



# Fiction and Eternity: Analysis of the Postmodern Characteristics of Borges's Literature from the Perspective of Deleuze

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**Abstract.** Based on the concepts of “simulacrum,” “rhizome,” and “territorialization-deterritorialization-reterritorialization” proposed by French theorist Gilles Deleuze, writing activities with postmodern characteristics show a significant deconstruction of classic and modernist concepts, including the decentralization and disintegration of the narrative concept of linear time. Jorge Luis Borges' postmodern characteristics are not only reflected in the use of “metafiction” to highlight the fictionality of his stories, but also in the characteristics of what is called “philosophical writing,” that is, in terms of themes, he ironically, deconstructs and reconstructs important classic Western philosophical concepts on “time” and “eternity” to achieve a decentralized effect.

**Keywords:** Deleuze; Borges; Simulacrum; Rhizome

## 1 Introduction

Borges's works are called “philosophical writings” as the themes often respond to classic philosophical concepts, especially including Platonists' proposition of eternity and the classic perception of linear time. Platonists and their successors devalued the real material world to a copy of the “world of Ideas,” which is an eternal and ideal world with perfect and immortal archetypes of the objects in the mortal world. Meanwhile, the classic perception of linear time has become dominant as a rational understanding and an indivisible straight line in both cognitive and narrative domains. Gilles Deleuze, one of the most crucial postmodern theorists, proposed concepts such as “simulacrum” and “rhizome” in his works *Difference and Repetition* (1994), *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) as a refutation to the above classic concepts. Furtherly, he affirmed the devalued desire and body, thereby dispelling the concept of eternity, universality and identity. In Deleuze's theory, life presents a process of difference that is constantly generated until the end, and pluralism must be valued.

Earlier than Deleuze, Borges foresaw highly similar responses to the above concepts in his texts. For example, in his story “the Immortal,” the immortals in a non-human state are used to show the negation of eternity to human existence; in “the Garden of

Forking Paths,” the possibility of coexistence of different parallel times and causalities are explored in the form of metafiction. With Deleuze’s theory, the analyses and explanations of the postmodernity of Borges’ works will be further deepened and expanded.

## **2 Fiction and Simulacrum: Fictional Field and Borges’ Postmodernist Writing Technique**

One of the most influential concepts that postmodern theorists must first overturn is the core concept of Platonism which is the binary opposition of “model-copy,” as the main source of Western philosophy. This Platonists’ intentions are described by Deleuze as “the will to eliminate simulacra or phantasms” [1] (Deleuze, 1994, p. 265). To achieve the purpose of decentralization, Deleuze (1994) pointed out that “each thing exists only in returning, copy of an infinity of copies which allows neither original nor origin to subsist...[and] the simulacrum is the true character or form – the ‘being’ – of that which is” [1] (p. 67). The concept of “copy” refers to the nature world which is exactly the non-fictional authenticity pursued by realistic narratives. However contemporary society is a collection of fragmented “simulacra”. It is not organized according to the principle of similarity and sameness, but a system with differences, that is, a collection of self-referential and repeated differences. The world of simulacra hints the collapse of the world of representation. Simulacra replace representations, break the violence of identity and restore the diversity and complexity of the world. The concept of simulacra further affirms that art is not to imitate reality, but to create feelings and perspectives, and elevates the value of fiction. Different from believing that one’s own writing has non-fictional authenticity and its negation of fiction, the fictionality in postmodernist writing is the affirmation and proliferation of simulacra.

Borges, who had distinct postmodern characteristics, always avoided overly concrete descriptions in his creation, because in his artistic and cosmic view, reality mixing with fictions were the true status of existence. He even claimed that “there is no difference between fact and fiction” [2] (Barnstone, 1982, p. 117). He put fictionality at the forefront of his works, which is highly consistent with Deleuze’s concept of simulacra to break the violent rule of identity. In Borges’s “the Garden of Forking Paths,” the garden that Yu Tsun enters to escape pursuit is a fictional maze space in the real time and space of the British land. This narrative based on a semi-fictional field is the opposite of the narratives that strive to restore reality, and this semi-fictional simulacrum space is closer to people’s real living space. Through Albert’s narration, Yu Tsun realized that the novel with disordered time and causalities left by his ancestor is another real labyrinth. The metafictional part of the novel written by Ts’ui Pen here further demonstrates the fictionality of the arts of novel creation. Borges described this novel to form a metaphor for the intricate fate and nonlinear time and space in reality. At last, Yu Tsun is forced to shoot Albert, who could further tell him the truth, which leads to his loss of the opportunity to understand the truth. This fateful failure constitutes an irony of mortals’ pursuit of the truth of the “world of Ideas” as described by Platonists. In “the Immortal”, there are also many metafictional characteristics. As the narrator’s words that “due to over-employment of circumstantial details, a way of writing that I learned from

poets...[it] infects everything with falseness, since there may be a wealth of details in the event, yet not in memory” [3] (Borges, 1999, p. 437). To the aspect of metafiction, it actually reflects the fictionality of writings and shows that it is impossible to reach the authenticity of writing as claimed by realist writers.

Borges’ “the South” also further explores the existence of reality and existence as “simulacra.” Dahlmann’s pursuit, in his mind, of the South is not the same as the real Argentine south. In his mind, he imagines the South where his ancestors lived and imitates the idealized gauchos with romanticism. At the end of his life, ironically, to practice his belief of the spirit of gaucho, he chooses to duel as an ideal gaucho with a gaucho who does not have the spirit of an ideal gaucho. The South and the gauchos presented by Borges do not have their own certainty. Rather, the South is formed by people’s subjective will projecting onto reality. It is just an aggregate of countless simulacra of the South and the gauchos, which constitute a semi-fictional simulated space similar to that in “the Garden with Forking Paths.” The semi-fictional spaces that exist in the superposition of real material spaces and the fictional spaces projected by human culture and desire are the real living spaces of human beings.

### **3 Eternity and Infinite Chaos: Nonlinear View of Time and Deconstruction of Classic Concept of Eternity**

Deleuze pointed out that the real world is chaotic and disordered. The purpose of exploring the chaotic world is not to fabricate abstract philosophical concepts and order rules that do not ever actually exist, but only to construct an order that allows people to find a place to settle down in the chaos. Without temporarily stable ideas and viewpoints, life cannot continue. Therefore, the task of “philosophy is no longer synthetic judgment...it is like a thought synthesizer functioning to make thought travel, make it mobile, make it a force of the Cosmos” [4] (Deleuze 1987, p. 344). Thus, philosophy is not to reveal the essence of things, but to describe the environment and events of the process of individualization. The individualization process of existence is a never-ending generation process. The individualization process of an individual will never end and will always be in a semi-individualized state. Therefore, there will be no truly complete people or individuals with stable subjectivity in the world. Deleuze describes a “conjunction of flows of life and of society that this body and this person intercept, receive, and transmit, always within a biological, social, and historical field where we are equally immersed or with which we communicate” [5] (Deleuze, 1983, p. 331) to unveil our positions of existence. Furthermore, any event is not fixed in time, it is a creation of a new direction of time flows.

Echoing Deleuze’s concept that life is the flow of time is the appalling scene of the life of the immortals described by Borges in “the Immortal.” As the narrator says, in infinite time, “no one is someone; a single immortal man is all men” [3] (1999, p. 432), because eternal life makes the immortals lose their human natures and desires. Therefore, the immortals who have lost their identity inevitably go to nothingness. They demolish the original city and build a purposeless weird city, suggesting that eternity makes all creations as human beings meaningless. The passage of time brought by death

is the root of human creativity and existence. In “the Garden of Forking Paths,” Ts’ui Pen’s novel, which claims to contain everything in the world, shows a world where time is intertwined, infinitely branching out, so that all causes and possibilities coexist, which changes a deterministic time and space under the linear view of time and the events that happen in it. Through that, Borges deconstructs the linear view of time and narrative mode of modernity in this way. Similarly, in “the Book of Sand,” the infinite number of pages in the Book coexist at the same time, recording the ever-changing world in the form of a fluid book. This book is regarded as a scared book by the salesmen and the narrator who take the concept of linear time as the basis of cognition, precisely because it reveals a nonlinear perception of time that is illogical and chaotic from a postmodernist perspective, thus constituting an irony of the classical view of time. The irony of certainty and the pursuit of sameness is another important theme of Borges’s literature with postmodern characteristics. In Deleuze’s theory, this certainty is a negation of the life process and the opposite of vitality. Certainty eliminates different possibilities in time and creates a centralized world of identity. Borges practices decentralization with the high degree of uncertainty and nonlinearity of his narratives.

#### **4 Rhizome, Line of Flight, and the Body: The Body as A Desire Machine and Desire in Borges’s Writings**

In order to dissolve the integration of totality and overthrow the rule of logos, Deleuze proposed “rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. He introduced that “there are no points or positions in a rhizome such as those found in a structure, tree, or root” [4] (1987, p. 8). Furtherly, “there are only lines” [4] (1987, p. 8), which is a groundless and nomadic state. These curved lines are free, and the masses they form are no longer regular and orderly aggregates, but fuzzy and nomadic multiple bodies, rather than clear and centralized tree structures. They are constantly exploring the outside and escaping to the unknown. Deleuze defined that there are three types of lines: molar line, molecular line and line of flight. Among them, the molar line is also called “a rigid line, which brings about...segmentation” [4] (1987, p. 222), by Deleuze to symbolize fixed and rigid life patterns and thinking tendencies. In Deleuze’s view, modern society is like a “super-coded” machine that traps people in a specific ethical domain through social codes with normative functions, thereby restricting desires and achieving control over individuals. The molecular line is vague and ambiguous and is easily re-territorialized. Deleuze emphasized the power of bodily emotions by his concept “body without organs” in *A Thousand Plateaus* to overturn the concept “mind-body dualism” as well as the strangeness and differentiation of feelings as a rebellion against the values that devalue desire. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze pointed out that desire is “conceived of as production” [5] (1983, p. 25) and reaffirms the positive role of desire in liberation, escaping from the repressive constraints of the ego and the superego. Desire exists in the line of flight and has potential to generate infinite possibilities.

In Borges’ story “the South,” Dahlman practices a romanticized duel as a way of deterritorialization. This highly symbolic behavior is a metaphor for the line of flight, which brings him the perfection of life. In addition, in “the Immortal,” the immortals

are in a territorialized field full of molecular lines, because their lives are extremely certain, and are in tree-like centralized structures, as the anti-rhizome. At the same time, Platonists regard the highest existence as the “one” or “the highest good.” In the context of this concept, the rhizomatic attributes of the “scared book” [3] (1999, p. 1025) in “the Book of Sand” conflicts with the tree-like supreme concept of the “one.” The existence in the postmodernist concept is rhizomatic and nomadic, and such characteristics are naturally terrifying and evil in the eyes of the salesman and narrator.

The line of flight, as an important concept of Deleuze, is regarded as the key to breaking the centralized tree structures, and desire is the necessary foundation for the line of flight to take effect. Deleuze pointed out that the rhizomes in a nomadic state have the desires to explore the unknown, and the pursuit of uncertainty is also an important literary theme of Borges. As mentioned above, Borges’s works showed the importance of uncertainty to human existence, and this uncertainty is indispensable to breaking the shackles of identity.

Italo Calvino, influenced by Borges and considered to have important similarities with him, puts forward similar views to Deleuze in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. To reply the feeling “that the entire world was turning into stone.... that spared no aspect of life” [6] (Calvino, 1988, p. 4), he borrowed the metaphor of the tale of Medusa and Perseus to emphasize the effectiveness of lightness - liberating the territorialized space in the molar line, that is, changing the petrified heavy world. In the *Non-existent Knight*, Agilulf’s body is not existent but he only exists as a spirit with “lonely self-preoccupied, impatient something jogging along...inside the armor” [7] (Calvino, 2017, p. 102). His image is a metaphor for the traditional values of the idealized, suppressed and devalued body of desire. In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino described different models of cities to symbolize desire and generativity. Some cities that change and shift over time and can never be understood by citizens are energetic and generative. Because there are only the ever-changing simulacra of the city here. They are in the field where the line of flight is effective, just like the perfect city described by Marco that “piece by piece, the perfect city, [is] made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals” [8] (Calvino, 1972, p. 171). On the contrary, the cities that can be understood have stopped changing to keep stable subjectivities, and have lost their vitality and generative ability. They are in the territorialization ruled by the molar line and are also in the space of rigidity and extinction.

As an important postmodernist writer, Calvino and his works are effective references for further understanding the characteristics of Borges’s literature. He chose themes similar to Borges’s - a positive affirmation of the body and desire, as well as the generative ability of rhizomes. But in terms of generativity, Borges’ works show different aspects of generative ability. Calvino’s works achieves Deleuze’s concept of line of flight by lightweighting the quality of words and materials with a light perspective, while the line of flight in Borges’s writing emphasized the extreme uncertainty of generativity and the nonlinear juxtaposition of possibilities.

## 5 Conclusion

In the context of postmodernism, literature is no longer a tool for describing reality but has the ability to lead to a different world, proliferate language and thinking, and to resist assimilation and integration. As narrators no longer have stable subjectivities, it gives new creativity to the narrative method and to generate.

Under the perspective provided by Deleuze's theory, it can be seen that Borges took the fictional space of incomplete presence – the fictional space overlapping the real space – as the narrative field, replacing the traditional realistic narratives with the imagined reality and simulation, as well as the binary opposition of model and copy.

Borges' writing theme disintegrated the traditional philosophical view of eternity and reality, and at the same time affirmed the positivity and importance of the body as a desire machine, and while affirming desire, resisted the consciousness trap of assimilation and integration dominated by the view of centralization.

As a result, the postmodern characteristics of Borges' literature are further revealed, and his influence on other postmodern writers and postmodernism itself will continue to deepen.

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