explains the role of the Real with respect to the Symbolic and the Imaginary with the example of the elements of a game of chess. The Symbolic is equivalent to the rules of chess. We know and share these rules in advance. They tell us the objective of the game (how to win) and the moves that each chess piece can make in order to win. Thus, the piece called "The Knight" is defined by the moves that this particular piece can make. The Imaginary is equivalent to the ways in which the different chess pieces can be represented (as horses, castles, crowns, bishop's hats, etc.)

and also their names (the King, the Queen, the Bishop, etc.). The representations of the chess pieces are arbitrary. The Real is “the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or directly cut the game short” (Žižek, 2006a, p. 9). These are the chance events beyond the order and control of the Symbolic and Imaginary. The Real is the actual playing of the game itself, and this playing is contingent on many factors that have nothing to do with the rules and the shape of the pieces (the intelligence of the players, unpredictable intrusions, etc.). This is true of the playing of any game, of course, and it is the presence of unpredictable contingencies that provide the main reason why we play and why we watch. It is because we do not know what will happen in advance that makes playing or watching the game interesting. Referring to the sport of football (or soccer, in the USA), Eco (1984) writes, “we know beforehand the place, the numbers and personalities of the players, the rules of the game, and the fact that everything will take place within the area of the great pitch – except that in a game of football we do not know until the very end who will win” (p. 160). The Real is the ultimate unknown, that which will be revealed only when all the contingencies of the game have been played through, and why we will always root for the underdog rather than the champion.

But there is no Real of this kind that can be said to be the driving force of *Rex Libris*. *Rex Libris* is not a game, it is a narrative. It does not play out in real time, like a game. It is a fixed document that comes into play once it is read by the reader. What drives the reading of the narrative is not a game where we do not know the outcome in advance. It would be easy to discover the outcome of the narrative by simply reading the final few pages right away. Rather, it is those contradictions that the narrative attempts to reconcile.

Eco (2008) captures succinctly how this would play out in a narrative such as Dostoyevsky’s (2008) novel *Crime and Punishment*. Eco asks us to consider the contradiction inherent in the statement: “killing old ladies is interesting.” Of course, killing old ladies should not be considered interesting at all since, in the rules that inform our symbolic reality, old ladies are considered to be nice, innocent, and helpless, just like the old lady that *Rex Libris* helps out and rescues in the labyrinth of literature (Turner, 2007a, p. 52). But, explains Eco, the statement is interesting precisely because it is a contradiction in the traditional symbolic order, i.e., of the way we typically think about old ladies. Eco (2008, n.p.) writes:

Killing old ladies is interesting. With that idea you get an F on an ethics paper. In a novel it becomes *Crime and Punishment*, a masterpiece of prose in which the character can’t tell whether killing old ladies is good or bad, and in which his ambivalence – the very contradiction in our statement – becomes a poetic and challenging matter.

If we read Eco’s statement with respect to Žižek’s Symbolic/Imaginary/Real triad, we get the following: “Killing old ladies is interesting”:

With that idea you get an F on an ethics paper [*the Symbolic*].

In a novel, it becomes *Crime and Punishment*, a masterpiece of prose [*the Imaginary*].

In which the character can’t tell whether killing old ladies is good or bad, and in which his ambivalence – the very contradiction in our statement – becomes a poetic and challenging matter [*the Real*].

In *Rex Libris*, the librarian stereotype is the Symbolic – it is what we know, and what we bring to the text. It is a means by which we structure our understandings of and

interactions with the world. We use it to understand that we are seeing a “librarian,” as opposed to a policeman, or a private detective, or a master villain. In the realm of the Symbolic, the librarian is meek, mild, well read, obsessed with order, and so on.

The narrative of *Rex Libris* is the Imaginary – how the Symbolic is given form. In this case, the Imaginary deliberately contradicts, exaggerates, and plays upon our knowledge of the Symbolic, just as *Crime and Punishment* plays with and contradicts the idea that old ladies are nice and should not be killed. The Real is the means by which these contradictions and exaggerations play out and propel the narrative. The story of *Rex Libris* is not the story of a unique individual and his adventures in some symbolic vacuum. It is constituted by a fundamental contradiction between the Symbolic which tells us that the librarian is meek and mild, and the Imaginary which is telling us that the librarian is a violent warrior that stands between the world and total chaos. Turner’s (2007a, 2009) attempt to articulate, play with, and make sense of this contradiction becomes Eco’s “poetic and challenging matter” (the Real).

The contradiction, and the humor that is generated by the juxtaposition of polar opposite conceptions (librarian as meek vs the librarian as potent and violent) is the very foundation of the *Rex Libris* narrative. In his description of *The Orda Bibliotheca – The Secret International Order of Librarians*, Turner (2007a, p. 163) writes: “The ‘old maid’ image [...] has been an especially effective means of disguise for concealing the formidable sultry side of femme fatale librarian agents who employ a variety of methods, from lethal martial arts to feminine wiles, to protect knowledge, retrieve books, and add to the library collection.” So here the old maid image is the Symbolic, that which we know, that which constitutes the fantasy of our world. The “femme fatale librarian agents” are the Imaginary, the manner in which the librarian is put into narrative in this tale (see Figures 6-8).

The Real is the manner in which these two contradictory representations are put into discourse. We find in *Rex Libris* that the manner in which the Symbolic and the Imaginary play on each other is quite complex. It is much more than a matter of making librarians into super-heroes and then having them have adventures. Turner continually plays the Symbolic and Imaginary against each other. Consider this exchange between



Notes: *Rex Libris* tm and © 2009 James Turner. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission
Source: Turner (2009, p. 56)

Figure 6.
Hypatia finally gets
to see some action



Figure 7.
Hypatia engages in urban combat

Notes: Rex Libris tm and © 2009 James Turner. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission
Source: Turner (2009, p. 60)



Figure 8.
The battle for the library, and the whole of mankind, has begun

Notes: Rex Libris tm and © 2009 James Turner. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission
Source: Turner (2009, p. 64)

Rex and Hypatia, a new librarian fresh out of library school. Rex considers her too inexperienced to embark on the missions he takes part in. He tells Hypatia: "Look Hypatia: yer a little too eager for action and adventure. A true librarian doesn't seek out such foolish things! Our primary mission is to acquire, prioritize, classify, organize, and disseminate information" (Turner, 2009, p. 5). Rex's description of the mission of the library could be taken from any MLIS introductory textbook, and is in the realm of the Symbolic, that which we know, the rules that we live by. But then Rex continues: "Kicking alien ass, traveling to other planets, time travel – dat's all incidental! Remember dat!" (Turner, 2009, p. 5). Now the text is invoking the Imaginary, putting the librarian into a very different

form that is beyond our everyday Symbolic understanding. But then Rex finishes the exchange with the following: “Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta book to reshelve” (Turner, 2009, p. 5). In this sequence, we get these sudden and wild swings between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, from the mission of the library, to kicking alien ass and time travel and then coming back to the Symbolic again with Rex’s assertion that he needs to do something as mundane as reshelving a book.

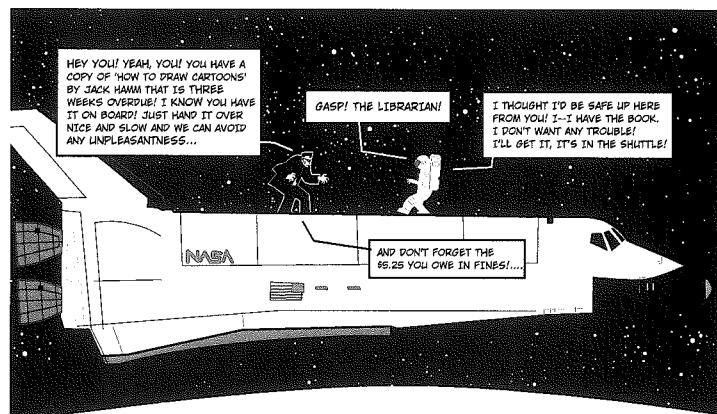
This clashing of great power and mundane things is exemplified in this image of Rex in outer space, enclosed in a personal atmosphere bubble, and standing on the roof of a NASA space shuttle. Rex confronts an astronaut saying “hand it over nice and slow and we can avoid any unpleasantness” while the astonished astronaut replies “Gasp! The librarian! I thought I’d be safe up here from you! I [...] I have the book. I don’t want any trouble!” (Turner, 2007a, p. 17, see Figure 9).

Compared with the resources, skill, and knowledge required to make possible the amazing achievement of confronting an astronaut in space (the Imaginary), the reason for this is the retrieval of a book entitled “*How to Draw Cartoons*” and the fine is “\$5.25” for being “three weeks overdue!” (the Symbolic) (Turner, 2007a, p. 17).

Narratives within narratives

Sonny, you can’t just put out the same old same old! People want to see something new! Stories with a twist. A new angle. Take your story for example. All this saving the world stuff. It’s been done! Done to death I tell you (B. Barry Horst – Turner, 2007a, p. 18).

Since we cannot capture everything in our symbols, we create the Imaginary to fill the gap. As Taylor (2010) notes, “The Imaginary describes the illusion of false wholeness, the misleadingly stable and non-antagonistic” (p. 68). For example, we create religious stories that tell us what will happen to us after we die, tales of heaven and hell, angels and demons (see Žižek, 2003). In the narratives of popular culture, the good guys always win, evil never pays, and true love always finds a way. These are our fantasies, and they give us an impression of wholeness and order, even when our experiences are incomplete and contingent. Our fantasies do not and cannot unveil or take us to the Real. As Žižek notes, “we are doomed to forever circle around the impossible Thing” (Žižek and Daly, 2004, p. 69).



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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 17)

Figure 9.
Rex Libris retrieves
an overdue book
from the orbiting
NASA space shuttle

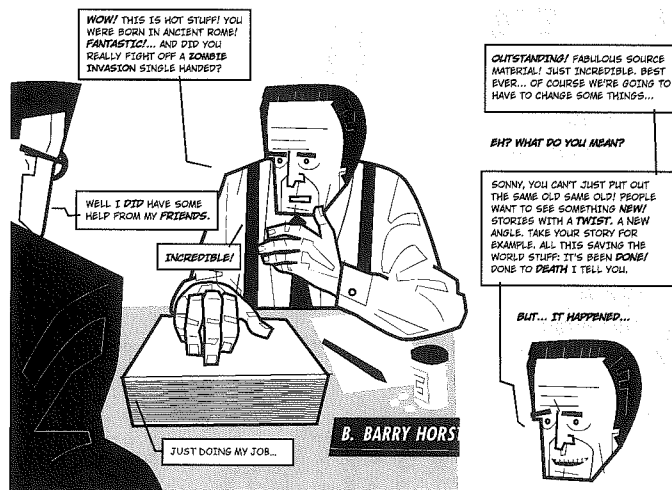
It is these fantasies that Žižek addresses in his study of cinema narratives. For example, *The Matrix* (1999) is a narrative which purports to present a contrast between a fantasy world created by a giant computer (the Symbolic/Imaginary), and a real world that is not (the Real). Žižek's (1999) Lacanian twist on this narrative is his provocative claim that the Real is not the true reality that lies behind the virtual simulation provided by the machines. The Real is the void that makes reality incomplete and inconsistent and the function of every symbolic matrix (our narratives and fantasies) is to conceal this inconsistency. This is played out in *The Matrix* by understanding that *The Matrix* (the movie, not the computer program) is itself a Symbolic/Imaginary construct that needs to be taken into account. *The Matrix* attempts to give form and wholeness to something that cannot have these properties. It is a fantasy about the creation of a fantasy world. The narrative of *The Matrix* seeks to provide to its characters a glimpse behind the simulation to experience what is real, but it can only do this in the form of a fantasy (i.e. the narrative). Therefore, Žižek (1999) claims that *The Matrix* only succeeds in distorting our perception of reality because it attempts to make us believe that there is a "real place" that one can experience when one "wakes up," like the character Neo, when he awakens in the vats in which the unconscious human race is presumably residing. This is expressed starkly in the offer Morpheus previously makes to Neo with the famous red and blue pills: "This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill – the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill – you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes" (*The Matrix*, 1999).

However, Žižek argues that the choice between the blue and the red pill is not a choice between illusion and reality (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006). Žižek demands a third pill which will enable one to see, not the real reality behind the illusion, but the reality that is in illusion itself. We know from watching the movie that the matrix (the computer program) is a means of producing fictions, and that these fictions function as a means of structuring our reality. However, Žižek's central claim is that if you take away from reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself. Therefore, Neo could not "wake up" in a new reality because he would have no way of understanding the "Desert of the Real" (*The Matrix*, 1999) that Morpheus reveals, except through a prior emergence in a symbolic structure, maybe not the matrix of the machines, but some other matrix, some other Symbolic-Imaginary narrative, which itself must revolve around a Real that is outside of language. Morpheus's narrative is as much a matrix (a device for producing fictions) as the matrix of the machines is. The fact of the matrix exists in Morpheus's narrative which, in turn, is part of the narrative of *The Matrix* (the movie), which we watch for our entertainment at the movie theater, after which we return to our normal Symbolic-Imaginary reality, and which you then read about in the narrative of this paper!

Something similar to this is happening in *Rex Libris*. Turner's comic book series is not only a narrative about the adventures of the librarian; it is also a narrative about the narrative itself. It is claimed in the story that the graphic novel *Rex Libris* is based on a totally different book entitled *I, Librarian*, written by Rex Libris (the character) and purports to tell his autobiography. The reason for Rex writing his autobiography is itself a response to the librarian stereotype (the Symbolic). As Rex laments: "Society doesn't appreciate us like it should. There are TV shows about cops, lawyers, doctors, soldiers, and secret agents ad infinitum. Movies and books too. But nothing for the librarian, even after I've saved the world, oh, about a dozen times over [...] and that's just me!" (Turner, 2007a, p. 18).

The comic book publisher, B. Barry Horst, wants to do a comic book series based on Rex's autobiography. However, in the conversations between Barry and Rex (recounted in *Rex Libris*, see Figure 10), Barry does not want a straight retelling of Rex's story. He remarks that all this "saving the world stuff" has been "done to death" (Turner, 2007a, p. 18). Barry is talking explicitly about the Symbolic, i.e., what we already know about the narratives of comic book heroes. Saving the world is one thing that one would expect to appear in a comic book, but, as Barry points out, it has been done, and Barry wants something more. So Barry suggests some twists on the familiar theme. Perhaps Rex could have homoerotic feelings for his greatest enemy, or maybe he is a compulsive sex maniac with a drug addiction, or perhaps he has a terminal illness! The Imaginary needs to go beyond the Symbolic, otherwise, according to Barry, it will not sell. What is ironic about this conversation is that Rex himself is the twist – he is a librarian who behaves like a superhero! He fights intergalactic warlords, cosmic monstrosities, and villains straight out of fiction. Where has that narrative ever appeared before? More than this, Rex reveals in his autobiography that he is some 2,000 years old, that he was a librarian at the original Library of Alexandria, and that he works for "The Library Administrator," the Egyptian God of writing, Thoth, whose task is maintaining the order of the universe. In another ironic twist, Barry, who wants a story that is different, remarks that Rex's real story is too implausible. Rex replies: "That doesn't make sense, Barry. I couldn't get more out there if I was makin' it up. In fact, the very ridiculousness of it all is what validates it: no one could make up somethin' so nutty. An' it's a comic book for cripes sake" (Turner, 2007a, p. 75). Barry considers this, and then replies: "True, but this isn't any ordinary comic book, Rex. It's autobiographical. We don't want to lose suspension of disbelief with a story based on fact" (p. 75).

The absurdity of Barry and Rex's discussion becomes the story within the story. They are addressing the contradiction, the Real, which is the driving force in Turner's narrative: the reconciliation of a librarian stereotype with its opposite, and, in this case, the reconciliation of a story based on fact with deeds and events that can only exist within the realm of fantasy. Rex has a similar conversation with Thoth, the God who is



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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 18)

Figure 10. Rex Libris and B. Barry Horst discuss Rex's Autobiography, "I, Librarian"

Figure 11.
Thoth, the Egyptian
God of Writing and
Administrator of the
Middleton Public
Library



Notes: Rex Libris tm and © 2009 James Turner.
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Source: Turner (2007a, p. 28)

also the Library Administrator (see Figure 11). Thoth gives Rex the following advice: “Librarians have been a respected caste for many thousands of years, and we have cultivated an erudite public image worth protection. Thoth therefore forbids you from wearing a hood and cape in the library! Such garb would diminish the sanctity of the celestial scriptorium” (Turner, 2007a, p. 28). Thoth continues, “No tights, no spandex. You will continue to wear a suit and tie. No getting contacts either” (p. 28). Thoth relents and gives Rex permission to appear in Barry’s comic book. However, “That being said, you may participate so long as you make Mighty Thoth look good and are not a ‘superhero.’ The genre is entirely overdone, unworthy of a servant of the God who created writing” (p. 28). Rex and Thoth are talking about the comic book in the comic book, just as Morpheus and Neo discuss the matrix within the matrix within *The Matrix*. The necessity for Rex to maintain the semblance of normality (in dress and demeanor, a Symbolic fantasy) is echoed in the portrayal of the library as both normal and site for the fantastic (the Imaginary).

Conclusion

In Žižek’s (1991) terms, the library is perhaps the ultimate fantasy space, the place of order that keeps back the Real that is a “gray formless flux” (Heinlein, 1976). It is the window that separates Randall’s fantasy from the Real that exists outside of his car, or the window on the airplane that allows us to drink our coffee and watch our movie in fantasy world comfort, while just a few inches away, the screaming winds of the void remain out of sight and out of mind. Rex Libris is the ultimate defender of that fantasy space, made possible by an arsenal of knowledge and weaponry that ensures the gray formless flux that is the Real be kept at bay by whatever means possible. As Rex points out, “I’ve gone to hell and back to get books back, but I’m equipped for it. Why? Because I have the most formidable weapon of all – knowledge. I’ve read just about every book here in the library” (Turner, 2007a, p. 16). However, the knowledge from books is backed up with “rocket launchers, tracking devices, electro-magnetic field generators, freeze rays, and the usual assortment of automatic weaponry you’d expect in your typical library” (Turner, 2007a, p. 17).

However, the insights provided by Žižek tell us that the library is not only the place where the trauma of the Real is defended against; it is also the place where the Real is brought into existence. The narrative of *Rex Libris* has much in common with the

narrative of *The Matrix* (1999). Like *The Matrix*, which purports to show that one can escape the realm of a machine produced illusion reality into a real reality, the narrative of *Rex Libris* claims to show a universe of discourse that is under the complete control of Rex the librarian and the library, not only for discourse in the present, but discourse in the past, the future, and in other dimensions. However, the fantasy conceals the fact that Rex's library cannot own everything, it cannot contain all knowledge, it cannot control all patrons, it cannot even control its own space and architecture such that its own users may get lost and perish.

The fantasy of *Rex Libris* creates the distinction between the Real and reality to be addressed by its characters. *Rex Libris* posits the chaotic in its most extreme forms and nullifies them through Rex's strength, drive, wisdom, powers, weapons, spaceships, and technology. Rex is as fantastic as the dangers he is required to face. However, the demons and other dangers are made possible from inside the narrative. They are a product of Rex Libris's and Barry Horst's collaboration in the production of the comic book.

Consider the Demon Samurai who appears at the beginning of *Rex Libris: I, Librarian* (Turner, 2007a). The Demon Samurai is similar to Agent Smith in *The Matrix* (1999) who is a product of the machines that produced the matrix (from the outside) and is placed inside the matrix to stalk and nullify threats. But Morpheus knows that Agent Smith is from the outside by virtue of his own narrative about the matrix. This leads us back to Žižek's original problematic of the Real: is Agent Smith a product of the outside (the Real, the machines), the inside (the Symbolic-Imaginary, Morpheus's narrative), or some combination of both? We see the same dynamic at work in the narrative of *Rex Libris*. The Demon is presented as being from outside of the library, and as being a threat to the order of the library and, indeed, the entire universe. But Rex knows about the demon, his powers, and his intentions, because he has access to a book entitled *Demon Samurai and How to Defeat Them* (Turner, 2007a, p. 8) which is a narrative inside the library, and this library, in turn, is inside the narrative being devised by Rex and Barry, which, again in turn, is part of the *Rex Libris* story being written by James Turner.

Ultimately, what drives the fantasy of *Rex Libris* are the contradictions posed by Žižek's concepts of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. The resolution offered by *Rex Libris* is that there is no outside to the library. Rex can travel to different dimensions and different planets. He can commune with Gods of Knowledge, and exist across huge swaths of historical time. He may even be immortal. There is no threshold for Rex. Everything is within his grasp. Nothing can exist beyond the bounds of Rex's library. However, the library also exists to contain the chaos that could be unleashed from within. The library, as an institution, exists to impose barriers, thresholds, and limits on discourse. It is understood that in one's experience of the library, catalogs and indexes must be used, and that every text is contained within the structures libraries impose. These structures are in place not just so library users can find texts, but to ensure each text makes sense with respect to the universe of texts of which it is a part. One's experience of this order also implies its opposite: the realm of disorder, the realm of what might exist if that order were gone. All that would be left would be the gray fog or the formless flux, and the fear of the monsters and other dangers that lurk within.

All this, of course, is a contradiction, but it is the contradiction that holds our fear. At the heart of librarianship is a dialectic of revealing and concealing that is possibly an irresolvable tension: "On the one hand, material is collected in order to be used,

and thus regularly taken away for private consultation; on the other, material is there to occupy a certain place in the collection, like a piece of a puzzle” (Winter, 1994, p. 123). In *Da Bibliotheca*, Umberto Eco (2005) boldly states: “I believe that libraries came into being whose purpose was not to encourage reading, but to hide, to conceal books” (p. 8). As evidence for this counter-intuitive claim, Eco describes a 19-point model of a negative library, which includes such things as: “The librarian must consider the reader an enemy, a layabout (otherwise he would be out working) and a potential thief” (p. 9), and in which catalogs and classification systems would be divided and subdivided to the point of confusion, call numbers would be so convoluted as to defy transcription, the user could not use more than one book at a time, there would be few if any bathrooms, and so on. The Real is not a literal gray formless flux around the library, or demons living in some other dimension, or the chaos of unchained and uncontrolled discourse in the hands of those unqualified or unworthy to possess or even understand it. The library is eternally trying to embrace the Real, i.e., to house all knowledge and eradicate the gap that is the Real, the unknown, the inexpressible. But it cannot, because in this very quest, it creates the very monsters it is attempting to assimilate, whether these are Samurai Demons from another dimension or just the regular library user who must be considered an enemy, a layabout, and a potential thief. Thus the everyday and mundane life of the library (checking out books, talking, retrieving books, keeping order) becomes the basis of terror that is unleashed, to extraordinary degrees, in the narrative of *Rex Libris*.

In Figure 12, we see Rex Libris and the stereotypical old lady library user successfully return from their trip deep within the library labyrinth. Rex proclaims:

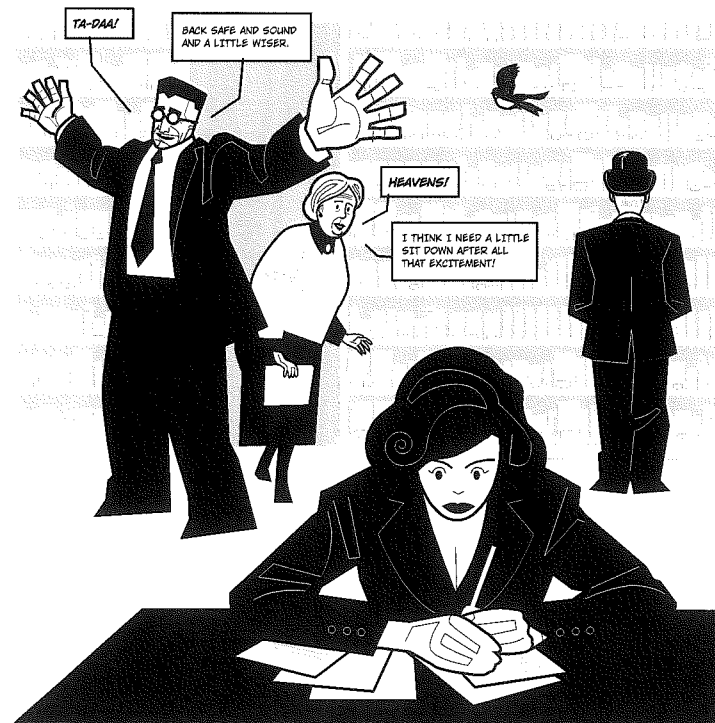


Figure 12.
“I Think I Need a
Little Sit Down After
All That
Excitement!”

Notes: Rex Libris tm and © 2009 James Turner. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission
Source: Turner (2007a, p. 54)

“Ta-daa! Back safe and sound and a little wiser.” The old lady exclaims: “Heavens! I think I need a little sit down after all that excitement” (Turner, 2007a, p. 54). At the end of this paper, we also return home safe and sound, and hopefully a little wiser, following this exploration of the world of *Rex Libris*. We have encountered the traumatic Real expressed in the narrative, and safely returned to our fantasy of order and normality, just as Žižek assured us we would.

Notes

1. James Turner's *Rex Libris* is a comic book series published quarterly by Slave Labor Graphics. The series consists of 13 issues published from August 2005 to October 2008 (Turner, 2005a, b, 2006a, b, c, d, 2007b, c, d, 2008a, b, c, d). The first five issues were published together as a trade paperback entitled *Rex Libris: I, Librarian* (Turner, 2007a). Issues 6-13 were published as a second trade paperback entitled *Rex Libris: Book of Monsters* (Turner, 2009). All references to *Rex Libris* in this paper are to the two trade paperbacks (Turner, 2007a, 2009).
2. The two *Rex Libris* trade paperbacks cited in this paper (Turner, 2007a, 2009) do not have page numbering. Therefore, to locate the source of quotations and images, the following numbering convention has been used. For *Rex Libris: I, Librarian* (Turner, 2007a), page 1 is the “I, Librarian” cover page with the text “Chapter One: I, Librarian.” Page 2 is the introduction “Barry’s Brain” written by the fictitious publisher, B. Barry Horst. Page 3 is the first page of the comic book, showing Rex sitting behind the reference desk and saying, “Lemme get this straight. You wanna take out this book. But you ain’t got a library card. Right?” Page numbers are listed consecutively from this point, and include the subsequent title pages and B. Barry Hort’s introduction to each chapter. For *Rex Librarian: Book of Monsters* (Turner, 2009), page 1 is the title page “Chapter Six,” page 2 is the introduction “Barry’s Brain,” and page 3 is the first page of the comic book with the graphic of Hypatia saying, “Rex, someone left a giant bag of bird seed behind the circulation desk.” Again, page numbers are listed consecutively from this point, and include the title pages and B. Barry Horst’s introduction to each chapter.
3. There exists a substantial body of literature that focusses on the librarian stereotype, with themes such as the librarians’ preoccupation with order, enforcement of library rules, and meek behavior that resonate strongly with those that are played upon in *Rex Libris* for both female and male stereotypes (e.g., see Radford and Radford, 2003, 2001, 1997). Evidence that stereotypical media portrayals of librarians has continued to be of interest to the library profession is the recent publication of an edited book: *The Librarian Stereotype: Deconstruction Presentations and Perceptions of Information Work* (Pagowsky and Rigby, 2014). This work was published by the Association of College & Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association. It includes chapters titled: “Contextualizing Ourselves: The Identity Politics of the Librarian Stereotype,” and on “The Stereotype Stereotype: Our Obsession with Librarian Representation.”
4. Throughout this paper, the *Rex Libris* comic is considered image by image, panel-by-panel for the sake of analysis and discussion, but we are aware that this analysis falls within the context of the overarching story line. Comic books are read and understood through the juxtaposition of the images to one another and the invisible space between them (e.g., if in panel one there is an image wherein a punch is thrown and in panel two the image is of a fist striking someone’s face, between the panels the fist must have traveled from point A to B. While unseen, it is clear that this action occurred due to the juxtaposition between panel 1 and 2). Groensteen (2007) explains that comics follow elaborate discursive codes that regulate the panels, which are the fundamental building blocks of comics, and “weave themselves inside a comics image in a specific fashion, which places the image in a narrative chain where

the links are spread across space, in a situation of co-presence" (p. 7). Panels, by themselves, are fragmentary and "never make up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus" (p. 5). This fragmentary nature of comics, that is individual panels linked together to form narrative, seems to make the story untenable, yet at the same time "allows me [the reader] to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration" (p. 11). The "narration passes first and principally [...] by way of the images" which "participate fully in the narration" (p. 11). This phenomena is due to what Groensteen labels "iconic solidarity" (p. 18), that is, the interdependence of the images that allows understanding of the greater whole through the individual panels each of which is insulated for integrity (pp. 25-26).

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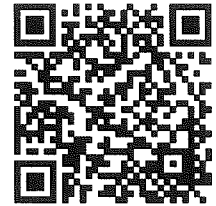
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