

Funes The Memorious, Aura and House Taken Over- a critical glimpse into our technologically oriented present through the lenses of Latin American literature

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INTRODUCTION

In this brief text I will explore and connect three elements that seem to have no relation with the dynamic and information technologically oriented world we live in today. I believe that these apparent irrelevant and disengaged elements are essential in the formation and education of present-day digital humans and learners. There is no real age limit to how these elements contribute to the formation of these individuals but my reading will focus mostly on higher level education students.

These elements contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, the establishment of basic relations with information and the construction of self-knowledge and relations to the world. They are connected to how we, as contemporary digital humans, have acted and have interacted and will continue doing so. They are essential to how we judge and understand what we believe is right and is wrong in given contexts and how we thus act.

I will be exploring three concepts memory, history and awareness of being. These concepts will be boarded and interpreted through a reading of Funes The Memorious by Jorge Luis Borges, Aura by Carlos Fuentes and House Taken Over by Julio Cortazar. I will also connect the concepts and the interpretations to how students today relate to, learn and process information. In a digital and overwhelming environment, students need certain tools and criteria to process and analyze what they absorb and what they are bombarded with. This is text is a call for us to pay attention to and to think these three elements critically in order to act in the present.

In this sense this paper has two different levels. On a first level it weaves together literature and reality, providing a connection and interpretation that is not necessarily obvious. My focus as a scholar here is to point out the relevance of these texts and invite readers to look at their present with the insights and perspectives provided by the texts. These texts from the 20th century not only echo in the 21st, they enrich our analysis of

our current context. On a second level is my personal stance. I write as a gesture of protest because I believe as a collective we have given into the dynamics of digital culture and the speeds of information technology. Metaphorically speaking in one hand, I am holding up a sign calling for us to look at ourselves critically and in the other I hold a mirror. In these three texts our characters will be drowned in data, devoured by time or become refugees due to unknown forces, and I cannot help but think of our contemporary world.

METHODOLOGY

It is important to point out how this text came together. The three texts mentioned above and selected are not random. I have worked them for over 15 years with different groups of undergraduate and graduate students at Universidad Escuela Colombiana de Ingeniería. This is a reflective essay in the sense that I establish a dialogue with the texts I read but at the same time I do not limit myself to my own reading experience. My insights also come from how my students and I have reacted to the texts as we have read them collectively and the dialogues we have had in the classroom over the years. This text is not the result of a controlled experiment and it does not pretend to aim at having an objective reading of reality. What I bring forth here is my shared reading experience and how it has allowed me to question my place in higher education and society. In this sense the text itself reflects what it proposes readers do after reading this paper. It is an exercise from my standing point and experience that allows me to present a critical reading of my present. In a way it is also a rebellious stance towards objectivity and universality. This reflective practice is also a call to question what is around us, our world, and what we believe is and is not. For this reason, it is key that I present myself as a part of the

process, a subject that shares with readers in hopes of raising more questions than answers.

I was born at the end of the 20th century and so I grew up in real time with evolving information technology. I am perhaps an early or incipient digital native. My first personal computer was put together in my house in 1986 by an engineer, a serious man who smoked as he worked and who came over for about a week and would click away on the keyboard, there was no mouse for that pc back then. As a five year-old I was marveled by the work, the precision of the commands through text and of course by my first video game which the engineer showed me how to play.

From then on information technology has been a part of my life, in spite of my resistance to let it invade all of my spaces. Nearly 40 years later, as an educator, I have been dazzled and overwhelmed with the information and resources my students- and perhaps all of us- have at hand instantly. Each semester there is something new and a new dynamic in the access and relationship with information. The constant novelty also worries me profoundly. Each change is a change in how my students and in general people interact and use said resources.

I write here today from my place and role, as a professor in his midlife stage, reflecting on and exploring how our relationship with information and our grasp of knowledge have changed in the past few years. It is essential that the reader grasps and understands where I am coming from. My reading of the current situation does not pretend to be universal, it is more an invitation to look at what we are living with critical eyes. There is no intention here to point out universals or perhaps even answers. Nonetheless, the reader can deduce that perhaps the first connection this text has with our digital and highly technological world is the subject writing, mine is a tale of resistance to and marvel with technology at the same time.

Memory: how too much information can overwhelm and paralyze our thought process and our capacity to act

Irineo Funes is a fictional character, created by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. After a riding accident Funes is left bedridden and with an exceptional memory. Although he has lost his physical ability to move Funes is not heart broken or sad. On the contrary, Funes explains to the narrator- who calls himself Borges- that he has never felt so free or capable of seeing the world fully. Funes acquired the ability to see the past and everything that has occurred in each object he sees or interacts with. His sight goes beyond his capacity to imagine or think, he vividly experiences memory. Like in the *Aleph*, another short story by Borges, everything coincides in one place and one moment, the instant is the totality. In our context, we launch a question or a prompt and receive information instantly. Our electronic devices and the information technology highway have given us powers comparable to those of Funes and his memory.

For Funes his exceptional perception allows him to see the all of something, a totality of a unit, but not to act beyond his sight and narration. All he can do is narrate what he witnesses to himself or to those he speaks to. His mind becomes an enormous hard drive with memory and space beyond our grasp. Our condition of digital suffers in the digital world turns us all into potential Funes like characters, overwhelmed with information and stories but also stuck behind the screen of a digital device. Perhaps one of greatest actions now is resending or sharing information with someone via the electronic device. The irony of Funes' existence and ours is there. We can see but perhaps not act upon.

Our memory is no longer exclusively in our brain but in the technological extension of the devices which allow to click away and save in a cloud what we believe to be memorable. The paradox is we are not creating with our own memories from experience but instead we are creating a memory with what we consume. Like Funes our action parts with what we see through the device, our magical mirror into the world. Where is our power to act on this plain when our world has become an interaction and an amazement with the digitally created? I will not even venture on the question of what is true or false, real or fake, in our context.

If I were to have the unique and exceptional ability to see memory and past, as Funes did, as I sit here writing on my laptop, with a cup of coffee on my right, I would be able to see in the coffee the story of each particular bean that grew under rain and sun and then was dried and grounded up and brought together with others to blend in with the hot water to become my black coffee. I could see where the water flowed from and how it had formed over and over again in clouds and springs. I should also see the earth and mud that came together to make my mug and so on. But I can't, I see the black beverage in the mug and I can only imagine the process that it required to get here.



What I have just described is a conscious effort from my behalf to think about and to imagine the historical process of any item. It is not automatically fed to me and so I don't see the "code" behind the object in front of me. My thought process is the "code" which I create and use in what I described above. Each particular situation of my coffee in the mug does not exist in my memory nor can I see it in a flash like Funes. In my particular case, memory is the result of a conscient and even distorted action, that of recalling and remembering different elements of information recollect before hand. My memory is thus a thinking and selective process of what is stored. Digital memory perhaps is a little less creative not making the jumps of our imagination and creation; for now. Perhaps our current digital learners need to become more aware that memory is a selective thought process.

Funes on the other hand is swamped with stories and multiple pasts that coincide in one specific moment, the moment when he lays his sight on something and it sinks into his brain, his material memory. Such is the bombardment of information that he is unable to decipher it all and let alone make abstract generalizations. For Funes each memory opens a unit, a specific moment which I like to think as an atom, a unit in itself which conducts to another unit and so forth eternally. He can see the basic building blocks that are contained in the space of memory and time and at the same time he is launched into an endless loop. He sees the basic universal blocks but can't act upon them. This is where I see our current world reflected in this story. We too are bombarded and become passive recipients for stories and memories —fictional or not— that overwhelm us.

Since he is overwhelmed, he cannot generalize or make concepts. He can tell what he sees and he can describe it, but everything is unique in his mind and cannot be connected abstractly to something more general. For that reason, the basic platonic concept of dog cannot exist in his mind for, as Borges beautifully puts it, the dog seen from side at 3:14 is not the same as the dog seen from the front at 3:15. Each dog in each moment is a different dog, each dog is unique always. There is no concept or thought process in Funes' visualization of universal memory.

Martin Heidegger mentions in his letter on humanism that language is the house of our being and that our greatest action possible is thought. In a philosophical triad Heidegger brings together memory, language and thought under one roof in this poetic house. For us to have thought we must have language and memory. Without language we cannot build concepts for we cannot express them to ourselves or others. The concept constructed is the materialization of our thought process. Memory is the cornerstone that allows us to poses a language system that brings together symbols and ideas. Hence with no recollection from memory the system cannot be. But memory is not passive in this interpretation by Heidegger, it is intertwined with the thought process and requires generalizations.

Funes has an exceptional memory and has a language system that allows him to express what he sees to himself or to others. However, he doesn't have the possibility to generalize from those specifics to concepts, in other words he cannot reach abstract reason because he is submerged in the atoms of the past that are perhaps never ending. Irineo Funes cannot think and let alone be critical of a situation or a context because he is unable to build a general concept of any kind. Under this logic he is unable to act doubly because he is unable to think and is also bedridden. Like Funes we too are trapped behind our devices when we are in consumer mode.

This brings me to my first concern and the first connection to my world as an educator. I stand here being a 44 year old university professor who tries to understand how and for what reason students are trying to learn something. Perhaps as a collective global society our relationship with information technology has given us the opportunity to see many things, just as Funes did, perhaps too many things. Our students are bombarded with an excess of information, be it real, genuine, fictional or even fake. They catch bites and pieces and build upon it as if using LEGOS. However, the question is can they question, reason and have critical thinking or are they contributing to the bulk of noise our systems have created. In this sense the excess of information is perhaps more overwhelming than it is potentially constructive.

My point with Funes is that in spite of having bushels of information at our grasp, information is useless and dangerous if we cannot reason, think or be critical. I will always recommend learning certain things with memory because facts and data are our building blocks that we select and organize to build with our language system thought. We can't depend exclusively on what's online to feed our structures. I for one consider that our structures as individuals and collectives are built upon the architecture of thought and reason. I think it essential to be aware of the triad of memory, language and thought. Without memory, inner memory in our minds and collective memory as a society, we are vulnerable. Information will be manipulated and played with and we will have no frame work to hold onto and decide what is and what is not.

History: a balance between what was and what is, a coexistence of times and processes in our own time

Now I would like to present a cultural cliché and in doing so open the door to the relationship we have with the past beyond the act of remembering or establishing memory about something. We have often heard that those who do not know the past are condemned to repeat it. If too much memory can clutter our thought process, not having enough historical consciousness can make us fragile and the feed for manipulation. History could be seen as everything that has happened but as humans we can't board it all. History in this context is our awareness, reading and threading of the past, through memory and fact to construct a narrative. I don't believe we all need to be historians and to center our present around the past, although I personally find the past fascinating and love to connect dots of then with the present we all live. What is the amount of historical awareness we need to operate in our present without being highly manipulated by the mass cultural media and collective narratives? Undoubtedly to engage with history we need memory of some data and the capacity to think.

In his short novel *Aura*, the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes narrates the story of a young historian who is asked by an old widow to sort out and complete the memoirs of her late husband, General Llorente. The young historian is Mexican, he works as a teacher in a local school, and despite his studies in France, has not found a job that would let him focus on the historical topics that fascinate him. Unlike Funes, this story is not about memory but about history and digging up the past to give some meaning

to a present. For the Llorente widow, finishing and organizing her husband's memoirs and giving him a voice in the narrative of history, is extremely significant.

In this case the past gives the present sense. The notion of future is also present in the present and is part of the motivation of what is done thinking of what will come. The present is thus a convergent point of senses given by the past and the hopes of a possible future. Both the young historian and the widow look at the past in relation to their specific presents but both also strive for what they believe the exercise of the memoirs will bring in the future. For the young man he will be rewarded with a pay that will allow him to pursue his academic interest and the widow will have the peace of leaving the memoirs complete. What must be pointed out here is that past, present and the horizon of future come together in this novel and we can see that time and history are not necessarily lineal and excluding. The past has present in the present and actions in the present are shaped with the expectations of a future horizon.

The plot unravels in an old colonial palace in the historical center of Mexico City. The papers that Felipe Montero, the young historian, sorts through are from the XIX century, dating back decades because his present, the story takes place in the 1960s. The old house appears to have been frozen in time and also past upon by the dynamics of the growing and vivid city. Around the old building the city has incorporated houses and buildings into commercial activities or the older structures have been torn down to give way to newer, bigger and higher structures. The city is alive and the tension between old and new, use and disuse, and change and conservation is evident. In the Llorente household the furniture, the decoration and the inhabitants all seem to be from different times. Montero enters the house and notices the outside the world moves at a different speed, while this house has been left in darkness and dampness, making it moldy and musky. Symbolically the sun does not shine or reach the old colonial palace. But the place exists and coexists with the changing dynamics even if the city dwellers are not aware of existence or place in the present.

Unlike many, Felipe Montero is a connoisseur of the past and understands some of the codes and demands of the widow. The rest of the world has appeared to simply have ignored her presence in the world, she is insignificant in present and in the narrative of the past her story has not yet been heard. Like in our world, in Montero's world not many are aware that the past coexists with the present. Most just simply go about their business without realizing their fitting into a historical structure which is profoundly complex. In this sense, I identify with Montero as I observe people around me who are not concerned about things that have



occurred and somehow impact their present. The question of historical awareness is essential here, and for our present a minimum of historical literacy, a mix of facts and processes could be very useful for our society.

Historical literacy implies a construction based on memory and that memory has levels and conditions. Since we are not eternal and timeless beings, we exist in certain contexts and some of our notions of the past are built on the testimonies and memories consciously or unconsciously built by others. We rely on thought processes of others and thus must be critical and aware of the building blocks we are using to create our versions and narratives. In this sense, the historian has a significant role in the building of a collective memory and a narrative that gives sense, meaning and direction to the present. The widow Llorente was aware of this and thus searched for the young historian to finish the memoirs and in doing so she also opened the possibility of their times and stories coinciding. In this novel the levels of time and history come together in one single moment. It is necessary to bring up, Borges' Aleph one more time in this text because again we see how in one spot everything seems to coincide.

Being a little mystical, the story suggests that the past can haunt the present. Montero moves into the old palace; it was a condition given by the widow. As time goes by, he experiences different situations which lead him to question his grip on reality. Yet, the supernatural is part of the narrative and it is only when he becomes fully aware of the presence of the past in his present life that Montero can begin to understand his true role in the story. Our being aware or not of the presence of the past in our present brings forth consequence.

In the classroom we have often done an exercise with my students where we make our family tree. The students have to research and ask around so they can go back at least 4 or 5 generations. With this information they then select a relative from their family tree that has called their attention. The only condition is that the relative must have been born before 1950. Looking into the history of their family and the story of the selected gives the students the chance to reflect upon and think about their own connection to said person. When they look back they start to question how the past connects with their own personal story and present.

As mentioned above Aura has an interesting reading of the notion of time and its progress. While in our everyday life we tend to think that history progresses in a given direction, generally we think it goes forward, the story takes place on different plains. On a superficial level the story takes place in a dynamic and growing city full of inhabitants living their lives. On a deeper level the narrative suggests that elements from the present are tied to elements from the past and thus in specific places, contexts, conditions and moments the past can be repeated in the present. This phenomenon breaks with a linear reading of history and time and gives us as readers a much larger plain to work with. Time and history can have multiple plains and directions and in one said point diverse moments and stories can come together making multiple times coincide. Even if we were to limit ourselves to a linear notion of progress, in this narrative there can be parts of the past that can be part of the present; they are there simultaneously like are the existence of Aura and the Widow Llorente. There is a suggestion of a circular or spiral movement of history in Aura that coexists with the present of the narrative. At the same time the past can be thought

of as a changing force in the present, depending on how it is read and how it is interpreted and used. This brings me to my third and final topic, awareness of being because even if we have memory and history we must exist here and now.

Awareness of being: our present is a complex construction which we need to be aware of

In his short story “House Taken Over”, Argentine writer Julio Cortázar explores the story and the history of two siblings who are the last of an ending bloodline, residing in their families’ old colonial house in Buenos Aires. Like *Aura* this story is urban and is set amidst a changing city where the new and the old coexist and have tensions. I can’t help but think once again about the *Aleph* by Borges and how the changing city is part of a narrative of the everchanging present. So far I have focused on the need to think, have a language system, a structured notion of the past and its relationship to our present, and on our use memory critically. I don’t want the reader to think this text is an apology for the past but it does gravitate around our notions and uses of memory and history in the present. Thus in this final part of the essay I make an open call for critical thinking and analysis of the present. Awareness of being is essential for this purpose. I understand awareness of being as our consciousness of our presences in a present that in itself is also a historical construction based on our memory and language. What allows us to create concepts, judgments and act upon then inhabits that house pointed out by Heidegger where memory, language and thought come together. For this reason my final story gravitates around a house taken over and the metaphorical house given to us by Heidegger in his Letter on Humanism.

The siblings in *House Taken Over* live a very comfortable life. They are clearly wealthy and receive an income from the production of their rural properties. Their lives can appear a little empty and excessively rutinary. Their schedule resides around their meals and keeping the house tidy. They each have a hobby or a routine to fill their hours. She knits while he reads or looks at his stamp collection. Similar to the context of the household in *Aura* the siblings seem to live like aliens of their own time, the urban world outside of the house moves at different speeds. Although the brother goes out he finds very few things of interest. He buys yarn for Irene and wanders the bookshops but since the war has found nothing interesting.

Family and tradition uphold their household and reason for existing. Their history and collective memory are present in their present. The siblings are not atemporal beings that do not know their place in time. They know their



past and try to preserve what they can. Ironically, the brother is aware that any effort is futile for they are the end of the line, that when they pass distant cousins will come and knock down the house and give way to a modern building. Their branch of the family and the old house dies with them. Yet, they must exist and go about their lives. The paradox of being the last and yet being aware of the future and will come after the end is all too human. No matter how much we try to leave a mark after us time devours all.

Yet what is interesting in this story is the tension between present and future. The past resides in history and memory but the siblings are struggling with an undefinable force in the house that slowly starts taking over spaces. The dispute is twofold, one for the house and the other for survival. At first, they heard noises, ignored small changes, moved objects and missing things but as time passed the force became stronger and started taking entire rooms in the house. Their house is no longer just their house, but they don't leave it. The large wooden door protects them, a part of the house, perhaps the older part has been lost. We can think they have given up on owning their memory and history and so the siblings reduce their vital spaces and continue inhabiting what is left to them. One day or perhaps night the force surpasses the wooden door and in instinct they flee. Like refugees they are forced out of their home and are left on the street, leaving the house taken over locked up. Ignoring their awareness of being the siblings lose themselves and their identity for everything is left behind in the house that is no longer there's.

Many have associated this story with the political situation in Argentina during Cortazar's life. However, this interpretation is not the focus of this reading. What I see is a parallel with the overwhelming presence of information technology and how it has invaded our lives. Like the undefinable force in the story, information technology and social media have become silent yet absolutely visible force that have taken over our house and reduced all our spaces, and perhaps like in the story will one day own it all, including our being. We, like the siblings, ignore the little signs of the force that is coming and some of us have even closed the great big wooden door and left parts of our existence to the force. Our house is perhaps less tangible than the siblings' house but we all have one, our house is our time, where we spend our existence. Do we recognize and are aware of our being? Or have we let the artificial memory, the elaborated historical narrative that is not necessarily ours and silent force run our existence?

The call here is for us to be aware that we are and that we can exist at different rhythms and in different contexts to those dictated by the intangible but profound system that has spread over the globe like wild fire. Awareness of being is presence in the moment, but not just filtered through the lens of and interaction with technology. It is not mindfulness, it is a critical and analytical posture that deconstructs the present with us in it in order to make our own sense. The siblings decided to ignore what was there, the undefinable force that swooped them out. Perhaps our new relation with the excess of information is also swooping us out of our home, in brief our moment and mind in the present.

BRINGING IT HOME FOR NOW

The three texts play with time and space and our relationship to them. They also question our capacity to think and understand a context and a present in a given moment. Our take on the present is run through with our notions of memory, history and awareness of being. How deep or superficial these notions are set in us will undoubtedly change our experience in the present. We as a collective are living a unique moment in our relationships with ourselves and the world as it is mediated by an excess of information, speed and technology. There is more and more for us to grasp and at the same time our attention is each day growing shorter. I see it all around me, from brief moment to brief moment we are all victims of the haziness of endless scroll on the screen that becomes nothing at the end of the day. And in the morning, we are not sure what we remember, how to organize it to give meaning or how it shapes our present. Never before have I felt us so stranded and adrift as a collective. Like the spherical object, the aleph, under the stairs leading to the cellar in

the house in the already mention short story the Aleph by Borges, we find the universe at our finger tips and then it slips away.

This is a battle within ourselves for our metaphorical house and our poetic existence as human beings. Memory, historical literacy, awareness of being, complex language and our own thoughts are needed to resist the overwhelming force of the intangible and fascinating world of information technology that we as a collective have produced and now inhabit. Be aware of where you stand in relation to your own present and your own existence.

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