

New Media Forms and the Strange Loop of Subjectivity in Borges's "El milagro secreto"

David Laraway

Hladík, absurdamente, recordó las vacilaciones preliminares de los fotógrafos.
Borges, OC 1: 512

Can the loop be a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age?
Manovich 317

The scene is familiar to every reader of Borges. The protagonist lies in a darkened cell, awaiting the moment of his execution. His mind too has become a prison; a frustrated writer, he circles endlessly over the possibility of not so much physical escape as artistic redemption while he takes stock of a life unremarkably lived. Then, not one but two miracles occur. The first is the sudden, unanticipated revelation of a project of the imagination that would somehow redeem him; the second, his improbable completion of that task, the syntax of his work curiously mirroring his own life in ways he cannot fathom. The loop binding life and art together is completed only at the moment of his death, as if to suggest that the subject were unable to abide the fulfillment of its own fantasy. The wheel begins to turn once more as the reader dimly begins to realize that each time the text is read, the subject comes to life, dies, and then lives again. The reader comes to understand that she herself is not just a reader but a

witness. And not just a witness but a participant in the scene, the fact of her spectatorship somehow having enabled the impossible pursuit of the impossible satisfaction of an impossible desire.

We might say that Borges's "El milagro secreto" is, among other things, a story about the closing of the circuit of subjective desire. It is about the way, that is, that desire manages to erase or cancel the subject in the very moment of its satisfaction. The closing of the circuit, the completion of the narrative loop, entails the dissolution of the subject. And one might add that paradoxically that gesture of closure also unleashes a liberation of libidinal energies such that the project of organizing them again into the form of a subject may begin anew. This, I take it, is one of the morals to be drawn from the observation that every time a reader picks up a copy of "El milagro secreto," the protagonist comes to life once more, only to perish again at the tale's end.

Of course, this way of framing the matter already directs our attention not only to the theme of subjectivity but to the most general contours of the narrative itself. And as with so many others of Borges's canonical texts, "El milagro secreto" invites us to attend to a certain circular pattern in the very warp and woof of the tale. The attentive reader cannot help but notice that the narrative arc traced by the life of our protagonist, Jaromir Hladík, is more like a narrative circle, just as Hladík's own mad protagonist, Jaroslav Kubin, dwells in a kind of perpetual "delirio circular" (OC 1: 510) of which he will remain forever unaware. And just as Kubin follows endlessly the circular path of his own mad imagination so too we are invited to entertain the possibility that the beginning and end of the arc of Hladík's life also bend toward each other until they finally merge. They come to constitute a narrative circuit that is renewed and broken again with every reading of his story.

None of what I have had to say so far about the form of "El milagro secreto" is necessarily unique to this particular story. The notion of a circular narrative is of course explored in a number of Borges's other texts, most famously, perhaps, in "Las ruinas circulares". But I do think that "El milagro secreto" provides us with a distinctive opportunity and invitation to reflect more carefully upon the nature of the structure at issue. Indeed, I shall suggest that the text provides us with resources that would enable us to read the kind of circularity at stake in "El milagro secreto" as not merely

a familiar sort of rhetorical or organizational trope but rather in its more unabashedly material dimensions. In a word, I shall claim that the intertwined logics of circularity and desire that subtend Borges’s tale may be illuminated by specific narrative forms that were not fully developed until long after he had composed the work and which have now become indelible reference points in our electronic media-saturated cultural landscape. In particular, I shall argue that the techniques of photogrammetry that are employed to generate the so-called “bullet time” effect in film, along with the ubiquitous form of the looped graphic interchange format—better known as the “gif”—provide us with useful tools for examining the logic that subtends “El milagro secreto.” It will not do simply to note that the story’s form is circular, as if the mere identification of this geometric/narrative shape were sufficient to give full expression to the conceptual richness and complexity of Borges’s work. Rather, if the narrative form of the tale were really intrinsic to its meaning, we would need to spell out in more detail precisely what this might suggest.

It must be said that methodological pitfalls lie everywhere in wait. The most obvious of these is the temptation to read Borges not just anachronistically but in a naively anticipatory vein, as an expression of what Andrew Brown has called a “desire for a Borgesian present” without ever having properly attended to the generative—and not merely descriptive—dimensions of our own readings. We do this when we we breathlessly “discover” that Borges had already foreseen the internet, or hypertext, or Wikipedia, or what have you, long before these things came into being.¹ Furthermore, as David Ciccoricco has argued, we may readily succumb to the temptation to regard Borges’s texts as tacitly operating in a mode of incompleteness or deficiency, thinking that, for instance, the emergence of electronic and digital media would represent a logical extension of creative postulates that Borges himself would have embraced, had they but been available to him (Ciccoricco 73-87).

1 Brown makes the intriguing suggestion that we might think of these impossibly forward-looking avatars of Borges as *hrönir*. And as with the curious artifacts described in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the question of their authenticity is misguided from the start. Rather, we ought to regard these *hrönir*-Borges figures as having emerged, at least in part, as a product of our own (presumably unwitting) interpretive labors (237).

To be sure, there is much yet to be done in developing what I would call a “hermeneutics of prolepsis” with respect to Borges’s work.² I will not pretend to do so here. The reflections regarding “El milagro secreto” that follow are exegetical rather than strictly theoretical or methodological in nature and accordingly will have to be judged by their fruits, i.e., whatever interpretive insights they yield which the reader may deem valuable. But perhaps this much can be said by way of a provisional hypothesis. Bolter and Grusin’s 1999 study of the phenomenon of remediation provided a crucial landmark in its identification of the complex ways in which new media forms “remediate” or reconstitute old ones. They do so not so much by eclipsing them as by recycling and repurposing them to accommodate new expressive possibilities afforded by developments in technology. And old media, in turn, are reimagined in terms of the challenges and affordances posed by more recent forms (cf. 3-15). Bolter and Grusin are manifestly not interested in the latter phenomenon as constituting any sort of metaphysical problem but rather as a practical consequence of older and newer media forms living side-by-side. But the notion of remediation does grant us license, I would suggest, to imagine ways in which traditional media forms, such as the narrative genres that constituted Borges’s literary world, might at the same time be seen to resonate powerfully with mediatic forms that arose long after his works were published. Again, I cannot hope here to defend the theoretical postulates that would subtend any more ambitious claim about the temporality of media forms nor pretend to justify creatively anachronistic readings of Borges in general. But inasmuch as a careful study of those forms in “El milagro

2 Such a project, as I envision it, would necessarily focus on the rhetorical constitution of Borges’s texts, so as to explain how they seem to actively solicit anachronistic readings on our part. This has long been a feature of popular and journalistic approaches to Borges, as Brown and others have noted (Brown 231; see Cohen). Yet another sort of odd prolepsis in “El milagro secreto” has been noted by Balderston, who observes that the information that Borges draws upon in elaborating the tale was so historically fresh that some of the details he included—such as the allusion to the “Final Solution”—were not even widely known at the time the story was written. The story exhibits, Balderston observes, a certain “historical prescience” (63) and he notes as well that that Hladik’s obsessive behaviors prior to his execution proved to be uncannily similar to those that were later reported by death camp survivors (156).

secreto” may shed light upon the story’s thematic concerns, perhaps the effort is worth making.³

BORGES IN BULLET TIME

Let us pick up the thread of “El milagro secreto,” not at the story’s beginning but rather toward its end, which will turn out at any rate to be the same thing. Our hero, Jaromir Hladík, a somewhat mediocre Jewish intellectual in Prague, stands with his back to the wall—literally—awaiting the volley of Nazi bullets that will end his life and prevent him from completing his life’s work, a play in verse entitled “Los enemigos.” But his waiting is suddenly interrupted, albeit not precisely in the way he had anticipated: “El piquete se formó, se cuadró. Hladík, de pie contra la pared del cuartel, esperó la descarga. Alguien temió que la pared quedara maculada de sangre. Hladík, absurdamente, recordó las vacilaciones preliminares de los fotógrafos. Una pesada gota de lluvia rozó una de las sienes de Hladík y rodó lentamente por su mejilla” (OC 1: 512).

Although it is easy enough to miss, the allusion to the scene as something akin to a photographic composition is significant, for its constituent elements are indeed framed not just functionally but aesthetically. Fittingly, the description of this intervention is in my view as vivid and rich as any description Borges has ever offered.⁴ Now ready to proceed, the sergeant barks out the decisive command. And then we read this:

El universo físico se detuvo.
Las armas convergían sobre Hladík, pero los hombres que iban a matarlo estaban inmóviles. El brazo del sargento eternizaba un ademán

3 Another essential reference point for a more theoretically informed study than I am able to provide here has been offered by Jerónimo Arellanos. Taking as his starting point Borges’s brief “Del Rigor en la Ciencia,” he highlights the way that material technologies of inscription have been figured in Borges and warns of the dangers of ignoring the limitations and affordances of particular mediatic platforms, including more recent, inscriptionally complex, works of fiction (405-25).

4 The point here is subtle enough that it is missed in Victoria Pineda’s otherwise excellent reading of “El milagro secreto” in light of Poe’s “The Oval Portrait.” One of the differences between the two stories, she suggests, is that Borges’s text is peppered with allusions to the process of literary composition while Poe’s makes reference to pictorial composition (135). But in the reading I develop, the elements of visual composition in Borges’s tale are likewise absolutely essential to its meaning.

inconcluso. En una baldosa del patio una abeja proyectaba una sombra fija. El viento había cesado, como en un cuadro. Hladík ensayó un grito, una sílaba, la torsión de una mano. Comprendió que estaba paralizado. (OC 1: 512)

The sergeant's arm hangs unchanging in the air while the shadow of a bee remains is etched upon a patio tile: the array of elements that constitute the image could not be more evocative in their arrangement. Indeed, we might claim that the sliver of time captured in this description is as much an aesthetic artifact as a realistic depiction of the scene. And of course it is fitting that the visual dimensions of the description are highlighted once again in our narrator's decision to describe the scene as a *cuadro*, as if to remind us of its status as a carefully framed visual display, a still life from which all movement has apparently been subtracted.

Even as Borges's narrator invites us to regard the scenario as a visual composition, we find ourselves obliged to deal with the representational challenge that it provides, above all because three different narrative positions come into play simultaneously in the story's climax. On the one hand, of course, we have Hladík, our primary focalizer, who perceives the normal flow of time as having been disrupted, even as he labors to complete his work in the allotted time. On the other hand, we are tacitly invited to imagine the perspective represented by members of the Gestapo firing squad, who would have had no reason to believe that anything out of the ordinary had occurred as they carry out the execution at the scheduled time. And finally we have the position of the reader, who, in her attempt to grapple with the interpretive challenge that the story presents—i.e., deciding whether to read the event as a subjective miracle or an entirely naturalistic phenomenon—is invited to toggle back and forth between the two, perhaps never really alighting decisively upon either alternative.⁵

Borges had good reason to describe the scene as a *cuadro*, as the term suggests a cessation of motion and an invitation for the viewer to inspect at his or her leisure the elements that make up the picture. But even so, it

5 Perhaps this is one of the reasons that some critics are more inclined to either take at face-value the supernatural element of the story or at least regard it as an allegory of literary creation (see, for example, Abreu Mendoza, Waldegaray, and McMurray), while others are more drawn to more narrowly naturalistic readings of the text (Bell-Villada, Priel).

is worth noting that this term is not altogether satisfactory. Indeed, the narrator himself seems to acknowledge as much in his confession that the figure he has employed is only a simile, a likeness, an approximation of something else that continues to defy description: “el viento había cesado,” he tells us, “*como en un cuadro*” (OC 1: 512; italics mine). Just as he had made use of a simile to compare the composition of the scene to the labors of a photographer, the narrator suggests that he too continues to seek the name of a figure that escapes him, just as Hladík himself will be occupied with a search for that final elusive epithet that would complete his work.

Perhaps, I would venture, the narrator searches fruitlessly for the name of this figure for the simple reason that it did not exist when the tale was first composed. And just as Hladík will suddenly strike upon the verbal formula he has been seeking—a formula, we should note, that is never revealed to the reader—I would suggest that we do have available to us a name for the figure that our narrator endeavors to describe, and which apparently remained hidden from him. Or, if not a name per se, then an instrument for more completely and satisfactorily characterizing the figure at issue.

In 1998, more than a half century after “El milagro secreto” was published, television viewers were impressed by the appearance of an extraordinary commercial by clothing retailer The Gap featuring the old Louis Prima tune, “Jump, Jive, an’ Wail.” The live-action ad featured dancers leaping into the air in real time, when their images would suddenly be frozen while the camera appeared to pan around them. Once the freeze-frame had concluded, the action resumed as before. The spot was a striking example of one particular use of photogrammetry, namely, the technique of firing simultaneously (or almost simultaneously) a bank of cameras arranged in close proximity to each other so as to yield a collage of highly similar photographs of the subject. Software is then used to stitch the photographs together into a single moving image.⁶ The Gap’s

6 Strictly speaking, photogrammetry simply involves the use of photography to demarcate geometric relations between objects, but the term has been widely used to designate the reconception of digital photography as the art of data capture, rather than a mere collection of digitally generated images. As Willis puts it, “photogrammetry is akin to taking a picture with the main exception that instead of capturing a single image, you instead capture multiple images; these multiple images understand [sic] where they

advertisement earned a degree of notoriety unusual for such spots and it was instrumental in bringing a new tool for visual narration to the attention of the viewing public (Swing Club).

The techniques associated with photogrammetry—a felicitous marriage of cinematography and software—imprinted themselves definitively upon public consciousness a year later, with the release of the Wachowski siblings’ film *The Matrix*. Like the ad from The Gap, *The Matrix* likewise prominently featured the technique and it was by any account a groundbreaking technological achievement in the history of cinema. This time, however, the technique was placed at the service of a fast-paced, high-action, philosophically ambitious film that used it to signal the special mode of personal enlightenment that had been achieved by Neo, the film’s messianic hero, and his associates, who have come to see that they live in a sort of computer simulation. Early in the film the Wachowskis drop their calling card: Trinity, one of the film’s protagonists, takes on a trio of hapless police officers in a fight scene that shows the latter dramatically overmatched by the female lead. What might have been a conventional fight scene is dramatically enriched by a shot in which Trinity leaps into the air to deliver a kick to one of her opponents only to have the camera’s representation of the action paused as it traced a 180-degree arc around the two actors. Although it has perhaps become almost overly familiar technique to us now (cf. Rehak), it is important to recall how amazing the shot was for many viewers at the time, for it was not only an impressive technological achievement but it managed to subtly impeach some of our most cherished intuitions about the nature of filmic subjectivity. As Bukatman has noted, scenes such as this one seem to “decentre humanity by supplanting ‘character-oriented subjectivity’ with vehicular or autonomous movement” (qtd. in Jones 136). It would not be too much to say that bullet time emblemizes a dramatic shift in how we understand the subject, as it both radically de-centers subjectivity and yet reinscribes it in a non-empirical, non-anthropomorphic subject. The gaze, to be sure, continues to be privileged by photogrammetric bullet-time but it issues now from an impossible fantasy space that is irreduc-

are spatially relative to all of the other images, allowing you to then stitch the images together to create a mosaic or composite images that contains a high degree of detail, both representational and topographic” (64).

ible to any particular subjective position. When the camera rotates around a temporally stationary object or character, the space that we occupy as viewers is strictly analogous to the kind of fantasy space occupied by the noumenal subject. It is, as Purse notes, a way of suggesting to the spectator that “he or she can see *everything*,” which is another way of saying that that the spectator occupies no particular empirical or anthropomorphic subject position at all (cf. Purse 158; italics in original). We cannot but recall Freud’s description of the fundamental fantasy, which, in addition to its more familiar version consisting of the subject imagining or fantasizing about being present at the moment of his or her own conception, also includes the fantasy that one may view the scene of one’s own death from a radically non-contingent position, thus rendering one’s death a mere accident, rather than a metaphysical necessity.⁷

The film’s pioneering use of the techniques of photogrammetry is used to set up *The Matrix*’s final climactic scene, one that, strictly speaking, does not rely upon the bullet-time effect, even if it now presupposes our familiarity with it. The sequence involves the definitive encounter between Neo and his nemesis, Agent Smith. Smith and his team carefully take aim at Neo and launch a hail of bullets at him. It would appear that all is lost. But then the miracle occurs: in what had appeared destined to be the moment of his demise, Neo manages to achieve an enlightened state of awareness, fully grasping the nature of the matrix in which he is embedded. And this enlightenment consists in recognizing not only the computer code that structures his sensory experience but his own ability to rewrite that code on the fly. And so it is that the swarm of bullets fired from the Smith’s gun suddenly hangs motionless in mid-air before him, rather like the bee in Borges’s story that casts a motionless shadow upon

7 The position occupied by the viewer is strictly analogous to the position that Hladik himself seeks to occupy. Upon learning of his death sentence, Hladik, it will be recalled, attempts to exhaustively imagine every possible combination of circumstances that might attend his death. The point is not that he wished to somehow predetermine any fatal outcome for himself but rather that by exhausting every contingent possibility of imagining his own death as an empirical subject, he might somehow bootstrap himself into a subjective position that we might properly regard as noumenal. By fully anticipating and thus transcending every conceivable empirical perspective, he might in some way affirm himself as a subject that is irreducible to any particular subjective position, thereby cheating death itself (cf. Johnston 32-44).

the patio. Neo bemusedly plucks a bullet from the air before him and casually inspects it before letting it fall harmlessly to the ground.

The point is as subtle as it is powerful. It is not just as if time stopped for Neo; it is as if bullet-time itself had stopped. Or, rather, we might say that we now experience an odd sort of deepening of bullet-time that in essence amounts to its reversal. It is not a case now of the human subject being arrested mid-action as the subjective camera moves freely to take in the scene unimpeded. Rather, it is almost as if the true subject itself—the noumenal subject, not the anthropomorphized, empirical one—had come to be associated with the subjective camera, which now moves unimpeded through the gallery of objects that had defined the contours of the impossible fantasy space. This is not a case of simply reverting to the default position of the subjective anthropomorphic observer. Rather, it is as if, having passed through the crucible of bullet time, Neo—or, more accurately, the viewers of the film for whom Neo serves as a focalization device—had identified the (non-localizable) twist in the Möbius strip of the story's narrative, the impossible join where the empirical subject shades into the noumenal subject who occupies an impossible fantasy space.

Although the moment occupies but a few seconds of screen time, it undoubtedly marks the film's climax as the consciousness of our protagonist is displaced from its contingent spot in the matrix of mundane causes and effects. Perhaps predictably, Neo directs his (now noumenal) gaze toward Smith but he no longer perceives him as a discrete set of sensory impressions but rather as endlessly looping, endlessly scrolling lines of computer code. Again, it is not just that Neo at the moment of his enlightenment learns that everything around him is code—of course the most die-hard physicalist would have no trouble accepting the claim that our senses and nervous system ultimately deliver nothing more than electrical pulses to our brain—nor is it that he can suddenly read the world as computer code. Rather, it is that he comes to appreciate the radically creative role that he is now entitled to assume as the author of that code.⁸

8 It should be pointed out that others in the film—Cypher, for instance—can also render code on the fly. In one scene, for example, Cypher gazes at lines of scrolling code on a screen, visualizing the data as human characters. But this is merely the demonstration of an ability to “see” already-written code as it would appear were it to be rendered by means of a graphical interface. Presumably, sufficient exposure to the code in question

Neo’s sudden moment of anagnorisis, his epiphanic recognition of who he truly is, assuming the full weight of the truth that “He is the One,” is functionally identical to Hladík’s acceptance of the fact that it is only as an author that he exists, if he exists at all (OC 1: 511). It would seem that to exist, to extricate oneself from the tangled web of empirical causes and effects, is to affirm oneself, not on the fleeting, contingent level of the empirical but on the level of the noumenal, fully outside of time and space. Borges’s hero stands before the wall, his eyes now wide open to his fate—and finally sees himself as the author of a truly free creative act. This author, like every author whose work is not parasitic or derivative, may lay claim to being, like Neo, the “One,” a being whose capacity to create renders him, at least fleetingly, a god. The moment of Neo’s anagnoristic reverie occupies but a few seconds of screen time; in terms of sheer duration, it is perhaps no briefer than the amount of time that it takes us to read the paragraph containing Borges’s stunning description of Hladík’s static world. But it is to be understood that this creative gesture is as radically atemporal as is the fantasy itself. At any rate, the creative gesture is as much an aesthetic act as a metaphysical one and we might even go so far as to say that they are two sides of the same coin (or, better yet, Möbius strip).

It is important to not lose sight of the way in which the logic of bullet time may illuminate one of the key elements of “El milagro secreto,” one that has proven particularly vexing to readers. The *cuadro* that Hladík takes in during the story’s climactic moment is subtended by a logic that cannot be fully captured by the genre of still photography to which the narrator had turned in order to explain it. For while the form of the static composition may invite one’s disinterested (or at least temporally unencumbered) perception, it doesn’t fully account for the perceiving subject’s simultaneous immersion in—and distance from—the depicted scene. It is of the essence of Hladík’s situation, I have argued, that the perceiving subject here be understood as a kind of noumenal subject rather than an empirical one: this subject inhabits an impossible fantasy space and indeed it is from this impossible fantasy space that the subject’s perceptions issue. Likewise, the narrative logic of Borges’s tale also outstrips the metaphor of still photography insofar as that particular two-dimensional medium

could result in a semi-automatic capacity to visualize it graphically, much as a trained musician can “hear” music by simply reading a score.

cannot capture the story's tacit invitation to the reader to step into the scene. To be sure, Hladík is our primary focalizer and we are given direct access to his thoughts, or at least the narrator's summary of them. But we should note that even though Hladík's eyes are presumably immobile, we nevertheless enjoy free reign for our gaze to pass from one item—say, the hovering bee—to another, say, the face of the soldiers or the wisps of lingering cigarette smoke. In fact, we might readily imagine that a filmed version of the scene would, like *The Matrix*, allow us to move in, out, and around the immobile objects that populate the frame.

However, it is important to point out that the stories of Hladík and Neo diverge in crucial ways as well. The latter, for instance, enjoys his newly-found messianic powers in a way that Borges, the eternal skeptic, would never have granted his characters.⁹ If the moment of anagnorisis for Neo makes it possible for him to assume a truly heroic posture, Hladík's fate is to be much more ambiguous at best. While the Wachowskis suggest in *The Matrix* that the hero's test is his willingness to embrace his own messianic identity, Borges will understand this moment to be the closing of a circuit that is much more complex than the conventionally heroic narrative arc of *The Matrix*. The moment of Hladík's redemption will prove to be indistinguishable from the moment of his decline and demise. The figure of bullet time cannot help us here as much as we would like, for the fantasy space that it opens up is maximally unstable. What kind of figure might help us understand the workings of this uncanny space? To make sense of this curiously precarious and yet endlessly enduring fantasy space, we must turn to yet another new media form that entered our cultural field long after Borges's story was published.

THE STRANGE LOOP OF DESIRE

At a metadiegetic level, "El milagro secreto" may correctly be said to obey a kind of circular logic. As we noted earlier, the reader's engagement of the story of Hladík in "El milagro secreto" serves not only to actualize

9 Consider, as a case in point, the fate of Tzinacán, the kingly protagonist of "La escritura del dios." The beneficiary of his own secret miracle, Tzinacán is given all power but cannot bring himself to exercise it, as the bestowal of that power had entailed the sacrifice of his own individual will (OC 1: 596-99).

latent narrative possibilities in the text but to close the loop that binds Hladík to his protagonist, Kubin. Just as Kubin is trapped within the “delirio circular” of a never-ending, endlessly repeating play, so too Jaromir Hladík traces an endless loop, one that is only visible as such from the external vantage point of the reader of “El milagro secreto.” The point, so baldly stated, is almost banal: every time the text is read—or, as we might say, “performed,” in keeping with the theatrical dimensions of the work (Quackenbush)—our protagonist comes to life, is once again imprisoned, and once again completes his play just as the bullets penetrate his flesh. And then he arises anew as his story is read once again. The narrative possibilities associated with bullet time capture the internal logic of the impossible moment of Hladík’s creative labors. But it cannot account for the metadiegetic looping of the story. How might we begin to properly conceptualize this never-ending looping of the narrative itself as it is consumed again and again by Borges’s reader?

I will claim that the figure that we seek is one that, like Poe’s letter, has become invisible because it is virtually ubiquitous today. Perhaps more than any other form of new media, the looping gif has become so pervasive that one observer has gone so far as to call it “the preeminent narrative device of our time” (Sorgatz). In its most familiar form, the gif—short for “graphic interchange format”—as a data organization tool goes back at least as far as the 1993 MCSA Mosaic browser, which was the first online browser to render images and text together online (Eppink).¹⁰ From that point it was just a matter of time before gifs were to become a staple of online communication.¹¹ Particular online platforms and hosting sites, such as Tumblr, were soon to provide particularly fertile soil for resourceful programmers and aficionados to work within the limitations of the tool to create and share looped images, which now could feature endlessly repeating snippets of video (Eppink). And it was not long before the gif began to appear in a variety of more popular online environments as well.

10 And as Eppink points out in his brief historical sketch of the gif, its conceptual roots may be traced back to a number of 19th century devices such as the zoetrope. Certainly it is feasible that Borges could have taken inspiration from such devices even if in fact he did have them in mind when composing the story.

11 In addition to Eppink, see also Johnson’s excellent history of the way that digital artists have learned to harness the expressive possibilities of the looped gif.

Many contemporary uses of the gif are whimsical, as in *BuzzFeed* articles which weave them into “listicles:” these gifs tend to feature clips culled from popular films or television shows with an eye toward succinctly communicating some particular affective stance toward the topic in question. In other cases, gifs are often used for more narrowly informational purposes. For example, they may be used to communicate information about, say, patterns in the relocation trends of Syrian refugees or the unpredictable movement of R.A. Dickey’s knuckleball.

It is crucial to note that while the gif may have a particular narrative dimension—namely, the representation of a particular event unfolding sequentially in time—that the informational content of the gif cannot be reduced to a strictly linear narrative. The very nature of the gif is such that its meaning is only disclosed through repetition and not through what we might call the root narrative itself. Speaking of a loop that simultaneously depicts all of LeBron James’s shots against the San Antonio Spurs in the 2013 NBA finals, Sorgatz notes that the gif in question

lasts only four seconds, but one could gaze at it for quite some time. It almost seems to contain the entire history of the game, evoking a sense of the data, like a visual stats card. It has information inside of it, but we can only understand the data by repetition. By definition, you have to watch The Loop [sic] again and again to understand its depth. Loops are not short films. Loops are more like spreadsheets: data, but with a fourth dimension, time. (Sorgatz)

And here we have Kubin, endlessly hearing the clock strike seven as dusk falls, endlessly killing a conspirator, endlessly receiving guests that endlessly repeat the same words, totally oblivious to his entrapment within the loop that totally circumscribes his world (OC 1: 510). And here too we have Hladík, endlessly lamenting his misfortune and trying to imagine his way out of it, endlessly writing and re-writing Kubin’s story, endlessly felled by the Gestapo’s bullets, forever oblivious to the ways in which his fate so closely mirrors that of the protagonist he has created.

It is difficult to imagine a more suitable narrative or rhetorical figure to lay bare this particular feature of the logic of Borges’s story than that of the gif. It will not do to say simply that the stories of Kubin and Hladík trace similar arcs and that the story of each character begins anew precisely where it had ended, one paralleling the other. At issue is not merely

a closed, circular loop in which the character merely returns to the point where they had begun. Or, at least it is not just that. It is true, of course, that every iteration of Kubin’s play *Los enemigos* is indistinguishable from every other one: the fiftieth or millionth version of the work in Kubin’s mind would not differ in any respect from the first. But that is not to say that the endless looping of the work does not result in the gradual emergence of fresh new meanings, albeit ones that can only be appreciated by the spectator or reader and not by the character trapped inside. Borges’s narrator tells us as much: as the play is staged again and again, it is the observer who makes the crucial discovery: “el espectador entiende que Roemerstadt es el miserable Jaroslav Kubin” (OC 1: 510). This is a kind of knowledge or awareness that is only made available through the kind of repetition native to the media form of the gif.

In short, although every element of the play was always fully inscribed materially within the text from its first iteration or performance, the meaning could not be described by its audience until the narrative had begun to loop and repeat. And the simple reason for this gradual unfolding of meaning when the root narrative itself had remained unchanged is the presence of the audience of “*Los enemigos*” and the reader of “*El milagro secreto*.” From our vantage point outside of the loops inhabited by Kubin and Hladík, the structure of their constraining narratives is gradually disclosed to us, even as we come to see those patterns that of necessity will be invisible to the characters themselves. The kind of repetition at issue is thus an essential one for, as Sorgatz succinctly notes in his discussion of the gif, “without the repetition, you would not see the data.” One is almost tempted to go a step further and say, in homage to Borges’s famous essay, “*Kafka y sus precursors*,” that the data would not even properly exist—or at least would not be imbued with the same meaning—without subsequent generations of readers, writers, and spectators who essentially constitute that data as such, by dint of their own interpretive labors (cf. OC 2: 88-90).

This is one of the advantages that the figure of the gif affords us as a tool for explicating Borges’s story: it reveals the critical role of the reader or observer in unpacking (and thus constituting) the story’s meaning. We readers come to stand in precisely the same relation to Hladík as he stands to Kubin, our witnessing of the event somehow perpetuating it. Our role

is not simply that of spectator but of witness, and not simply witness, but the driving force behind the endless looping of the narrative itself.

It is important to be clear about the kind of repetition associated with the gif, by way of contrast to the kind of repetitive exercises of the imagination in which Hladík had been engaged prior to the bestowal of his secret miracle. We noted earlier that there was a Freudian tale to be told about how Hladík's attempts to imagine his way out of predicament could be read as an attempt to address the fundamental fantasy, i.e., in terms of the competing modalities of the necessity of death in general and the merely contingent means by which we might meet our own individual demise. But another explanation, also familiar to admirers of Freud, commends itself to us as well: we might speculate that Hladík's repeated efforts to anticipate obsessively the circumstances of his death might be explained by means of a story about the connection between trauma and repetition. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had famously argued that compulsive repetition could be understood in many cases to be a response to trauma, experienced or anticipated, and as a symptom of the drive toward death itself (Rogers). Indeed, there is nothing to prevent us from explaining Hladík's fruitless attempts to imagine exhaustively the circumstances of his death beforehand by appealing to a connection between repetition and the death drive.

However, it is not clear that the kind of repetition at stake in the structure of "El milagro secreto" could be reduced to this kind of symptomatic interpretation (although it need not be altogether incompatible with it). What I have been arguing, rather, is that Borges's tale seems to evince a notion of repetition—expressed through the figure of the gif—that we might instead call algorithmic or mechanical repetition, rather than symptomatic repetition.¹² The mechanisms that generate the sort of end-

12 Rogers's treatment of Freud's rather messy and inconsistent discussion of repetition is helpful here. As Rogers notes, Freud often discusses repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as entirely symptomatic and then invents the notion of the death drive as if to give it a referent. But, as Rogers points out, the problem of neurosis can also be seen as what he calls a "sign in circuit." "Rather than being a thing in itself, a disease entity," he says, "neurotic repetition becomes not the problem but a mode of representation of the problem" (583). Just so, we might understand the operative notion of repetition in "El milagro secreto" to be semiotic, or, as I have been describing it, algorithmic or mechanical.

less looping that the story both describes and embodies are not psychological in nature, or least not exclusively so. Rather, they are essentially algorithmic, the product of a function that mechanically generates self-perpetuating narrative structures. In short, they constitute an executable code. To run the code, to begin to set the narrative cycle in motion, is to necessarily occlude the subject. But the subject does not vanish altogether. It remains as something like a stain or a material opacity, the unlocalizable but decisive location of the twist in the Möbius loop of the narrative. Borges's characters—and the characters created by his characters—are inevitably blind to some aspect of their own being. This blindness would appear to be as inevitable as it is tragic, and it both fuels the narratives of their lives as well as condemns them to a fate that they will never be able to grasp fully. Again, the physiognomy of this problem could perhaps be rendered in a variety of critical vocabularies, including standard psychoanalytical ones. But, I would argue, recent technological developments that have resulted in new forms of visual media—in particular the techniques of photogrammetry associated with the bullet-time effect in cinema and the form of the looped gif—have provided us with an invitation to read Borges anew. And the Borges that we are called to appreciate in stories such as “El milagro secreto” is one whose texts seem inevitably and indissolubly to bind the most elemental aspects of human subjectivity to particular mediatic forms, both old and new alike.

David Laraway
Brigham Young University

WORKS CITED

- Abreu Mendoza, Carlos. "Borges y el 'milagro secreto' de la creación literaria." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 36.69 (2009): 279-93.
- Arellano, Jerónimo. "Writing on the Desert: Latin American Narrative and the Materiality of Media Forms." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 46 (2012): 405-25.
- Balderston, Daniel. *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Bell-Villada, Gene H. *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art*. Austin: U Texas P, 1999.
- Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras completas*. 4 vols. Ed. Carlos V. Frías. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989.
- Ciccoricco, David. "Borges, Technology, and the Same Infinite Substance as the Night." *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges*. Ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2009. 73-87.
- Cohen, Noam. "Borges and the Foreseeable Future." *New York Times* 6 January 2008.
- Eppink, Jason. "A Brief History of the Gif (So Far)." *Journal of Visual Culture* 13.3 (2014): 298-306.
- Johnson, Paddy. "A Brief History of Animated GIF Art." *Artnet.com*. 2 August 2014.
- Johnston, Adrian. *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2008.
- Jones, Nick. *Hollywood Action Film and Spatial Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT, 2001.

- The Matrix*. Dir. Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski. Warner Bros, 1999.
- McMurray, George R. "Borges's 'The Secret Miracle': A Self-Conscious, Self-Begetting *Ficción*." *In Honor of Boyd G. Carter: A Collection of Essays*. Ed. Catherine Vera and George R. McMurray. Laramie: U of Wyoming, 1981. 43-48.
- Pineda, Victoria. "Borges y Poe: la sombra de 'The Oval Portrait' en 'El milagro secreto.'" *Variaciones Borges* 29 (2010): 127-40.
- Priel, Beatriz. "Negation in Borges's 'The Secret Miracle': Writing the Shoah." *Key Papers in Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Paul Williams and Glen O. Gabbard. London: Karnac, 2007. 139-57.
- Purse, Lisa. "The New Spatial Dynamics of the Bullet-Time Effect." *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'Reality' TV and Beyond*. Ed. Geoff King. Bristol: Intellect, 2005. 151-60.
- Quackenbush, L. Howard. "Borges' Tragedy." *Hispanófila* 92 (1988): 77-86.
- Rogers, Robert. "Freud and the Semiotics of Repetition." *Poetics Today* 8.3-4 (1987): 579-90.
- Sorgatz, Rex. "Trapped in The Loop." *Tribecafilm.com*. 6 May 2014.
- Swing Club at UVA, "Gap Commercial – Khaki Swing." YouTube. 13 August, 2006.
- Waldegaray, Marta Inés. "'La otra muerte' y 'El milagro secreto': Relaciones entre literatura e historia." *Variaciones Borges* 17 (2004): 187-97.
- Willis, Holly. *Fast Forward: The Future(s) of the Cinematic Arts*. London: Wallflower P, 2016.