

Stacey Meeker
1127 Ninth Street, #101
Santa Monica, CA 90403
310-871-8804

smeeker@ucla.edu

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Abstract: **Otlet and (Neo)Documentalist Epistemology**
Stacey Meeker, PhD student, UCLA Department of Information Studies

European documentalist Paul Otlet has increasingly attracted the attentions of information studies since W. Boyd Rayward brought translations of a number of Otlet's writings to the English-speaking community in 1990. Otlet's entry onto the contemporary information studies scene has undoubtedly shed a new light on the issues of networking, access, and the relationship of information and documents. But Otlet is also of interest because the information studies community has projected onto him an epistemological—and ultimately ontological—self-examination as it struggles to establish itself as a legitimate academic discipline with firm theoretical foundations and as it negotiates about the value of the “L” in LIS.

This identity negotiation appears in the writings of three critics, Boyd Rayward, Ron Day, and Bernd Frohmann, as a parable of projection that may—or may not—produce interesting epistemological insights for information studies. Rayward would establish Otlet as a “nineteenth-century positivist” in a postmodern context. Ron Day takes up the discourse in an article defending Otlet against the charges of positivism and refiguring him as postmodern and *then* modernist. Frohmann maintains the charges of positivism but attempts to use Otlet to justify a “discursive turn” in IS.

Where Rayward saw closure and a commitment to the correspondence theory of truth, Day sees openness and space for multiple viewpoints. Day's analysis comes from a different epistemological tradition, namely that of the "deconstructionists" who read the text of the world according to a linguistic, hermeneutic, relativistic model. Day sees synthesis, but Frohmann observes that there are "tensions in Paul Otlet's work between epistemological and social conceptions of information" (2000). Although like Day Frohmann is concerned with semiotics, he advocates a non-subjectivist 'material conception of information' as the foundation of a 'philosophy of documentation.'

This paper will advance a new interpretation of Otlet's theory of knowledge as a "documentalized" relationship between representation and thought that suggests that the IS community's attraction to Otlet lies in a barely-explored affinity between social epistemology and documentalism.