

Lost on the forking path

a manual inspired by Borges' novels

“Years are passing by and I have been telling this story so many times that I don't really know if it is it that I remember or only the words I am telling it with.”

Night of the gifts - Jorge Luis Borges



Escher Ascending and Descending

Mostly based on a study of the collection of novels *Ficciones*, this essay is an attempt to classify, to diagram, to X-ray narrative structures in order to bring relief to the tricks used by Borges while he is driving us into his magical interpretation of language.

Nothing is more typical of modernist fiction than its shattering of narrative line. And the impending threat is usually focused on the idea of Time. Put in another way, we can say that letting go of the religious respect writers had to Timeline is giving to modernist writers new tools to explore narration, to place the reader in wandering and finally to get closer to the way we actually experience Time, memory, events etc.

Borges said about Joyce's *Ulysses* that it was "almost infinite". Infinity, major theme in his oeuvre, takes multiple appearances in his novels. Indeed trying to convey what can not be represented requires multiplying again and again interlockings, constructions and tricks that we will further dissect.

Giving up to Joyce, Cervantes or Homere the fastidious and improbable task of writing a total oeuvre, he chooses to "create the shortest infinity possible".

We highlight here four ways to achieve this goal, or let's say for the suspicious ones, to make us believe it is achieved.

Then we consider ways to mix those structures, still in the light of selected Borges' novels.

Finally going inside the structures, we bring out the essential substratum nourishing those structures.

It is a deliberate choice here not to focus on what is told in the novels, but to concentrate on the way it is told, drying them up in order to reveal the structures and tricks in their essence.

STRUCTURE 1

Potential infinity

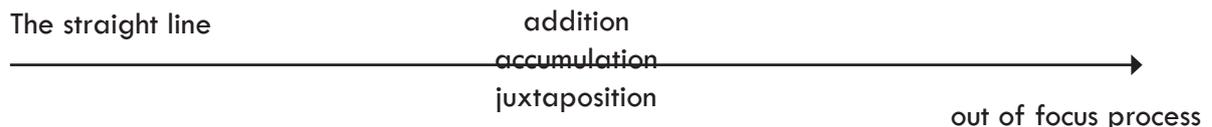
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substratum capable to grow endlessly

The potential infinity relies on the particularity that a syncategorematic term, a term which in itself doesn't mean anything, can only modify the meaning of the previous ones, therefore creating an endless growth. This infinity, made out of components that can only "mean with", necessitates a process: what is actually finished imposes the creation of a substratum that can possibly grow infinitely. This growth process that appears to be quite simple in mathematics, Borges achieves it by what we can call an iterative "blur", or "out of focus".

We can take as an example the 'hero dreamer' of Circular Ruins who creates in his dream a dreamlike person before we discover he is himself dreamt of. The reader cannot rely any more on where the narrative started and doesn't know where it now stands.

The purpose is to leave us in an unreal state, the one that precisely stands between several possible realities.



STRUCTURE 2

Cycle / final curl

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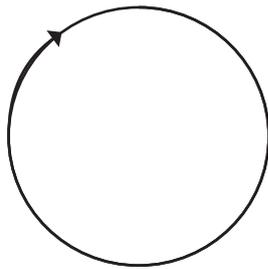
bring the narrative back to the beginning...

As we all know the circle is the finite element per se...

And is probably the most effective way to disturb the well-seated beliefs we can't help but have when we start reading a story.

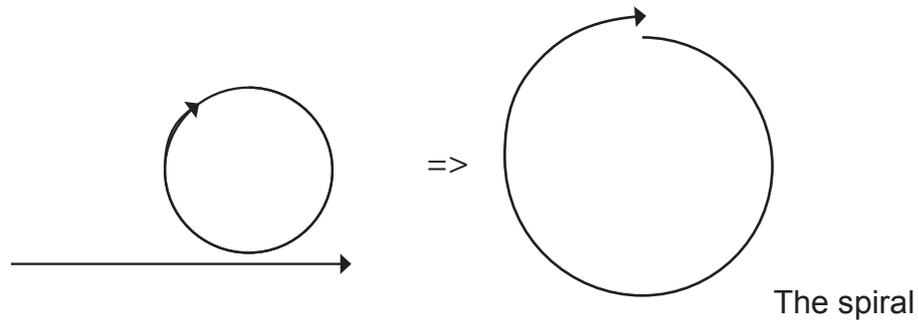
A novel usually gives at its very beginning the basis, the roots to what the reader thinks he can rely on for the rest of the story. The understanding is then built upon those foundations, this is why damaging them at the end of the story inevitably deeply disorientates the reader.

The reversal Borges usually produces at the end of his novels, often with a few words only, to bring back the story to its starting point or threaten a part of the novel, even the novel itself, can be illustrated by the geometrical figure of the circle.

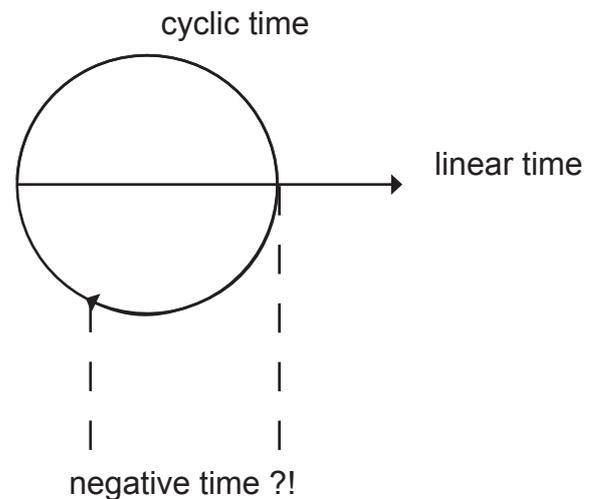


The circle

... or just nearby



Between the circle and the straight line, the spiral implies a slight move away from the starting point which tells on an evolution in the understanding of the same scene, a different reading of the same event.



Unlike the linear time which follows an iterative path, the cyclic one, as it is going back to where it started, without always denying itself implies a negative time. This negative time, used to belittle the role of destiny, is very much linked to the idea of fatality.

In the Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz, the same event is repeated three times, one using the implicit (supposed) culture of the reader which allows Borges to finish the story without having to tell it.

The repetition through a new narration keeps certain elements through time (objects, plots etc.) but replace others.

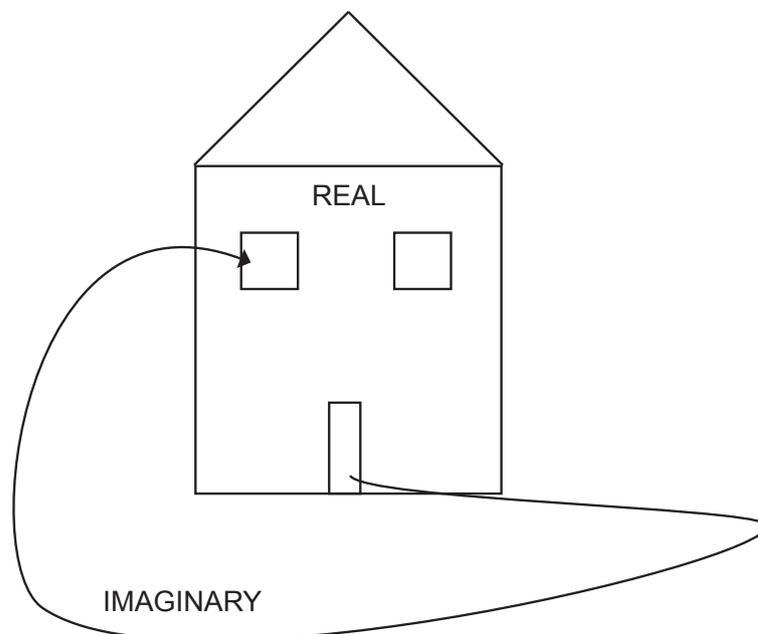
STRUCTURE 3

Cycle / final turnover
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real = imaginary imagined

Still with the ideal figure of the cycle, the action of going back to where it started can also attribute a new nature to the event the story started by, or to an historical fact that belong to the culture of the reader as an undoubted event.

After an acute fictional disruption, going back to the 'real' as another fictional layer to the story is considering the 'real' at the same status as the fictional. The 'real' is simply another possible.

After the introduction of an imaginary random process, the growth of its impact and meaning makes it become identical to something existing, known by the reader which finally gives a new perception of this known, existing reality.



In view of the infinity, two concepts seemingly opposing unite:

REAL
IMAGINARY



STRUCTURE 4

Chaos

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no apparent form

Chaos as we sometimes understand it is the boundary between two absolutes: the order and the disorder.

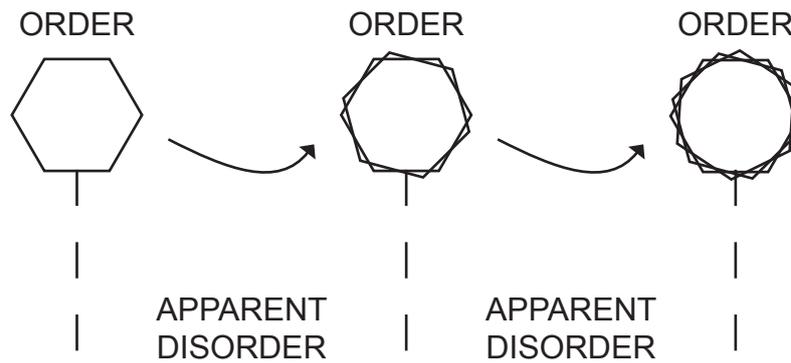
According to the mathematician B. Mandelbrot, exist an ordered chaos and a disordered chaos. The ordered chaos is an apparent absence of form, juxtaposed to the suspicion the reader has of the existence of an underlying order.

The reader assumes there is a hidden, implicit order, overwhelming him.

We can take here as an example the novel Funes, or the memory : in the presence of a disorder that leads to a potentially inexhaustible number of explanations, the order suggested by Borges takes automatically a superior dimension. The disorder leads to an inexhaustible number of possible explanations. The order then suggested will automatically be supreme.

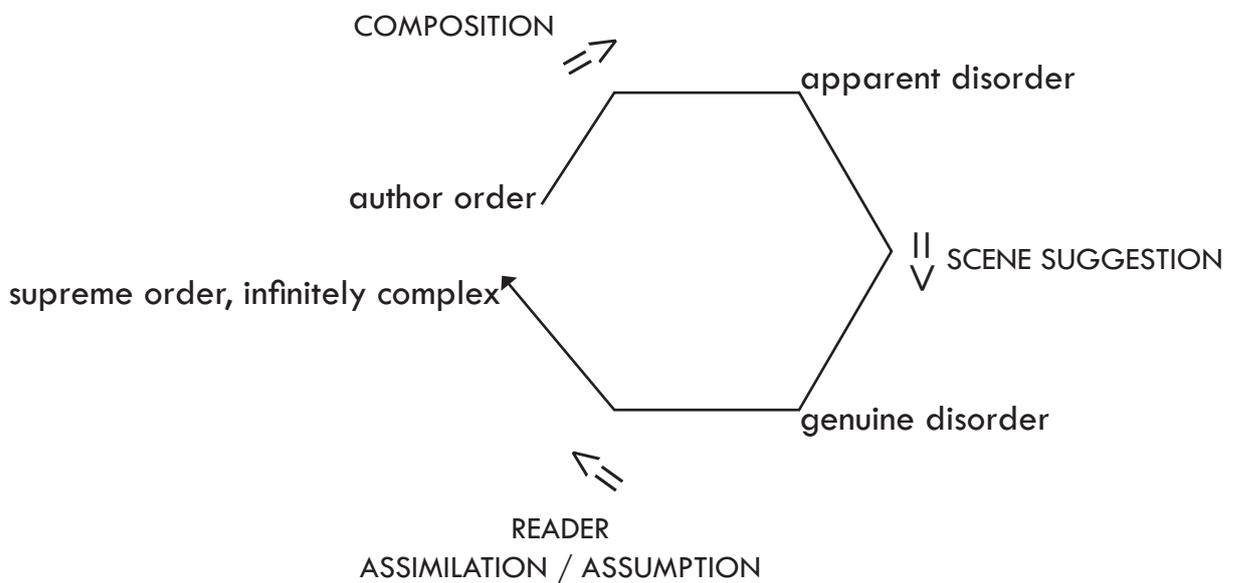
MIXED STRUCTURES

1&4 - Potential Infinity and Chaos



Inside the potential infinity process, the order appears at each attempt to represent the chaos (since disorder is always finite), then the increase of the complexity corresponds to the infinite growth of the apparent disorder.

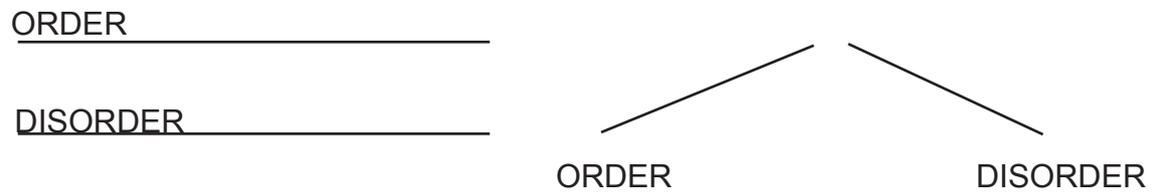
2&4 - Curl and Chaos



3&4 - Turnover and Chaos

In this case the order is the disorder of the disorder.

As well we can consider that, taken too far, disorder becomes order: The paroxysm of indetermination results in an absolute determination.



INSIDE THE STRUCTURES

Substratum

Inside those diverse possible structures, Borges continues to play with language itself, words and objects, references etc.

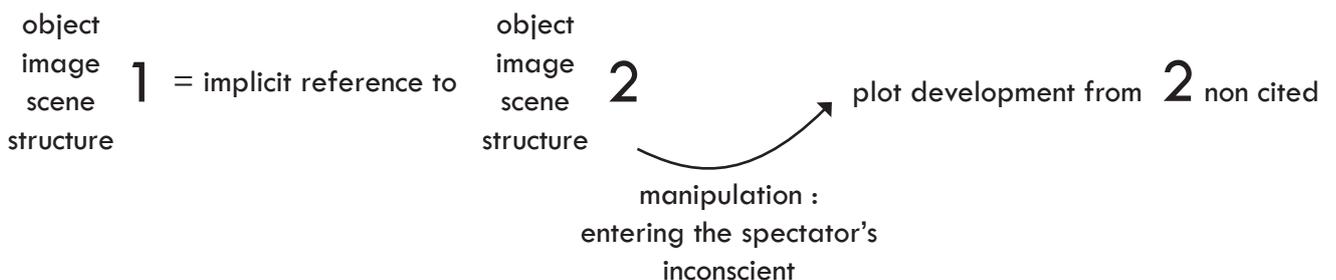
As Rosset said “It is the most common lot of reality to escape from language, and the most common lot of language to lack reality.”

Borges is far from ignoring this and allows himself to undress language to the point of revealing its absurdity.

REFERENCES

The use of citations is a sort of gate into the reader subconscious. Counting on the reader’s culture and ideas combination, it enables to go further in the plot without having to describe an event.

In this way allusions are creating interlockings, but above all they implicitly force the reader to make the structural links and they therefore establish a “meta-narrative”.



REFLEXIVITY

Multiplying transitive actions, transitive verbs for example, forces the reader to follow an often abstruse path, on which Borges inevitably goes too rapidly.

The evocation of reflective objects, obviously the mirror, which instantly creates a perfect cycle with no modification at each step, no possible evolution, finally creates an infinite cycle from which no one can escape.

CONFUSION

One of the most powerful tools that triggers off confusion definitely is contradiction without negation.

We consider three ways of achieving this contradiction:

The juxtaposition of contradictory statements dealing with subjects of different natures.

For example Babel's Library is spatially finished while containing infinity.

Here we can also relate the famous mathematical paradox of Achilles and the turtle:

"Achilles is supposed to go 10 times faster than the turtle, who is therefore given 90 m at the start. When Achilles has covered those 90 m, the turtle only precedes him from 9 m, those 9 m as well covered, the turtle still precedes him from 0,9 m etc." The turtle will indefinitely have $1/10$ of the distance in advance from Achilles....

The sequence of two almost contradictory scenes, yet together possible: in the reader's mind the first one is erased while still meaningful in the whole story.

The vicinity, as if equivalents, of two things that usually do not have a common place to meet.

Also confusing the reader is the flow of the narration: an incomplete understanding of a scene disables the reader to swallow the present (too soon became past) event and forces him to concentrate on the following one without the complete and necessary understanding of the previous.

Several diverse narrative levels place the spectator between several possible without providing the means to choose.

Starting with an unreliable starting point (hypothesis, condition), prevents coming off with a reliable ending. The whole story is subject to doubt.

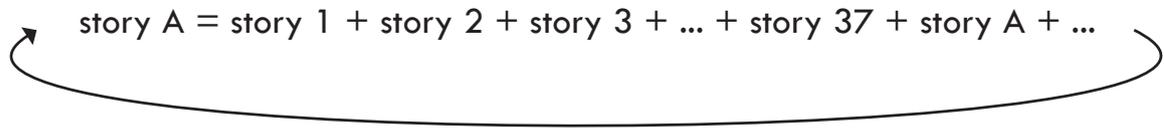
FACTALES STRUCTURE

The principle of autosimilarity states that a set is infinite when exists an isomorphism between the whole set and one of its parts. Each of the two ensembles (the all and the fragment) relies on the other to exist.

Let's consider here as an example the novel Garden of forking paths.

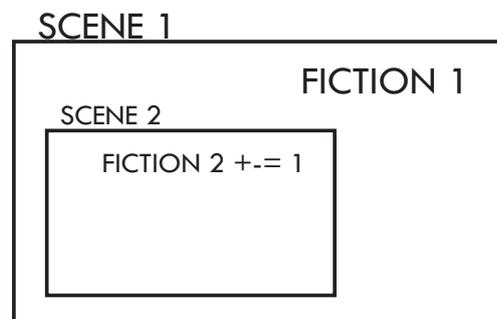
The whole is the novel, the part is the labyrinth (plus allusions to some interlocked labyrinths) and the bijection is given by the reference to famous tale The thou-

sand and one nights. We can easily see how infinite is here suggested, with the contribution of the reader's culture.



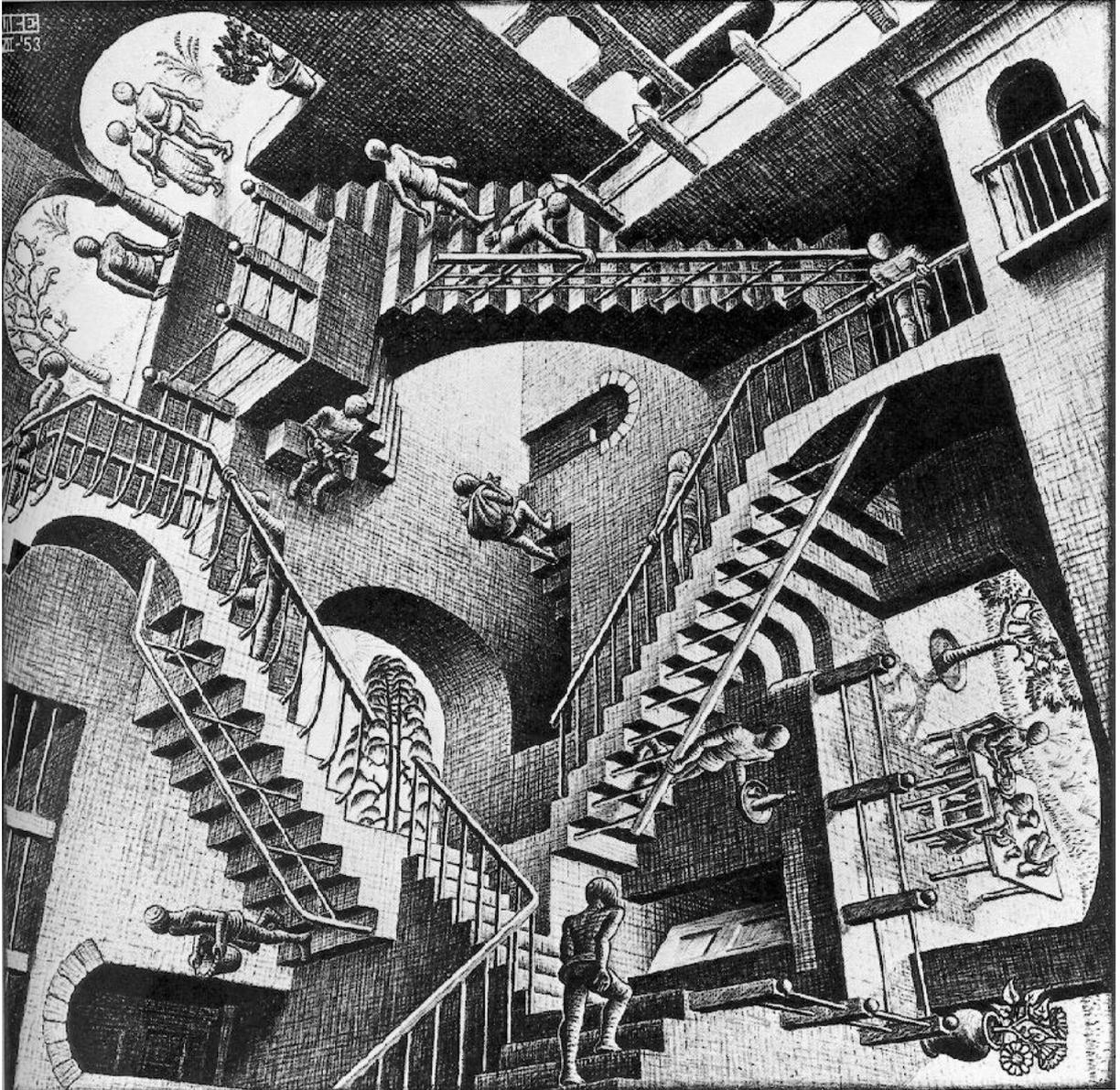
Another example would be the novel Theme of the Traitor and the Hero where the historical event of the assassination of Kilpatric repeats the theme of a theatrical representation (fiction) during which a real murder occurred: the assassination of Julius Caesar and even uses the setting of the representation to perpetrate the murder.

The city in turn becomes a stage. The first, admitted historical event (the assassination of Julius Caesar) is taken as a fiction, to deepen even more the confusion of the second supposed historical event (the assassination of Kilpatrick) staged inside a fiction, as if its truth already relied on a fiction.



INCLUSION

This process is similar to the reference one, but the allusion remains inside the narrative. It is the reader consciousness of a scene that occurred earlier on in the story which enables the complete understanding of another scene, or even enables the scene itself to occur.



This essay is meant to become a manual, almost a taxonomy, of which the purpose would be to serve other disciplines than literature. Cinema, architecture, graphic arts, more interestingly music etc. It talks about relationship between an author and a receiver, but above all analyses the experience of receiving a work and, reversing the process, provide tools to trigger off specific reactions.

I would like to conclude with a wonderful work by the graphic designer Sam Wis-ton: A Dictionary Story, in which I find a similar enjoyment when playing with signified and signifier.



A Dictionary Story _ Sam Winston

“ I started looking at the dictionary as an object that contains everything you can say. It contains Shakespeare, it just isn't in the right order. So I thought what if certain words in the dictionary met each other.”