Echoïc mention, parody and the figuration before hypermedia: Jorge Luís Borges and Rhys Hughues

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The circulation of concepts of different scientific disciplines is today an inevitable fact. The necessity of transdisciplinarity is proclaimed as a way to overcome deadlock situations in investigation, having always as the main objective a greater creative success. It is presently acknowledged that one of the pillars of transdisciplinarity[1] is complexity and therefore it is important to study the specific cases of different disciplines in which complexity is identifiable, in order to better understand the case of hypertext. This text has the objective of a) underlining how the game of parody (and irony) becomes the product of a complex process; b) to highlight some aspects of its particular working; and c) to demonstrate how the understanding of the complex game that it activates can be useful to understand the way hypertext operates.

Recent scientific developments in Physics, Biology and Neurology — among others — reveal the importance of considering chance, nonlinearity and auto-organization, for example, as inevitable elements to consider in the observation and the study of certain phenomena or certain specific situations. Taking into account the epistemological implications of this situation, Edgar Morin (1991: 287) proposes, as MAIN PRINCIPLES OF COMPLEX THINKING, the Hologramatic Principle, the Dialogical Principle, and the Principle of Recursive Organization:

- The hologramatic principle establishes that not only parts are in the whole, but the whole is in the parts.

- The dialogic principle establishes that duality can be maintained at the core of a unit **(duality in oneness).** It links two terms that are complementary and antagonist at the same time.

- The organizational recursivity principle establishes that products and effects are, at the same time, causes and producers of that which produces them **(- that breaks down the cause/effect lineal idea, of product/producer, of structure/superstructure - retroaction mechanisms)**.

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1 Segundo Henalgulph (2000) "The three pillars of transdisciplinarity -- levels of Reality, the logic of the included middle, and complexity -- determine the methodology of transdisciplinary research." in The three pillars of transdisciplinarity" .

These principles comprehend fundamental issues such as multidimensionality, recursion, contradiction, the retroactivity mechanisms and dialogical interactivity[2] that are part of a relational paradigm and whose representation is established through the metaphor and the image of the network. The hypertext brings about this sort of relational conceptualization stressing the multidimensionality of the connections. However, even before the arrival of cyber-literature, the parody game (aided by irony) was proving to be a moving force intensively **relational** and **multidimensional** – not only in the conceptualization part but also in the interpretive stage.

It is a fact that many theorists have already summoned attention to the dual nature of parody, among them is Linda Hutcheon who says that:

> Parody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression" (Hutcheon, 1985: 26).

Parody is based on a game of similarity and dissimilarity in relation to a certain artistic object or to his components. If one wants to understand fully the complex mimetic status of parody in literary texts it becomes necessary to recognise what changes and what remains when comparing one or more texts.

It is sustained here that the main semantic features of parody are: the relational being; the inclusive being and the differential being (the three attributes that Linda Hutcheon identifies as being essential to irony); however, apart from these features parody also reveals itself being multidimentional and dialogical.

The aim of this text is to perceive some of the characteristics of the complex procedure that distinguish parody by observing the way Rhys Hughes' work intitled *The New History of Infamy* parodies Jorge Luis Borges's *Universal History of Infamy*.

1. Considering, first of all, the three semantic characteristics mentioned above, it is easy to understand how parody becomes <u>inclusive,</u> because in addition to appropriating the general tone of Borges' stories and the title itself (and in assuming this in an ostentatious way), Hughes also appropriates the work's structure, going to the extent of inventing two humoristic prefaces in order to highlight the similarities with the second edition of Borges' work – as he himself points out:

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2 Edgar Morin: "The word "dialogic" means that it will be impossible to arrive at any single principle or any one key word whatsoever. A simple principle will always have something irreducible about it, whether chance, uncertainty, contradiction or coherence. But at the same time the dialogic medium, (…) holds the potential for establishing an interplay between concepts which are at once complementary, competitive and contradictory, operating in what I call the tetragram of order – disorder – interactions – coherence. (…) In other words, the dialogic principle involves the complementary interaction of concepts which, if taken as absolutes, would be contradictory and mutually exclusive.

Borges was perhaps the greatest fiction writer of the previous century. His first book of prose (…) consisted of seven relaxed essays, one short story and eight fake fragments. The following slim volume follows it almost exactly but with a **wink**. My own pieces are insolents in their desire to ape the originals (…). Even this Preface, which I did not wish to write, because I could think of nothing sensible to say, was deemed necessary to match my model. In fact, two Prefaces have been included, because that is the number which appears in the edition I own. It is fun to lie and not be caught. One of the best ways of doing this is to admit the lie beforehand, so there is nothing to catch. (Hughes, 2004: 18) (Bold added).

These words show how the author completely recognises the game-like nature of parody – simultaneously inclusive and differential – warning the less alert reader that his texts have profound <u>similarities</u> with Borges' texts, but that in these similarities substantial <u>differences</u> are incrustated – the so called 'wink' that the reader has to detect. Parody presupposes a reader who is capable of reading beyond the surface of the text, who is competent comparing the presupposed duality in parody. It is in this sense that we can better understand the statement made by J. Ferreira Duarte (1999:72):

…parody is less representational than hermeneutic [since it is] an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation. (…) Functioning thus by means of a chain of intersubjective relationships, a parodic text behaves like a mirror-image of discourse, rather than representing objects, it operates counter-representationally.

This element is easily recognisable in the counter representations of Sally Swains' portraits where the differences relative to the original are intentionally minimal and, even so, they convey different meanings, as we can see in her painting "Mrs Degas vacuums the floor".

Still, what is surprising in Hughes' work is the fact that the similarities in relation to the original have not excluded countless differences of a nearly frightening intensity. Besides the organizational structure of the work (mentioned above), the author has retained the *ethos* particular to Borges' work, a kind of tragic-grotesque-burlesque atmosphere in keeping with the original idea of exposing stories of a shocking nature. Rhys Hughes manages to maintain this sort of intricate combination by developing the referred aesthetic categories and by filling them with irony, as Borges did. And not only is he able to maintain this atmosphere but he also manages to highlight all these elements. The portrayed violence is blatantly exhibited in a gratuitous manner similar to many of present day's horror stories. His infamous characters are "violent and repulsive", they are anti-heroes made out to be fake heroes through fear and strength. If

with Borges characters there is still room (although minute) for an etching of self-righteousness concerning the insatiable characters of the men remembered, the characters of the new writer are so sadistic and repellent that it is impossible for the reader to identify himself with them.

Such is the case of Francisco Solano Lopez, the dictator of Paraguay, who committed many deranged deeds that reveal his insane lack of values and contempt for all human life. Aberration, absurdity and complete excess turn him into a crude and grotesque caricature of any dictator that may have actually lived – therefore the reader must be able to deconstruct and judge this character with a critical sense of mind.

In Hughes's infamous portraits a **differential** meaning is surreptitiously introduced, mainly through sarcastic commentaries that imply a consideration of similar situations within the modern world, where perversity is also dominant. In doing so, the text forces the reader to question why identical situations continue to exist, and it also leads to a better understanding of how violence and immoralities serve the interests of different social powers.

Then, it can be said that the game of parody allows both visual and verbal images to be deconstructed, thus preparing the reader in a way that is absolutely essential for those who navigate in cyberspace and systematically have to select and abandon whatever it is that diverts them from the objective of his/her search.

Detecting differences is an operation intrinsically connected to the **relational** game among texts, in the case of parody. In effect, readers are compelled to develop a kind of interactive to and fro movement in order to understand the connections that are established between texts – in this way the **relational** being becomes an inherent feature of parody.

Through the implication of this interactive to and fro movement, parody creates a game that is simultaneously "digressive" and "progressive". And, we can see that this same duplicity is present in web search programs, where the "Logic of Discovery" is "based on abductive inference" which, according to Uwe Wirth (2006:51) "formulate some principle of browsing, deriving from guiding principles of abductive reasoning".

Various authors[3] have already approximated the learning process of how to use cybernetic space information to the abductive[4] reasoning, highlighting the way abduction implies a supposition generated by subtle and unpredictable associations that connect all elements involved. In this sense it is easier to understand Gary Shanks and Donald Cunningham's words:

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[3] Among others, consider Wirth, Uwe (2006); Shank, Gary; Cunningham, D.J.; Vitanza, Victor (1996).

[4] According to Peirce "Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea" (Peirce, 1903: CP 5.171, *apud* Wirth, 2006).

The focus of education is rapidly shifting to conceiving the learner as a reasoner and problem solver. (...) the inferential basis of learning from the web is largely abductive. (Shank and Cunningham).

In his turn, Uwe Wirth stresses the following parallelism: "both, the logic of abduction and the logic of hypertext are based on the very idea of cognitive linking" (2006: 53).

For some authors this form of thinking and progressing through association implicates the devaluing of an hierarchical way of reasoning, whose most common visual metaphor is the tree, and gives increased importance to other kind of connective thinking that has the rhizome as its metaphor, as is stressed by Victor Vitanza (1996): "The new logic is nonlinear, non-Euclidean, and is anti-tree, but rhizomatic."

If a radical perspective were to be taken, this conversion would cause this second way of thinking to suppress or eradicate the first, however, if hierarchical reasoning can lose precedence over associative reasoning[5] "it will be cleverer to claim (and easily argued) that both co-exist and fight for dominance": they don't eliminate each other, they cohabit.

Keeping this in mind, it is useful to recall, with Uwe Wirth, the way digressive and progressive characteristics inherent to abduction are inferred in Charles S. Peirce's theory:

According to Pierce, inference has at least two elements: "one is the suggestion of an idea by another according the law of association, while the other the carrying forward of the asserting element of judgement, the holding for true, from the first judgment to the second" (CP 4.55, *apud* Wirth, 2006: 54).

This shows that things move forward – an essential pre-requisite to comprehension. However, in considering hypertext and particularly hypertextual narratives this progression does not happen along one single level but along multiple levels that may establish connections among themselves, assuming the shape of a network. The reader can observe something similar in the constant motive retrieval in Hughes' parody of Borges' well known short story: "The Book of Sand". It's very interesting the way in which Hughes re-establishes new courses of action based on

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[5] V. Vitanza (1996) stresses this co-existence in his review of Ulmer's *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention*: "Ulmer's proposal looks toward "the logic of cyberspace" (hypermedia). Such a place (…) can for certain be colonized as if it were a product of Euclidean typographic culture. Links might be made in terms of High Scholastic trees. The new logic is nonlinear, non-Euclidean, and is anti-tree, but rhizomatic. The choice of the former or the latter is not our choice in many ways, for the medium (hypermedia) as the message will change the conditions for writing, opening up new possibilities. The orientation toward product does become one of process, and perpetually so. But process is (…), situated in the future perfect, is everything. (…) The movement from orality to literacy is now rushing on to a third place, what Ulmer refers to as electracy.

suggestions or difficulties mentioned by Borges' characters. Borges' short story presupposes a first person narrator that buys a book that has an infinite number of pages; however, this "treasure" becomes the cause of such a "monstrous" obsession that he ends up by hiding it in Argentina's National Library. Hughes' short story begins precisely with a Latvian engineer who reads Borges' *Collected Fictions* as he travels and he decides to go to this library in search of the book. Once in his possession he also becomes obsessed by its power, but in a different way. Recalling the idea of burning the book (an idea that his predecessor gave up out of fear of suffocating the whole world with smoke), he imagines a scheme to make it profitable, and with his employers technological knowledge, they build an electrical power station, fuelled by the infinite energy released through the slow controlled combustion of the book. Everything goes well until the moment when the main character begins to fear that his country's image might be ridiculed over this miraculous phenomenon, especially if the project failed on account of the book not actually being infinite. Therefore he decides to steal the book and throw it into the river, provoking an irreversible calamity since the infinite book absorbs the water out of all the rivers and all the oceans contaminating them with its ink:

> A submarine exploring the dwindling oceans (…) reported entering a vast expanse of opaque water  (…) The words of the Book of Sand have started to smudge and run. The unusual consistency of the ink means that it seals the water beneath it, preventing evaporation. Clouds are becoming rare. The planet is in a grip of severe drought. Rain is only a memory. (Hughes, 2004: 149).

Thus, the welsh author's text employs a "leave and take up" artistic technique, since he takes Borges' original ideas leading them into new directions in which the reader can easily detect echoes pertaining to the fears and catastrophes that are devastating today's world and its inhabitants.

2. Such contemporary meanings convoyed by parody and their complex interconnective game, both, lead us from the relational sense to the **dialogical** sense of parody, because not only must the reader be aware of the dialogue that that is established between the two (or more) texts, but he must also establish a dialogue with the new meanings brought up by the confrontation of the artistic objects proposed to his attention and appreciation[6], and thus questioning their own representations:

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[6] It is already implied that the relational sense is essential in the definition of works of art and artistic correlation, as  proposed by G. Genette (1994: 10) "*une œuvre d'art est un objet esthétique intentionnel (…) à fonction esthétique*"), within an association that progresses "d'une intention à une attention".

> [T]hrough a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (...) In other words, parody works to foreground the politics of representation. (...) I would like to argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation. (Hutcheon, 1989: 93, 94).

Therefore, the confrontation of texts, plots and compositional schemes has not only the "cognition dialogique"[7] meaning proposed by M. Bakhtine (1978:170) but also possesses the complex nature that Edgar Morin confers to this concept (as mentioned above).

Another example of the complexity of these dialogues can be observed in the cross reading Borges' short story "Man on Pink Corner" and Hughes' Streetcorner Mouse". There is a genuine reproduction of situations and narrative incidents in both short stories: both present an "I" that is simultaneously a witness and a narrator; both have at the centre of the plot a duel between an anti-hero (a poor, weak, incompetent creature) and a sturdy fellow (who is famous and feared). However, in Hughes' narrative the duel turns into a duet between an harmonica player and a dreadful, filthy harp player. The description of the music is deeply synesthetic and structured like a thrilling *crescendo:*

> Now Llygoden was entering the final phase of his performance. With a sly wink at the entire fabric of spacetime, he increased the velocity of his thumb. It became invisible. (…) It was swelling. (…) As an object gradually approaches the speed of light, its mass increases. It takes more and more energy to accelerate it even a fraction. Physics, that is. (Hughes, 2004: 104).

In a metaphorical level the duet represents the dialogue between the two musicians (in other words the interactive dialogue between languages generally). And it is interesting for the reader to observe that this transformation of a duel with knives into a musical competition carries several changes among other compositional levels of the story. This means that the multidimensional nature of parody allows it to operate upon various levels of the narrative composition.

3. Then, this text supports the idea that the parody game is a **multidimensional** one. As mentioned above the parody generated by mimesis and dissimilitude forces the

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[7] The concept of "dialogic cognition" is coherent with his concepts of bivocality and hybridity (Bakhtine, 1978: 177).

reader to get involved in the complex web of similarities and differences concerning its objective which, according to L. Hutcheon, is based upon an ambivalent relationship: "constructive"/"complicity" vs. "destructive"/"distance". In the case of the "Streetcorner Mouse" short story, although the structure of the plot (and its incidents) remain identical to the parodied "Man of Pink Corner", it highlights the conversion of an idea of strength to one of artistic skill and dexterity. Furthermore, there are differences that arise from other levels of narrative composition: for instance, the Fantastic, as category, is introduced, because in *The Patranha* bar, where the duet competition occurs, the characters are metamorphs who can transform into animals or objects. This use of modern Fantastic is in tune with the strange modernity of the chosen music and with the spacetime of the story. All theses strategies (and others that would take too long to give a detailed account of) formulate another coherent narrative that, although linear, is different from the previous one on many compositional levels, compelling the reader to be aware of the diversity of the composition and the complexity of the inner components.

Parody stimulates the reader to appreciate simultaneously the complex coherence of the analogies and the differences in the narrative orchestration; it prescribes a critical analysis of its organic functionality binding him to the narratives compositional conventions, in other words, forces him to process multiple flows of information, as in the case of hypertext.

Finally, by what has been said we can see that if parody possesses the same kind of semantic features identified by Hutcheon in irony — it is inclusive, differential and relational — its degree of intensity and extension is, however, greater. Here the "echoic mention"[8] doesn't diminish or dissipate — quite the opposite, it endures and remains active throughout the whole reading process (and even far beyond the moment of reading).

The dialogical and multidimensional features, in their turn, extend to other levels such as the syntactic and the pragmatic spheres. The dialogue carried out between texts, in this to and fro movement of parody, implies at least three kinds of linear syntactic organization: the structure of the parodied text, the structure of parodical text, and also the structure of the connections between both. To all the simultaneous and interconnected readings that the reader is forced to do, he will pragmatically add his own 'know-how', his attitude and his will, bringing out a thought pattern with different

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8 In a relevant article that had the objective of discriminating the concepts of irony, satire and parody, Roger J. Kreuz e Richard M. Roberts (1993: 99) supported the idea that both "satire and parody may use different kinds of irony", but, "although both explore the bivocality and discursive representation, parody operates as an "echoic mention" while satire uses a sort of irony that is based on a faked ignorance, in other words, it pretends to ignore the causes, the problems".

degrees of development. Therefore parody reveals itself to be not only a complicated process but also a complex one[9].

The dialogical and multidimensional meanings point to the when and where of the established connections and also to the pointers of narrative construction. Evidently these texts maintain the linearity that Marie-Laure Ryan (2002: 607) considers inherent to the narrative. However, as this scholar clearly highlights, one of the greatest challenges that "narrative in digital media" has to deal with consists in conciliating the "fluidity" of the digital domain with the "solid structure of the narrative". For this association to work "some compromise will be necessary" making it essential to find new ways of interactivity and new coherent forms "by orchestrating periods of user activity and periods of system control" (Ryan, 2002:607).

Thus, what the observed texts demonstrate is that fictional/narrative parody generate a dual intelligent game: upstream in the narrative construction, and downstream in the reading, stressing the need of a coherent system of nodes and connections. The intention, here, is not to defend parody as a model for imitation, but to acknowledge that its complex game can be an incentive for the urgent discovery of "narrative modes and themes more suitable to interactive nature and multimedia capabilities" of the hypertext. (Ryan, 2002:605).

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9In an interesting article, Hugo Letiche explains the difference: "In complexity theory the distinction is made between 'complicated' – that is, constituted of many elements; and 'complex' – that is, characterized by increasing levels of evolutionary development".,

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