

**LIBRARIANS AND PARTY GIRLS:  
CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE MEANING OF THE LIBRARIAN**

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This article responds to Wayne Wiegand's argument that the library and information science field has failed in the past to extend its research and inquiry by exploring theoretical perspectives from disciplines outside the LIS field. It provides a brief introduction to the cultural studies approach using an application of the work of Stuart Hall to a popular and ever present cultural icon: the media stereotype of the female librarian. The film *Party Girl* is analyzed which contrasts two stereotypical images: the party girl and the female librarian. We argue that adopting a cultural studies approach to an analysis of a longstanding problematic image for LIS does allow a new vantage point for interpretation of media images of the profession. This wider focus allows a rethinking of the basic assumptions that have been made by the profession and acknowledges that there are potentially many different ways to see the same phenomenon, or perhaps to see phenomena for the first time, which were previously in our blind spots.

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### Introduction

Wayne Wiegand's "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots" presents a compelling argument that the library and information science (LIS) field has failed in the past to extend its research and inquiry into "interdisciplinary and theoretically rich perspectives" [1, p. 3] offered by scholars outside the discipline, such as critical and cultural theorists. One result of this tunnel vision and these blind spots has been to maintain a narrow focus for the type of questions scholars ask within the LIS field and the examination and analysis of the field's past, present, and images of

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its future. This article responds to Wiegand's argument by exploring the potential contributions of cultural studies to LIS. The cultural studies perspective encompasses theoretical approaches that center on the examination of culture in terms of the texts and practices of everyday life [2–4]. According to Stephen Littlejohn, cultural studies works with two definitions of the term "culture": (1) "the common ideas on which a society or group rests, its ideology, or the collective ways by which a group understands its experience," and (2) "the practices or the entire way of life of a group—what individuals do materially from day to day" [5, p. 234].

Of the many theorists and schools that reside under the umbrella term of "cultural studies," this article focuses on the work of one prominent theorist, Stuart Hall. The reason for this choice is to confine the discussion to an understanding of the potential relationships between cultural studies and library scholarship and not to digress into a treatise on the history and nature of cultural studies in the United States and abroad or the philosophical nature of culture, codes, and meaning. Stuart Hall's work is recognized here as being central to and representative of mainstream understandings of cultural studies, and his work on stereotyping offers a particularly valuable bridge between cultural studies and the ways in which librarians are represented in contemporary cultural forms. The goal of this article, then, is to present an overview of Hall's cultural studies that can serve as an introduction to the nontechnical reader. It is hoped that the reader can apply this knowledge base when "reading" stereotypical images of librarians in the mass media in interesting and informed ways and, in so doing, transcend the narrow focus that, in Wiegand's eyes, characterizes library scholarship in the twenty-first century.

### The Cultural Studies Approach

To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe. Inhabitants of this universe know how concepts and ideas translate into language, and how language can be interpreted to refer to or reference the world. Inhabitants see the world from within the same conceptual map and make sense of it through the same language systems [6, p. 22]. Those who belong to the same culture, then, employ a process of making sense of the world in broadly similar ways.

The study of mass communication and popular culture is central to cultural studies. Cultural texts (such as books, articles, films, television shows, commercials, music, and other media) are regarded as not simply reflecting history and society but as integral components in the

making of history and society. As Littlejohn explains, cultural texts are studied for the ideological work that they do, rather than for the ideological work (always happening elsewhere) that they supposedly reflect [2, p. 3]. Structuralism, derived from the theoretical work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, provides a key method employed in the analysis of cultural texts [7–8]. Saussure's work on language made possible a concern with the relations of cultural texts and practices that form an underlying "grammar" that makes meaning possible. Culture studies scholars hold the view that meaning is always the result of relationships of selection and combination made possible by this underlying structure. In other words, cultural texts and practices are studied as being analogous to language.

Culture is regarded as political rather than aesthetic, as a "terrain of conflict and contestation" [2, p. 2]. The media are seen to be powerful instruments wielded by the dominant ideology. Cultural studies is distinctly reformist in orientation. Cultural scholars want to see changes in Western society, and they view their scholarship as "an instrument of socialist cultural struggle" [5, p. 234]. The field is grounded in Marxist theory by two assumptions. The first assumption is that to be understood, meanings of cultural texts or practices must be analyzed within their social and historical contexts of production and consumption. Culture helps to shape history. Stuart Hall notes that media are involved in forming or constituting the things that they represent or reflect. There is no world "out there" that is free from its representation [7]. The second Marxist grounding for cultural studies is found in the assumption that capitalist industrial societies are divided unequally along, for example, ethnic, gender, generational, and class lines. Cultural studies contends that culture is one of the "principal sites where this division is established and contested: culture is a terrain on which there takes place a continual struggle over meaning" [2, pp. 3–4].

A key term in cultural studies is "representation," which is a central practice by which meanings are produced and reproduced and by which culture is created. In other words, a culture is defined by its shared meanings. Hall defines representation as "the production of meaning through language" [6, p. 16]. According to Hall, there are two systems of representation involved. The first of these systems is that of mental representations of physical as well as abstract things that we carry around in our heads and without which "we could not interpret the world meaningfully at all" [6, p. 17]. The second of these systems is language. Hall uses the term "language" in a very broad and inclusive way that includes written and spoken systems as well as visual images (including mechanical, electronic, and digital images and those produced by media, drawn by hand, and so on), and facial expressions.

Language is the privileged medium in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images, and ideas that enable them to think and feel about the world and to interpret the world in roughly similar ways. They must share the same cultural codes. Drawing on Saussure's theory of language [8], Hall argues that meanings can only be shared through common access to language, which is a representational system that uses signs and symbols. These signs and symbols or "signifiers" stand for or represent an idea or concept, the "signified" [8]. Hall distinguishes between two different kinds of signs: iconic signs, which are visual representations (such as a photograph or painting), and indexical signs, which are written or spoken signs (such as words) that "bear no obvious relationship at all to the things to which they refer" [6, p. 21]. He uses the example of the English word "tree," which is arbitrarily assigned to refer to the tallest plants. The French use the term "arbre" to refer to the same tall plants. Any different letters or sounds could be used to refer to these tall plants as long as the members of a culture agree, because

The meaning is not in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word. It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable. The meaning is *constructed by the system of representation*. It is constructed and fixed by the code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system in such a way that, every time we think of a tree, the code tells us to use the English word TREE, or the French word ARBRE. The code tells us that, in our culture—that is our conceptual and language codes—the concept "tree" is represented by the letters T, R, E, E, arranged in a certain sequence. [6, p. 21; emphasis in original]

Thus, meaning is culturally produced and is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. Participants in a culture give meaning to people, objects, and events. Things in themselves do not have a single, fixed, and unchanging meaning. Meaning is produced within the contexts of use, through the context of language. We give things meaning in terms of how we use them, or integrate them into practices. So cultural meanings are not only in the head. They organize and regulate social practices, influence conduct, and have real practical effects.

Because meaning is fluid there is a great diversity of meaning within a culture. Meaning is a dialogue. Meaning is always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange. There is, obviously, more than one way to interpret or represent any cultural dialogue or written text. As Larry Grossberg notes, meaning floats. Texts take on meaning depending on context and "do not define ahead of time how they are to be used or what functions they can serve. They can have different

uses for different people in different contexts" [9, pp. 52–53]. The meaning of a text cannot be finally fixed. However, attempting to fix it is the work of a representational practice, in which an intervention takes place (for example, by mass media) in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one.

### Stereotyping

Stuart Hall's work in cultural studies has had a major focus on representational practices, particularly those used by the mass media and the ways in which they present "people and places which are significantly different from us" [6, p. 225]. He explores our fascination with otherness, and the reasons why popular culture has frequently highlighted representations of these differences. One way in which popular culture represents differences is through its use of stereotyping. Hall's work has mainly focused on racial and ethnic stereotyping; however, he notes that "what is said about racial difference could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability" [6, p. 225]. The application of Hall's work to gender stereotypes will be important as this article unfolds.

Hall notes that "stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics which are represented as fixed by Nature" [6, p. 257]. He makes a distinction between the human tendency to make sense of things in terms of wider characteristics (types) and stereotyping. "*Stereotypes* get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to these traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity" [6, p. 258; emphasis in original]. Further, stereotyping is divisive and exclusionary. "So, another feature of stereotyping is its practice of 'closure' and exclusion. It symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong" [6, p. 258].

Further, Hall asserts that "*stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power*" [6, p. 258; emphasis in original]. Power can then be directed against the excluded or less powerful group, which has been deliberately constructed as outsiders or "the others," those who are different, set apart, excluded. According to Hall, Michel Foucault called this practice a "'power/knowledge' sort of game" [6, p. 259; see also 10], in which, according to Hall, stereotyping "classifies people according to a norm and constructs the excluded as 'other'" [6, p. 259]. Hall further notes that "representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with 'difference,' it engages feelings, atti-

tudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” [6, p. 226].

There is then, within stereotyping, a “connection between representation, difference and power” [6, p. 259]. Hall asserts that although people tend to think of power in a physical way (for example, a stronger person or force overpowering a weaker one by brute strength), power can also be thought of in cultural terms, involving the representation of someone or something in a certain way, a way in which the stereotyped person or object is ritually expelled or dismissed within a “regime of representation” [6, p. 259]. Stereotyping can be seen, then, as a “key element” in wielding “symbolic violence” [6, p. 259]. Foucault also asserts that power involves knowledge, ideas, and representation as well as economic and physical coercion [9].

Images gain in meaning when they are read or viewed in context, against or in connection with one another. Images do not carry meaning or signify on their own; they accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media. So, in looking at media images, the question is not whether a particular meaning is right or wrong but, rather, the questions are of a deeper level. How is the image placed in the context of other images to create a constellation of meanings? Which of the many meanings in this image is privileged? Which is the “preferred meaning?” and why is it privileged? Why is the system of representation (for example, media) choosing to promulgate a constellation of certain images and to downplay or exclude others? What power is being wielded through the deliberate use of these (stereotypical) images?

#### A Cultural Studies Reading of *Party Girl*

One example of the application of the cultural studies perspective to the library and information studies field can be seen in an analysis of media stereotypes of librarians portrayed in the motion picture *Party Girl* [11]. This film provides an example of the ways in which stereotyping creates a “regime of representation” that ultimately constricts the power and economic status of a gendered profession—librarianship. *Party Girl* juxtaposes feminine stereotypes of both librarians and party girls in an interesting way. It is not enough to ask how the librarian/party girl is represented; rather, one must examine to what use that representation is being put. Hall notes that members of a culture must share a common knowledge of particular signs and symbols [6]. The stereotype of the librarian is one that has a long history and has re-

mained remarkably consistent over the course of the last century—even against the astonishing technological changes that have taken place in that time, and the rise of the so-called information age [12]. Hall's discussion of stereotypes quoted earlier makes reference to the assertion that stereotypes fix widely recognized characteristics "without change or development to eternity" [6, p. 258]. This fix is certainly true in the case of the stereotype of the librarian, which has remained fixed in popular culture since the early 1900s with evidence that, "certainly by the 1930s it was well established and regularly appeared in comic strips, movies, and even advertising. It brought with it, for more years than anyone cares to remember, regular cries of outrage, and even threats of boycotts, from the more vigilant members of Our Profession, who viewed such portrayals as an attack on their integrity. So firmly had that image been ingrained into the popular culture, however, that the protests had no effect whatsoever" [13, p. 62].

Characteristics that are generally attributed to the stereotyped librarian include: an obsession with order, sexual repression, matronly appearance, dowdy dress, fussiness, dour facial expressions, and monosyllabic speech. In media representations of professional librarians there are three predominant activities in which librarians engage: shelving, stamping, and shushing. Occasionally they are also seen to be pushing carts of books around, pointing library users to the stacks in a desultory fashion, or rebuking users for failure to follow library procedures [14]. Frequently, libraries and librarians are portrayed as intimidating and scary, inspiring fear in the library user [15].

*Party Girl* is not an attempt to add to that stereotype. Rather, it takes it for granted and places it alongside another stereotype—the party girl. At one level, one might read *Party Girl* as the story of how a party girl (stereotype) becomes transformed into a librarian (stereotype). In another reading, the transformation can be seen as a metaphor for coming of age. Mary, as party girl, is represented as childlike, living in the moment, ego centered, and lacking a sense of personal responsibility. Hall has asserted that this technique of "infantilization" is a common representational strategy for stereotypes of both men (for example, grown black men referred to as "boys") and women (for example, women athletes widely referred to as "girls") [6, p. 262]. It is not until Mary begins the transformation into the librarian (stereotypically depicted as mature and matronly) that she begins to take her responsibilities more seriously.

The transformation is seen in a series of scenes from the movie in which Mary undergoes a metamorphosis, not just in appearance (as she moves from outrageous styles and loud colors to a subdued black suit) but also in her intellectual growth. The transformation in her

intellect is shown in a series of scenes in which she pores over the Dewey Decimal System (DDS) schedules and learns the application of the classification system in a frenzy of shelving, when she organizes her roommate Leo's record collection by the DDS, and when she demonstrates her ultimate mastery of the sources and systems of library practice, as revealed in the final scene. A transformation also takes place in her attitude and behavior toward the library users. Early in the movie she childishly exclaims: "What a dick!" because a library user complains of books being out of order, but later on in the film she takes on a more mature, stereotypical demeanor, as she priggishly browbeats the library user for reshelving a reference book in the wrong place. This behavior clearly reveals her conversion to the librarian mind-set. An examination of several of these transformational scenes is provided below.

#### Mary Becomes a Librarian Trainee

In the opening scene of the film, Mary is first seen as a flamboyant party girl being shut into a jail cell. As the jail cell door clangs shut, the scene shifts immediately to the outside of a branch of the New York Public Library. Mary climbs the steps, stops at the circulation desk, and asks where Judy, her godmother, can be found. A desultory person behind the desk slowly points a finger to the reference desk where Judy is on duty.

Mary asks Judy for a loan to cover her legal expenses and rent. Judy asks Mary if she has a job. When Mary says that she is "freelancing," Judy chastises her and tells her to find a real job, like becoming a waitress. Mary becomes angry and loudly says, "I am *not* a waitress." In the meantime, a library user comes to the desk to complain that the books by the political scientist Hannah Arendt are out of order. Judy apologizes to the user saying that the library is "reeling from budget cuts" and is understaffed. As if to herself, Judy mutters that maybe Mary . . . no, Mary could never be responsible enough to be a clerk in the library. Mary takes offense at this, claiming that Judy does not think she is "smart enough to work in your library," and Judy defiantly hires her on the spot. Immediately, the library assistant Wanda, who Judy asks to train Mary says to her, "You do know about the Dewey Decimal System, don't you?" While the room spins around Mary, the haughty, stern face of Melvil Dewey looks down at her from a wall poster.

This initial encounter between Mary and Judy sets the stage for Mary's transformation from party girl to librarian that is to follow. Mary's desperate financial situation provides a rationale for the reason



why someone as footloose and fancy free as Mary would find herself working in a library. Not only does Mary accept the job, but she also now must succeed in the job to prove to Judy that she is worthwhile and "smart enough to work in your library." Judy also wants Mary to succeed, despite her knowledge of Mary's mother, who Judy believes was a woman with no common sense.

*The Mis-shelved Book*

As this scene opens, Mary is on duty at the reference desk, surrounded by piles of books, mechanically taking them, one at a time, opening them to the back cover, stamping them, and closing them. She looks up to a male library user walking by the reference shelves, and she speaks to him:

Mary (loudly): "Excuse me, what are you doing?"

People sitting at tables, reading books, silence. The library user stops abruptly, freezes, looks at Mary in silence, raises a hand to his chest as if to indicate Who? Me?

Mary (loudly): "Yeah, you . . . Were you just putting that book away?"

The library user stands frozen like a deer in the headlights.

Mary: "It looked like you were just putting that book away."

People at tables and standing by the reference desk look around, some look at the library user, some look at Mary.

Mary: "I guess you didn't know we had a *system* for putting books away here."

Now all eyes are on Mary.

Mary: "Now, I'm curious, you're just randomly putting that book on the shelf. *Is that it?*"

Close-up on user, man looks lost, helpless, trapped, unable to speak.

Mary (even louder): "You've just given us a *great* idea. I mean, why are we wasting our time with the Dewey Decimal System when *your* system is so much easier, *much easier*. We'll just put the books (raises voice even louder) *anywhere*. (Is now speaking to her audience.) Hear that everybody? Our friend here has given us a great idea. *We'll just put the books any damn place we choose!* (Shouting, banging fist on the circulation desk) We don't care! Right? Isn't that right?"

Users do not move. Woman by reference desk looks angry, others look at Mary, listening, one looks surprised, and others have frozen facial expressions. The librarian (Howard), approaches Mary from behind the desk.

Howard (quietly but firmly): "You haven't taken a break all morning. *Take a break.*"

Mary (frustrated): "I just want to do a good job, Howard."

Howard: "You *are* doing a good job. Take a break, I'll cover. (firmly) *Take a break.*"

Mary walks away, reluctantly, frustrated.

Here, Mary demonstrates that her transformation has begun. She exhibits some of the classic components of the stereotype. Although the materials in the reference area are meant to be used by the public, when a library user takes a book from the shelf and then returns it to the wrong place, the order of the collection has been disrupted. As the person in charge of keeping that order, Mary experiences the tension between the two opposing roles of the librarian—she wants to “do a good job” in maintaining the integrity of the collection and its order, and she wants also to “do a good job” in helping the library user.

The librarian experiences the frustration of Sisyphus here, the mythological character who eternally pushes the rock up the mountain, only to have it roll back down. Mary is eternally shelving books, putting them back in the right order on the right shelf, only to have the library users come in and remove the books from their right place, leaving them strewn about the library, or worse, shelving them in the wrong place, so librarians and other users cannot find them. Visitors to the library thereby introduce the element of disorder by their very use of the collection that ostensibly is designed and chosen for library clients and exists only to be used. The disorder introduced by the client is thus in direct opposition to the order imposed by library systems and its handmaidens of systematic order, the librarians [12]. The order that provides access also exists as a barrier because of its complexity. One can only assume that the library user in the above scene was not an anarchist, looking to wreak havoc on the order of the library, but was either careless in putting the book away in the wrong place, or (as librarians might suspect) unable to figure out the intricacies of the Dewey Decimal System, which is not as intuitive as some think [16].

In the above scene, Mary also displays the stereotypical fussiness and sternness of the librarian who uses the age-old tactic of public humiliation to tame the unruly library user. In her quest for order in the library, Mary becomes an aggressive harpy in her attack on the hapless male library user. The attractive (alluring) party girl is being replaced by the unattractive (repulsive) caricature of a librarian—a fearsome librarian with whom library users would be loath to interact.

#### *The Organization of Leo's Record Collection*

As the movie progresses, we see Mary continue to take on additional characteristics of the stereotype. The movie takes the stereotype librarian as a whole constellation of signs. Umberto Eco refers to these as “super-signs”—signs whose content is not a content unit but an entire proposition [17]. Thus *Party Girl* takes the complete librarian stereotype as its necessary foundation and works with it as a complete unit, including the stereotypical attitudes, behaviors, values, and outward ap-

pearances. However, what is interesting about *Party Girl* is that it is not a statement about librarians or their stereotypes but an exploration of what happens when the stereotype is placed in another, very different, context. Actually, the direction of the story is "what happens when a party girl works in the library?" Thus we see Mary dancing on the tables as she shelves the books. But as the movie unfolds, it becomes clear that the movie is also about "what happens when a librarian joins the party set." Mary's organization of Leo's record collection shows this nicely.

The scene opens in Mary's loft apartment, which she shares with Leo, who works as a disc jockey in a local dance club. Mary jumps up from reading on her bed as Leo enters and says, "Surprise!" Leo, looks around in disbelief as his record collection is not in the piles in which he had left it, but is now neatly stored in bins on the floor. Leo asks Mary, "Where's my crate? What have you done with my albums?" and Mary replies, "I organized them, Leo, according to the Dewey Decimal System." Leo becomes angry and shouts obscenities at Mary, calling her names and accusing her of "ruining" his life.

Here we see Mary taking another step in her transformation to a stereotypical librarian, obsessed with order. She is unable to continue to passively stand by and see Leo's albums in a chaotic state. Without his request, permission, or even knowledge, she takes it on herself to organize his collection by the Dewey Decimal System. Not only does Mary reorganize the albums, she also creates a detailed card catalog that is cross-referenced by artist and subject. This time-consuming and aberrant practice is not the activity of a "normal" person. A normal person might conceivably put the records in alphabetical order by album title or by artist, but Mary transcends the normal, to devise a unique classification system by type of music. Mary has clearly crossed the line from normalcy to obsessive behavior. Leo's reaction, screaming at her, labeling her a "bitch," and shouting that "you've ruined my life" demonstrates how aberrant he believes her behavior to be. Her present inexplicable behavior is so unlike her previous persona that a stunned Leo finds Mary to be unrecognizable. She has now metamorphosed into an "other" set apart from the normal person through her stereotypical librarian behavior. Mary here has turned an intellectual corner in displaying her now firm and fully operationalized belief in the principals of organization and access promulgated by Dewey. She has become a fervent Dewey disciple—a critical step in her transformation.

Rather than shout back at Leo, Mary patiently explains the system to Leo, as if to a small child. Here we see another aspect of the stereotype. The librarian (Mary) has created a complex system that is not

intuitive for the user (Leo). When the user is unable to fathom the system, the librarian asserts that it is "easy" and explains it in a condescending tone, implying that the user is intellectually inferior to the librarian. Mary has also created a situation in which Leo will be forced to be dependent on her in the future. When Leo buys new albums, who will catalog them? Surely it will be Mary. If he has trouble locating an album, he must turn to Mary again.

The use of the librarian stereotype in *Party Girl* is not meant to be evaluative or judgmental. It does not deliberately set out to portray librarians as mean, obsessive, or repressed. However, because of the fixed nature of the stereotype that has been powerfully evoked here, Mary does exhibit these traits. She is mean to the library user who carelessly mis-shelves the book. She is obsessive in arranging Leo's records, and she is repressed in her inability to communicate her feelings to Judy. In the end, Mary longs to be a librarian. Judy, on duty as a librarian at a branch of the New York Public Library, gives lengthy speeches about how the profession is maligned, how it is considered "women's work," and the poor pay and budget cuts the library faces. These issues are presented in serious contexts. Mary's appreciation of the library, and even of Dewey's system, is genuine.

#### *The Birthday Party*

Mary's transformation from party girl to librarian culminates in the final scene in the movie: Mary's birthday party. The scene opens with Mary amid a crowd of reveling friends, loud disco music, and a male stripper. Mary is dressed in a black business suit with gold brooch, her hair in a bun, and wearing round, dark rimmed (albeit designer) eyeglasses.

Judy apparently has not been aware of the transformational changes Mary has been experiencing. She insists on seeing Mary as only the party girl, whose mother had no common sense. When Judy makes her entrance to the party Mary dramatically rushes to the stereo and stops the music. She blurts out to Judy, "I want to be a librarian!" but Judy is not convinced. She does, however, pause to listen to the testimony of Mary's friends, who provide Judy with the list of the elements of the stereotypical librarian that Mary has exhibited: she has become obsessed with order in scolding the user for mis-shelving the book and in reorganizing Leo's records; she has become knowledgeable about the library systems and resources as seen in her assistance to friends in finding information on body piercing and on teacher certification; and the library has taken on new meaning for her, and so on. Judy challenges Mary, asking her what she did to answer her boyfriend Mustafa's question on teaching requirements, and Mary is able to rattle off

a list of sources she checked, complete with a hefty dose of library jargon. Only then is Judy convinced that Mary's desire to become a librarian is genuine and Judy can give her a symbolic hug, welcoming Mary to the profession.

Here we see an additional indication of Mary's "transformation" symbolized by her choice of clothes. Her outrageous clothing at the beginning of the film gradually takes on more conservative proportions until at the end of the movie, we see Mary dressed in a black suit with bun and glasses.

#### *The Second Party Girl/Librarian*

Interestingly, there is a second character in *Party Girl* who embodies both stereotypes. This character is a secondary one, not as well developed as Mary. Wanda works by day as a library assistant at Judy's branch library. It is she who is given the job of training Mary when she is hired by Judy and who utters the threatening question to Mary: "You do know about the Dewey Decimal System?" which sends Mary into a dizzying whirl. By night Wanda is paid to dance at the club where Leo is sometimes the DJ. By day Wanda wears conservative blouse and skirt combinations with a sweater; by night she is dressed in a slinky silver short dress with glitter on her face and in her hair. By day she has a dour, condescending look on her face; by night she is playful and alluring, and Leo falls for her.

We do not know that much about Wanda, but we do see her become more friendly to Mary as Mary "gets with the program" of becoming a librarian. Wanda helps Mary look through library school catalogs and shows her the ropes. In the last scene, Wanda has one of the last lines of dialogue as she grabs the broom handle at the party, saying "Let me do it!" and hits the piñata, releasing the candy. The release of the candy from the piñata can be interpreted as another symbolic transformation, echoing Mary's release of her pent-up desire to be a librarian.

Wanda is not seen as a character who has integrated both her roles. She seems, instead, to lead the bifurcated existence of the split personality. She is either librarian or party girl, but not both at once. She appears so transformed in her nighttime appearance that film viewers might not realize that she is one and the same person as the dowdy assistant librarian by day. Yet, her existence seems to underline the contrasts in the stereotypes.

#### Conclusion

The point of *Party Girl* seems to be to juxtapose the librarian stereotype with its direct opposite—the party girl. Whereas the librarian is ob-

sessed with order, the party girl is obsessed with chaos; whereas the librarian is obsessed with quiet, the party girl is obsessed with noise; whereas the librarian wears frumpy clothes, the party girl wears the most outrageous clothes possible. How could both possibly coexist within the same person? What would happen if a person were forced to do so?

Stereotypes can and often do exist parallel to the ability to create sophisticated rational categories that transcend the crude line of difference present in the stereotype. We retain our ability to distinguish the "individual" from the stereotyped class into which the object might automatically be placed [18, p. ii].

In this spirit, *Party Girl* gives us an appreciation of both worlds of party girl and librarian and, in the end, challenges our stereotypical understanding of both. Hall believes that it is possible to challenge stereotypes through three approaches. The first of these approaches is that of reversing the stereotype. In the LIS context this would involve media images of librarians as the reverse of their stereotypical images, that is, as young, cool, and hip. In a sense *Party Girl* does this reversal, but in the end we see Mary changing into the stereotype and Wanda maintaining a split personality in which her librarian persona is kept apart from her party girl identity. One recent example in popular media of reversing the librarian stereotype can be seen in Rupert Giles, the high school librarian from the television program titled *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Giles was not a character in the motion picture of the same title). GraceAnne DeCandido asserts, "I am not alone in the belief that the appearance of school librarian Rupert Giles on television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has done more for the image of the profession than anything in the past 50 years, with the possible exception of Katharine Hepburn in *Desk Set*. Giles, this wily and attractive professional, is our hero librarian: a pop culture idol whose love of books and devotion to research hold the key to saving the universe—every week" [19, p. 44].

Another strategy for challenging stereotypes is to substitute a range of positive images for the negative imagery that continues to dominate popular representation [6, p. 272]. This strategy can be seen in illustrations in our professional journals in which the librarian is portrayed as a smiling, smartly dressed professional, usually seated or standing behind a computer terminal. According to Hall, there is a third strategy, which "locates itself *within* the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to *contest it from within*. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories" [6, p. 274; emphasis in original].

Working within the stereotype to contest it from within can be seen in LIS through the appearance of Web sites such as the Lipstick Librarian [20–21] and other serious/humorous articles such as the tongue-in-cheek article by Norman Stevens, “The Last Librarian” [13]. These two examples are satirical in nature and can be seen to work both from within the stereotype as well as refuting it. There is an interesting backlash to the stereotype emerging in cyberspace in additional Web sites such as the Leather Librarian [22], the Modified Librarian [23], the Renegade Librarian [24], and the Warrior Librarian Weekly [25]. These sites have been deliberately designed to challenge stereotypical views. It remains to be seen if these images will succeed in their challenge to the stereotypes, for in a sense they serve to reinforce the stereotype by proclaiming, in essence, “we are librarians, but we are the exceptions to the stereotype.” In naming a Web site Renegade Librarian, or Leather Librarian, the creators seek to invoke the stereotype first to then to surprise us by their outrageous departure from the norm. Hall does hold out some hope for reversing stereotyping images in the media, but he also reminds us that lasting change is impossible since meaning is fluid and constantly shifting.

As can be seen in the above example, adopting a cultural studies approach to an analysis of a longstanding problematic image for LIS does allow a new vantage point. From this new vantage point, it is possible to see—in this case, media images of the profession—with a wider focus. This wider focus allows a rethinking of the basic assumptions that have been made by the profession, and acknowledgement that there are potentially many different ways to “see” the same phenomenon or perhaps to see phenomena for the first time, which were previously in our blind spots. This broader view also allows one to ask different sorts of questions than had been asked previously and perhaps to suggest different sorts of answers to long-standing questions. Wiegand argued that LIS “has yet to harness the ideas of many critical theorists whose thinking now dominates so much of the discourse occurring in other professions and academic disciplines” [1, p. 1]. Cultural studies presents just one area in which LIS could extend its vision beyond the tunnel.

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