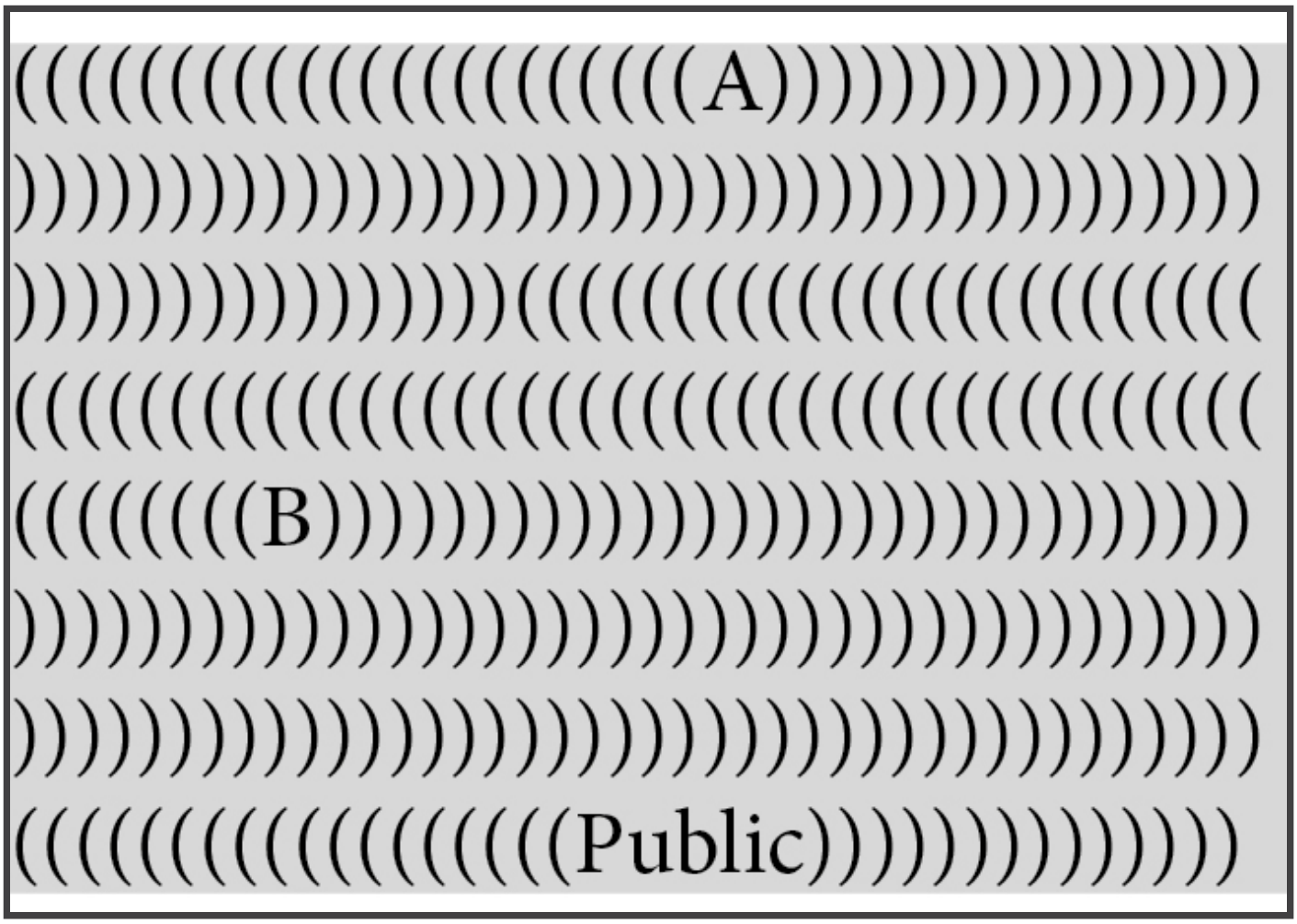
Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

Bibliography with Attitude

Sezgin Boynik

According to Sezgin Boynik, bibliography – the historical materialist study of printed matter – is an inherently democratic and egalitarian way of presenting knowledge. Against contemporary art's neoliberal notion of subjectivity understood as individualization, Boynik argues in this essay that the orthodox field of bibliography offers us powerful tools to connect different political struggles and collectivize knowledge – through bibliographies with attitude.



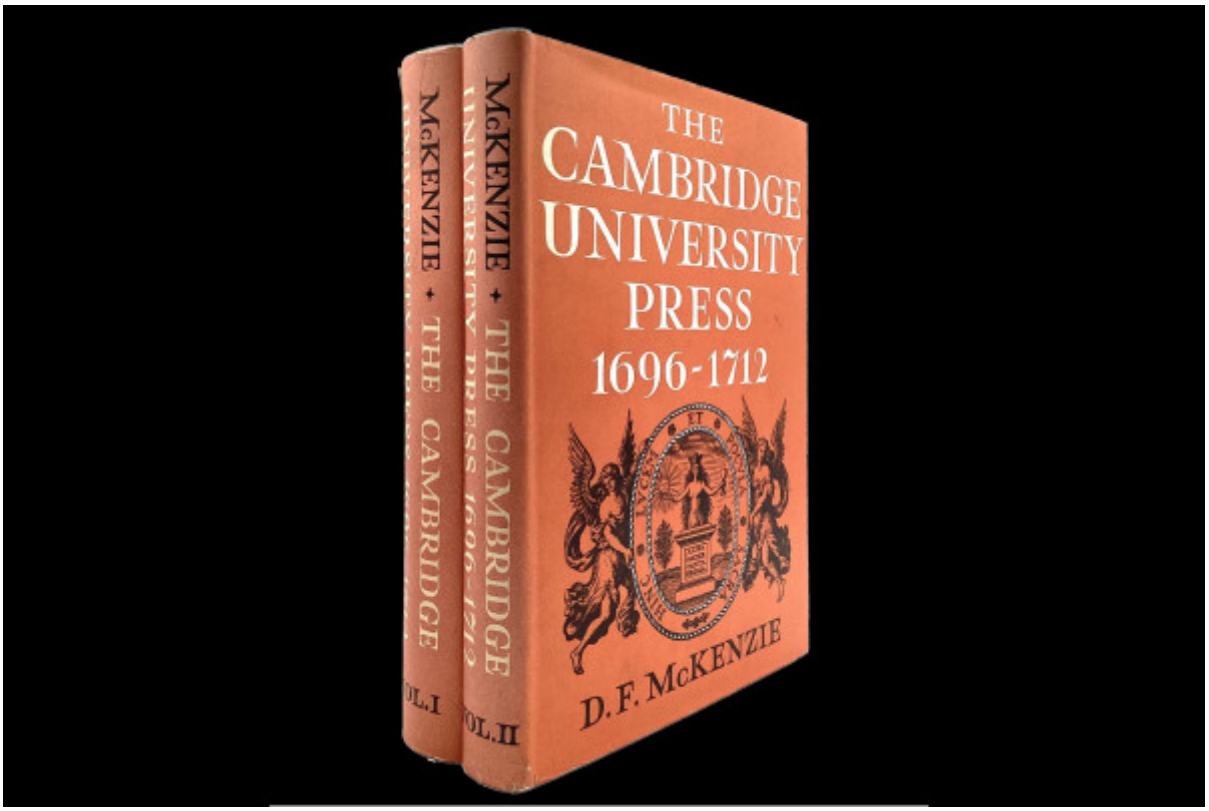
In this short essay, I will argue that the bibliography is an inherently democratic and egalitarian way of presenting knowledge. It can also be used as a tool for organizing and imagining new futures in which new subjectivities can emerge. By bibliography, I do not mean the simple listing of books, but rather the transparency of knowledge through printed matter, which also extends to its material production. In other words, bibliography is understood as a historical materialist study of printed matter. This field has its own difficulties, particularly in the area of critical bibliography, which I am interested in discussing here. Critical bibliographers rarely write about their craft, and in most cases they – Seth Siegelaub and Jasia Reichardt, for example – are not professional bibliographers. They compile bibliographies out of necessity, either to support an argument or to document a marginal art practice. They do not seem to consider it relevant to discuss the theory of bibliography. On the other hand, there is a professional field of bibliographical study, with its peer-reviewed journals and book series, producing scholarship influenced by analytical bibliography – often offering very interesting theoretical observations on books about subjects that are hardly ever relevant to our times. The hypothesis I propose below oscillates between these two poles and exploits the conceptual ambiguity of this otherwise rigorous field.

I will begin with a personal note. As someone involved in independent publishing with a focus on marginalized left-wing avant-garde histories and counter-institutional contemporary practices, I can say that, to some extent, almost everything I do involves bibliographies. Every book we publish is, in a sense, a bibliographical exercise, and this is the case with many independent publishers: we produce books as a form of opposition in response to issues that concern us. Independent publishing is always an intervention. A spark is often ignited by a conversation, a random discovery, an exciting encounter (whether with a person, document, text, film, or sound), a strange experience or an unexpected realization of something new. These experimental discoveries, which are mostly intuitive, are then grounded and expanded upon through bibliographical work. In reference to my publishing practice, I like to say, as a joke, that everything starts with intuition, but nothing is left to chance – something like the surrealists' concept of «objective chance.»

In my case, with the work of Rab-Rab Press, these encounters are mostly political in nature. They are realizations of certain connections that defy the logic of the closure of the state, the nation, or capital, and introduce radical gestures of genuine internationalism and solidarity. Usually, once there is an idea or intuitive thesis, the next step is to expand and generalize: to share these encounters (discoveries, ideas, realizations, experiences) and explore the history or background of the subject. This is achieved through bibliography, which shifts the focus away from the idea itself to its formation and to what led to it – to the material conditions that formed the idea and its historical background, rather than to the primacy of the idea itself. In this crucial step, the experience is secularized against the tendency to prioritize it as unique and personal. Through bibliography, we collectivize knowledge. We create entry points. Against opacity and mystification, bibliography is about clarity and accessibility. Instead of scarcity and singularity, it is about abundance and commoning. It is about making things available.

This is not only the case with leftist avant-garde bibliographies; anything subjected to bibliographies and listings is democratic. To demonstrate this, I will examine the work of Donald McKenzie (1931–1999), a scholar described by his editors as «a student of traditional Anglo-American bibliography.»[1] McKenzie, originally from New Zealand, was a professor of bibliography and textual criticism at the University of Oxford, and he was active in «a small intimate bibliographical world.»[2] His first major bibliographical undertaking was the taxonomic listing of Stationers' Company apprentices, which lists all the registered guild personnel employed in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century printing industry in England. His other notable work was the extensively documented history of the Cambridge University

Press, focusing on their activity between 1682 to 1712. This work of «staggering diligence» was also seen as one of «Sisyphean inconsequence,» as it is difficult to see who benefits from such detailed listings.[3]



A work of «staggering diligence» and of «Sisyphean inconsequence:» D.F. McKenzie, *Cambridge University Press, 1696–1712* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966)

McKenzie's real influence came from the prestigious inaugural Panizzi Lectures that he delivered at the British Library in 1985, organized by the Bibliographical Society. There, he defined bibliography as «the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception.»[4] He termed this «the sociology of text,» a new field within the flourishing discipline of analytical bibliography. The sociology of text was intended to emphasize the technical and material aspects of publishing and situate them within their historical context. Nevertheless, it is difficult to describe it as a historical materialist approach, let alone a Marxist one, even though McKenzie's conclusions sometimes sound more Marxist than those of Terry Eagleton or Pierre Macherey in their studies of literary productions. «By admitting history,» he writes, «we make it secular,» and he adds that «bibliography as a sociology of text has an unrivaled power to resurrect authors in their own time and their readers at any time. It enables what Michel Foucault called ‹an insurrection of subjugated knowledge.›»[5] Bibliography has the potential to unveil the text by considering the role of the printer to be almost as significant as that of the writer. It presents a book as an X-ray of a dispositif involving numerous technical contributors, each of whom plays a part in creating the text's meaning. Analytical bibliography brings production to the forefront of publishing, not just the writer's work. Accordingly, books are not the result of «printers of the mind»; a text does not become a book simply through writing, through a mere materialization of ideas into a book, but also through «composition, correction and presswork,» as well as through the work of «joiners, smiths, glaziers, plumbers, typefounders, fellmongers, carriers.»[6] Traces of labor are inscribed at every stage of the publishing process. As a result, we begin to see the book as an unstable product, a fact that bibliographers must acknowledge. McKenzie, moreover, refers to «the very instability of the text from copy to copy.» Another conclusion of his scholarship is that typographic conventions mediate meaning.[7] These two observations – instability and

primacy of typography – drawn from the study of the very old publishing practices, are also issues that haunt today's independent publishers and their bibliographers and archivists.

We have much more to learn from McKenzie's classical bibliographical studies, most importantly, his understanding of the labor relations that emerge when printing houses handle several jobs concurrently and work on more than one commission at a time – what McKenzie calls «the principle of concurrent production.» He explains that, «however efficiently total production was organized, the system inevitably meant that individual books took longer to print than we might have thought likely, just as most books today take far longer than the productive capacity of the machinery would lead us to expect.»[8] By studying the «full record of the press variants» of works printed by the Cambridge University Press in 1705, McKenzie showed how the transition from manuscript to book – via page proofs, revisions, stop-presses, and the like – meant that «each successive stage superseded the previous one.» [9] He concludes that «productive conditions were constantly changing, not just from century to century in different houses, but from day to day in the same house, simply because concurrent printing has been the universal practice for the last 400 years.»[10] Publishing, as we come to understand, is inherently experimental, and bibliography must adequately record these irregularities and unevenness.»

The task of analytical bibliography, according to McKenzie, is to establish the transmission of a particular text and determine its «bibliographical truth.» He liked to emphasize that analytical bibliographies are not the same as enumerative bibliographies, sometimes stating even more dramatically that «bibliography has nothing to do with bibliographies.»[11] Despite their secondary importance, McKenzie also attributed criticality to listing bibliographies: «the enumerative bibliography permits the resurrection of the most marginal texts and their makers (the documents and writers who were always excluded from the merely literary canon), and thereby the study of all who were kept the centers of power by reason of their sex, race, religion, provincial or colonial status.»[12]

In contrast to traditional and classical bibliographers such as Donald McKenzie, contemporary artists engaging in experimental bibliographic practices tend to overlook the political potential of bibliographies. In today's economic and political climate, the meaning of the book has undoubtedly changed. As Amaranth Borsuk has pointed out, the codex (the book form) is vulnerable to political and market forces, and since, for several decades now, the definition of the book has changed to become «an idea,» the very use-value of the book has transformed. The «book as an idea» nowadays calls for «self-referentiality and self-awareness,» challenging the traditional use of the book as a container for information.[13] Borsuk shows that artists' books are at the forefront of this paradigm shift, as exemplified in the work of Ulises Carrión and his *bookworks*, outlining several key themes that recur throughout artists' books of the twentieth century – «spatiotemporal play, animation, recombinant structures, ephemerality, silence, and interactivity.»[14] These experiments refer to the book as «a negotiation, a performance, an event,» and, as Borsuk suggests, they also represent a compromise with the new reality of «books in libraries being deaccessioned, sold, and, in some cases, thrown away, while libraries focus spending on creating comfortable social and collaboration spaces, providing access to computers and the internet, and facilitating meetings and events.»[15]

My aim here is not to suggest that artists' books are influencing the reorganization of libraries, but rather to speculate on the possibilities for understanding the contradictions of current bibliographic conjuncture through the contemporaneity of artists' experimental publications. Using Marxist terminology, we can refer to artists' books as an «objective form,» which helps us understand contradictions related to current bibliographical issues in terms of both the production and reception of printed matter. One feature of this new conjuncture is the emphasis on the «personalization» of the book and the playful potential of

book spaces. In these experimentations, books become surrogates or substitutes of criticality. In her recent book *Bibliographic Performances & Surrogate Readings*, Janelle Rebel compiles a list of over fifty art projects that use bibliography as a reference. «There is action implicit in the noun,» she writes of bibliographies, presenting a wide spectrum of artistic actions (or performances) involving books, libraries, references, listings, and indexes.[16] The core of Rebel's argument is based on the idea that bibliographies are «constellations of surrogates,» or, as she puts it, «curated sets of surrogates.»[17] Surrogates are explained as substitutes for the real and as superficial constructions that help to «create models» and «co-produce reality.»[18] These models are curiously explained with reference to Olafur Eliasson's understanding of experimental models, which, in the art world, are synonymous with very expensive installations.

In essence, the idea of bibliography as a model allows for performative, unpredictable, aleatory – or, as Rebel calls them, «tychic» – elements to occur in bibliographic events. The results of this «experimental subject bibliography– or «visual bibliography,» introduced as «examples of visual categorization and unusual variants in the physical arrangement of books,»[19] do not seem so different from the conclusions discussed earlier with regard to orthodox and established bibliographical practices. The difference is that Rebel's cases attempt to introduce something «more than information» into bibliographical practices.[20] The suggestions range from cross-institutional research projects and individual course syllabuses to diversity initiatives and book actions emphasizing «experiences» and promoting «self-actualization,» which, in fact, as noted, is similar to the policy of libraries in the era of neoliberalism. Individualization, spontaneity, performativity, and openness lie at the heart of today's libraries. They are also among the criteria that Rebel used for selecting the items listed as experimental bibliographies, which were based on their nature of being «uncategorisable» and «hospitable,» and that they were «inviting and compelling.»[21]

While the decanonization of bibliographies through contemporary art is welcome, the results listed in *Bibliographic Performances* leaves one wondering whether contemporary art can achieve what bibliographies already do.

At the heart of this debate lies the question of the «publicness» of libraries, which is firmly related to the political potential of books. This is why the question of use value [subjectivity] and the autonomy of the production and dissemination of books – i.e. bibliography – is so important. A liberal understanding of libraries is based on the ideological premise that professional librarians are apolitical and neutral, that they are objective toward knowledge, and that the librarian or bibliographer, is a «profession» just like being «a doctor or lawyer.»[22] Despite their openness and hospitality, libraries and their holdings are «neutrally» defined by «professionals,» who, as Joe Pateman and John Pateman [Angela Meady] have argued, are strictly «petit-bourgeois.»[23] Instead of public libraries, they argue for vanguard libraries, because «they do what they say they are doing.» In other words, these libraries genuinely provide a «safe» space for communities (and the working class) and «never assume or second-guess the needs of the communities.»[24] In practice, vanguard libraries are no longer organized according to the Dewey Decimal Classification system but are inspired by the system used in Indigenous Knowledge Centers, which is based on «circular» knowledge. Considering that «everything is interconnected,»[25] the Patemans suggest that public libraries should be restructured according to people's genuine political needs: the need to understand the world from a people-centered point of view rather than from the demands of the state and the logic of capital. While some of the Patemans' suggestions – such as the idea that Indigenous worldviews and the Marxist reorganization of libraries share the same concept of «circularity» of knowledge – are rather abstract, their emphasis on politicizing libraries along a «subjective» line is a path that bibliographical scholarship has yet to explore.

We can now shift the discussion in a more political direction and ask whether it is possible to evaluate bibliographies from these militant experiences? To illustrate this, let us consider Nadezhda Krupskaya's writings on bibliographies and annotations. As head of Glavpolitprosvet (the Main Political and Educational Committee of the People's Commissariat of Education), Krupskaya was at the forefront of organizing library systems in the Soviet Union. In the 1920s she initiated the construction of 24,000 reading huts across the country. In her speech at the All-Union Conference on Theoretical Questions of Librarianship and Bibliography in 1937, she said the following about «annotated bibliographies»:

When I have to deal with library affairs, I encounter some things which to a non-librarian (and I am not a professional librarian) appear very strange, and which I view with bewilderment. Take the question of annotation. I remember that arguments there used to be with publishing houses, which would have had us believe that annotation ought not to include any kind of political evaluation, that objectivity was all important. It may be that a simple annotation is sufficient for arranging books, but that side by side with this annotation there ought to be a Marxist evaluation of the book.[26]

This short quotation reveals that Krupskaya believed Marxist bibliography to be the antithesis of objectivity. However, this position requires further elaboration to become the affirmation of subjectivity we have in mind: a militancy that transgresses the authority of ruling institutions. For those not familiar with the strange dynamics of Soviet institutions, it is important to note that Krupskaya's statement, despite her stature, did not represent institutional authority. by that time she had already been marginalized, but was permitted to challenge the official «objectivist» and «apolitical» position on libraries in the Soviet Union – a position that was Stalinist – only because of her symbolic credentials. After all, she was the «bride of the revolution,« as her not-so-sympathetic biographer called her.[27] Krupskaya was a «firm supporter of the theory that there could never be a book that was strictly objective, one that did not contain an open or hidden political line.»[28] She opposed the then-prevalent Soviet view that the purpose of public libraries was to «improve people's lives, raising individuals to the maximum level of productivity, well-being, and happiness,» labelling it «the American viewpoint on libraries.»[29] Krupskaya aimed to collectivize books and librarianship, adopting a militant approach in which libraries should serve as places for political education. In the existing literature on political libraries, this is often seen as «indoctrination,» an act that freedom-loving intellectuals view with horror.[30]



Deputy People's Commissar for Education Nadezhda Krupskaya with students of the Communist Political and Educational Institute, 1932

Objectivity «was deeply entrenched in the highest levels of the Russian library profession» [31] during Stalin's regime, and it is also at the heart of the prevailing Western understanding of librarianship. In reaction to this «objectivist» hegemony, Krupskaya and her contemporaries did not call for «subjectivist» bibliographies. However, today we can do so, and it would be highly beneficial if, rather than viewing subjectivity as individualism and experiments in self-actualization, we expanded it to include learning activities that connect struggles against oppression and authoritarianism.

In his review of *Internationale Bibliographie zur Geschichte und Theorie der Komparatistik*, Glyn Tegai Hughes described this particular bibliography as a work that sets to «emphasize the specific nature of the subject's independence» – in other words, the independence and autonomy of a specific area of scholarship – as «propaganda.»[32] Why not? We on the left should also produce such bibliographies that are «part manifesto, part monument,»[33] taking a strong attitude against the inertia and stagnation of existing institutions of knowledge production.

We have bright examples to start with. From Seth Siegelaub's bibliographies as «social activities»[34] to Willi Münzenberg's anti-fascist libraries of burned books, and the lesser-known shadow libraries of anarchists, anti-colonialists, punks, and queers around the world. Not to mention the ongoing reading lists, oppositional curricula, and alternative study circles everywhere, all compiling their own subjective and experimental bibliographies that explain why Western values failed in the face of ongoing genocides, how fascism is possible within a

democracy, why feudalism is making a comeback, and how security justifies surveillance and militarization. Perhaps it is time to recognize this as a science, connect these learning experiences, and develop bibliographies that are ours – that is, bibliographies with attitude.

[1] Peter McDonald and Michael Suarez, «Editorial Introduction,» in D. F. McKenzie, *Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p. 3.

[2] Julian Roberts, «The Bibliographical Society as a Band of Pioneers,» in *Pioneers in Bibliography*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (London: St Paul Bibliographies, 1988), p. 96.

[3] John Sutherland, «Publishing History: A Hole at the Centre of Literary Sociology,» *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 584.

[4] D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts, The Panizzi Lectures 1985* (London: The British Library, 1986), p. 5.

[5] D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, p. 19. McKenzie wrote that «the land itself can be a text» and speculated on «totemic topography,» referring to the indigenous M?ori population of New Zealand for whom the land «is not simply a sacred object, but also has a textual function.» As such, it has a «narrative function» with «descriptive content» (Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts, pp. 28–32). In other words, landscapes can also have their bibliographies and counter-bibliographies.

[6] D.F. McKenzie, «Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing-House Practices,» in McKenzie, *Making Meaning*, p. 18.

[7] McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, p. 26.

[8] McKenzie, «Printers of the Mind,» pp. 25–26.

[9] Ibid., p. 49.

[10] Ibid., p. 53.

[11] Ibid., p. 63.

[12] D. F. McKenzie, «History of the Book,» *The Book Encompassed: Studies in Twentieth-Century Bibliography*, ed. Peter Davison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 296.

[13] Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), pp. 112–13.

[14] Borsuk, *The Book*, pp. 146–47.

[15] Ibid., pp. 181–82.

[16] Janelle Rebel, *Bibliographic Performances & Surrogate Readings* (London: The Everyday Press, 2024), p. 20. Analytical bibliographers are also familiar with performativity. In his analysis of a seventeenth-century play by William Congreve, McKenzie claims that Congreve worked closely with his publisher and distributor. Together, they «decided to make their pages speak, to edit and design their plays in a way which gave typography a voice in the hand-held theatre of the book [*The Way of the Word. A Comedy*, 1700].» McKenzie, «Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve,» *Making Meaning*, p. 201.

[17] Rebel, *Bibliographic Performances*, p. 27.

[18] bid., p. 20.

[19] Ibid., p. 53.

[20] Ibid., p. 28.

[21] Ibid., p. 28.

[22] Joe Pateman and John Pateman, *Public Libraries and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 39.
[23] Ibid., p. 39.

[24] Ibid., p. 106.

[25] Ibid., p. 110.

[26] «Krupskaya on Libraries,» in *Lenin, Krupskaya and Libraries*, ed. S. Simova (London: Bingley, 1968), p. 48.

[27] Robert McNeal, *Bride of the Revolution: Krupskaya and Lenin* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972).

[28] Boris Raymond, *Krupskaya and Soviet Russian Librarianship*, 1917–1939 (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), p. 63.

[29] Raymond, *Krupskaya and Soviet Russian Librarianship*, p. 64.

[30] Krupskaya wrote about the problems of the «political» libraries in her self-ironic short essay from 1924 published in Pravda as «A Bolshevist Index Expurgatorius,» explaining why she had issued an order to clear the libraries of occultist and anti-Semitic monarchist trash, https://www.marxists.org/archive/krupskaya/works/index-expurgatorius.htm.

[31] Raymond, *Krupskaya and Soviet Russian Librarianship*, p. 64.

[32] Glyn Tegai Hughes, «Bibliography as Propaganda?,» *Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal* 8 (1986): pp. 301–2.

[33] Ibid., p. 305.

[34] https://ravenrow.org/texts/nothing-personal-an-interview-with-seth-siegelaub.

SEZGIN BOYNIK

Sezgin Boynik (or Sezgin Bojnik, 1977, Prizren, Kosovo) is a theorist and publisher. He founded Rab-Rab Press in 2014 in Helsinki, an independent publishing platform for books on experimental art and left-wing politics. He is also co-founder of Pykë-Presje in Prizren, Kosovo, and holds a PhD from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland on the cultural politics of Novi Film between 1963 and 1972.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21905046