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Elusive Allusions and Intertextual Irony in *Rick and Morty* and Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths"

Introduction: What is Intertextual Irony?

About halfway into his lecture "Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading," Umberto Eco explains the idea of double coding: that a text, when quoting, referencing, or alluding to another text, can split its readers, offering a different meaning to each group while avoiding alienating either ("Intertextual Irony" 220). Soon after, Eco remarks:

> If we had to explain the phenomenon of intertextual irony to a first-year university student, or at any rate to someone who is not in the know, we would perhaps have to tell him that, thanks to this citation strategy, a texts presents two levels of reading. But if, instead of someone not in the know, we found ourselves facing someone who was a habitué of literary theory, we could be put on the spot by two questions. (220)

The two questions Eco addresses are important and the latter of which will be addressed, albeit briefly in a footnote, later in this essay. The reason why this essay begins with this quote, however, is that the quote—and the surrounding discussion of it[1]—provide an excellent example of the way in which Borges and *Rick and Morty* use intertextual irony. Just as the Eco quote above changes meaning depending on whether the reader of this essay is aware of the context that this essay's author is, himself, a first-year college student, the many allusions and references in Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" and the animated comedy *Rick and Morty* allow for multiple readings of each text. Allusions have many functions throughout "The Garden of Forking Paths" and *Rick and Morty*. They enhance themes and acknowledge influence. They affect plot, both as devices and as red-herrings. Fake texts and nested critical analysis allow both texts to explore

[1]And attention-dragging meta-discussion of that discussion.

tangential ideas. But whereas Borges embraces self-criticism of its use of influences, *Rick and Morty* obsesses over it.

Allusions for Acknowledging and Adding to the Past

Both *Rick and Morty* and "The Garden of Forking Paths" use allusions to expand upon ideas discussed in previous works while crediting their influences along the way. Almost every episode title of *Rick and Morty* is a mangled pop-culture reference, just as almost every episode draws some amount of plot, themes, and jokes from previous works. The series' second episode, "Lawnmower Dog," takes its name and central conceit from the 1992 film *The Lawnmower Man*.[2] In the episode, self-described mad-scientist and general malcontent Rick Sanchez—as a condescending and sarcastic response to his step-son Jerry's sad attempt at blackmail—endows his family's dog Snuffles with an intelligence-boosting helmet so that he will no longer, presumably, pee on the carpet. This reference guides the reader through the text. It is an example of how—to use the words of Umberto Eco when they are better than mine—"The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" ("The Enjoyable" 67). The title establishes for readers familiar with *The Lawnmower Man* the main questions the episode will explore: Are sentience and intelligence the same? When are actions in the name of scientific progress justified? It also works as a simple, substitutional play on words, swapping "Man" for "Dog." Throughout the episode, Snuffles expands the capabilities of his helmet, eventually gaining control over his humans and pervious owners. Smashing a mirror with the fist of a mechanized suit, he demands via the aid of a self-designed computerized voice box to

[2]A work which, itself, borrows its moral-complexity-of-tampering-with-the-intelligence-of-humans-and-animals theme from the Daniel Keyes's 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon* and its title (though not much else) from the short story be Stephen King.

be called Snowball "because my fur is pretty…and white" ("Lawnmower Dog"). This joke exemplifies intertextual irony. Naïve readers laugh at the contrast between the dog's modest desires with its chilling display of power. Readers who recall the Snowball from Orwell's *Animal Farm* learn that Snuffles is more Trotsky than Stalin. Joking references of varying depth fill the episode. A two-second sight gag during the eventual canine takeover, for example, shows dogs playing poker in front of a picture of humans playing poker in front of a painting from C. M. Coolidge's series *Dogs Playing Poker* (see Figure 1 in Appendix). The joke serves multiple purposes. It shows the rapid progression of the dog's takeover through cultural progress. It winks at the audience, giving those notice the joke as sense of satisfaction. And it plants the (later expanded upon and critiqued) idea the dogs will simply become the cruel and careless people they overthrew.

Borges also uses references—to the *Annals* of Tacitus, to physicist Isaac Newton and philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, and to Irish revolutions occurring in 1916—to contribute to the themes of time, space, and purpose explored in "The Garden of Forking Paths." The story chronicles the final hours, final thoughts, and final mission of a German spy named Yu Tsun, who is in a race against time (and the pursing English spy Captain Richard Madden) to relay a message to his handler. The story—of which a major theme is masterworks and final works, and the extent to which readers are willing analyze and find meaning in them—mentions "a young boy who was reading with fervor the *Annals* of Tacitus" (Borges 21). On one level, the boy serves merely as an observation of Tsun, showcasing Tsun's perceptive abilities as a spy. On another level, the boy's intense reading of a masterwork of an ancient historian mirrors Stephen Albert's devotion to understanding *The Garden of Forking Paths*, a novel written by Tsun's ancestor Ts'ui Pên. In the case of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Tsun is surprised by Albert's devotion to understanding a

work overlooked by Ts'ui Pên's entire family; in the case of the *Annals* of Tacitus, the reader is shocked that a young boy would have the ability and interest to read an ancient historical text. Both texts also share that their life is prolonged by being read by devotees.[3] Later, when describing *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Albert says, "In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, [Ts'ui Pên] did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times" (28). The reference, to Newton's rules for predicting the deterministic motions of bodies and Schopenhauer's postulation that time is constrained by a linear set of decisions, ground the reader in previous thought before "The Garden of Forking Paths" adds to that body, suggesting that reality may follow multiple directions simultaneously. Additionally, while not an allusion, the story being set in July 1916, two months after the Easter Rebellion—one of Ireland's many attempts around that time to establish independence from England—is significant. "The Garden of Forking Paths" frequently suggests the existence of multiple, conflicting identities. Captain Richard Madden being Irish in a time of Irish rebellion, yet serving England, furthers the theme that the difference between being an enemy and a friend can be arbitrary and complex.[4]

Possibly the most important reference in "The Garden of Forking Paths," however, is to the *Thousand and One Nights*, a text Borges cites as an example of a text whose influence reaches far beyond those who have read it, unknowingly infecting other writers (Fishburn 143). While describing to Tsun the forking infinity of his ancestor's *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Albert contrasts it to the cyclic infinity in the *Thousand and One Nights*: "I remembered too that night which is at the middle of the Thousand and One Nights when Scheherazade (through magical

[3] In reality, it is not the boy on the train that allows the *Annals* of Tacitus to persist, for that boy does not really exist. It is Borges who has read and propagates the existence of Tacitus' *Annals*.

[4] Other places the theme of multiple identities appears: Tsun is Chinese and is fighting for Germany to prove to his racist Chief that "a yellow man could save his armies" (21); Tsun enters the home of Stephen Albert both as a curious friend, looking to discuss his ancestor, as well as an assassin; the editor of the story is both a neutral voice and once biased towards the English (19).

oversight of a copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and One Nights, establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus to infinity" (25). The reference to the *Thousand and One Nights* acts as citation of ideas, but the specifics of the citation, the fact that the retelling of the story is emphasized, relates again to the message in "The Garden of Forking Paths" that a text can live on through references to it. By acknowledging past influences, *Rick and Morty* and "The Garden of Forking Paths" acknowledge their past—that neither are purely original texts. Doing so, they are able to extend upon the ideas of others, to invent on top of them.

Fake Allusions and Real Criticism

Both *Rick and Morty* and Borges create and critique false texts, allowing for tangential observations and analysis of the process of criticism. In "A Modest Proposal for the Criticism for Borges,"[5] Ronald Christ presents a critique of the works of Borges by "presenting brief projections or synopses…of imagined but not yet written critical and interpretive works as if those works had already undergone the tedious process of development, elaboration, and extensive documentation, not to mention stylistic development," the idea being that, as Borges put it, "the composition of a long book is: the expansion to five hundred pages of an idea whose perfect oral exposition takes a few minutes" (Christ 388; Borges qtd. in Christ 388). It is critical to both *Rick and Morty* and "The Garden of Forking Paths,"[6] that the works not only contain references to fake texts but contain discussions of them.

[5] The title of this essay references Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal;" the only further connection I can find to Swift is the pun in the essay's conclusion: "So, at last, I come to my proposal, which, swiftly formulated…" (Christ 397)…until later whereby—I kid not—random Hladík-esque flipping through my copy of *Labyrinths*, I find a reference in Borges' essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which could be the Christ's intended reference (185).

[6] As well as Borges' other stories. See, for example, Hladík's ruminations on *The Enemies* in "The Secret Miracle," or Borges' discussion with himself in "The Other."

In the *Rick and Morty* episode "Rixty Minutes," Rick's access to "interdimensional cable" provides both quick and efficient parody a variety of genres while allowing character commentary that provides additional criticism and meta-criticism. When Rick destroys his family's cable box, disgusted with their taste in trashy, fake[7] reality TV, he announces, "I've just upgraded our cable package with programming from every conceivable reality….How about Showtime Extreme in a world where man evolved from corn?," Jerry doesn't quite get it, questioning, "So what? It'd be better if people were corn?" ("Rixty Minutes"). Jerry's mistake is focusing on a particular trivial change, the substitution of man for corn. Rick is not excited about any particular show, but as he demonstrates through channel surfing, about their newfound scope of shows. "Rixty Minutes" contains dozens of parodies, often serving multiple purposes. A fake show called *Quick Mysteries* parodies cops shows by reducing their plots to their conclusions[8] while simultaneously serving as Rick's example of how interesting the infinite can be. While initially intrigued by a TV show from a universe where all proper nouns begin with "Scml," after a character on that show basically lists a bunch of names—Scmlantha, Schmlona, Schmlove, Schmlandula, Schmlonathan—Rick speaks for the audience, "That actually got old pretty quick."[9] *Rick and Morty* never shows more than glimpses of the fake show *Ball Fondlers*, a show that appears to consist solely of action and explosions. Yet Rick and Morty are engrossed by it, in contrast to Jerry, Beth, and Summer who, as Rick puts it, "have been checking out alternative lives," a simplification of his family's situation, but a valid one, "and have been realizing [they] don't have it as good." A trailer for *Last Will and*

[7] In particular, Rick is critical that his family just spent "three months, watching a man choose a fake wife" ("Rixty Minutes"). The use of the word "fake" is interesting here since the TV shows Rick watches are fake to him and are dually fake to the audience of *Rick and Morty*. Why they feel more real than so-called reality TV is because they do not make false claims to reflect actual reality.

[8] Asking, essentially: If a show is only interesting because of a twist or of the resolution, why not just skip to that?

[9] This particular criticism—essentially that "rhetorical experiment" is not enough to justify the existence of a text—is also addressed by Albert in "The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges 27).

Testimeow: Weekend at Dead Cat Lady's House II—a parody of romantic-comedies wherein a dead cat-lady's cats control her corpse to help her find love—first shocks Jerry that it "is an actual movie," then shatters his self-confidence when he learns that the once-idolized alternate version of himself which he has been observing throughout the episode has both written *and* directed such a lazy movie. Finally, there exists a silly car commercial that is mostly setup for the meta-commentary joke later about how, as Rick and Morty put it, "TV from other dimensions has a somewhat looser feel to it…an almost improvisational tone," acknowledging and making fun of how many of the TV spots in "Rixty Minutes" are improvised. Ultimately, the ability to observe altered—but recognizable—universes through interdimensional TV provides characters in *Rick and Morty* with a mechanism for asking what fundamentally makes them the characters they are, and allows Morty and Summer's parents to determine whether or not they are together by chance or by fate. While "Rixty Minutes" functions at one level of as collection of parodies,[10] the injections of character-driven commentary allow the characters to criticize what they see on their TV, in each other, and in their selves.

The framing of Tsun's story in "The Garden of Forking Paths" as a section from Liddell Hart's *History of World War I* richens the story by allowing its readers and critics to mimic the stories Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert. Although Liddell Hart is a real British military historian who lived from 1895 to 1970 and wrote multiple histories of World War I, it would make no sense for the remainder of Borges' story to actually be a quote from Hart's text, as is claimed by the text; thus, the reader assumes that they are entering a fictional section of a real text. However, even by considering the legitimacy of the text they are reading (or by looking up "Liddell Hart" or any

[10] The episode works so well as a collection of snippets that it was originally released as a series of 15-second Instagram videos on the official *Rick and Morty* Instagram account (@rickandmorty).

other proper noun that appears in Borges' story), the reader has embarked upon what Robert Chibka calls a "bibliographic detective story…another story that is incited and 'scripted,' if not precisely written, by Borges" (106). In a story concerned with details, riddles, messages, and unorthodox ways of transmitting them, it would not seem out of place for the text itself to have riddles decipherable through devotion and research. Were a reader to look up the section of text in Liddell Hart's history that "The Garden of Forking Paths" claims to come from,[11] that reader would themselves be entering a forking labyrinth. Chibka notes that different translations claim different page numbers for Liddell's history—the edition from *Ficciones* claiming page 212 while the edition from *Labyrinths* claiming page 22.[12] Although the difference in numbers may be a typographic error by editors, the possibility cannot be rejected that Borges—who read that the number 1001 in *Thousand and One Nights* as evocative of the idea of extending the infinite (represented here 1000) by further incrementing it (producing 1001)—might encode meaning, symbolic or otherwise, in a number (Fishburn 148). At this point, the reader may wonder if they are like Albert, days into a decades-long task of deciphering a foreign text—or if this is all meta-trickery leading them astray, a trap in the text. Whereas the story of "The Garden of Forking Paths" relishes in successful attempts to encode and decode hidden messages,[13] the text suggests that struggle is all that is real. However, despite most readers and critics failing to find a perfect

[11] Even if Borges' story is not taken from *History of World War I*, whatever is found in there may be of thematic relevance, and thus is worthwhile for a Model Reader to know about.

[12] A Spanish non-translation opens, "*En la paginá* 242," deepening the mystery by adding a third number ("El Jardn" 1). Another relevant Eco quote: "Translation can not only alter the play of intertextual irony, it can also enrich it" ("Intertextual Irony" 232).

[13] Tsun is successful in sending his message (the message to bomb the city of Albert, France) and Albert is successful deciphering the mystery of *The Garden of Forking Paths* (at least, so long as somebody deciphers *his* notes as both he and Tsun die).

deciphering of Borges' story akin to Albert's "solving" of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the effect of creating a search is still present.

Moving one meta-level further, having characters act as critics in "The Garden of Forking Paths" and *Rick and Morty* not only allows an efficient exploration of ideas, but functions as criticism of criticism itself. As Stephen Albert guides Yu Tsun through understanding his ancestor's text, Tsun makes preemptive jumps. Tsun initially misinterprets Albert's motion towards his desk as a suggestion that Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth is a tiny ivory labyrinth inside the desk. Albert corrects Tsun telling him it's "a labyrinth of symbols" (Borges 25). Later, Albert presents Tsun with a riddle, to which Tsun "propose[s] several solutions—all unsatisfactory" (27). Moreover, even after Albert has deciphered the structure of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, he pushes his analysis further, not content to write off the novel as merely "the infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment" (27). That Stephen Albert, who comes from a different culture, is able to decipher Ts'ui Pên's novel while every member of Ts'ui Pên's own family (including Tsun himself) dismisses it as nonsenses indicates that distance (in time, culture, and background) may aid criticism. This is a point that exists divorced from the themes explored in *The Garden of Forking Paths*—it is a statement about scholarship and criticism.

In the *Rick and Morty* episode "Look Who's Purging Now," discussion of a fake text act as both a criticism of screenwriting tropes as well as an examination of the ambiguity of what people want when they ask for feedback. In the episode, Rick and Morty are trapped on a planet that (along with many planets) shares the gimmick underlying the movie *The Purge*. To prevent crime year round, one night a year people are allowed to running around killing each other.[14] In

[14] For some reason this works—the absurdity of which is noted but never explained, which serves rhetorically to emphasize the absurdity of the underlying gimmick by allowing the viewer to dismiss the practicality of the device for any reason they see fit, and to move on as quickly as possible.

exchange for temporary shelter in a lighthouse, Morty agrees to listen to the tale of an old man. The tale, originally presented as mystic and potentially relevant to the mythology of the *Purge* planet, is soon revealed to be a mediocre amateur screenplay. The old man probes Morty for honest criticism, which Morty is hesitant to give. Eventually Morty submits, commenting, "Well, um, I'm not a huge fan, personally, of the whole 'three weeks earlier' teaser thing. I feel like, you know, we should start our stories where they begin, not start them where they get interesting" ("Look Who's Purging Now"). This is both a legitimate criticism—and one that this episode follows, as it certainly could have teased the chaos and cliffhangers that occur through the episode—but after the old man reacts in a scornful, petty way, it becomes clear that the conversation had always been a trap. While here criticism of criticism is possible through inclusion of a fictional text, *Rick and Morty* usually relies on its characters' semi-awareness that they exist in a structured TV show to prompt such criticism. At the end of the episode "Big Trouble in Little Sanchez," Jerry proudly notes, "Huh! Sounds like our stories were connected by a theme." Rick shoots him down—"Not really, Jerry. Probably a cosmetic connection your mind *mistakes* for thematic."

Conclusion: Tone and Anxiety of Influence

Mapping influence is tricky. In another lecture—this one titled "Borges and My Anxiety of Influence"—Eco describes Borges' treatment of influences: "What remains fundamental in Borges is his ability to use the most varied debris of the encyclopedia to make the music of ideas" (134). Borges copes with being both an influencer and and influence by striving for a perfect oral exposition—an exposition that includes allowing the reader to enter Borges' own library of influences, but does not force this path upon the reader.

How *Rick and Morty* treats influence is reminiscent (though in no way identical) to how Borges treats influence. The fact that *Rick and Morty* contains an episode about characters'

decisions forking realities[15]—that also clearly cites influences including physicists Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger as well as Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time*—yet has no explicit reference to Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths" is illustrative of the problem that influence not only exists from text to text, but from culture to text (and, by necessity, *vice versa*). The characters Rick and Morty are inter- and meta-textual beings, not confined to their own show—they crash their hovercraft into the Simpsons family in a *Simpsons* couch gag (See Figure 2)—puppet versions of Rick and Morty hesitantly act as corporate shills for the *Rick and Morty* season 1 Blu-Ray ("Rick and Morty: The Complete First Season")—Rick frequently breaks the fourth wall, announcing at the end of season 1 that season 1 is over, then demanding the credits are rolled ("Ricksy Business"). Being comfortable with uncertainty is a theme frequently explored in *Rick and Morty*, and is apparent in the tone of how allusions are presented. Names of references are repeated by characters to the point that their extended repetition becomes absurd. The titles of episodes frequently involve wordplay no cleverer than a substitution, removing a word and replacing it with some variant on "Rick" (see the Works Cited page for examples). Rick is hardly able to use a simple idiom without twisting it, even when that twist is slight. "Out of the frying pan, dot, dot, dot," he notes after he and Morty escape Goldenfold's dream world in "Lawnmower Dog," eschewing the common ending of the phrase "and into the fire" with a replacement that is roughly as long.

The lax tone of *Rick and Morty* regarding its presentation of allusions is an emergent symptom of the text coping with its own uncertainty about influences and identity. This tone contrasts that of "The Garden of Forking Paths," whose peppered references to real geographic

[15] *Rick and Morty* isn't plainly copying Borges examination of infinity here. In "A Rickle in Time," realities only split when characters are unsure about a decision, not whenever a decision is present. This allows for a deepening of the characters' relationships as well as for dialogue about the value of uncertainty, a theme present throughout the show (see also: "Total Rickall").

locations and existence as a frame story (including even a fake Editor's note) give the initial illusion of legitimacy. But while the tones of the two texts are quite disparate, both acknowledge the problem of how best to address influence—a problem they address both thematically and in practice.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Dogs playing poker in a room which contains a fake painting *Humans Playing Poker* which contains the an original from C. M. Coolidge's series *Dogs Playing Poker* ("Lanwmower Dog").

Figure 2. A still from the opening credits sequence of the 26th season finale of *The Simpsons* showing the carnage resulting from Rick trying to teach Morty how to drive ("Mathlete's Feat").

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