THE EXTRASEMIOTIC IN BORGES' "THE LIBRARY OF BABEL"

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Whether the universe is perfused by signs, or whether there is an extrasemiotic realm, is one of the fundamental questions in the field of semiotics.

In his *Handbook of Semiotics* (1990), Winfried Nöth draws a distinction between *transsemiotic agnosticism* ("nothing can be said about the nonsemiotic world"), and *pansemiotism* ("the whole world is a semiotic sphere") (81). To say that everything is semiotic, it seems to me, is the same as saying that nothing is semiotic. What is semiotic from the point of view of one system may be meaningless from another. Or vice versa.

I was looking for examples to illustrate these theoretical questions when Borges' classic story about the vastness and limits of signification came to mind. "The Library of Babel" (1941) turned out to be an ideal example. This is how it begins: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle, encircled by low railings" (79). Thus, in the very first sentence, as we shall see in more detail during our study, Borges has divided the universe of signification into two spheres: one that contains a vast system of signs (the books in the library), and a 'nonsemiotic' system in which "the enormous ventilation shafts" serve a special function.

The coexistence of these mutually exclusive systems marks the boundary between the semiotic and nonsemiotic registers in Borges' story. More generally, it exemplifies the way a semiotic system is defined, and limited, in relation to the extrasystem, that is, in relation to what lies outside its borders. One of "the fundamental questions relating to the description of any semiotic system," writes Jurij Lotman at the outset of *Culture and Explosion* (2009), is its "relation to the extra-system, to the world that lies beyond its borders" (1). This is true when we consider any semiotic system—even if the system is a metaphor for all systems of signification. The much-studied structure of Borges' lasting story illustrates this theoretical question in a remarkable manner. To approach it, we must first offer an outline of the general theoretical context.

Some Theoretical Perspectives

In the 1860s the American polymath Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) observed that a sign could be explained only through another sign,
which leads to an infinite chain of signs. Perhaps the lapse of a century justifies the validity of this idea. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1977), Umberto Eco describes Peirce's notion of the *interpretant* (which is not to be confused with *interpreter* or with *interpretation*). "The most fruitful hypothesis," he writes, "would seem to be that of conceiving the interpretant as another representation which is referred to the same 'object.' In other words, in order to establish what the interpretant of a sign is, it is necessary to name it by means of another sign and so on. At this point there begins a process of unlimited semiosis, which, paradoxical as it may be, is the only guarantee for the foundation of a semiotic system capable of checking itself entirely by its own means" (68).

Peirce's model, which we can only mention here most superficially, has been extensively applied to the study of anthroposemiotics (the study of human signifying processes), but not exclusively. It has also been applied to *zoosemiotics* (the study of signifying processes of speechless animals), as well as biosemiotics (the study of all other signifying processes in the biosphere). Venturing into possible areas of sign activity in the inorganic world, in *Basics of Semiotics* (1990) John Deely hypothesized an even "more inclusive macroscopic realm of evolution in general," which he calls *physiosemiosis." This is a process whereby first stars and then planetary systems develop out of a more primitive atomic and molecular "dust", but these systems in turn give rise to conditions under which greater complexifications of atomic structure become possible" (30).

Deely, an assiduous student of the semiotics of John Poinson (1589–1644), draws a distinction between *virtual* and *actual semiosis*. Everything is potentially significant: a bone fossil, for instance, may be interpreted to be part of a dinosaur by a paleontologist. But the interpretant, as Deely observes following Peirce, does not need to be a person or a "psychical structure." The paleontologist could be replaced by a "geological stone formation that used to be a bone" (90). Here, "the bone, or the rock formation that used to be a bone, is 'not a sign formally but virtually and fundamentally', as Poinson puts it" (90–91).

This proposition stretches our understanding of signs and sign processes to all "relational phenomena." Since everything is in a constant state of change, movement, and relation, everything could be potentially a sign. In the fecundity of Peirce's work, Deely finds confirmation for his thesis. He quotes a 1907 passage where Peirce writes, "the *utterer* and the *interpreter* of a sign don't have to be two persons; they could be animals, insects, or even the weather. "Who is the utterer of signs of the weather?" asks Peirce. He then adds:

However, every sign certainly conveys something of the general nature of thought, if not from a mind, yet from some repository of ideas, or significant forms, and if not a person, yet to something capable of somehow 'catching on',... that is, of receiving not merely a physical, not even merely a physical dose of energy, but a significant
meaning. In that modified, and as yet very misty, sense, then, we may continue to use the italicized words [utterer and the interpreter].

(Basics 84)

Peirce’s remark that “this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs,”3 observes Deely, “may be regarded as a kind of capsule summary of his broader conception, and his much earlier enigmatic assertion that ‘man is a sign’ would be a kind of corollary” (84).4 But in what “misty sense” is meaning transmitted without “even merely a physical dose of energy”?

That everything is, or could be, a sign is an interesting but paradoxical proposition, because, as we said at the start, if everything is a sign, then nothing is a sign. When considering any sign, we must ask ourselves: to what system does it belong? When Peirce explained to Lady Welby that “a sign is something by knowing which we know more,” for instance, he placed the sign in the context of a particular system: the situation where “a zoologist who wants to know what ought to be the meaning of “fish” in order to make fishes one of the great classes vertebrates” (Letters 642). In this example, the scientific meaning of “fish” is defined in relation to the other, perhaps nonscientific, systems that could also be used to describe these aquatic critters.

In Semiotics of Cinema, Lotman offers the following example from Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman.” In this story a dog tells another dog how strangely her owner acted before receiving a military medal. When he finally gets the medal, the general tells her: “‘Look, Medzi, what do you suppose this is?’ I saw some sort of ribbon. I sniffed it, but couldn’t discover any smell at all. Finally I gave it a little lick. It was slightly salty” (2).

This is a question of value, and that is how Lotman frames it; but the story also illustrates the semiotic limits of a given system. In the dog’s system of smells, the medal is an insignificant sign. Compared to the signs she uses, say, to mark her territory, this sign has little value—it is extrasemiotic. But not for the man who has placed so much value in a medal. Gogol, as Lotman tells us, left an unfinished novel in which the protagonist “imagined that he turned into a medal” (2).

Let’s take another example. We are rushing to the airport in an unfamiliar city. As we drive, we see a signpost on the road with the outline of an airplane. We have no problem distinguishing the sign from the post because the picture of the plane is some-thing form which we learn something more, namely the proximity of an airport—both by indexicality (the outline of the plane leads by contiguity to airplanes) and convention (we have learned that the outline indicates proximity to an airport).

The post itself is not a sign in the system of signs helping the traveler to the airport; but it could be a sign in other existing systems. As Deely explains, the post can also be considered a virtual semiotic phenomenon, a sort of latent thirdness—something that is or could become a sign in
another system. After a devastating earthquake or a tsunami, the discovery of the post may become a sign of a sign, evidence of the proximity of a system of signs to direct traffic and mark important social structures such as hospitals and airports.

Deely’s semiotics fills a logical gap that extends semiosis from the formation of the universe to the evolution of organic life in our biosphere. It also brings us back to one of the fundamental questions in the field of semiotics. By attempting to describe from a macroscopic perspective the full extent of intersemiotic activity, he opens up a space for what Kant called “a universal self-consciousness,” which brings forth another system. And then, we may need yet another system to understand that all-reflective one.

We may speculate that the universe is an endless number of signs interacting with other signs; but as we do, we have placed these signs within the context of a given system. To give it an extrasystemic dimension all we have to do is to consider that among its many mysteries, including that of its own existence (ex-sister), there is an unknown and perhaps unknowable ‘aspect’ of the universe (or multiverses as Giordano Bruno and quantum physics might suggest): a totally ineffable, asemiotic realm sub specie aeternitatis. But we don’t have to take such abstract flights to illustrate this principle.

Considering the frontiers of the field he is about to describe, at the outset of A Theory of Semiotics Eco writes: “By natural boundaries I mean principally those beyond which a semiotic approach cannot go; for there is non-semiotic territory since there are phenomena that cannot be taken as sign-functions” (6). In Universe of the Mind Lotman observes that the world “is divided into the domain of objects which signify, symbolize, indicate something (have meaning), and objects which simply are themselves” (133). Nothing can replace the air we breathe, the food we eat, or the love we share. Or, as Aldous Huxley put it, “man is an amphibian who lives simultaneously in two worlds—the given and the home made, the world of matter, life and consciousness and the world of symbols” (9).

The Lacanian model gives us another way to approach this question. In the course of his writings Jacques Lacan divided the structure of the psyche into three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. To describe the relation of these orders he used the image of a Borromean knot (a set of three rings tied in such a way that one ring cannot be cut without cutting the other two loose). Lacan’s model is, if fact, an intersemiotic system that contains an extrasemiotic dimension, namely the Real.

Before we come back to what Lacan means by the Real, we must describe, albeit superficially, the other two, interlaced, orders. The Symbolic (symbolique) is associated with language and discourse (both conscious and unconscious). It is made up of signifiers (signantia) that gain additional meanings as they enter into systems of relations. Here, Lacan’s development of Freud’s discoveries was made possible by the contributions of Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss. The Symbolic order is made up of
signs, of language. It is fully semiotic and it is also masked; it is structured like the unconscious.

The Imaginary order was the first to appear in Lacan’s work (Rome Report, 1953). It is the domain of images, the visual field which the Symbolic order structures. The Imaginary (imaginaire) is related to the mirror stage—a form of Gestalt in which a child apprehends the unity of itself in relation to the reflection of its image in the mother, or in a mirror, or both (the individual sees its image reflected beside the mother). This image rings “true” to the child. This is how Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen explains it: “the infant, delivered as he is into a sort of primordial ‘dehiscence,’ anticipates his bodily unity and mastery in an image, whether his own specular image or that of some counterpart (semblable) whose stature of commanding presence happens to fascinate him [or her]” (49).

“Image, ‘spectacle,’ ‘gaze,’ ‘identification’: we recognize here the master-words of the Imaginary relation according to Lacan” (Borch-Jacobsen 93). The Imaginary, like the Symbolic order, has a very specific function in analytic treatment. Lacan describes the resistance of the Imaginary ego, its way of obstructing access to the unconscious, in terms of alienated speech. Therefore, as Borch-Jacobsen notes, “we cannot be content with simply relegating the Imaginary to the domain of specular vision” (116). The Imaginary speaks as it resists to speak, like dreams. Let’s not forget that much of Freud’s work on psychoanalysis hinges on his study of dreams—our main highway into the unconscious. More loosely, the notion of the Imaginary can be related to perceived, imagined, or dreamt images—or even to a whole artistic vision of the world, as when actor Michel Piccoli talks about the imaginaire in the work of Luis Buñuel, for instance.

The Real. Lacan is known as a master who contributed precise and useful formalized expressions (mathemes) to the clinical field of psychoanalysis, which previously relied almost exclusively on verbal descriptions. But Lacan is also known to be an equally cryptic writer. And in few areas has he been as elusive as in his description of “the Real”—perhaps because, as he writes in his interpretation of the dream of Irma’s injection, the Real is that limit at “which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence” (Seminar II 164).

The ‘Real,’ writes Alan Sheridan in his “Translator’s Notes” to Écrits: A Selection, “stands for what is neither Symbolic nor Imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech.” The Real “may be approached but never grasped [it is] the umbilical cord of the Symbolic” (280). The Real lies beyond both symbols and icons, and it is in this restricted sense that we can call Lacan’s “Real” nonsemiotic.

In Lacan’s voracious intellect, the Real is a multifaceted concept. In his lecture, “Of the Network of Signifiers,” he tells us that he uses “quite intentionally, the formula—The gods belong to the field of the Real” (Four Fundamental Concepts 45). In the same essay, which serves as an introduction to his key lecture on “Touché and Automaton” (53-64), he calls the Real
"that which always comes back to the same place" (49). And he concludes his 1973 lecture on "Rings of String" with this sentence: "The Real, I will say, is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious" (Seminar XX 131).

System and Extrasystem in The Library of Babel

With these theoretical questions in mind, it is interesting to look at the distinction between the semiotic and nonsemiotic realms from the perspective of Borges’ "The Library of Babel." This classic story ciphers the universe of signification in the form of an infinite library. There are two references to systemic boundaries in the very first sentence. The first half of the sentence reads: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite number of hexagonal galleries [..]" The word "perhaps" opens the possibility of a limit to endlessness itself. But it is in the second part of the sentence where we see a clear division of the library’s space into a system and an extrasystem. In the middle of the hexagonal galleries of this perhaps infinity universe of signs (the books in the library), we have "enormous ventilation shafts [..] encircled by low railings" (79), a second system.

Let’s begin by considering the first system, the one that has attracted almost exclusively the attention of the critics. The Library contains all the books of a given length that could be written with the combination and permutation of a predetermined set of "orthographic symbols" (twenty-two alphabetic letters plus the comma, the period, and the space sign). Everything is there, "that is, everything which can be expressed, in all languages" (83). Most of the story consists of the search for meaning among endless galleries of mostly incoherent sequences of signs. It is natural for readers to focus their attention here. I would like to take an unorthodox approach and read this story instead for what it can teach us about the distinction between the semiotic and extrasemiotic.

To consider the second, "extrasemiotic" system, we must reflect on the physical structure of the Library (the universe). The Library is constructed of an arguably infinite number of interconnected hexagonal units, which Borges calls galleries. "Twenty shelves—five long shelves per side—cover all sides except two; their height, which is that of each floor, scarcely exceeds that of an average librarian. One of the free sides gives upon a narrow entrance way, which leads to another gallery, identical to the first and all the others" (79). This implies that four out of six walls are covered with books (sign systems). The two remaining free walls should lead to two passageways between the galleries.7

"To the left and to the right of the entrance way are two miniature rooms. One allows standing room for sleeping; the other, the satisfaction of fecal necessities. Through this section passes the spiral staircase, which plunges down into the abyss and rises up to the heights" (79). The fact that there is a staircase in this space implies that the hexagonal galleries are infinite both vertically and horizontally and invites us to draw a
corresponding image in our mind. Significantly, Borges does little more than what we have just read to describe these transitional spaces; he gives us very few elements to imagine how they could look. One thing is clear, however: the passageways don’t have bookshelves, and in this sense, they don’t contain signs.

Every word in the story, and by extension every object, place, and concept described in it is, of course, a sign. Some are signs of signs: the low railings around the ventilation shafts are signs of danger, for instance. But in Borges’ Library (in the universe), there are two clearly marked internal systems: the semiotic (the signs in the books that trigger the quest for meaning) and the extrasmiotic (all the remaining places in the Library, which include the two empty walls in each gallery, the ventilation shafts, the passageways, the tiny sleeping rooms and latrines, and the staircases). It is in this sense that we can talk about the “extrasmiotic” spaces in Borges’ story. In a text like “The Library of Babel,” the iconic principle of verbal art must obey precise geometrical laws. As the editorial history of this story shows, however, this rigor may have even surprised Borges himself.

We have been making reference to current versions of this story. Like other English translations, Anthony Kerrigan’s is based on editions published after 1956. A notable error in earlier editions made it difficult for readers to visualize the Library’s structure. “The Library of Babel” was first published in 1941 as part of the collection of stories titled El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan (The Garden of Forking Paths). In 1944 this set of stories, along with the collection that compose Artificios (Artifices), was reprinted by Ediciones SUR under the title of Ficciones (1935–1944), which became the most popular anthology of stories by Borges. In this, as well as other editions published prior to 1956, each hexagonal gallery was described as having only one passageway. Books covered every side of each gallery, except one. “Twenty-five shelves—five long shelves per side—cover all sides except one [...] the free side gives upon a narrow entrance way, which leads to another gallery, identical to the first and all the others.”

There have been many interesting attempts to draw Borges’ Library. Cristina Grau’s drawings in Borges and Architecture (Borges y la arquitectura, 1989) propose that Borges’ original text, that is, his description of the Library in editions prior to 1956, would imply that on any floor of the Library—any horizontal plane, that is—you could link only four galleries together, since there would be a single wall without books in each shelved gallery. This arrangement, according to Grau, would create an open quadrangular space among each set of four hexagonal galleries. The spiral staircases connecting the vertical planes would run through these squares.

Another architect, Antonio Toca Fernández, corrected Grau’s interpretation noting that the story makes no reference to squares, and that its logic implies that the connecting space should also be hexagonal. But
even if the connective spaces were hexagonal, having only one side free of books would mean that only six hexagons could be connected. Thus, the Library—described as being so vast that with increasing frequency leads greedy pilgrims to madness and suicide—would turn, in its horizontal planes, into isolated sets of six cells (for the inhabitants of these enclaves the Library would still be infinite vertically, however, by means of the staircases).

Probably attentive to the response of his readers, Borges corrected these errors in the 1956 Emecé edition of Ficciones. He changed the number of bookshelves from twenty-five to twenty and the number of sides without bookshelves from one to two. This made it possible to have two passageways (the “double staircase argument” we discuss below), which could or could not be parallel to each other, leading to additional, interconnective hexagons that would contain the staircases in this infinitely symmetrical library. The staircases would presumably be located in the middle of these extrasemiotic hexagons, just like the ventilation shafts, also extrasemiotic, are placed in the middle of each shelved hexagon.

According to the drawings by Toca Fernández, in the revised editions, the Library would contain a series of bookless hexagons in the center of every set of six shelved hexagons. I find it plausible that Borges, one of the great innovators of detective fiction, the author of “Death and the Compass” (1942) and co-editor of an anthology of The Best Detective Stories (1949), would have left a structural mystery for the reader to discover, an absent image, an abstract minus device: namely, the image of a series of equally sized extrasemiotic hexagons containing the stairs and ventilation shafts. This would make it possible to have a library composed entirely of hexagons with reasonably sized staircases running through them.13

This interpretation, however, is largely unsubstantiated. Let us remember that Borges never explicitly mentions the existence of connective hexagons without books. Instead he emphasizes the narrowness of the passageway (“un angosto zaguán”), “which leads to another gallery, identical to the first and all the others.” It is in this narrow passageway where Borges places not only the “miniature rooms for sleeping” and “the satisfaction of fecal necessities” but also, and rather implausibly, the spiral staircase that connects the planes of the Library vertically (79).14 Thus, what we have called extrasemiotic spaces, if we follow Borges’ description, are reduced to these small areas—with one notable exception, that is, of the “vast” ventilation shafts in the center of the shelved galleries, which, as we shall see, may very well serve an ironically redeeming function.

In The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges’ Library of Babel (2008), William Goldbloom Bloch takes literally the verbal image of spiral staircases passing through the narrow halls (zaguanes). Considering the “profound and prodigious consequences [that] derive from [the] double staircase argument” (94), Goldbloom, a mathematician who, “lacking Spanish,” as he admits, constructs a set of fascinating theories concerning the structure of the Library. For interconnectivity to happen at the
horizontal planes without a central extrasemiotic hexagon, the two doors of the hexagon could no longer be parallel to each other, turning the library into a labyrinth. Thus, and according to Goldbloom’s considerations, the quickest way a librarian could reach an adjacent hexagon without a passageway would be by using the staircase. He concludes that “Borges simultaneously intended for the Library to have a spiral staircase in every doorway and also to present the librarians with a bewildering array of options” (102).

Goldbloom arrives at conclusions about Borges’ intentions seemingly unaware that his analysis is based on a revised edition of the story. But it is precisely the unrevised editions that have much to say about the original intentions of an author. Ironically, we find a facsimile of the handwritten first page of Borges’ “La Biblioteca de Babel” reproduced in the frontispiece of The Unimaginable Mathematics. As we read that page it is hard to imagine that when he wrote the story Borges had in mind anything like Goldbloom’s idea of the interconnectivity of the hexagons. With careful, somewhat childlike hand writing, deceptively unrehearsed, in pencil, I think, Borges wrote “[...] todos los lados menos uno [...]”, “every side with the exception of one” is covered with books. “La cara libre da a un angosto zaguan,” “the free side gives upon a narrow entrance way” (79).

Toca Fernández wonders why Borges’ revised text reads “Una de las caras libres da a un angosto zaguan [...]” (“One of the free sides gives upon a narrow entrance way [...]”). Had Borges added one word: “Cada una de las caras libres da a un angostozaguan” (“Each of the free sides gives upon a narrow entrance way”) the whole picture, he argues, would have been made clear. A picture, which, as we said, would have added a set of equally sized extrasemiotic hexagons. And this assumes that the two free sides are opposite to each other, something not mentioned in the text.

I would say that by writing “one of the free sides gives upon” instead of “each of the free sides gives upon” Borges meant to suggest that the librarians had to move continuously into new hexagons. This would lead one to think that by the time Borges revised his text (approximately 15 years after it was first published), his idea of the Library may have been in a way closer to Goldbloom’s than to Toca Fernández’s. But only in a way, because in Borges the idea of the infinite is associated with the labyrinth, but also with the spiral—it is circular, but not fully repetitive. Borges probably didn’t envision the large extrasemiotic hexagons imagined by Toca Fernández (his description of the narrow spiral staircases in the passageways does not support this reading), but it is also unlikely that he had in mind Goldbloom Bloch’s complex mathematical structure requiring librarians to walk up and down stairways to reach adjacent hexagons.

If we are looking at intentions, perhaps a more important question is why were the extrasemiotic spaces smaller in the first editions? It seems to me that everything—including the corrections—indicates that Borges wanted to maximize the semioticity of his Library. He wanted his universe to be as replete with signs as it could possibly be—with the notable
exception of the huge ventilation shafts. That is why his Library originally had five extra shelves and a single passageway in each hexagon. The iconic principle of verbal art, its capacity to generate images, however, would not let this description make visual sense. Thus, and in order to preserve the visual and logical coherence of the Library, Borges was forced to 'open up' another of the six walls in each hexagonal gallery—and he did so at the cost of reducing the semiotic space of the Library.

There is a place to sleep and a place to attend the call of nature as we go from one hexagon into another. Even in this emblematic situation where we are almost completely surrounded by signs, we still need a place to sleep (upright) and to satisfy some of our physical necessities. Apparently there is no need to eat in Borges' Library, which strengthens the pun between "letras" and "letrinas." "Letrinas," the Spanish word for "latrines," which Borges uses a couple of times, resembles the diminutive of the Spanish word for letters ("letras").

This is funny considering that the latrines are placed in each room of a universe where the only food there is to consume is most often 'disagreeing' sequences of letters. "As is well known: for one reasonable line or one straightforward note there are leagues of insensate cacophony, of verbal farragoes, and incoherency" (114). There is no place to eat in the universe. Nor is there a place to make love. How do people in Borges' Library procreate is a mystery. Actually, there are no women in the story.

At the center of each hexagon, and in every version of the story, there are vast ventilation shafts encircled by low railings. They are the conduits of an essentially nonsemiotic element, the air the librarians need to breathe. But they are also an alluring image: "From any hexagon the upper or lower stories are visible, interminably" (112). Since the readers in the Library are doomed to consume mostly senseless signs, these shafts, bounded only by low railings, give them the opportunity to put an end to their lives, something that happens throughout the story at an increasing rate. "I believe I mentioned the suicides, which are more and more frequent every year," writes Borges (118).

In various ways, the ventilation shafts are the most important extrasemiotic spaces of the story. Borges never attempted to reduce their vastness. They are the source of life—providing air for the inhabitants of the library—and also the heights that can allow discouraged travelers to put an end to futile semiotic quests—one of which is the quest for the Book-of-Books: "On some shelf of some hexagon, men reasoned, there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium of all the rest" (85). The shafts represent a way out, but also the possibility of an ultimate answer. In this latter sense, each shaft is a sort of specular image where the explorers may see the resolution of their quest—an image capable of deciphering all signs because it contains none.

Let's not forget that there is a mirror in each passageway. "People are in the habit of inferring from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream," writes
Borges, "that the polished surfaces feign and promise infinity..." (79) These mirrors also remind us of Borges’ famous observation in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” the first story of Ficciones: “Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind” (Collected 68). In the context of the “The Library of Babel” it would perhaps be more accurate to say: Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply this senseless reality.

The Image and The Library

It is significant that Borges chose not to include images on the pages of the Library’s books. There are no illustrated books on the shelves of the story. This is curious since the structure of the library provides exciting material for intermodal correspondences, as shown by Erik Desmazières’s illustrations of Borges’ imaginary architecture. In one of Desmazières’s etchings a series of large frames with invented signantia (signifiers) replace the books on one of the Library’s walls. The two adjoining vertical frames of the wall are opened like a large door. Behind them we see a gallery of books. A librarian is bringing some of them out. Thus, Desmazières imagines libraries behind each sign in Borges’ library. This creative interpretation is very much in the spirit of the story.

It is true that Borges wanted to present us with a “bewildering array of options,” as Goldbloom puts it. But these options do not only concern the interconnectivity of the galleries. Borges’ Library is a metaphor for intersemiotic quests; as such, it is also an invitation for correspondences between the various languages of art. If a Library can be the universe, the system of systems, then a book, a system within this system, can be a language, any language—including the languages of mathematics, of music, of visual images, et cetera.

It is precisely the metaphorical dimension of the story that makes it such an exciting territory for intermodal communication. Jean-Jacques Annaud’s film The Name of the Rose (1986), an adaptation of Eco’s novel by the same name, depicts a fabulous Borgesian library. But while the books in Borges’ library contain no illustrations, in Annaud’s film the images of illuminated manuscripts play an important function. The powerful intersemiotic effect of seeing text and images burn when the library catches fire is reminiscent to the indelible burning of books in Truffaut’s film adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1966). The difference is that in Truffaut’s film the books were mostly verbal (with the notable exception of Robert Descharnes’s, The World of Salvador Dalí), whereas in The Name of the Rose we see both verbal and visual signs consumed by the flames, simultaneously. Borges’ Library, which makes no reference to visual systems, inspired what may be the most famous labyrinthine library in the history of film.

A close reading of the visual aspects of Borges’ classic story—particular of its architectural structure—shows that the iconic principle of verbal art, the way we “see” by means of words, is as important in constructing
abstract metaphorical systems as are the narrative capabilities of language. Much like the futile quest for meaning through the library’s verbal signs, the Symbolic masks the truth. And as with the Imaginary, it is the library’s images that have the ring of being true. They bring us close even to the truth that lies at the end of that distance of distances, the interminable fall into one of the ventilation shafts: the Real.

Borges invites us to imagine a traveler, exhausted by ineffective explorations in the library’s vast system of verbal signs, looking over the edge of the enormous ventilation shaft at the center of one of the galleries. Despondent, disenchanted by vain quests into the sphere of signs, he looks down the shaft. The abysmal image is hypnotic, and the railing low. He feels the anxiety of vertigo and the seduction of returning to a pre-Symbolic harmony. At the other end of the fall he sees himself having crossed the labyrinth of (mostly senseless) signs. It is the image of freedom, an image that can be said in words but cannot be shown. Ironically, this image, too, is inscribed, as are these words I write, in one of the books shelved in the hexagonal galleries of the Library of Babel.

Endnotes
1 Anthony Kerrigan’s close translation of “The Library of Babel” (Ficciones 1962) is the one that best fits the purposes of our discussion. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations form this story are from his translation. Spanish quotes are from the 1975 Emecé edition of Ficciones.
2 Peirce was “perhaps the most inventive and versatile among American thinkers, so great,” remarks Roman Jakobson, “that no university found a place for him” (Language 414).
3 Sebeok refers to this quote at the start of his 1976 study on “Semiosis in Nature and Culture” (The Sign and Its Masters).
4 “It is that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken into conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thoughts, proves that man is a sign; so that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an external sign” (Philosophical 249).
6 Much like the Cartesian method of coordinates connected Euclidean geometry and algebra, Lacanian mathemes simplify the work of the psychoanalyst by providing an intersemiotic link between psychological phenomena and mathematical notation.
7 The word Borges uses for “entrance way” is “zaguán,” a short, unlit passageway in a particular kind of Spanish architecture of Moorish origin. Andrew Hurley translates it as a “sort of vestibule.” I variously use the words “passageway” or “hall” to underline its interconnective function. In any case, as Gaston Bachelard writes in The Poetics of Space, “an important phenomenological investigation remains to be made on the subject of dark entrance halls” (132).
8 "I am not the first author of La Biblioteca de Babel," writes Borges in the book's prologue. As his precursors he lists "the heterogeneous names of Leucippos, Lasswitz, Lewis Carroll, and Aristotle" (7).

9 Exemplars of the 1944 edition will not last—their acid-based pages are quickly disintegrating, erasing Borges' 'error.' The man who wrote "The Book of Sand" (1975) and who said that he was "tired of writing these drafts," probably wouldn't have minded. Time erases all errors.

10 I have modified Kerrigan's translation to reflect the 1944 edition. The emphasis is mine.

11 Toa Fernández's drawings and "modest proposal" ("La 'Biblioteca de Babel' una modesta propuesta") are available online.

12 Los mejores cuentos policiales, published in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares.

13 There is an absent image in Cortázar's story "Blow-Up" ("Las babas del diablo," 1959), in which the reader is asked to participate as a sort intersemiotic and intermodal detective. See my essay, "Blow-Up: A House with Many Stories."

14 Technically, the tiny rooms are beside the passageway ("a la izquierda y a la derecha") but the stairway passes through it ("Por ahí pasa la escalera espiral que se abisma y se eleva hacia lo remoto" (Ficciones 89).

References


