

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF FANTASTIC SPACES: *TLÖN*, *LES CITÉS* *OBSCURES* AND THE COGNITIVE POWER OF FICTION<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I will establish similarities between Jorge Luis Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius" ("Tlön") and the graphic novels *Les Cités Obscures* by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters. "Tlön" is largely grounded in the 'as if' principle: 'If idealism governs reality, then...' The 'as if' allows Borges to disjoin and conjoin again, the result being an utopian world erected for epistemic purposes; it is in this 'otherness' that the explanatory power lies. The idea of describing thoroughly another world in Tlön fashion has been developed in *Les Cités Obscures*, a series of graphic novels produced since 1982 by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters. Schuiten and Peeters lavishly use architectural décor for the setting of their stories. The city of Brussels, slightly displaced into Brüssel, appears in most of the albums. By means of extrapolating elements of the city's rich architectural heritage, the authors have managed to create a universe of their own. The procedure is similar to schematic fictions: general types are deprived of unnecessary traits to make it easier to single out constituent elements. Like Tlön, *Les Cités* are a re-cognisable world. They direct our regard upon cultural practices, architectural styles and history by means of superimposing transparencies, a well-known method in which Borges excelled.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, Postmodernism, Theory of Fiction, Epistemology.

**RESUMEN:** En el presente artículo se tratan de establecer similitudes entre "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius" ("Tlön") de Jorge Luis Borges, y las novelas gráficas *Les Cités Obscures* de François Schuiten y Benoît Peeters. "Tlön" está fundado en el principio "como si": "Si el idealismo gnoseológico gobierna la realidad, entonces..." El principio "como si" permite a Borges deconstruir para volver a construir, el resultado es un mundo posible erigido con una finalidad epistémica. Tlön, al constituir un mundo posible permite, por vía de contraste, explicar nuestra realidad. Una idea similar ha sido desarrollada por los autores de *Les Cités Obscures* (1982). François Schuiten y Benoît Peeters hacen uso de varios edificios emblemáticos de Bruselas, ciudad esta que aparece ligeramente transfigurada con el nombre de Brüssel. Mediante un desplazamiento sutil se llama la atención sobre el modo de ser de estos objetos. Utilizando elementos del rico patrimonio arquitectónico de la ciudad, los autores han logrado crear un universo singular. Al igual que "Tlön", *Les Cités* constituyen un mundo reconocible. Como artefacto ficcional, funciona mediante la superposición de transparencias; el resultado es una realidad aumentada que guía nuestra mirada hacia prácticas culturales, periodos históricos y estilos arquitectónicos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Literatura, Postmodernismo, Teoría de la ficción, Epistemología.

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### ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’

‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’<sup>2</sup> (hereafter referred to as ‘Tlön’) by Jorge Luis Borges was first published in number 68 of the literary magazine *Sur*, which appeared in May 1940. The initial action of the story takes place in a suburb of Buenos Aires. In a conversation between the narrator and Bioy Casares, the latter cites a savant from Uqbar. Later that evening, when the characters try to verify the source of the citation in the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, they find that the book contains no indication of such a place. Close examination of a different edition of the same encyclopaedia reveals that it contains four extra pages with an entry devoted to Uqbar. As the story unfolds, we learn that Uqbar is a region of an imaginary planet called Tlön. The story recounts what it appears to be the work of a secret society, which has laboured for centuries in the task of minutely describing the history, geography and culture of an imaginary world where idealistic philosophy rules. Reality in Tlön is nothing else but a mental projection of the individuals without any material substance. The story goes on depicting Tlön by means of partly reproducing a mysteriously found eleventh volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, and up to that point in the narrative all seems explicable, if rather odd, until objects from Tlön begin to appear in the real world. Suddenly everyone wants to believe in this *brave new world*, to write about it, to study its philosophy and its literature; because Tlön follows a man-made order (as it is the case of ideologies, Borges reminds us), reality caves in. History and the sciences are reformed according to those existing in the imaginary planet. Contact with Tlön starts eroding reality. At the end of the story the narrator realises that Tlön has taken over.

The creation of utopias is perhaps the confirmation of a need to construct finite systems and regions that can be encompassed only by reason. The eighteenth century was notable for the proliferation of the genre. The Enlightenment proclaimed the unlimited power of reason to explain the world. This new faith resulted in a project aimed at replacing the philosophical basis of the *Ancien Régime*. Thus reason sets out to reassert the individual in a world constantly exposed to the realm of contingency and ultimately irrationality. In ‘Tlön’ excessive reason leads to excessive order and ultimately to totalitarianism. The eternal regression is set in motion once again; the world has superseded another world for analogous reasons: the longing for symmetrical order.

Like most utopian tales, ‘Tlön’ is largely grounded in the ‘as if’ principle. By means of the ‘as if’ philosophical idealism is empowered by fiction: the result is the apperceiving act we are able to effect whereby our own world is revealed. The story opens up a new scenario of thought in that although we also see the world ‘framed’, there is no stepping out from the world to show the borders of our perception. It is precisely in the otherness that the story posits where the explanatory power lies; by relating to Tlön we make the borders explicit. Tlön is a possible world that mirrors our knowledge of the real world, but the remarkable trait of Tlön is that it can be found interwoven in the fabric of reality.

<sup>2</sup> BORGES, Jorge Luis: *Collected Fictions [CF]*, translated by Andrew Hurley. London, The Penguin Press, 1998.

## The Philosophy of ‘As If’

In what follows I will try to establish correspondences between Borges’ story and a number of philosophical ideas, principally those related to knowledge and representation. In this context, I will discuss fiction within the conceptual framework of Hans Vaihinger’s *Philosophy of ‘As If’*.<sup>3</sup>

Borges alludes to Vaihinger’s main work *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* (*Philosophie des Als Ob*) in ‘Tlön’: ‘The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has allowed them to proliferate’ (CF, 74). The metafictional character of ‘Tlön’, its ubiquitous self-reflexivity, is more than pertinent in this connection: it is no wonder that ‘Tlön’, as an artefact that systematically draws attention to its own fictional status, brought to the surface the underlying structures upon which it was constructed.

Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933) was a German philosopher who contributed to the renewal of interest in Kant. He saw in the heuristic fictions posited by the latter, a general explanation for discursive thought. Although Kant had denied epistemological value to metaphysical notions like the soul as a simple substance, he concluded that they served as a regulative idea: we must act *as if* the soul were indivisible. We also act *as if* we were free agents and this fiction is justified by the moral actions resulting from that belief. Extrapolating from ethical postulates, Vaihinger argued that fictions are all-pervasive in discursive thought. Only sensations are real; the rest consists in justified fictions which are only a means aimed at facilitating our ideational capacity. The justification of fictions in discursive thought lies in their *expediency*.

With the limiting extent given to this term, Borges story is a circuitous fiction. In order to explain this statement I have to refer to Vaihinger analyses of the lexical form ‘as if’, which he takes to be a guiding principle for establishing knowledge. The formula ‘as if’, according to Vaihinger, expresses that reality as given is compared with something whose unreality and impossibility is at the same time admitted. Fictions constitute cognitive instruments. They advance an understanding of the empirical world in as much as it is by means of fictional arrangements, chiefly the raising of certain attributes of the real and the suppressing of others, that we permanently subsume the unknown to the known. This is plainly the case of concepts and categories where only the common elements are highlighted while the differences are suppressed. Fictions such as categories and general ideas intervene in any assertion that we make about reality. Vaihinger explains the formation of categories in these terms:

The factor common to all fictions in this class [*abstractive fictions*] consists in a neglect of important elements of reality. As a rule the reason for the formation of these fictions is to be sought in the highly intricate character of the facts which make theoretical treatment exceedingly difficult owing to their unusual complexity. The logical functions are thus unable to perform their work undisturbed, because it is not possible here to keep the various threads out of which reality is woven, apart from one another. Since, then, the material is too complicated and confused for thought to be able to break it upon its component elements, and since the causal factors sought are probably of too complicated a nature for them to be determined directly, thought makes use of an artifice by

<sup>3</sup> *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* [*Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (1911)], trans. C. K. Ogden, London, Routledge & Kegan, 1965. All the citations from Vaihinger’s work correspond to the English version.

means of which it provisionally and temporarily neglects a number of characters and selects from them the more important phenomena (Ibid., 19).

The subsumption of one individual into the category reserved for another constitutes an unjustified transference. According to Vaihinger, geometry deliberately makes use of unjustified transferences in the manner of ideational constructs. It occurs, for instance, when we treat the curve as if it were a straight line or a circle as if it were an ellipse. These fictions are examples of purely artificial constructs that advance operations of thought. A straight line is a curve whose radius is said to be equal to infinity. Similarly, the possibility of defining the circle as a limiting case of an ellipse whose foci are separated by a distance equal to zero puts these two figures in relation to each other and thus their inner nature is shown. Likewise in 'Tlön' the world can be seen as a strange planet and then the strange planet is seen as the world. According to Vaihinger the world's intelligibility is dependent upon these contrastive operations.

Although Vaihinger's influence on Borges remains somewhat nebulous,<sup>4</sup> both authors, I believe, are in perfect accord about the epistemological value of fictional discourses; the main contention being that fiction is instrumental to knowledge. In 'Tlön' the 'thusness' of the world accesses consciousness through a fantastic construct. By means of the 'as if' strategy, idealism – which in 'Tlön' fills the gap between the 'as' and the 'if' – is empowered by fiction; the result is the apperceiving act we are able to effect whereby an idea of the world is revealed. Notice that what Tlön reveals and subsequently effaces is an idea of the world and, certainly, not the only possible one, for metaphysical necessity has been ruled out. Tlön, another idea of the world, takes over.

Although contemporary studies have grouped fiction into two large classes – cognitive fictions and narrative fictions – in Vaihinger's work such a difference is far from neat. Narratives such as Plato's ideal republic, the eighteenth-century French tales of primeval states, and Campanella and Moore's utopian fictions, are mentioned in *The Philosophy of 'As If'* as examples belonging to the first category. All these depictions constitute, according to Vaihinger, schematic fictions and have in common a paradigmatic element: they are postulations of general types conceived as absolutely bare and deprived of all those characters of reality that might interfere with the procedure. These conceptual constructs only possess a value for an understanding of reality when real conditions are substituted for ideal representations; their epistemological value lies in the apperceiving power they are able to prompt. Thought is a pliable mechanism that operates by bringing together disproportionate elements in order to show their intimate nature ('all cognition is the apperception of one thing through another.' Vaihinger, Ibid, 29). Thus fiction makes it possible to draw two elements into a comparative apperception; the 'as if' guides the procedure. Tlön is the circle that is the ellipse; by increasing the distance between the foci, the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker: A study of Motif in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1969; Floyd Merrell, *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991. Although both authors cite the interview conducted by Jean de Milleret in which Borges denied having read Vaihinger, a recent study on the archaeology of TUOT reveals that Borges was acquainted with Vaihinger's book: 'In Xul's library [Xul Solar] there is a volume of the first edition (Leipzig, 1923) of Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*; a book famously cited in "Tlön." The volume contains Borges' hand-written notes and it is signed and dated "Jorge Luis Borges, 1940, Buenos Aires."' Nicolás Helft, 'History of the Land Called Uqbar,' *Variaciones Borges*, 15 (2003), 176.

world's constitutive traits are shown.<sup>5</sup> Tlön is an imaginary planet only *modus dicendi*, and only as long as Tlön and Earth are at odds with each other, but when they finally reunite, the Orbis Tertius (the third orb) evaporates. And this also points to the provisional nature of all our representations of the world: They are constructs, like Wittgenstein's ladder,<sup>6</sup> which must be thrown away after we have climbed up it. In this sense fantastic constructs can be viewed as aids to thought.

### De-territorialising the Map

The possibility and limits of representations constitute perhaps one of the most constant motifs in Borges' narrative fictions. There is no better text of his to show the paradoxes arising from representations than the one which describes a hypothetical map drawn on scale 1 to 1:

'...In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome, and, not without Irreverence, they abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation, no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography.' (*On the Exactitude of Science*, CF, 325).

Real maps can only stand for the territory by reproducing its features on a particular scale so as to constitute an organised whole. The size of the map is given by the number of elements included in it, but this number finds a limit in the level of comprehension arising from the map; it cannot be extended indefinitely. A hypothetical complete map indistinguishable from the territory will equal nil comprehension; it will appear before our minds as a closed entity. Maps in order to represent must possess a sketchy nature that can be 'filled in' in a continuous and endless progression towards the territory, but the ultimate complete territory of the map is unattainable and remains a postulate of reason. Maps distinctively show how there is always a fictional dimension in any representation; we readily conceive a 3-Dimensional environment as a flat spatial schema, which is in itself a remarkable achievement. This operation evinces to what extent the 'as if', always at work, is an inextricable part of representations. By ignoring elements of the territory, maps advance systems of knowledge. Maps carry knowledge. They are not innocent spatial organizations of data, but rather cognitive schemata that chart things under the particular mode of seen-all-together.

Territories represented by maps are deemed to be complete entities. This assumption rests on the false premise that we can think a 'real' territory, but in actual fact thinking the territory means already thinking a spatial organisation, a representation; in short, a map. Since the territory is not given to us directly and

<sup>5</sup> On the first page of the Encyclopaedia of Tlön there is a blue oval with the inscription 'Orbis Tertius.' An oval figure aptly represents the planet whose characteristics have been 'elongated.'

<sup>6</sup> WITTEGENSTEIN, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness; Rev. Ed., London, Routledge, 200, XI.

comprehensively, maps are the necessary surrogate territories for thinking the territory. A map is extended onto another map, as one entity signals another entity in an ascending relationship towards completeness. It goes without saying that the ultimate complete entity of the series can only be ideally postulated. There is no completeness with which to contrast representations, yet it is on the basis of this final referent that reason can operate, for a system of representation must be anchored in some sort of ultimate reality, or at least in something which is posited as if it were the ultimate reality. On the other hand, this absolute limit can only be drawn on representations not on what causes them, otherwise, as Wittgenstein put it, we would be able to think both sides of the limit and therefore we would be able to think the unthinkable.<sup>7</sup>

Borges narrative fictions always try to push the relationship map-territory to its limits. The epistemological dimension that emerges from this destabilising tension between map and territory reminds us of the provisional nature of our representations. The map of the Empire turns into a 3-D *maquette* of the Empire and, finally, the Empire. The completion of the itinerary that leads from one term of the relationship – map – to the other – territory – results in negating reality to reality: the ultimate referent has absconded. And that is so for the same mechanism that allows the narrator of ‘Tlön’ to proclaim in the final lines of the story that the world will be Tlön. The Encyclopaedia threatens to disintegrate our world and replace it with the strange order described in its volumes, which also operate retrospectively, modifying the past. The fulfilment of the Tlönian prophecy requires the same obliteration of boundaries. On reading ‘Tlön’ we progress along an epistemological distance, knowledge, though, does not come towards the end in the form of an epiphany (the end point of the story is not a vantage point), but rather as an activity of thought, as the covering of the itinerary itself. In this regard, the Borgesian story, like any piece of fictional narrative, cannot be re-stated or summarised in a number of findings; what the story says cannot be separated from the way in which is said.

### Les Cités Obscures

The idea of describing thoroughly another world in Tlön fashion has been developed in *Les Cités Obscures*, a series of graphic novels produced since 1982 by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters.<sup>8</sup> The first album, *Les murailles de Samaris* [The Walls of Samaris] anticipates other stories of the series creating a sort of dialogue or interplay within the work itself. In *L’Archiviste* [The Archivist], Isidore Louis has to investigate rumours which have begun to circulate about some mysterious cities. Although proper evidence is hard to come by, Isidore manages to put together several pieces that are of interest. Among those are snippets about Calvani, Xhystos, Brüssel, etc., all of them cities that were to appear in later albums. Emulating a typical Borgesian artifice, Schuiten and Peeters mix references to books already published along with non-existent ones. In line with this procedure, it was later published in the format of the Michelin Green Guide, a reference book about *Les Cités*. The guide covers all the aspects of the imaginary world: geography, history,

<sup>7</sup> ‘The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).’ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, XI.

<sup>8</sup> The whole series has been published by Éditions Casterman, Brussels, 1982; 2004.

fauna, flora, etc. It amounts to the elusive eleventh volume of the Tlönian encyclopaedia.

Like Borges, the authors of *Les Cités* make use of similar devices to blur boundaries between fiction and reality. The inclusion of real people or fictional characters named after real people has further contributed to giving an air of solidity to what would otherwise be just make-believe. The procedure of including references to a whole ‘family of kindred spirits’ also provides a key to the reading of *Les Cités*; Novalis, Maeterlinck, Julien Gracq, René Daumal, Italo Calvino, Kafka, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jules Verne, among others, are the authors cited by Schuiten. More frequent and more important though are the references to Borges and the explicit acknowledgement of ‘Tlön’ as the matrix of *Les Cités*. In *L’Archiviste* there are allusions to the *dada* metaphor of transparent tigers and a city called Uqbar. Isidore Luis is none other than the narrator of ‘Tlön’ with even a physical resemblance to Borges. So he speaks:

Only perhaps a large group of artists and savants of all disciplines could have accomplished such a feat. Assembled in the most secret society of them all, they had constructed this insane mystification with infinite patience; labouring guided by obscure motives, they built century after century, a completely chimerical world (*L’Archiviste*, pièce 17).

In *Les Cités* as well as in ‘Tlön’, an enquiry into the strange facts precedes the methodical exposition of the other world, but, at the same time, the selfsame enquiry is what makes the facts come true: ‘In spite of all verisimilitude, we declare that the phenomenon did not develop until after I have began my work; it is my own research that appears to have granted consistency to it’ (*L’Archiviste*, Pièce 18).

Schuiten and Peeters lavishly use architectural décor for the setting of their stories. The city of Brussels, slightly displaced into Brüssel, appears in most of the albums: ‘The best way to define the world of the obscure cities is as a displaced reflection of our world.’ (*L’Archiviste*, Pièce 18). By means of extrapolating elements of the city’s rich architectural heritage, the authors have managed to create a universe of their own. The procedure is similar to Vaihinger’s schematic fictions: general types are deprived of unnecessary characters to make it easier to single out constituent elements. Like ‘Tlön’, *Les Cités* are a re-cognisable world. They direct our regard upon cultural practices, architectural styles and history by means of superimposing transparencies.

As it has been implied, we cannot enter the world without representations of some sort, without our language-games. Nor can we attend to what is ubiquitous. And ubiquitous is the world; it cannot be shown by contrast with competing features unless we bring these possibilities forth. Through fiction we give form to these possibilities; the discourse of fiction is the locus where the realm of the possible can be contrasted with our mundane always between quotes ‘world’. This contrasting operation has cognitive effects, effects of truth; after all, all cognition is the apperception of one thing through another.

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