

Amusing Ourselves until (Dis)appearing in *La invención de Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares

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Abstract

La invención de Morel reflect on how the use of technologies could be fascinating and dangerous at the same time; and the way the island seems to be a space of freedom while it is actually a place of prison and death. *La invención de Morel* presents a utopian situation that transforms into a dystopia. Characters, especially the narrator, project their desires along with the holograms, but they are deceived without realizing about their loss of reality. The novel uses phantasy and science fiction resources to reflect about the way humans self-imprison. This is studied by analogy to the effects of technologies in today's society. In this sense, the novel by Adolfo Bioy Casares is about a menace due to the human preference of imaginary life over real one.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Technology, Literary Genres, Hologram, Island

1. Introduction

La invención de Morel is a novel that has aroused a lively critical interest because the text has a metafictional nature asking the reader for a critical assessment of the literary artifice (Tamargo, 1976). In the first place, it is a text that has traits of various literary genres and that was an innovation in Spanish literature. Second, it is an ideal work to deal with the creative fact because there are several levels of construction of narratives and their reception. Third, it allows reflections on the possibilities and dangers of science for the human being that go from the purely philosophical to current considerations. Fourth, it presents the story on an island as a propitious space for a utopia that pushes human desire to the limits. All these aspects are interesting and can serve to structure Bioy Casares's work in form and content, but the way in which this text critiques the illusion generated by the World of Spectacle has not been studied. This term refers to a concept coined by Neil Postman to refer to the fact that the progressive advance of the media contributes to capturing the attention of the population with stimuli and prevents the subjects from making real reflections (Postman, 2001, p. 73).

La invención de Morel turns eighty in 2020, when the problems it relates have worsened. The narrator is trapped by technology in an unsettling way, which symbolizes the dangers of those narratives whose appeal can override the subject. According to Lopez Pellisa, "The technological artifact that besieges the island is described as a cinematographic projector, although its result is what we now know as virtual reality" (2009, p. 896). This virtual reality imposes itself on the narrator's own life until it is canceled. "The conception of pictorial, photographic and cinematographic art based on mimesis as a model

of understanding and mastery of reality has led Western culture to think that this type of technological reproductions can generate 'spiritual super-realities' " (López Pellisa, 2009). Virtual reality immerses us in a digital environment in which images are the means of communication, the inhabited place and the tools - icons - through which we operate.

La invención de Morel is narrated by a fugitive who comes to hide on an island, where people do not live because there is something in it that causes illness and death to those who visit it. However, some tourists appear and the narrator hides from them, but, to his surprise, they do not react to his presence. After several investigations, the narrator discovers that Morel is a scientist that has built a machine to record the lives of his friends on that island, that is, to reproduce their holograms forever. Both Morel and the narrator fall in love with Faustine, a mysterious woman who is part of the group of tourists. Morel's invention captures all aspects of the subjects, both the physical and the soul, except, perhaps, the conscience, and immortalizes them. In this way, the holograms remain forever, but people die in the process.



Faustine. The image of this character was inspired by the actress Louise Brooks. Retrieved from:
<http://www.propellermag.com/Feb2014/DeWeeseMarienbadFeb14.html>

2. Literary Genres in *La invención de Morel*

La invención de Morel urges the reader to make a critical assessment before the narration itself, because the prologue written by Borges makes a series of considerations about the genre that condition the reading. Beyond the evidently promotional aspects of considering that the plot is perfect (Bejil & Getz, 1980), the distinction of literary genres has academic interest. We are going to point out two issues about literary genres proposed by Borges and another that would complete the main aspects to bring to the classroom.

In the first place, Jorge Luis Borges differentiates between a psychological novel and an adventure novel, to which he assigns the text by Adolfo Bioy Casares. The psychological novel tends to "hide the character of verbal artifice and make all vain precision (or all languid vagueness) a new plausible touch" (1970, p. 12). In contrast, the adventure novel is not proposed as a transcription of reality but as an "artificial object that does not suggest any unjustified part" (1970, p. 12). According to Borges, Bioy Casares's text presents a careful artifice that becomes self-conscious. So much so that it is going to analyze how the narrator or fugitive, who tells of his arrival on a mysterious island, wants to understand what he experiences and even writes it in a diary, but he ends up completely disappearing in his speech (Tamargo, 1976).

Second, Bioy Casares's text has a fundamental relevance for the fantastic in the Hispanic context. The year 1940 is of great relevance due to the appropriation or translation of the Anglo-Saxon term and the choice of a modern modality of the concept of fantastic that José Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo made in the *Anthology of fantastic literature*. It is also important because of the disquisitions made by Jorge Luis Borges in the prologue and Adolfo Bioy Casares's literary approach in *La invención de Morel*. These works led to a renovation of the link between the real universe and the fictional universe in the literary work (Fort, 1988; Martínez, 2018; Meehan, 2006).



Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Retrieved from: <https://www.perfil.com/>

Third, some authors have pointed out that the novel we are working on would have characteristics of science fiction in that a possible technological explanation is given to what the narrator discovers (Meehan, 2006). It is possible that a recording preserves or attempts to preserve the characteristics that it can record or encode (López Pellisa, 2012). In this sense, Soldán (2007) points out that this work is inserted at a time in Argentine literature in which the authors put great interest in the possibilities of technology, especially cinema, to modify reality. In the case of *La invención de Morel*, although there is a fascination for the spectacle that the invention develops, the message consists of a warning in front of:

Dangers of the rapid technological and mass media change that occurred in Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s.

Seduction and death: nothing else, suggests the novel, technology and the mass media to the individual, ambivalent promises of modernity for peripheral societies (Soldán, 2007, p. 767).

This novel anticipates the way in which technology can provoke simulacra of life opposed to life itself, as we experience today. For these reasons, Bioy Casares's text allows us both to deal with very relevant literary genres and to deal with a theme that has become very present in our society.

2. The Narrators of Eternity

Science fiction has dealt many times with the possibility of finding technological means to perpetuate existence indefinitely. The aspiration to continue living represents a powerful and usually catastrophic longing because it leads to situations in which existence loses its meaning, as occurs, for example, in *Four hearts with brake and reverse* by Enrique Jardiel Poncela (1936), *The immortal* by Jorge Luis Borges (1950), *The End of Eternity* by Isaac Asimov (1955) and *Ubik* by Philip K Dick (1969). In *La invención de Morel*, the eternity is sought through the recording by Morel and the narrative by the narrator and the editor. The narrator tries to preserve what he experiences of the oblivion that time implies and of his own expiration as a living being. This is how he calls his writing with terms that refer to the legacy to future generations (testament, diary, report, memoirs). In the same way, he insists on expressions that try to strengthen the veracity of what has been told in the face of any type of falsehood (Fort, 1988). As mentioned at the beginning, Morel's invention is an example of narrative creativity (Forgues, 1979), but it is not so accurate to say that it presents "the power of the human intellect and creative imagination to manufacture new realities" (Meehan, 2006). Neither Morel nor the narrator produces a new reality, but rather they are trapped by the images, as happens to us today with other media. According to Fort,

The narrator writes to set limits to thought (103), to contain himself (Mill), for nerves (M40). The symbolic function of language begins to appear. But the writing process in turn reveals the gap that the text opens between its discourse and the referent, the latter's ineffectiveness in the face of the weight of textual reality (1988, p. 184).

It is true that writing saves the character for a time from falling into despair due to the uncertainty in which he lives. Writing is a reaction to confusion: "the perception of a surprising reality and the decision to write. The confabulation of both produces the text" (Fort, 1988, p. 183). In this way, the narrative at the beginning contains the thoughts of the fugitive, but later texts are incorporated, his own writings and those of Morel, which give sense to what happens. The problem is that it is a sense that limits the action of this character and, in reality, the narrator's ability to write what happens is determined and does not lead him to clarify his own situation. Thus, he himself realizes that he collects the facts in a very partial way and does not have control over their text. He doesn't fulfill what he plans to do or write.

In a way, the narrator is both a reader and a writer, because his text responds to his interpretation of the narrative constructed by Morel. The problem lays on the power of both narratives, the hologram created by Morel and the narration written by the narrator (Tamargo, 1976). They seem to empower their creators, but in reality they trap them. We could establish three levels of reading: Morel's level, narrator's level and editor's level (as the first reader of the written narrative). In Gallagher's words, "the inventor (God? the writer?), the voyeur who attempts to interpret the inventor's manifestations

(man? the critic?) and the reader who attempts to interpret the book” (1975. p. 253). Each of those who receive the narrative is fascinated by their own creation, but cannot go beyond that. Morel and the narrator die for the invention. For its part, the editor does not come to offer true interpretations. He transmits the text, but does not offer all the information it has. In his annotations, he justifies not offering clarification on the other texts that the narrator is preparing and he does not clarify on which island the invention is located and the adventure takes place. The message of the novel is closely related to the experience we can have today on social networks, when they capture us and can separate us from material reality. Morel, the narrator, and possibly the editor are subsumed by the fascination the hologram provokes (López Pellisa, 2012).

La invención de Morel emphasizes the relationship between reading and writing. Morel, the narrator or fugitive, and the editor create and receive narrations. The narrator “reads Morel's papers and includes comments from his reading in his narration; Morel not only writes his experiments, but also reads part of his own notes; and, finally, the Editor includes comments that prove that he has read the fugitive's manuscript” (Bejil & Getz, 1980). This work is going to focus on the narrator because is the character most influenced by the hologram. When he recounts what is happening around him, he shows his passive personality. According to Tamargo,

His language is doubtful and with phrases such as "I believe", "it seems to me", "I follow my destiny", he intersperses alternatives instead of describing facts; He thinks he is telling his adventures, which are not his, while they pass without realizing what they definitely consist of, reading without knowing the end and without having an authorized explanation for the events (1976, p. 489).

The narrator tries to understand his own motivations and those of other characters with little success because, in reality, the hologram is imposed on him rather than builds a true narrative. Thus, paraphrasing Gallagher, it is quite probable that both Morel and the narrator are invented by that alternate reality rather than they are creators of it (1977, p. 253). To finish this section, it is worth highlighting the metaliterary sense that this novel has, which allows us to work on the value of the narrative to constitute the human being. The characters (and also the people) define our identity through discourse (Sevilla-Vallejo, 2017a), although this also has its dangers. What is the fugitive but his speech? What is Morel's enunciation but his own enunciation, his activity within the fugitive's discourse? What is the Editor if not its editorial activity aimed at a virtual reader who embraces it and is part of it at the same time?” (Bejil & Getz, 1980, p. 13). In a broad sense, the text points out that language itself can also be a trap when trying to live through it, as Morel and the narrator experience. In a general sense, they get caught up in an audiovisual narrative that at the same time establishes who they are.

3. Amusing Ourselves until (Dis)appearing

The narrator or fugitive is a character who seems endowed with great energy and a complex personality in his political, philosophical and emotional stances. However, as it enters into relation with the hologram, it loses its own identity, because it is not defined in a precise way, but instead faces the diffusion or inconstant identity of adolescence (Sevilla-Vallejo, 2019). According to Fort (1988), this is produced by the character's isolation, ignorance of his exact spatial location (the narrator speculates about the island he is on) and the progressive disappearance of the reasons that led him to flee. All of this causes the character to progressively lose not only discursive identity, but also identity in practice, that is, he becomes blurred as an individual and as an actant (Sevilla-Vallejo, 2017b).

La invención de Morel presents “a simulacrum of reality that threatens the very notion of 'identity' and 'reality' of the narrator” (Soldán, 2007, p. 766). This leads us to consider that the hologram (and all those technologies that capture attention in an absorbing way) carries a risk that is not evident. As Postman exposed (2001), it is necessary to realize that technical progress brings not only gains, but also losses and both aspects are linked. The fascination that the narrator feels for what Morel's invention projects captures his senses and leads him to want to be another character in the recording, without fully realizing that he is giving up his health and his projects outside the island. “The novel relates the mass media with the idea of the archive, and both with death and the afterlife” (Soldán, 2007, p. 766). In *La invención de Morel*, technology is presented as an artifact capable of killing the individual and then artificially resuscitating him or her and making him or her eternal in a simulation archive (Soldán, 2007). This text is part of prospective literature, that is, it leads the reader to consider what could happen from technological development at a given moment (Moreno, 2015). In this case, the reason for the possibility that technology prevails over humans is addressed:

What is scary about all this is that the narrative becomes a machine to create interest and effects, and achieves its autarky, while its creators become dependent on it. Upon death, both Morel - who invented the machine - and the fugitive - who eternalized it with his testimonial text - can only remain immortal by the performance of their inventions (da Silva Alves, 2008, p. 6).

The illusion that is provoked in the narrator focuses on the infatuation of Faustine, a woman who does not respond to any of her actions. The narrator falls in love with her in an extreme manner, to the point that he tells her that he was dead and she has brought him back to life. Another recurring motif in prospective literature or science fiction is the search for a loved one through technology (López Pellisa, 2012). In this case, *La invención de Morel* highlights the paradox by which what love for a holographic woman makes the narrator want to live again, however, the enthusiasm that is awakened in him leads to a gradual decrease to death. Thus, “the enigmatic woman quickly becomes for the castaway an illusion that is worth everything and that it is necessary to face, like a desire that must be consummated in order to be annulled” (Lozano-Rivera, 2017, p. 152).



La invención de Morel. Retrieved from: <http://www.bne.es/>

4. The Island Where Nobody Can Live

The island is a propitious space for utopias or dystopias, depending on the moment of enthusiasm or failure from which they are written (Glantz, 1980). It is well known that Bioy Casares names the inventor, Morel, in homage to Moreau, the main character in H G Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. This choice warns the reader that there is something threatening on the island (Alonso-Collada, 2015; Levine, 1981; López Pellisa, 2009). Likewise, one of the characteristics of the island is to be a separate space and this allows the search for a different society, with all the possibilities that this opens up. According to Snook,

Morel had used his scientific discovery to create his own private world in seven days in which all he desired was present, a reference which obviously parallels biblical accounts of creation. While Morel the inventor plays the role of a god-like figure, his actions also reveal the desire for omnipotence characteristic of the narcissistic infant. His utopic island provides him the eternal presence and control of Faustine, the woman he loves, and his invention serves, in the words of the inventor, to give perpetual reality to his "sentimental fantasy" (1991, p. 110).

Morel had a scientific-technical knowledge that allowed him to do something extraordinary, which, as has been commented, is between the genres of fantasy and science fiction. However, his knowledge is not rationally driven, but rather he wants to apply it to achieve his desire and that is the beginning of his (dis)appearance on the island. He buys an island and seems to spread a rumor about its harmful nature to prevent anyone else from approaching it. Therefore, only someone desperate like the narrator can get there. Morel believes himself superior and takes advantage of his knowledge to create a world that he conceives as if it were heaven because he records a (supposedly) happy week and makes it last forever. It should be noted that the same duration of the recording parallels the creation of Genesis with *La invención de Morel*. Furthermore, he believes that falling in love with Faustine will be easier than what he has already achieved. However, he fails in both purposes, because it is precisely recorded how he is rejected by Faustine and, beyond the relaxed atmosphere of a holiday week, it does not seem that characters are particularly happy. The narrator also lives the same illusion. At first, he wants to protect himself from possible enemies and make Faustine fall in love, but later he forgets about those and what he wants is to participate in Morel's invention. He is convinced that, if he manages to coordinate with the scenes that the hologram repeats, he will become part of the life recorded in them. Thus, the narration emphasizes the he faces barriers:

The narrator's concern with boundedness and boundlessness, with integration and separation, is also apparent in his descriptions of objects or people in terms of parts or fragments of the whole. Passages which depict the fragmentary nature of objects often utilize the same devices which serve to establish the opposition of inside and outside, (ie, windows, doors, keyhole) (Snook, 1991, p. 112).

The narrator repeatedly refers to the limits and separations between him and the other characters, but what he does not seem to perceive is how this separation is inevitable. The island is a place where nobody can live, that is, there can be no real encounter. Nor does he perceive that what he is increasingly separating from is himself, because the island, with Morel's invention, absorbs him in such a way that he forgets who he is and the pretensions he had before arriving there. In addition, we can find multiple references that can be included in the semantic field of the disease: hallucination, catalepsy and fainting; and of the illusory: the dreams, the nightmare, the apparition and the ghost (Fort, 1988). The narrator faces the loss of control and reality. There is thus a dispersion in his identity due to the distractions to which he is subjected (Sevilla-Vallejo, 2019; Snook, 1991).

The island is culturally associated with both negative and positive aspects. On the one hand, it is linked to confinement and would have a negative connotation because, both in reality and in fiction, it has functioned as a scene of punitive institutionality or prison. That is, it can represent a power of absolute order that shapes the political space (Lozano-Rivera,

2017; Pérez, 2004). On the other hand, the island can be a space of self-determination of the subject by the independence that it offers him with respect to other lands. Morel's invention has both facets. The narrator is trapped by the island, although he feels that he has gained freedom because he has escaped from his pursuers and there he finds a challenge thanks first to the mystery of Faustine, after to the mechanism created by Morel and finally due to the possibility of immortalizing himself with Faustine (Lozano-Rivera, 2017). However, on the island of *La invención de Morel* the negative aspects predominate because, ultimately, it is the prison in which Morel and the narrator live and die. They arrive there full of illusions, they become part of the hologram and never leave it again. In the case of the narrator, the other characters appear to him and he wants to be one more appearance of the hologram. All of the characters are assimilated by Morel's invention and by the island. Therefore, the island is the place of illness, death and a potential pandemic if more people arrived to it. Characters lose their mind and their health due to the illusions caused by the invention. In Bioy Casares's novel, it happens as in Jorge Luis Borges's *On exactitude in science*, where the projection of space becomes space itself, producing a break with this second. The technique replaces the experience to the point that the subject disappears:

This projection of the territory in the territory itself serves as an alternative instance for the experience of the shipwrecked person, who by unraveling the artifice is dedicated to fervently wanting to stop being him and to become an image of himself and thus be enabled to interact with the woman who, at this point we can affirm, is a doubly imagined entity (Lozano-Rivera, 2017, p. 155).

The text by Bioy Casares and the one by Jorge Luis Borges have in common that an artificial element (the hologram and the map, respectively) substitutes the reality itself. The use of phantasy and science fiction resources in these texts demands a reflection about the possibility of forgetting real life in favor of appearance life.

5. Conclusion

La invención de Morel is a very important text for different reasons. In the first place, for the wealth and innovation about the literary genres it presents. According to Jorge Luis Borges, it is an example of the adventure novel, as a perfectly structured literary artifact to generate intrigue. Adolfo Bioy Casares takes this genre to the self-awareness of literary creation. It is also part of an iconic moment regarding the fantastic in literature written in Spanish. And finally, it is an example of science fiction literature that anticipates the fascination with technology that is so important today. Second, the processes of reading and writing written and audiovisual narratives are presented in an explicit or metafictional way. It shows the fascination and danger of fiction that makes those who come into contact with the hologram lose their reference to the real world, as also happens to the reader of Julio Cortázar's *The continuity of parks*. Third, it leads us to reflect properly on how both Morel and the narrator believe that the hologram can eternalize them, while at the same time disappearing psychologically and biologically. *La invención de Morel* can lead us to reflect on the extent to which audiovisual media and social networks today also separate us from real life. Finally, it has been analyzed how Bioy Casares uses the island's *topos* to install the opposition between the ideals of the characters fascinated by the hologram and the isolation in which they spend their last moments.

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