

# *Once I Was Lost, but Now I Am Found, or How to Navigate in the Chartroom of Memory*

Neri Oxman: A Question for Edge

“I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began’, he said to me. And also: ‘My dreams are like other people’s waking hours’. And again, toward dawn: ‘My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap.’”

*Funes, el Memorioso*, Jorge Luis Borges

*Funes, His Memory* tells the evocative tale of Ireneo Funes, a Uruguayan boy who suffers an accident which leaves him hopelessly immobilized along with an acute form of Hypermnnesia – a mental abnormality expressed in exceptionally precise memory. So vivid is Funes’ memory that he can effortlessly distinguish any physical object at every distinct time of viewing. In his perpetual present images unfold their archaeology as infinite wells of detailed information: “*He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30th, 1882*”. Funes’ memories are intensely present as muscular and thermal sensations accompanying every visual record to have been recorded. He is able to reconstruct every event he had ever experienced. His recollections are so accurate that the time it takes to reconstruct an entire day’s worth of events equals to the duration of that very day. In Funes’ world perception makes no sense at all as there is simply no time or motive to perceive, reflect, or interpret.

As a consequence, Funes lacks the ability for detail suppression and any attempt to conceive of, or manage, his impressions – the very stuff of thought - is overridden with relentlessly literal recollections (“*We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine*”). Funes is not able to generalize, to deduce or to induce anything he experiences. Things are just what they are, scaled one to one. Cursed with meticulous memory, Funes escapes to live in remoteness and isolation – a “dark room” - where new images do not enter and where his motionless is absorbed in the contemplation of a sprig of Artemisia.

Over a century later, Hypermnnesia appears to have been to Funes what the World Wide Web is today to the human race.

An inexhaustible anthology of every possible thing recorded at every conceivable location in any given time, the internet is displacing the role of memory and it does so immaculately. Any imaginable detail about the many dimensions of any given experience is being either recorded or consumed as yet another fragment of reality. There is no time to think, it seems. Or perhaps, this is just a new kind of thinking. Is the web yet another model of reality, or is reality becoming a model of the web?

In his "On Exactitude in Science", Borges carries on with similar ideas concerning *trace* as he describes an empire in which the craft of cartography attained such precision that its map has emerged as the kingdom it depicts. Scale, or difference, was now replaced by repetition. A model within itself, such map embodies the dissimilarity between reality and its

representation. It becomes the territory itself and the origin loses authenticity; it achieves the state of being more real than real as there is no reality left to chart.

The internet, no doubt, has become such a map of the world, both literally and symbolically, as it traces in an almost 1:1 ratio every event that has ever taken place. One cannot afford to get lost in a space so perfectly detailed and predictable. Physical navigation is completely solved as online maps offer even the most exuberant flâneur the knowledge of prediction. But there are also enormous mental implications to this.

As we are fed with all details required or desired to understand and perceive the world around us, thus withered the very act of perceiving it; as we witness other forms of perception while on personal journeys, we have atrophied the ability to engage in abstract thought. Models become the very reality that we are asked to model.

If one believes that the wetware source of intellectual production, whether in the arts or sciences, is guided by an ability to model reality, to scale information and to engage in abstract thought, where are we heading in the age of the internet? Are we being victimized by our own inventions? The internet may well be considered an oracle, the builder of composite and hybrid knowledge, but as it is today – is its present instantiation actually inhibiting the very cognitive nature of reflective and creative thought?

Funes is portrayed as an autistic savant, with the gift of memorizing anything and everything. This gift eventually drives him mad but Borges is said to have constructed Funes' image to suggest the "waste of miracle" and point at the vast and dormant potential we still encompass as humans. In letting the internet think for us as it were, are we wasting our own mental capacities? Is the internet making us obliviously somnolent?

Between the associative nature of memory and the referential analytics of the map lies a blueprint for the brain. While looming in the ambience of future ubiquitous technologies lurks the promise of an intimacy of interaction with an ecstasy of connectivity (new consciousness à la Gibson). It is the absence of such cognate presence that defies the achievement of modelling the internet as a *new* reality, a universally accessible medium for enhanced thinking. If the internet can become an alternative medium of human consciousness, how then can a cognate presence inculcate the properties of infinite memory with the exactitude of the referential sciences, all packaged for convenience and pleasure in a Mickey Mouse like antenna cap?

In Borges' tale, Funes cites a revealing line from the Latin *Naturalis Historia*. In the section entitled *memory*, it reads:

“ut nihil non iisdem verbis redderetur auditum”

So that, nothing that has been heard can be retold in the same words.