

Stories and Audiences: Whose Story is it Anyway?

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Introduction

I would like to begin my presentation with the image of a page from a book, which I have shown to students from the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, in some of my Literature classes. Here it is:



As you may have guessed, it is a page from a non-existent book. Actually, I picked it up at random from a web page (http://hamete.org/babel/index_en.html) which is an Internet simulation based on one of the most intriguing short stories of the prominent Argentinean author, essayist, poet and critic Jorge Luis Borges. The story is called "The Library of Babel". It describes a timeless Library composed of an "indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries". The Library contains "everything ... the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books." Its shelves are full of "impenetrable books" that register "all verbal structures", "all the possible combinations", permitted by the "twenty-odd orthographical symbols". (Borges, 1964a)

The page above is supposed to belong to the digitalized version of one of the books in the Library. In what follows, I shall briefly discuss some activities and topics which I have included in my teaching

practice, using as a visual “springboard” the “Library of Babel” page simulation. For this purpose I shall roughly delineate three modes of work: (1) creative activities; (2) theoretical-historical perspectives; and (3) critical-interpretive perspectives. Ideally, there should be interplay between these three modes of work, with creativity elements present in the theoretical and critical domain, and vice versa. But for the sake of clarity and brevity I shall focus on each group separately. Also, I shall outline some ways in which these activities and perspectives are related to the “storytelling” problematic.

1. Creative activities

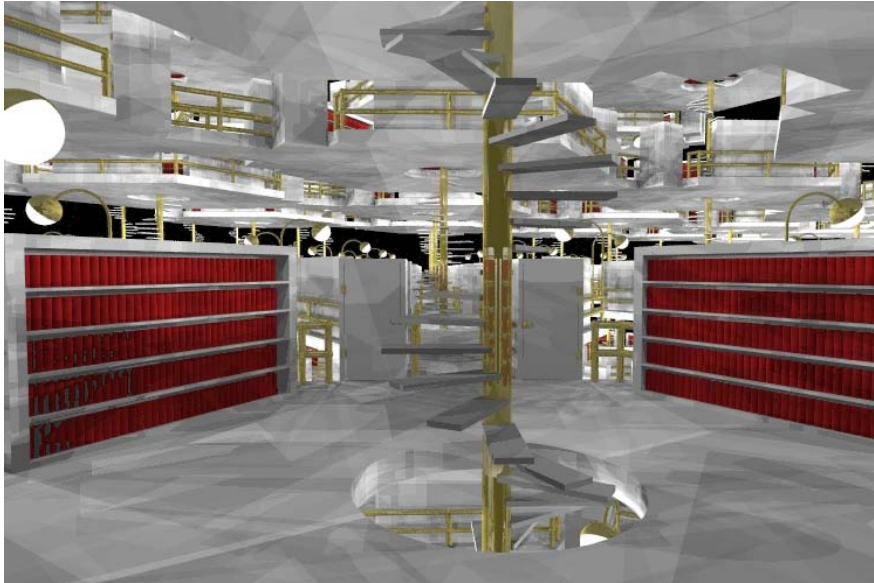
The imaginary book page may be used without any initial pre-introduction of the Borges context, just as a graphic “wild card” to initiate a brainstorming session, with the audience inventing (individually or collectively) their own story around the “strange book”. In response, students have generated a variety of fictional scenarios and genres: so, for instance, some have conjectured that it is a code-book (turning it into a typical spy-thriller element), or a book of magic (thus moving into the realms of fairy-tale and fantasy), or a book written in an exotic foreign language (which might take us into the world of travel, adventure and/or history), and so on. At some point the audience should be debriefed about the origin of the “strange book” and provided with relevant background information on Borges and his short story. As a possible follow-up students may be asked to relate the book to a particular character or characters, to develop a storyline, a storyboard, to explore the “Library of Babel” story/film/drama-generating potential, etc. Creative tasks and assignments can be both useful and fun in any kind of learning environment. In art education institutions, like the ones where we teach, they are, understandably, an essential part of the teaching and learning process. They develop the improvisation skills and imagination of the students and may also provide them with some ideas to work on, in the course of their further creative and artistic practices.

2. Theoretical-historical perspective

The “Library of Babel” page simulation image may be used as a lead-in to the study of the life and work of Jorge Luis Borges who, along with authors like Kafka and Joyce, Nabokov and Beckett, is widely acknowledged as one of the key figures of 20th century literature and culture.

An interesting point of discussion within this context could be the relationship between the real and the surreal, between reality and what might be called “virtuality” in the works of Borges, and more specifically in the “Library of Babel”. Significantly, at the time when the story was published he worked in a library; later he would be appointed Director of the Argentinean National Library at a time when he was almost completely blind, due to a hereditary disease. In the short story the Library is presented as a fantastic Universe; but actually, in the course of his long life (he was born in 1899 and died in 1986), Borges the librarian perceived the Library as an essential and tangible part of his real world. These biographical facts may shed some light on his provocative statement, made in one of his interviews, that he had always been a realistic writer. Of course, Borges – “the many-faced magician, the builder of verbal labyrinths, the teller or re-teller of myths”, as the literary critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal aptly calls him (Monegal, 1972), should never be taken too literally. On a different occasion he described himself as a “baroque writer”; others have defined him as a modernist, a surrealist, a magic realist, a forerunner and “patron saint” of postmodernism. Contradictory as they may seem, all these definitions re-capture some features of his complex personality and of his artistic legacy. In 1960 he wrote, with a characteristic ironic twist: “A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face”. (Borges, 1960)

About half a century after this statement it is undeniable that Borges has succeeded in drawing his labyrinth, and in projecting onto the world the “lineaments of his own face”. Which makes him not only an important and seminal author, but also, from a pedagogical point of view, a rich and productive subject of study: a cultural and transcultural literary figure whose work kaleidoscopically interlinks so many traits and trends and can be approached from many different angles.



The Library of Babel: <http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/babel.jpg>

Also, the fact that Borges is a recognized master of short fiction makes the preparation of a class session, or mini-seminar, on Borges and his story quite convenient in terms of reading time and accessibility. “The Library of Babel”, in the Bulgarian translation of Anna Zlatkova, is on the Internet (<http://oceansoul.truden.com/borhes.htm>) and students can be asked to read it in advance in their self-study time, either on-line or in the library. The Borges mini-seminar may be of different duration, depending on the number and profile of the students (on the average, I have planned it to last about 1-2 academic hours). Ideally, the role of the teacher should be that of moderator, provider of relevant information, maker of comments and suggestions, asker of questions. Some pedagogical goals in terms of “learning outcomes” may involve the possibility for students to exercise their analytical skills and critical thinking, to articulate and defend their ideas and personal points of view. In more specific practical terms, the discussion may yield topics of further exploration and analysis. Possible themes of comparative and creative reflexion that have emerged so far include (to give just a few examples): the image of the Library in contemporary literature and art (Borges – Umberto Eco, etc.); the uses of the Labyrinth in modern fiction and art (Borges, Kafka, Lewis Carroll, Italo Calvino, the film “Labyrinth” which was novelised and used as the basis of comic books, video games, etc.); Borges on stage and screen (Borges-based and Borges-related theatre productions and films – notably “The Spider’s Stratagem” of film director Bernardo Bertolucci; Borges essays and reviews on cinema topics, etc).

3. Critical-interpretive perspective

Another possible way of using the “Library of Babel” as a starting point for discussion occurred to me when I came across an article about a Borges seminar at the Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Washington. Two members of the faculty – Steven Hendricks and Brian L. Walter conducted an interdisciplinary seminar with first-year students, using Borges’s ‘Ficciones’ with the overall purpose “to look at literature in connection with mathematics” (Hendricks and Walter, 2007). The article presents a post-seminar analysis and evaluation of these experimental classes. Hendricks and Walter begin their analysis by quoting some of the initial student responses to “The Library of Babel”: “Borges was bored, was crazy, was trying to sound smart or “win some award or something”. In the authors’ opinion, these “erroneous assumptions” which students have made about Borges are indicative of the way in which “any challenging work with some opacity of language” provokes them “to judge and criticize the author”. Having encountered a difficulty in “accessing the meaning of the text”, students tended “to blame it on the author”, armed with the certainty “that the meaning of literature may only come from the author”. The article then describes in what ways the introduction of mathematical concepts into literary analysis has helped students to adopt a different attitude and re-assess their initial feedback. As one of the students comments in her self-evaluation at the end of the seminar: “I recognized the power of abstraction both for the reader and the writer: repetition of patterns as a cue of themes and the different configurations of structure, threading the concepts of the piece through on many levels.”

What I found thought-provoking in this article was not so much the relationship between literature and mathematics, but the issue of the relationship between texts and audiences. The assumption “that the meaning of literature may only come from the author” may seem self-evident, but since the late 1960s postmodern audience-response theories have increasingly emphasized the role of the reader/viewer as co-worker and co-participant in the construction of meaning. In this regard Borges’s text, with its complex and unconventional narrative, may serve as a good starting point to raise and discuss problems of reading and interpretation, such as: how do texts “mean” to different audiences and how do we (teachers, artists, critics) mean them to “mean”; the role of the social and (inter)cultural context; problems of authorial intent, expectation horizons, audience adaptation, etc. To people who are actively involved in art studies and practices these are not just academic questions, but topics of immediate interest and importance. Because of the specific nature of their work, students can share their experiences and views from a dual perspective, both as readers/viewers and as artists who are trying to communicate with their own audiences.

Conclusion

The three different types of activities described above, may be “tailored”, so to speak, to the profile and study concentration of the students. My students are typically B.A. students in acting, directing, scriptwriting, theatre studies, film studies. With acting, directing, script-writing students the emphasis could be on the creative tasks and assignments. Students in theatre studies and film studies might be more interested in the theoretical-historical and critical-interpretive perspectives. I have employed these perspectives, for example, in my Postmodernism Course and in the M.A. Theatre Arts programme, where I hold a seminar on “Interpretive approaches”.

Borges once wrote: "A book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader . . ." (Borges, 1964b). Many of Borges’s works have proved him to be a great teller of stories that provide a rich ground for dialogue with generations of readers.

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