

**Archiving Simulacra:  
The Invention of Reality in Adolfo Bioy Casares’  
*La Invención de Morel***

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**Abstract**

Adolfo Bioy Casares’ *La Invención de Morel* is a magical realist novel written in epistolary form that revolves around two characters: the anonymous narrator/author, and the scientist Morel, whose invention preserves reality by virtue of its ability to create perfect copies. Bioy Casares’ concern with the difference between subjective and objective reality, and the role of representation, anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theories about a simulated reality in *Simulacra and Simulations*. Through an analysis of character and Morel’s machine, as well as an integration of Baudrillard’s ideas, my research explores how *La Invención de Morel* calls into question our assumptions about the relationship between what we perceive to be reality and its representation. My research also examines the paradoxical aspect of magical realist literature in that it both creates mistrust in the mediums of image and language, as well as uses them to correct our assumptions about history or the world through the process of archiving. This research is useful in that it reminds us to question the means by which we communicate and perceive truths.

The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.

—Plato, *Book X, The Republic*

## **Introduction**

In the past, Adolfo Bioy Casares' novel *La Invención de Morel* has been read as a work of fantastic literature or of detective fiction, but there has been less scholarship regarding its postmodern characteristics concerning the influence of technology and image on the construction and meaning of the sign. Using Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, this reading of Bioy Casares' novel explores how *La Invención de Morel* is a critique on the ways in which we perceive and construct notions of the real through its representation in a postmodern society. My analysis addresses the means by which different representations of the archive in the novel become the product, or object, by which the real can be measured.

*La Invención de Morel* centers around two characters, each an inventor in his own way: Morel, whose scientific invention creates three-dimensional recordings so perfect that they appear to preserve, rather than copy, what is real, and the anonymous Fugitive, who is the writer of the narrative that we are reading. In Morel's machine and the images it projects, one can see an inherent desire to faithfully capture and preserve what is real. These objects can be compared to the object that the Fugitive leaves behind, his journal, which stores his account, and is also an attempt to record and capture the events of his life. Both the Fugitive's journal and Morel's museum can be thought of as different types of archives. Whether these archives work to preserve, copy or recreate reality remains ambiguous; however, as the status of these objects come to be confused with and eventually replace what they originally represent, I propose that the Fugitive and Morel's efforts to preserve the real is failed. Instead, they are left with an edited, perfected version of their desired reality, and to use Baudrillard's terms, this constructed reality is subsumed by simulation.

In the tradition of the castaway novel and the 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific romance, and with the scientist character Morel paying particular homage to *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H.G. Wells, *La Invención de Morel* is set on a small, unknown and uninhabited island in the Pacific. The Venezuelan Fugitive has been forced to escape to the island to avoid prosecution for a crime he did not commit. His solitary routine is intruded upon by the appearance of a group of vacationers; he soon learns, however, that the vacationers are not actually people but perfectly realistic, three-dimensional recordings of people that had spent a week together on this island ten years previously. The Fugitive discovers that one of the men in the group, Morel, had invented a machine with the power to create these recordings and had also designed the few buildings on this particular island, including the museum.

### **Hyperreality and the Archive**

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard posits that commodity culture in today's postmodern society has undermined the process of abstraction and representation and therefore, of a genuinely experienced reality. Baudrillard uses a post-structuralist approach to demonstrate how the real can be described in terms of a system of signs. However, he goes beyond describing a sign system of signifiers that may distort or falsify the true meaning of the imaginary (the signified), and instead states that signifiers have been replaced by simulacra, which threaten "the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (3). Simulacra do not distort or mask the imaginary they represent because they instead subsume all distinction between the imaginary and the real (the signifier and the signified), and substitute "the signs of the real for the real" (2). Therefore, instead of living in the real, we now live in the age of the hyperreal, a closed circuit of self-referential signs, or simulacra, only distinguishable in how they differ from each other. The process of representation and abstraction, therefore, is no longer one that represents an actual imaginary. In imitating the structure of a society driven by commodity and exchange, simulacra reconfigure the way in which the real is experienced into the hyperreal. In the hyperreal, it is the model of the real that precedes the real and does away with the "mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its

concept” in favor of “an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all signs of the real and short circuits all of its vicissitudes” (2).

Baudrillard further explores the implications of this theory by addressing the impact of the hyperreal on the construction of history. The hyperreal has grown to permeate and falsify not only contemporary Western culture, but it has also begun to extend into the past. The means by which it accomplishes this is in how we view and conceive of the past today, visibly compiled into museums or reenacted in films, for “in a world completely catalogued and analyzed, then *artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real*” (8) these constructions are necessary for our own understanding of what has come before us. This understanding serves not only in order to comprehend history, but also enable the placement of ourselves in the present in relation to it, for “we require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (10). This operational, visible and calculated effort can be thought of as the process of creating an archive, or a careful record that serves to preserve the past and define the present, something that is both a product of culture and a means of producing it.

When looking at Bioy Casares’ *La Invención de Morel*, Baudrillard’s theory of a simulated reality can be useful in comparing the relative qualities of each invention portrayed in the novel. The Fugitive’s journal and Morel’s museum each form a different relationship with the imaginary. As archives, they each preserve aspects of lived experience, but while the journal is a subjective, written account, the museum creates a scientific, objective and seemingly more realistic history.

### **Journal as Archive**

The narrative is structured as a work of fantastic fiction, as per Tzvetan Todorov’s generic conventions. The fantastic in literature occurs when the character(s) and/or reader experience a seemingly supernatural event that cannot be explained by the laws of the familiar world, and they must then decide whether the character is “a victim of an illusion of the senses,” thus preserving the laws of the familiar world, or if the supernatural event really has occurred and “is an integral part of reality –

but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us” (Todorov 25). Fantastic literature, therefore, exists in the ambiguity between opting for either explanation. *La Invención de Morel* is a fantastic text; it is narrated in the first person, a form that maintains the ambiguity as to what is real so that the reader may learn along with the Fugitive, lending to the Fugitive’s continual questioning and reconfiguring of reality. The epistolary structure of the novel, and the Fugitive’s errors, corrections and edits as he writes his narrative can be compared to his internal process as he attempts to figure out the truth about his experiences on the island. Mara García notes that this aspect of the narrative gives the reader a portrait of the creative process in action; as the Fugitive writes and comments on his own text, a sense of the journal as an object within the novel and as a literary work emerges (128). This self-reflexive aspect of the Fugitive’s narration is contingent upon the role of doubt in the Fugitive’s thought process in his attempts to ground himself epistemologically as he learns more about the vacationers’ presence and Morel’s invention.

This self-referential process of writing and editing that comprises the narrative is responsible for the novel’s tightly structured, linear plot, a characteristic that is mandatory in all fantastic (and detective) fiction in order to preserve the revelatory experience towards the end of a novel when the explanation for the supernatural event emerges. In *La Invención de Morel*, the device by which the supernatural is explained (i.e., when the Fugitive learns the truth about the vacationers’ presence on the island) is Morel’s invention, a scientific machine that functions according to laws of reality previously unknown by the Fugitive. The characteristic hesitance to accept a new reality in fantastic literature is expressed here by the Fugitive shortly after he discovers that the vacationers are actually only recorded images of people: “The habits of our lives make us presume that things will happen in a certain foreseeable way, that there will be a vague coherence in the world. Now reality appears to be changed, unreal” (Bioy Casares 65).

The fantastic structure of the narrative is significant because it makes up the first archive, the Fugitive’s journal. Although the text is written in epistolary form, the meta-literary presence of an editor’s footnotes reveal to the reader that the Fugitive’s journal could not have remained

undiscovered on the island, but rather was discovered and read at some point, thus fulfilling an archive's communicatory function. The Fugitive, who does not survive his time spent on the island, lives on in his writing.

The Fugitive does not originally approach his narrative with the intention of creating a record of his experiences. His intention at the beginning of the novel and at the commence of his stay on the island is to write two scientific and political books, "*Apology for Survivors* and *Tribute to Malthus*" (9), titles which reveal the Fugitive's initial leanings towards science and objectivity over narrative. As he becomes caught up in his experiences, the Fugitive becomes less concerned with producing these two books, however, than recording in detail what has happened to him. Wendy Ryden observes that conflict between science and literature is reflected in the Fugitive's "predilection for the scientific while constantly 'regressing' to the 'art' of narrative (his diary) and visual depiction (his flower portrait)" (196). In reference to the Fugitive's criticism of the lack of scientific texts in the island's library, Suzanne Jill Levine uncovers a similar theme, that "the intrusions of books, and even of the library ... 'interfere' with the scientific content" (18). This conflict demonstrates how the Fugitive privileges scientific objectivity over narrative, a preference that comes into play later on in the novel when he grows to admire the realism achieved by Morel's invention.

The Fugitive's goal to write *Apology for Survivors* and *Tribute to Malthus* remains unfulfilled, but he does create a subjective, unreliable record of his experiences on the island. By the end of the novel, the Fugitive declares: "If one day the images should fail, it would be wrong to suppose that I have destroyed them. On the contrary, my aim is to save them by writing this diary" (Bioy Casares 80). Therefore, the Fugitive has written this account in order to archive his experience on the island, and despite his attempts to be objective and factual, his narration is a subjective, at times erroneous one, as is pointed out both by himself at later moments in the novel and by the unknown editor.<sup>1</sup>

### **Invention as Archive**

In contrast, Morel's invention produces an archive that by all appearances is objective, factual and accurate. When Morel invented his machine, he believed that the perfect union of the copies of all elements

that make up the physical self—sight, smell, touch, etc.—would be enough to secure his immortality: “When all the senses are synchronized, the soul emerges” (Bioy Casares 71). Instead of being merely a copy of his life, Morel invented a machine to create a replacement for it; the recordings that the machine produces are therefore simulacra, because in murdering what is real, they usurp its place.

At the end of the week-long reel, Morel gives a speech in which he explains to his friends what he has done and reveals his motives. As a scientist, Morel had spent a great deal of time experimenting with and perfecting his invention. In the early stages of his experiments, Morel had planned to use his machine to compile various images and create large albums in which he could preserve and share his fondest memories. But as his invention became more developed, and he saw that his love for Faustine was to go on unreturned, Morel lost hope in creating the memories he desired. Instead, he devised the plan to create a week-long recording of his friends on the island, which, powered by the tides, would be able to play eternally. Yet the main building on the island was still referred to as the museum: “The word *museum*, which I use to designate this house, is a survival of the time when I was working on plans for my invention, without knowing how it would eventually turn out. At that time I thought I would build large albums or museums, both public and private, filled with these images” (Bioy Casares 76). The museum, which housed the vacationers for the week that they were there and then their images forever after, is an archive that functions to construct a visible past. As Iulia Micu observes, “The museum and the library (also frequent metaphors with Borges) are both spaces which collect, index, and exhibit all kinds of relics in a parallel world, metaphors of displacement, the utopian outside-time place where history and human imagination is preserved” (240). A museum’s existence outside of time immortalizes the objects it protects, as well as uses them to create a historical timeline that the viewer would identify with as leading up to the present moment.

### **Museum as Archive**

Similarly, Morel created a museum that would archive recorded images of himself and his friends, thus preserving and immortalizing them.

Morel's museum and its eternal loop of collected images are an example of the tendency to create a visible history lest "our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses" (Baudrillard 10). Baudrillard argues that this tendency actually creates a falsified, hyperreal version of history. As a metaphor, Baudrillard refers to a recent effort in the scientific community to save the mummy Ramses II from rotting in the basement of a museum, which had survived for 40 centuries prior to its being discovered in an Egyptian tomb:

Because mummies don't rot from worms: they die from being transplanted from a slow order of the symbolic, master over putrefaction and death, to an order of history, science, and museums, our order, which no longer masters anything, which only knows how to condemn what preceded it to decay and death and subsequently to try to revive it with science. (Baudrillard 11)

The objects inside Morel's museum, also, are dead; Morel's confidence that the consciousness of the person being recorded will emerge once all the senses have merged together perfectly proves to be a failed experiment. In this sense, the vacationers in the novel are like Ramses II; once Morel tries to preserve them and grant them immortality by recording their images using his machine, thus transplanting them to the order of "history, science, and museums," he is actually condemning them to "decay and death." Baudrillard terms this phenomenon, "extermination by museumification" (10).

Therefore, both the Fugitive's journal and Morel's museum are objects that function as archives in their faithful transcription and construction of what has occurred in the past. In the narrative itself, the reader can find evidence of the Fugitive's development as the facts about the images inhabiting the island begin to emerge; it can be said that the narrative demonstrates growth by going through several drafts before arriving at the final version of the story. Similarly, one can trace Morel's creative development in his explanation of the several experiments it took for him to arrive at the final version of his machine.



There are differences, however, in their respective archives. The Fugitive's journal is written linearly, whereas the recordings created by Morel exist in a type of circular time because they are programmed to keep repeating for all eternity. The Fugitive is confined to the use of words, and as a result, his account is much more subjective and internal than what one sees in Morel's recordings. The recordings, by nature of their recording external appearances, seem to be more objective. In the Fugitive's journal, one can find moments in which he expresses emotions, as well as moments of doubt and conjecture. The images of the objects recorded with Morel's invention do not offer this privileged insight.

Another way in which the central theme of the process of representation and reproduction is reinforced in *La Invención de Morel* is by its perspective on mirrors. At the moment in the novel in which the Fugitive is eavesdropping on Morel's speech about his invention in a room lined with mirrors, the Fugitive can't help but feel uneasy: "I remembered that halls of mirrors were famous as places of torture. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable" (Bioy Casares 64). The association of mirrors with torture indicates an awareness of mirrors' eerie ability to copy and imitate reality.<sup>2</sup> A hall of mirrors would be especially threatening because the Fugitive would have been able to see an infinite reproduction of his image reflected by standing between two opposing mirrors. As Ryden observes, "multiple images are torturous in the challenge they pose to the uniqueness of the originating subject, a torture especially acute for one who has declared his independent subjectivity by seeking hermitage on a remote island" (198). Therefore, multiplication of an image is threatening to the original image in that it may lessen its individual value, but also because mirror reflections recreate the original in a ghostly, unreal form.<sup>3</sup> The fear and anxiety associated with mirror reflections is in fact a fear of the real being usurped by its imitation, or by its simulation.

The Fugitive's anxiety about the room lined with mirrors is justified when he learns that the mirrors are part of Morel's machine, and that they *are* in fact capable of recording and usurping the real. The mirrors are capable of both creating one's double in its reflection, and of producing a three-dimensional copy. Baudrillard outlines four

“successive phases of the image” (6) culminating in simulacra. A regular mirror would qualify as the first phase, as “the reflection of a profound reality” (6). *These* mirrors, in their ability to record and reproduce these images, surpass this classification to the second and third phases of the image: “it masks and denatures a profound reality,” and “it masks the *absence* of a profound reality” (6).

The fourth phase of the image, that “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (6) becomes a part of the situation because Morel’s invention causes the deaths of those it records. Morel’s decision to record a week of his and his friends’ lives together on this island is a decision that privileges the image over the real. For Morel, creating a double of the real has rendered what is genuinely real disposable, in accordance with the “radical law of equivalence and exchange” (22) established by the movement of capital over the course of history. The museum created and stocked with images by Morel manifests Baudrillard’s theory of “the production and reproduction of the real” (23) in the service of creating a visible scenario in which the signs of life may replace life; the images from Morel’s recording are perfectly manufactured copies of the real, and at the same time are “the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: *hyperreal*” (27). The museum, therefore, in not actually housing genuine artifacts from the past but their perfect copies, ultimately constructs a past that could only have existed with the murder of its subjects.

The last element to take into consideration regarding the competing archives in *La Invención de Morel* is that without an outside spectator, collecting and creating archives are an exercise in futility. Preserving and programming the real is only useful so that others may observe it. In the absence of an outside viewer, one is forced into both roles of actor and observer. Cultures internally dominated or externally defined by the hyperreal acquire a performative aspect for this reason; in reference to the way in which ethnology has pigeonholed and historicized certain ethnic minorities in an effort to preserve their culture, Baudrillard states that, “we have all become living specimens in the spectral light of ethnology” (8). Beyond ethnic minorities, Baudrillard extends this performative aspect to metropolitan Western culture as well, declaring

that the “museum, instead of being circumscribed as a geometric site, is everywhere now, like a dimension of life” (8).

The episode in *La Invención de Morel* in which the Fugitive accidentally locks himself into the motor room is demonstrative of this dual sensibility. The Fugitive is overcome by panic, but unable to free himself because he is distracted by “the feeling that I was playing a dual role, that of actor and spectator” (Bioy Casares 92); he imagines simultaneously that he is in a play, and that he is watching himself flounder in inaction, doomed to starve in the motor room. This episode, also brought about by panic, demonstrates how the Fugitive is unable to act so long as he is hyperaware of his actions in the performative sense. Similarly, earlier in the novel, one of the Fugitive’s hypotheses about what he is experiencing is that he may be dead: “So I was dead! The thought delighted me. (I felt proud, I felt as if I were a character in a novel!)” (53). The literary pride that the Fugitive takes in the possibility of being dead reflects Baudrillard’s idea of a “living specimen;” the Fugitive takes pride in becoming both the subject and object, especially in the context of literature, in which as a character, he would become a part of the greater archive of literary tradition.

Perhaps this idea of being both “actor and spectator,” (Bioy Casares 92) or a “living specimen,” (Baudrillard 8) is what assists the Fugitive in his ultimate decision to insert himself, even knowing that it would cause his death, into the recorded week. At the start of the novel, the Fugitive hides, observes and learns about the recordings; by the end, he has become intimately involved with the images, to the point that he develops routines in walking amongst them and even sleeping beside the image of the woman that he loves, Faustine. The Fugitive starts off as subject and makes the slow transition to object, like the other vacationers, by the end of the novel. The process by which the Fugitive eventually abandons the real, his life, in order to become part of the archive created by Morel can be read as an allegory on the way in which the real is subsumed and usurped by simulation and the hyperreal.

## Conclusion

The archive that the Fugitive leaves behind, his journal, is the object by which the readers learn his true history. As García observes, the Fugitive “*comienza su creación como un acto de justificación, pero a medida que avanza su producción, el acto de escribir pasa de ser sólo una apología a convertirse en una obra de arte*” (125) [“begins his creation as an act of justification, but as his narrative advances, the act of writing evolves from a defensive undertaking into a work of art”].<sup>4</sup> García further points out that although the Fugitive never leaves the island, he becomes immortalized through what he has written (125). In a sense, then, the Fugitive becomes doubly immortalized, as an image in the recordings and also as the author of his narrative.

The Fugitive’s narrative and its imperfect, subjective and meta-textual qualities remind readers of the unreliable relationship with the real created through text. As Zamora states, “[M]agical realist texts question the nature of reality *and* the nature of its representation” (500). However, it is through this self-awareness and questioning that it can be said that fantastic and magical real texts “share (and extend) the tradition of narrative realism: they, too, aim to present a credible version of experienced reality,” the only difference is that they “amplify the very conception of ‘experienced reality’ by presenting fictional worlds that are multiple, permeable, transformative, animistic” (Zamora 500). In this sense, the uncertainty characteristic of the Fugitive’s journal is more closely aligned to the real than the “programmable, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine” (Baudrillard 2) that is Morel’s invention, which murders all that is real. In commenting on its own shortcomings, the fantastic text generates a representation of reality that most faithfully reflects the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the real, “while simultaneously presenting itself. In this manner, magical texts reflect upon their own blind spots, generating a metacritical discourse about their own indeterminate modality” (Simpkins 156). This discourse, characterized by doubt and change, is different from the stable, preprogrammed images that comprise the museum’s collection; yet perhaps it is this discourse that can triumph over the stagnant creation of the hyperreal.

The process of creating archives and its bearing on the construction of history in *La Invención de Morel* proves to be one that simulates the real. The differences in the two products created in this attempt, the Fugitive's journal and Morel's museum, demonstrate how the museumification of lived experience undermines the real in favor of a simulated reality. Attempts to construct the real are found to be none other than exercises in archiving simulacra, an operation that replaces the real, but is certainly no replacement for it. Perhaps it can be said that the real exists in our perceptions of it, and also in its unpredictable, unknowable and fantastic nature. In attempting to manipulate and historicize the real by inventing a machine that will create perfect recordings and play them eternally, Morel is in fact murdering the real and moving into the realm of the hyperreal. The Fugitive's journal, in its imperfect, subjective state is a better indication of how the real is experienced. In opting for chaos and subjectivity, Bioy Casares' *La Invención de Morel* addresses issues of perception, representation and notions of the real in a way that is distinctly postmodern.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 97, 107, 139, and 181 of *La Invención de Morel*.

<sup>2</sup> As an avid reader of detective fiction, it is likely that Bioy Casares was familiar with Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*, first published in 1910 and which features a mirrored room as a torture chamber.

<sup>3</sup> This theme was also frequently explored by Borges: "As a child, I knew that horror of the spectral duplication of multiplication of reality, but mine would come as I stood before large mirrors... I feared sometimes that they would begin to veer off from reality; other times, that I would see my face in them disfigured by strange misfortunes" ("Covered Mirrors" 297).

<sup>4</sup> Translation mine.

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