

# SIMULACRA REPLACE REALITY IN BORGES' SHORT STORIES

SuWen Dong  
Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 201620, China.  
Corresponding Email: [dongsuwen@shisu.edu.cn](mailto:dongsuwen@shisu.edu.cn)

**Abstract:** Borges' short stories are celebrated for their allegorical and philosophical fancies. He is infatuated with the idea of representation, simulation, and reproduction, which abounds in his fantasies. The idea of simulation is naturally related to the concept of *Simulacra*. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum in *Simulacra and Simulation* is one of the most significant pillars of postmodern thought. With the aid of his theoretical framework, some new ways are provided to read Borges' works which are all-embracing and flexibly welcome the postmodern interpretation.

**Keywords:** Borges' short stories; Simulacra; Postmodernism

## 1 INTRODUCTION

To almost all literary critics and enthusiasts, the name Jorge Luis Borges inevitably evokes the genre of fantasy—the philosophical, allusive, and thus elusive artistically woven short stories. The fantastic forms the most extraordinary body of his fiction. Given the definition of Todorov, fantastic tales are the “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” [1]. It is something in-between, between “real” and the “imaginary”, an intermediating state necessitated by kaleidoscopically intricate cerebral and psychological exposure. It is a genre bred from folklores and nutritiously cultivated through its passage of Romantic roaring great minds, which are passed down to Borges as relatively fledged. Yet Borges developed something new. In his fantasies, he consciously approached and created the “Simulacra”. Simulacrum, in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, is “never what hides the truth – it is the truth that hides that there is none. The simulacrum is true” [2]. Borges' fantasies are rife with the postmodern concept, and this paper aims to interpret the simulacra in his short stories.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Simulacra, which implies likeness and similarity, is a representation or imitation of something. Baudrillard believes that the contemporary modern world is a simulacrum in which reality has been displaced by images. Postmodern culture has been highly dependent on models, patterns, and maps, overriding the real world that generated them. The consequence is that reality itself reversely imitates the model; in Baudrillard's words, “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory” [2]. What is real now is the signs of real become real itself, imitation, duplication, and even parody are not plausible for the situation given reality does not exist anymore: “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” [2]. Modern culture is not qualified to be an artefact, for it has lost the reality to contend against. He clarifies three “orders of simulacra” in his system: the first is the sheer *Counterfeit* of reality, being natural, harmonious and optimistic, existing in the pre-modern era, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution; the second is the one that prevails during the industrial revolution in 19<sup>th</sup> century, for the fissure between the two starts to tearing its way accompanied by the proliferation of prints, paradoxically, and the representing imitation reproduces reality way beyond it truly is, so named *Production*; the third, which is the one closest to our age, is *Simulation*—simulacra advance much further than reality and thus determining the reality, with the aid of cybernetic game and internet.

Baudrillard provided the distinction between two taxonomies: *representation* and *simulation*. Representation, by his definition, stems from “the equivalence of the sign and the real” even though the equivalence is somewhat ideal or utopian, while Simulation is bred from the opposition to the sign as value and the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Representation is not capable of containing simulation in its domain, though it has accentuated its falsifying effect. Simulation envelops the whole structure of representation as a simulacrum. Therefore, the successive phases of the image develop: a mere reflection of a profound reality, denaturing it, masking its absence, and at last, voiding it—it becomes its own pure simulacrum. Simulations thus become the parameters of postmodern theory, fuzzing the boundary between metaphysical and physical, as well as the original and its copy.

## 3 SIMULACRA IN BORGES' FANTASIES

### 3.1 “The Map”—Death of the Second-Order Simulacra

“If once we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map that ended up covering the territory exactly—as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable... possesses nothing but the

discrete charm of second-order simulacra"[2]. By the implication above, Baudrillard refers to Borges' impactful one-paragraph story "Of Exactitude in Science", which he takes as a primitive sort, as "the mirror of the concept"[3]. The story is an emblematic and allegorical text dealing with symbol/image, meaning/reality, and connection between the two. To begin with, the story itself is a simulacrum: Borges attempts to construct the atmosphere that this one paragraph is an extract from J.A. Suarez Miranda's *Travels of Praiseworthy Men*, published in 1658, with the elision of three dots, implying there are many preceding: "...In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City" [3]. According to background research, no such author exists named "Suarez Miranda," which is an alternate name used by Borges. By purportedly citing its source Borges' objective is notably achieved; anyone who reads this for the first would mistakenly take it as an excerpt and doubt why it appears in Borges' original work anthology. The story is factually an extension of Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*; it elaborates on the concept of a fictional map that has the scale of a mile to a mile. In this sense, the story first is a simulacrum of Carroll's story; then, it hides itself under a pseudonym, which adds to its imitative nature.

In the story, the cartographers managed to fabricate a gigantic map on the scale of one to one to its original point-to-point in need of an extensive map, but was considered to be too cumbersome and thus was left rotten under the sun and rain in some desert, lastly declined to be "tattered Fragments... Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar"[3]. The story reflected Borges's grounding belief in the existence of an original system that ordains order and experiences, for the Empire comes first, followed by the Map. The Map, albeit discursive and exaggerated, is drawn from the outline of the Empire as a blueprint. It operates still on the metaphysical level but in a field that goes beyond metaphysical and physical; so be it, as Baudrillard's verdict, the exploration of the second-order simulacrum.

On the side of its length, the laconic style reflects laterally his view on representation as well: the representation need not be as large and as exact, the fidelity can be achieved through the contraction of the size, or, to be more bluntly, as it is acting on in today's society, fidelity is not even the first concern. That is how it is categorized into the second-order by Baudrillard: the second-order simulacra, in essence, is a Promethean representation; it stands for materialization founded on energy and force and the need for expansion, the indulgence in unbounded proliferation. It is distinct from the pre-modern era where the representation was instinctive, with pristine piety to God and hope for restitution of nature as God's image.

The ending of the full replication of the Empire is to be weathered and corroded; it forebodes the collapse of the Empire—the decomposition of the reality, and the withering of its representation, substituted by the full domination of simulacra of the hyperreal age where it functions both as reality and representation—the death of the concept of both given there will remain nothing to correspond to and contrast with: "No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensively: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation"[2]. The ratio is no longer underway; the parameter has thrown itself into the fire, so there is nothing left to measure against; hence, the distance between the two, whether ideal or distorted. What remains ruined is the synthesis of arbitrarily combined models.

### 3.2 "The Aleph"—Proliferation of the Third-Order Simulacra

Borges' trope of simulacrum is, in essence, his solution after grappling for so long with the communication between the infinite linguistic structure of the universe and its expression in the real world. Recognizing the limitation of the language in transcribing the infinite is the first step in approaching the simulacrum. "The Aleph" is one of Borges' most preeminent short stories, discussing the issues of infinity and boundary, synchrony and diachrony, abstraction, and concreteness. The text is a manifestation of the possibility of condensing time and space into a single dot as its own simulation, and it problematizes how humans can assimilate the finite and then express the infinite, how to use language that is always sequential to describe something of simultaneity:

"How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols...any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal...What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive" [4].

The Aleph is the overthrow of the logic of linear time and three-dimensional space. As a simulacrum it breaks down the originality in pieces and reassembles them aligned to its own logic—as Frankenstein, also being a simulacrum but a reconstruction of the former order and the force to replace or dismember it. In this sense, simulacra replace the former "reality" and transcend it to have sovereignty and autonomy. As George Steiner put in *After Babel*, that "notion of an absolute idiom or cosmic letter- alpha and aleph- which underlies the rent fabric of human tongues"[5]. It imposes a plight for human beings, an aporia that requires the language system of logocentrism to present something ineffable.

"The Aleph" thematizes the multiple endeavors to incorporate the totality of experience into a single representative form, or the coexistence and compound, superimposed state. It is a microcosm containing all points, the entity of geographical and spatial things. Carlos Argentino Daneri, in the story, spots it in his cramped and dim basement, the inspiration source of his long poem composition in whose eyes is the culmination, the amalgamation of simulacra, the extreme. In it, the narrator, "Borges," sees everything everywhere all at once, including himself, his blood veins, and his cells.

The plentiful portraits of Beatriz displayed in her house suggest that her reality, first and foremost, is plural; Beatriz herself is an entity, a single form composed of these minor simulacrum, which outlived her virtually; then the narrator's

repeated visits on every year's birthday of Beatriz become simulacra of each other, and together they are tributaries under the totality of the memorial visiting. Carlos' expatiatory poetic attempt to exhaust numerous and interlocking earthly images functions as a simulacrum of the simulacrum (the "real" Aleph, apparently). The story treated Carlos and his artistic creation with contempt for the absurdity of his project to exhaust the experience on earth and mostly for the action itself is a simulacrum for the simulacrum, and insofar as it can never correspond to any reality in the present world—it could only be a third simulacrum henceforth, and the fact that it is awarded later in the story is ironically a satire to the current evaluation criterion of the world: Give priority and recognition to a simulacrum of the simulacrum over reality; his poem succeed as a third order or fourth phase simulacra.

This coincides with Plato's belief in exiling the poet from the Republic. Simulacra of the third order is the postmodern version of the fable. Carlos imitates the representation of representation, thus being equally thrice removed from the truth. Borges quotes Bacon in his other story, "The Immortal" that "Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Salomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion"[6]. Later, the narrator "Borges" rejects the authenticity, for later, he begins to forget things; nevertheless, it is a confirmation of the idea that knowledge is a remembrance that is highly untenable and susceptible to oblivion. His narration hence clarifies the relation of knowledge and simulacrum: encountering the Aleph is encountering a part of the inconceivable. Yet reality as the original of simulacra is distinct from what Plato asserted as aloft, timeless, and still "Form". The reality is ever-changing, and the ontology of the simulacrum itself functions as a simulacrum in Deleuze's sense of "becoming": "A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification" [7], it is different from what Plato defined as copy; it is neutral, not merely a reflection of priori ontology, a liminal space of the process and becoming, but also "eludes the action of idea as it contests both model and copy at once"[8], for it erases the differences between the finite and infinite, between the copy and its original; it moves freely. Beatriz appears in the first sentence of the story and ends it as its last word. "Borges'" affection for her associates the whole story. "Borges'" erotic desire leads to his epistemological anxiety that begins with the discovery of the obscene reality of Beatriz"[9]. Beatriz is dead, so what is left reachable are her photos and the memories of the narrator, which are simulacra. She is also attainable in the Aleph, for sure. All that represents her in the world now are simulacra. She is it, and she is equal to it. The revealing of Beatriz's erotic letters to Carlos to "Borges" is the beginning of his oblivion to the marvelous exchanging experience with Aleph, for the difficulties to bear it works as a strong obstruction. He rejects the seen Aleph and doubts its authenticity, starting to resort to other possible textual records and believing the true Aleph resides in some stone pillars of the mosque of Amr, which is unseen. His choice of the unseen over the seen reflects his distrust of the simulacrum; he is in favor of the tangible knowledge over the intangible and unknowable one, given his inclination to decline the "betrayal" of Beatriz to him. This aligns with Platonism, which states that the seen is always the inferior copy of the real, so it is a simulacrum that may corrupt the real.

The story thus reflects a strong incredulity towards a relatively neutral, intermediate state of things, the neither nor, the sheer becoming—simulacrum of the third order. In the postscript of the story Borges also points out his distrust of simulacrum on the ground that it is received through vision rather than audition, that the real Aleph is not visible to anyone but is accessible to "who(m) lay an ear against the surface" and "tell that after some short while they perceive its busy hum"[4]. This implies the superiority of auditory to visual sense concerning the channels of communication and acceptance; therefore, the unreliability of the simulacrum captured through an optical medium.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

It is no overstating that Baudrillard extracts inspirations and ideas from Boeges' fantasies, and somehow, the rich connotation goes beyond his perfunctory four-phase designation. According to Baudrillard, the fourth phase of the simulacra is the phase of late capitalism, which corresponds to the postmodern world, which witnesses the total destruction of logic and rationality in representation. This part of the world is anticipated by Borges in his stories "Of Exactitude in Science" and "The Aleph", two among many others. "Of the exactitude in science" is an allegorical fake extract that foresees the miserable moving direction of the representation to the real, which is gradually apart from it and at last independent of it and reigns. In "The Aleph", Borges rejects the simulacrum in a rather Platonic way that the narrator favors the unseen over the seen, yet the seen Aleph represents the totalizing sign of the physical world. Borges's postmodernism is shown by his self-conscious way of narration, which is highly intertextual and self-referential; his narration is composed of multiple layers of simulacrum.

Thus, it could be said that Borges is a postmodernist, but it is more appropriate to describe him as a metaphysician given his belief in the infinite and in systems of order, which somehow stand opposite to Lyotard's rejection of the Grand Narrative. His figuration of the simulacrum is one way he understands the world: "a partial glimpse of totality undermined by an awareness of the partiality of that glimpse"[9]. The complexity of his stories lies exactly in his awareness of him. Nevertheless, his rich imagination and prophetic fantasies do picture the very touchable future of human beings, in which left no real but simulacrum, and what we sing eulogies for is a mere simulacrum of the simulacrum; everything is in-between, nobody can be sure in the next second what they are seeing at this moment will transform into. In the future people might conceive the world upon the seen, make it its pedestal, the suspicious and dubious seen, and dream about the incorporeal and inaccessible unseen Empire to our rescue.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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