Visual/Geo-Spatial Knowledge and the Digital Library: On the “Mutaciones” Section of Agustín Fernández Mallo’s *El hacedor (de Borges), Remake* (2011)

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Abstract

This article approaches Agustín Fernández Mallo’s literary text *El hacedor (de Borges), Remake* (2011) through scholarship on the role of visual knowledge in the digital library. By forging connections between Jorge Luis Borges’ explicit intertext *El hacedor* (1960) and twenty-first century work by Johanna Drucker (*Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, 2014) and Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Battles (*The Library Beyond the Book*, 2014), this article provides a way of assessing the limits of visual and digital forms of knowledge. Rather than advocate a simple rejection or embrace of the digital era, *Remake* recovers the contradictions of knowledge, time and the visual world that were already present in Borges’ text. Exploration of these contradictions begins by comparing the “Mutaciones” chapters of both versions of *El hacedor* and focusing on Fernández Mallo’s rewriting of “The Monuments of Passaic” by Robert Smithson. The essay then moves progressively toward theorizations of visual and geo-spatial information in the digital library that reassert Borgesian insights surrounding the vastness of knowledge, the reality of change, and the ultimately ungraspable nature of reality.

“Yet there is in the library something vast, something that always exceeds the acquisitive. In its combinatory potential, its ambivalence, its polyglot drift across time, the collection of texts quickly overbalances the ambitions and intentions of its keeper.”

—J. T. Schnapp and M. Battles, *The Library Beyond the Book* (32)

Introduction

There is perhaps no more enduring symbol in the work of Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges than that of the library. Borges’ library is both a physical and tactile space—one he navigated professionally as a librarian and upon which he draws throughout his work. It is also a conceived space and a point of entry into more philosophical matters. The infinite extension of his library’s spatial dimension—as in the short story “La biblioteca de Babel”—carries us

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1 Lisa Block de Behar puts it quite well when she writes, simply, “‘Borges and the library’: the theme seems excessive” (151; see her entire chapter “The Place of the Library,” 149-64).
2 One example is *El hacedor’s “Poema de los dones,”* where the trope of the library figures explicitly and implicitly in a range of poetic circumstances (Borges, *El hacedor* 73-75). Fernández Mallo’s “Poema de los dones” evacuates the poem of its library content, but as this essay explores, the library is indeed present in the larger *Remake* project.

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simultaneously into a temporal dimension that the human mind cannot fully grasp. The vast library is at once a symbol of totality and a labyrinth—a perfect metaphor for humanity’s necessarily incomplete quest for knowledge and the inassimilable and ungraspable nature of reality. It also has a material and visual dimension, however. The systematic concatenation of letters in readable type acts as a building block for vast catalogues of knowledge in which visuality is paramount. The concrete visibility of written language is then a complement to the aporias of time that limit our vision and experience of totality at the human scale. In this light, this article asserts that Agustín Fernández Mallo’s El hacedor (de Borges), Remake (2011), as an explicit rewriting of Borges’ El hacedor (1960), concentrates on the visual forms of knowledge already present in the original, pushing them in directions complementary to theorizations of the digital library.

Because both of the literary texts under consideration are internally heterogeneous and highly complex, there are undoubtedly other aspects of Fernández Mallo’s rewriting that are significant in their own right, but not specifically attended to here for reasons of space. Thus El hacedor (de Borges), Remake’s characteristic postpoetic impetus combines insights from visual paradigms of scientific knowledge with a critical stance on the consumer economy accompanying advanced capitalism. It also playfully subverts essentializing ontological discourse sur-

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3 Note that Borges was working in a library on Almagro Sur when he wrote “La biblioteca de Babel” (see Shaw 37). Beatriz Sarlo writes of the library in “La biblioteca de Babel” as a challenge to knowledge thus: “the infinity of the library cannot be empirically experienced, even if a traveller were granted infinite time. It can only be conceived, and thus challenged, intellectually. There is no way to confirm it through practical knowledge: the infinity of the Library is a theoretical hypothesis or a matter of belief” (71; see also Bell-Villada 120). Relevant references to the importance of the ungraspable in Borges are far too numerous and date from at least the 1960s/1970s. Regarding Borges’ poetry, “Siempre hay en él un margen de significación inasible, de gestión indeterminada, de polisemia que permite interpretaciones múltiples” (Turkевич 38), and in Borges’ poetry itself (a poem titled “East Lansing), “porque la realidad es inasible” (Borges, “East Lansing” 434). Jaime Alazraki foregrounds the significance of the theme of the unknowable from the first chapter of his La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges, noting, “En los innumerables sistemas teleológicos y proposiciones metafísicas, Borges ve un infatigable esfuerzo del espíritu humano por comprender e interpretar el universo. La solo pluralidad de estos sistemas, a través de siglos y milenios de historia, es indicativa de su fracaso; una empresa de tal envergadura rebasa los alcances de la inteligencia humana [...] El universo, pues [...] es inconcebible” (20; also “El carácter inaprehensible de la realidad,” 27; “El carácter incognoscible de toda realidad,” 41). Regarding the frequent appearance of the notion of infinity in both Borges’ work and scholarly criticism, “Borges knows that all reality is dissolved in the presence of Infinity; he summons it constantly in his work, sometimes alluding to it in a single word and at other times developing it within a complex argument” (Barrenechea 24).

4 This is a signifying ambivalence Borges once explored, for example, in an essay he titled “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” published in the collection Otras inquisiciones.

5 Note that not only does Fernández Mallo invoke Borges consistently and structurally in Remake, but he also includes what he calls a “versión plagiada” of “Borges y yo” along with a variation on the theme in his more recent Antibiótico (2012). See also Mario Garvin’s essay on Agustín Fernández Mallo, which opens with a reference to Borges (Garvin 339, see also 341).

6 Fernández Mallo’s interdisciplinary postpoetic methodology is covered in his 2009 book Postpoética and in addition drawn out quite productively with reference to two earlier essays (both titled “Poesía postpoética”; in Quimera [2006] and Lateral [2004]) in Jesse Barker’s interview with the author (“Entrevista”; see also Barker’s essay in the Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies, “Agustín”; and Mudrovic). In the prologue to Fernández Mallo’s Blog-up, Teresa Gómez describes the author’s stylistic approach melding art and internet, for example: “la vieja técnica del collage, o del apropiacionismo del que habla en tantos de sus ensayos, constituidas a base de cortar y pegar textos de autoria propia y ajena y de procedencia diversa (no necesariamente de origen electrónico), que se ensamblan en orden aleatorio a partir de la misma ley compositiva que, en rigor, rige la estructura de Internet: el inseguro azar” (Gómez 12, original emphasis; see also Mora 267). It is important to understand that the saturation of Fernández Mallo’s work with intertextual references (including borrowings and rewritings) is itself a link with Borges’ literary method. Vicente Luis Mora writes about Borges: “Que un practicante confeso del juego de reapropiación acabe siendo, a su vez, objeto de muchas y variadas tergiversaciones textuales, que luego examinaremos, no debe extrañarnos” (Mora 260). Also, as Perla Sassón-Henry notes in “‘The Library of Babel,’ ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’ and the World Wide Web as Rhizomatic and Hypertextual Environments,” chapter five of Borges 2.0: From Text to Virtual Worlds, “Before the creation of hypertext and hyperfiction, Borges’ works provided the foundation of a new type of reading, one that challenges the striated spaces of literature” (Sassón-Henry 70).
rounding the relationship of the copy to the original.7 And as the very first entry in Remake makes clear, the way cultural and literary references from Borges’ earlier text are swapped out in the more recent version marks a further shift toward embracing transnational/transatlantic forms of intertextuality and pop-culture references.8 These important directions in scholarship aside, however, El hacedor (de Borges), Remake can also be seen as an important contribution to contemporary discussions surrounding visuality, space and digital knowledge in the twenty-first-century library.9

In the sections that follow, I draw parallels between the role of visuality in Fernández Mallo’s work and in two books published in the same innovative metaLAB series: Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production (2014) by Johanna Drucker and The Library Beyond the Book (2014) by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Battles.10 This dual reading highlights Fernández Mallo’s contributions to theorizations of visual and geo-spatial knowledge and connects them with Borges’ original insights regarding the shifting nature of signification in the material world. Visual forms of knowledge are crucial components of the digital paradigm that has at once affected everyday life, literary production, and the premise and promise of the digital library. The first section below, “Mutaciones: Visual and Geo-Spatial Forms of Knowledge Production,” assesses the paradigm shift embedded in the section that has been most significantly expanded from Borges’ El hacedor (a section titled “Mutaciones” in both texts). Reference to the interrelationship between signifying functions, material culture and social practices was already pronounced in Borges’ text, as discussed below, but Fernández Mallo imbibes his rewriting with a highly visual and also geo-spatial sensibility.11 Careful consideration of the intertextual role of Robert Smithson’s photo-essay “The Monuments of Passaic” in Remake connects the aims of Borges and Fernández Mallo by exposing the productive contradictions surrounding the role of visual

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7 Eduardo Becerra, for example, deftly explores Remake examining “la copia y sus variaciones (plagio, parodia, calco, simulacro, etcetera) como una de sus pautas definitorias” (Becerra 200), inspired by the legal conflict involving Borges’ widow, María Kodama, over status of his textual ‘versioning’ in light of the digital paradigm in publishing. See, too, Mora (270-72) and the article by Pablo Rodríguez Balbontín, who devotes a section of his article on authorship specifically to “El caso Kodama-Mallo” (Rodríguez Balbontín 257-60).

8 Take, for example, the section titled “A Leopoldo Lugones” (1967: 7-8), that in Fernández Mallo’s book is titled “A Jorge Luis Borges” (2011: 9-10): “Los rumores de la plaza quedan atrás y entro en la Biblioteca. De una manera casi física siento la gravitación de los libros, el ámbito sereno de un orden, el tiempo disecado y conservado mágicamente. A izquierda y a derecha, absortos en su lúcido sueño, se perfilan los rostros momentáneos de los lectores, a la luz de las lámparas estudiosas, como en la hipálage de Milton […] Estas reflexiones me dejan en la puerta de su despacho. Entro; cambiamos unas cuantas convencionales y cordiales palabras, y le doy este libro. Si no me engaño, usted no me malquería, Lugones, y le hubiera gustado que le gustara algún trabajo mío. […] La vasta biblioteca que me rodea está en la calle México, no en la calle Rodríguez Peña, y usted, Lugones, se mató a principios del treinta y ocho” (Borges, El hacedor 7-8; cf. Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 9-10). The names and references in Fernández Mallo’s text are swapped out: Lugones for Borges, Lugones “el árido camello del Lunario” (from Lunario sentimental) for Juan Benet’s Valverás a Región, and the library in Mexico City for the library in Fernández Mallo’s own apartment. References to Pope John Paul II and Joy Division further complicate this transnational/transatlantic and temporal transposition. See Saum Pascual 277-91 for a well-crafted concise look at the work’s complexity and significance. See also Mora.

9 Note that the book was quickly retired from the market in a response to concerns expressed by Borges’ widow María Kodama (see Becerra).

10 The book HyperCities (Presner, Shepard and Kawano) is also an important contribution to that metaLAB series. Note that three more books are forthcoming with metaLAB in 2017, see http://metalab.harvard.edu/index.php/2016/03/21/metalabprojects-series.

11 Though I focus here on the context of the digital library, this sensibility connects meaningfully with the visual and geo-spatial forms of knowledge production on display in recent turns toward the digital humanities (spanning the arts, sciences and academic libraries), and the geo-humanities (spanning geographical and traditionally literary disciplines). Interested readers may start with Bodenhamer, Corrigan and Harris, The Spatial Humanities, Deep Maps; Dear et al.; Fraser, Digital Cities; and Gold.
knowledge in a digital age.12

More concretely, the second section, “Beyond the Book: Space and Visuality in the Digital Library” builds on the way Fernández Mallo’s text reframes visual knowledge production within a digital paradigm by emphasizing the way that shifts in the function and representation of space, place and architecture are at the heart of changes unfolding in the digital library. Drucker’s musings in *Graphesis* regarding the changes in (and limitations of) visual knowledge intersect productively with Fernández Mallo’s goal and also implicitly reaffirm Borges’ insight into the limits of human knowledge. Drucker’s musings in *Graphesis* regarding the changes in (and limitations of) visual knowledge intersect productively with Fernández Mallo’s goal and also implicitly reaffirm Borges’ insight into the limits of human knowledge. Schnapp and Battles’ *The Library Beyond the Book* outlines a contradictory but productive fusion of analog/print culture and digital culture that is not unrelated to Fernández Mallo’s own contradictory stance on knowledge production in the digital era. As the scholars assert, the twenty-first-century library is progressively and provocatively de-identified from its physical location. It is elevated from a mere material space to become a more diffuse concept or way of organizing visual and geo-spatial knowledge. In this way it recapitulates the movement explored in the “Mutaciones” sections written by both Borges and Fernández Mallo, squares with the pronounced emphasis on change in *Remake*, and ultimately returns us to the Argentine’s multivalent symbol of the library as a way of exploring the nature, promise and limitations of human knowledge itself.

Mutations: visual and geo-spatial forms of knowledge production

The section titled “Mutaciones” is the longest in Fernández Mallo’s rewriting of Borges and arguably also the best example of his stylistic innovation. What in *El hacedor* is a concise four-paragraph section is in *El hacedor* (de Borges) a forty-one page expanse featuring over thirty color and black-and-white images (Borges, *El hacedor* 51-52; Fernández Mallo, *El hacedor* 58-99). These are important details because the vast majority of the other sections in *Remake* comprise merely one-to-three pages, with the second-longest reaching only nine pages (“Una rosa amarilla,” in Fernández Mallo, *El hacedor* 46-54). In addition, there are only two images in the text that appear outside of this section (Fernández Mallo, *El hacedor* 101, 103) such that “Mutaciones” clearly stands out as the most significant, the most central, and the most visual contribution to *Remake*. In privileging this section, I recognize that an article-length analysis cannot exhaust the complexity of either Fernández Mallo’s or Borges’ text. I also want to read a specific, albeit lengthy, part of this section closely enough so as to do credit to the narratological layering that pervades *Remake* and trace out how well chosen its intertextual/geo-spatial referents tend to be.13 This sort of exploration ultimately contributes to a deeper understanding of the contradictions that surround visual knowledge production and thus leads to a better grasp of the ambivalent role of images in the digital library paradigm.

12 Mora’s essay discusses the “Mutaciones” section of *Remake* and its dialogue with Smithson in part of a single paragraph (Mora 275). While I do not necessarily disagree with his statement of comparative textual value there (comparing Smithson to Fernández Mallo), Mora has missed opportunities to investigate 1) how it is, precisely, that Fernández Mallo recapitulates Borges’ original insight in this section and 2) how it is that the choice of Smithson’s work as an intertext, in particular, is crucial in making a much larger point about the nature of time’s mutation and signification in the visual realm that is specific to the post-Borgesian digital era. I hope to make these points in the body text of this article.

13 It is worth mentioning that the sheer volume, brevity and heterogeneity of intertextual references in Fernández Mallo’s work often frustrates the art of scholarship, such that analysis of these texts tend to stick to more global considerations rather than carry out closer interrogations of individual references (such global approaches are on display in the urban frame in Fraser, “On Nocilla,” and the notion of authorship in Rodríguez Balbontín). I do not dispute the value of applying more global frames to Fernández Mallo’s work, but instead I seek to complement those analyses with the present approach by spending a significant amount of time with one particular section.
As a point of departure, it seems reasonable to suggest that Borges’ section title alone may have captured Fernández Mallo’s attention. The word ‘mutation’ certainly speaks to the interconnected themes that pervade the postpoetic author’s entire oeuvre: change as a law of physics, as an essential property of nature, as the core trait of both the human condition and the social experience, and as an inspiration for the interdisciplinary, genre-driven and quite often visual collisions that subtend his wider Nocilla project. Yet Borges’ contribution itself also conveys a deceptively simple kernel of truth regarding the way that forms of symbolic representation and their links are historically embedded in concrete spatial and social practices that are subject to change. Significantly, then, Remake reinforces the weight of this insight by applying it to an enduring digital present and by simultaneously decoupling the brute concept of change from the more positivist connotations of advancement.

Borges’ brief “Mutaciones” section concisely links three distinct symbols with the material contexts that condition and inform their meaning, as summarized in the last sentence of his piece: “Cruz, lazo y flecha, viejos utensilios del hombre, hoy rebajados o elevados a símbolos; no sé por qué me maravillan, cuando no hay en la tierra una sola cosa que el olvido no borre o que la memoria no altere y cuando nadie sabe en qué imágenes lo traducirá el porvenir” (Borges, *El hacedor* 52). The ubiquitous presence of the *flecha* in everyday social life arguably preceded its more symbolic use; the Magyar horse- rider’s *lazo* devolved from an instrument of capture to rudimentary ornament; the *cruz* is linked to the form of a Tau or ‘t’ and embedded in the practice of crucifixion. On display are the links between practical use and symbolic exchange, links hidden by the flux of temporality and obscured by the distance that time introduces between material/cultural history and visual presence. Borges’ prose regards this distance ambivalently as both a degradation and an elevation of the object (“hoy rebajados o elevados a símbolos”). This ambivalence is also evident in his perspective on temporality. Time effects an apparent loss in its seeming neglect of the past and simultaneously engages in a productive act, thus creating the new from its refashioning of the old. This is regarded neither from the subtractive perspective of loss or nostalgia nor from the additive perspective of rebirth or renewal. Change simply exists, even if it is riven by internal contradiction. Fernández Mallo’s training as a physicist would presumably encourage him to see change in terms of the reorganization of matter or energy, and decidedly not from a teleological point of view. The central ambivalence that Remake harnesses in its rewriting of *El hacedor* is this: knowledge must account for the fact that the visible sign hides the conditions of its own creation. As a result, the visual world must be regarded with a certain skepticism as a necessary simplification or occlusion of knowledge. This, of course, is one theme of the work of Borges overall—to assert that reality is at its root ultimately ungraspable.

Fernández Mallo’s “Mutaciones” recapitulates Borges’ insight regarding the necessary incompleteness of human knowledge but also problematizes knowledge through further narrative complexity and explicit incorporation of digital/visual data. Significantly, it is divided into three sections that all turn on visual representations of specific places. The first, “Un recorrido por *Los monumentos de Passaic 2009*” (Fernández Mallo, *El hacedor* 58-76), is a geo-spatial re-reading, in 2009, of Robert Smithson’s “The Monuments of Passaic [NJ, USA]” (1967); the second, “Un recorrido por los monumentos de Ascó” (Fernández Mallo, *El hacedor* 77-82), is an exploration of the monuments of the nuclear plant of Ascó in Tarragona, Spain, where an incident occurred.

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14 On the interdisciplinary character of Fernández Mallo’s work see Barke, “Entrevista,” “Agustín”; Fraser, “*Nocilla*”; Henseler; Ros Ferrer; Seisdedos; Saum Pascual; and Valles. On Fernández Mallo’s visual collaborations with comics artist Pere Joan, for example, see Fernández Mallo, *Postpoética*; Fraser, “Art and Science”; Gutiérrez García Huidobro; Pere Joan 2011.
in 2008; and the third, “Un recorrido por los monumentos de La aventura” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 82-99), is a re-interpretation and re-presentation of a more recent television program that sought to investigate and reveal the specific sites used for Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1960 film. The sites at the center of these three sections are interrogated through multiple narrative frames, an approach that foregrounds the change inherent in temporal distance and that thus emphasizes the susceptibility of signifying processes to mutation. They are also each accompanied by images, which has the additional effect of asserting the interconnection of cultural/artistic and socio-historical frames of reference in line with Fernández Mallo’s broader postpoetic conceit. I focus here on the extensive part of the “Mutaciones” section that engages Robert Smithson’s photo essay—not because the other two concise sections lack their own value, but instead because of the rather pointed way in which its complex visual narrative prioritizes the process of spatio-temporal re-signification that is such a central concern for both Borges and Fernández Mallo.\footnote{It is particularly noteworthy, in light of Borges’ comment on the flecha, that Fernández Mallo’s “Un recorrido por los monumentos de Ascó” interrogates the arrow through a digital paradigm via discussion of that familiar cursor icon with which we routinely interact on computer screens (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 80). Similarly, the presence of a remark on the cultural significance of the pen “¿ha sustituido el bolígrafo BIC al Montblanc como bolígrafo eterno?” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 81; original emphasis) draws attention to the same themes of cultural shifts in symbol and signification that motivated Borges. As I explore in the continuing body text above, the point is not that Fernández Mallo merely emphasizes cultural degradation but that he holds this notion in tension with a realism that notes the ambivalent reality of change and social shift.}

Itself a landmark of changes in the world of art, Robert Smithson’s “The Monuments of Passaic” (1967) provocatively re-read specific sites in the named New Jersey town through a sophisticated narrative frame. Building on a critical and ethical tradition that implicated industrialization in destruction of the American landscape, Smithson criticized the American suburb by equating it with the quarry and the desert (Menard 1022). Simultaneously, however, he rejected a simplistic environmentalism that had become commonplace and that embodied a nostalgic yearning to return to an idealized social landscape identified with the nineteenth century. Taking his Instamatic camera in hand on 30 September 1967 and wandering through a New Jersey town whose adjacent and iconic falls had become synonymous with the picture-perfect nature photograph (Menard 1025), the artist captured mundane images of what he saw there. Scholar Ann Morris Reynolds, for one, explores the purposely naïve quality of these pictures and the distancing effect they produce for viewers, concluding that “as still images constructed by rather stale conventions of picture-making, they offer little information specific to the site” (Reynolds 108).

Smithson’s narrative characterizes its accompanying images in a pseudo-scientific five-part typology whose textual elaboration more than once calls upon the overly mythologized classical world or the presumed historical depth of European cities as explicit points of contrast. On the surface, the implication is that the contemporary suburban environment of Passaic, NJ is evacuated of monumental splendor; it is an urban form that time has degraded rather than elevated. But content, form and context work together in the photo-essay to problematize this simple understanding of loss of meaning. The wink in Smithson’s style—the careful construction of his amateur narrator-photographer persona\footnote{His own activity should be seen as a highly self-reflexive endeavor (Reynolds 101): “One cannot fully reconstruct Smithson’s experience of his trip to Passaic apart from his own account, and the two things—experience and}—does not restore a faith in the monumental grandeur of other, more-storied civilizations, but instead foregrounds the superficial contribution of the visual to understanding changes hidden by time and related to complex social shifts. Temporality, and the power it holds to obscure the underlying processes informing such complex...
and sustained social shifts, is an explicit part of Smithson’s discourse. Time erodes context, and the visual image hides time’s mutation. As such it limits the human capacity to immediately (i.e. visually) grasp the coordinates driving social change and material signifiers. As Reynolds puts it, “[Smithson] is pointing out the inherent fragility of images; they are thin illusions, doomed to fail our expectations, doomed eventually to crumble” (Reynolds 116-17). On one level, the artist asserts the primacy of visual images, which he ultimately seems to regard as illusory, while on another level he simultaneously foregrounds and undermines their role in knowledge production. One way of summing up the complex premise of his work is to say that while images offer up the promise of a spatio-temporal concreteness, they nevertheless end up only showing what it is that we cannot come to know.17

While Smithson’s 1967 photo-essay re-read specific sites in the New Jersey town as a way of illustrating the aporias of time and the illusory nature of the visual field, “Un recorrido por Los monumentos de Passaic 2009” restages its predecessor’s insights within the context of a specifically digital visual paradigm. Fernández Mallo’s narrator sets the scene thus:

Ciudad de Nueva York año 2009, finales de Julio, 7.00 am, picaduras de mosquitos. En la calle los puertorriqueños tienen ya la música en sus coches a máximo volumen. Oriento el ventilador hacia donde ahora mismo estoy sentado. Preparo el material, me aseguro de que el teléfono móvil tiene suficiente bacteria como para hacer una Buena colección de fotos de la caminata [tengo una ruta preestablecida, pero dentro de ella iré improvisando; ni siquiera sé si encontraré algo que me motive lo suficiente como para hacer alguna foto]. Lleno la botella de agua. El café descafeinado, la sacarina, el niki verde, los calzoncillos slip estampados con pequeñas piscinas. (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 58)

Immediately following this set-up is a paragraph explicitly recognizing Smithson’s trip and his publication of the photo-essay in the journal Artforum (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 58), as well as another paragraph describing the narrator’s adoption of a pre-planned route from the book Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History by Jennifer Roberts (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 59). Readers note that the narrator has accessed the route visually on his iMac and photographed it on his Nokia N85 cell phone, in what is effectively a return to the speculative method of nineteenth-century armchair anthropologists. What follows is a carefully crafted commentary of the narrator’s return to places visited by Smithson—a return carried out over the computer without ever leaving his chair, computer or apartment. He does not visit Passaic, NJ in person, but instead visually consumes its selected locations through the distanced experience of place mediated by digital images on the web. Alongside color photos of the route map (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 59) and color images from Google Maps (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 60, 62, 64-71) the text intercalates Smithson’s black-and-white photos from 1967: the bridge (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 61), tubing by the river (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 63), a parking lot (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 69) and the sandbox that punctuated his original photo-essay (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 75).

This last image of the sandbox deserves mention because it also marks the end of this first

written account—are not equivalent. But one needs to recognize that Smithson’s essay is a reconstruction of what was a carefully constructed experience” (Reynolds 101; see also 118).

17 This is, itself, an appropriate connection with the oeuvre of Borges.
section of Remake’s “Mutaciones” chapter. In the original, Smithson’s discussion of the sandbox contributed to his larger rejection of nostalgic attitudes. In a thought-experiment captured through words on the page, he imagined the sandbox filled with black sand on one side and white sand on the other, and he subsequently posited a child walking a circle in the sand with his footpath and mixing black and white into grey. Should the child attempt to trace the circle in the opposite direction, the sand would not be restored to its original pattern, but instead, as Fernández Mallo publishes in his Spanish translation of Smithson’s writings, “el resultado no será la restauración de la división original, sino un mayor grado de grisura y un aumento de entropía” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 75). What was, in Smithson, the inability to restore an idealized nineteenth-century landscape is arguably, in Fernández Mallo, the inability to restore logic of the pre-digital/analog social world. Neither author seeks the comfort of a world-gone-by, nor can it be said that they overlook the opportunity for social critique. But what is most important for both is the intuitive grasp of the material change wrought by paradigm shifts—whether suburban or digital. Importantly, each uses visual media as a way of conveying the nature and the reality of these shifts but also of illustrating what it is that we cannot know through vision alone.

From a narrative perspective, it is significant that there are two layers of flâneur-inspired urban drifting in Remake, each of which involves site-specific referents in the New Jersey town.18 Fernández Mallo references and then dispenses with the narratological artfulness of Smithson’s conceit. As noted above, his narrator does not visit the geographic sites in Passaic physically, but visits them virtually—visually and digitally—over his iMac computer. Implied in this act, is the resonance of Smithson’s physical journey. At the first level of this textual intercalation, Remake clearly contains a criticism of digital era passivity. For example, the narrative playfully takes the visual experience of streets in Passaic (now explicitly mediated by screenshots from Google Maps) for granted, suspending disbelief and expressing frustration. The narrator imagines a conversation with the internet-banked digital image of a pedestrian (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 66), wonders how it is that the same red truck somehow appears in each image, and expresses amazement at the preponderance of green traffic light signals that he encounters (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 67). This tendency of the narrator to mistake the virtual image for reality is carried to the extreme. On another page, the narration refers to a split-screen Google Maps view as if it corresponded to a shift in visual perception: “Mi visión entonces se desdobla en dos […], la de a pie de tierra y la panóptica, como si cada uno de mis ojos procesara de manera distinta la información que recibo, o como si yo poseyera dos cerebros, dos sistemas de referencia” (2011: 72). The value of this remark is multiple. It raises questions regarding the links between representations and things, it makes clear that the internet as a tool has extended the scope of our vision, and most astutely it rather pointedly engages the central theme in Fernández Mallo’s wider postpoetic work. This theme is, of course, that frames of reference overlap and coexist, and that, though distinct, these frames do not map neatly to hierarchical categorization (elsewhere: literature vs. comics; here: analog vs. digital ways of ‘seeing’). More often, these sorts of humorous examples function as facile throwaways. Yet even thus, the skillful reduction of Smithson’s analog conceptual irony to a more bathetic digital humor in Fernández Mallo’s rewriting functions to reassert Borges’ original insight regarding the mutation of all signs and symbols in time.

The more substantial relevance to Borges’ “Mutaciones,” however, comes at another level of narration, as Fernández Mallo’s chapter charts the way the experience of space/place has

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18 Readers will note that the Situationist practice of psychogeographical wandering, popularized by Guy Debord in his publications, is a direct point of reference for what Fernández Mallo accomplishes here. See Debord; Knabb.
become resignified within a visual and digital twenty-first-century paradigm. The possibility of seeing distant places has drastically increased, just as the possibility of understanding them completely still eludes us given the obstacles time has introduced in the form of implicit knowledge gaps that escape visual capture. The frequency with which we can see some of the most distant or even remote locations of the globe on a screen has increased, such that viewers tend to exert ownership over the visual world in the same way that nineteenth-century landscape painting proliferated as a way for bourgeois art collectors to assert ownership over landscape. At one point, Fernández Mallo’s narrator grabs a snack from the refrigerator and then imagines himself approaching Smithson’s sandbox. “Lo veo a lo lejos, solo, cúbico y pleno. Me aproximo, me siento en el único banco que encuentro. Es de madera, está muy deteriorado. Sólo una pequeña parte de este banco se conserva en buen estado. Parece estar hecho exclusivamente para mí” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 74). Remake does not highlight landscape change itself but rather change in the experience of place—while the place itself may have changed, his focus is the change in the way in which we represent space/place in general. We now exercise dominion over space from afar using visual forms of knowledge, but we tend to cling too much to the mystery of space that visual knowledge seems to promise, ignoring the historical change and social relationships that images do not display. Thus, the narrator in Remake ultimately serves to voice our ignorance, such as when he confesses parenthetically to readers “[no entiendo cómo puede haber algo que no salga en un mapa]” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 73).

In the end, what we witness in Fernández Mallo is the connection between the simultaneous degradation and elevation of shifts in visual symbolic practice. As the next section explores, changes in the function, frequency and meaning of the visual image in our contemporary information society are at the center of what it means to produce, store and interpret knowledge. Scholarship on the digital turn may not provide tidy answers to some of the questions this change in visual knowledge brings up, but it does treat them directly and thoroughly in advocating a more nuanced approach to images and a move “beyond the book.” In this way it runs parallel to the work of Borges and Fernández Mallo.

Beyond the book: space and visuality in the digital library

The contradictory dynamics surrounding the limitations of visual knowledge—evident even in Borges’ references to material culture and rendered visible in Fernández Mallo’s rereading of Smithson’s Passaic project—are simultaneously at the center of digital humanities pioneer Johanna Drucker’s Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production (2014). In an early section of the book titled “Knowledge and/as Vision” (Drucker 21-28), Drucker expresses a core insight regarding the contradiction of visual knowledge: “We are keenly aware that the breadth and depth of contemporary knowledge exceeds the capacity of visual presentation. We no longer believe that everything that can be known can be seen any more than we believe in the ‘truth’ of visual images. Though we often use visual means to make images of invisible things, much of contemporary life simply can’t be shown” (Drucker 22). This simple statement is valuable because it resonates with the insight from Borges’ “Mutaciones” section, Fernández Mallo’s eponymous section, and Smithson’s own work. Like these others, Drucker stakes out a position on the visual world that is explicitly contradictory. On one hand, “the bias against visual forms of knowledge production is longstanding” and problematic (Drucker 16). On the other, images are more complex than they may appear to be as they “are not governed by principles in which a finite set of components is combined in accord with stable, fixed, and finite rules” (Drucker 24). In some ways, the current
place of visual representations is to simplify complexity, an unfortunate practice, while in other ways, we resist the contributions of visual forms of knowledge (Drucker 23). Like Fernández Mallo, she accepts without hesitation the contemporary reality that “our relation to experience is often (and increasingly) mediated by visual formats and images” (Drucker 16).

In the section of her book titled “Visualizing Uncertainty and Interpretive Cartography” (Drucker 125-29), Drucker outlines an appropriately contradictory role for images in contemporary knowledge formation:

Most, if not all, of the visualizations adopted by humanists, such as GIS mapping, graphs, and charts, were developed in other disciplines. These graphical tools are a kind of intellectual Trojan horse, a vehicle through which assumptions about what constitutes information swarm with potent force. These assumptions are cloaked in a rhetoric taken wholesale from the techniques of the empirical sciences that conceals their epistemological biases under a guise of familiarity. So naturalized are the maps and bar charts generated from spread sheets that they pass as unquestioned representations of ‘what is.’ This is the hallmark of realist models of knowledge and needs to be subjected to a radical critique to return the humanistic tenets of constructedness and interpretation to the fore. (Drucker 125)

In light of this quotation, readers can see that images in Fernández Mallo’s work (and particularly in the “Mutaciones” section of Remake) function both to poke fun at our habitually uncritical identification of visual representations with knowledge as well as to acknowledge the power that images hold to forge new connections between areas of knowledge. Drucker’s emphasis on “constructedness and interpretation” ultimately finds its complement in Fernández Mallo’s complex literary method. His self-reflexive prose, provocative narrative layering, and preference for intertextual intercalation prompt readers to question what is not being represented. This insight, of course, can be seen also in Borges’ “Mutaciones” section, where the socio-historical conditions for creating symbolic value are hidden by our necessarily partial view of the material world.

Even a cursory examination of The Library Beyond the Book (2014) by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Battles reveals how crucial visual representations are for the concept of the digital library. The book opens with an eight-page cartoon by Joe Altieri (art) and Matthew Battles (words) titled “Steampunk to Scrolls: Melvil Dewey, Time Traveller” (Schnapp and Battles 2-9), in which the authors portray the library as “a kind of palimpsest” (Schnapp and Battles 3). The cartoon features a tour, via a sort of time-traveling pneumatic tube system, of the library at Alexandria, a medieval scriptorium and the library of the future. Word balloons including statements by the tour guide recall the message of the “Mutaciones” sections by both Borges and Fernández Mallo above, if not also the overall postpoetic impulse of the Nocilla generation: “Old ways talk to new. Oh, much is lost, to be sure, but things survive, added to and transformed” (Schnapp and Battles 5); and “Indeed! The printing press brought a revolution, to be sure, but in so doing, it remixed

Cf. the clear similarities between Drucker’s comments on topological vocabulary (Drucker 54-55) and the essay written by Fernández Mallo (2012) on the topic of topological time. She also expresses quite clearly an equivalent of Fernández Mallo’s postpoetic endeavor when she writes that “The ‘book’ of the future will combine reading and writing, annotation and social media, text processing and analysis, data mining and mind-mapping, searching and linking, indexing and display, image parsing and distant reading, in a multi-modal, cross-platform, inter-media environment” (Drucker 63).
the past. More layers for the palimpsest! Change is in the palimpsest’s very nature!” (Schnapp and Battles 6). The authors’ conviction that the future of the digital library “presuppose the intermingling of the analog and the digital, books and e-books, paper and pixels” (Schnapp and Battles 22) reads very much like Fernández Mallo’s own mixed-methods approach to the literary itself where prose and poetry cohabitate with comics, visual images, internet screen shots, and further connections with the digital.

As encapsulated in the authors’ felicitous phrase “the book beyond the book” (Schnapp and Battles 17), the digital library mobilizes the “supposed fixity” of the written text, but does not dispense with reading or writing (Schnapp and Battles 17-18).

A substantial, innovative, and highly visual section of the The Library Beyond the Book labeled “Windows” (Schnapp and Battles 38-53) considers the shifts in material practices that accompany this mobilization, producing a message similar to that of the “Mutaciones” section of Borges’ El hacedor, now in the library context. An alphabetic list of nouns—“Book” (Schnapp and Battles 38-39), “Bookshelf” (Schnapp and Battles 40-41), “Card Catalog” (Schnapp and Battles 42-43), “Carrel” (Schnapp and Battles 44-45), “Copy Station” (Schnapp and Battles 46-47), “Librarian” (Schnapp and Battles 48-49), “Library Card” (Schnapp and Battles 50-51), and “Reference Desk” (Schnapp and Battles 52-53)—is accompanied by photographs, illustrations and diagrams that mix old and new, analog and digital equivalents, charting the shifts in material culture and cultural meaning at the heart of the library’s digital mutations. As in the “Mutaciones” sections by Borges and Fernández Mallo, the frame here is decidedly not teleological in orientation. Change involves a refashioning of old knowledge in new ways, but we nonetheless continue to deal with its contradictions and complexity as we negotiate time’s palimpsest-like qualities in search of a total knowledge that proves quite elusive.

Regarding space, it is significant that the digital library and even alternately the “library of the future” (Schnapp and Battles 17) has been decoupled, but not separated entirely, from its traditional spatial and architectural form. This process of spatial de-identification acknowledged in Schnapp and Battles’ text does not mean that libraries are completely virtual, but rather that they now function differently as contemporary signs. Mutated by temporal shifts, they now accept and make possible various and disparate uses of space. The authors’ prose, as in the epigraph chosen to begin this essay (Schnapp and Battles 32), praises mixed-use and sculpts the library as a multivalent signifier: “Libraries as sites for access, congregation, contemplation, delight, discovery, dispute, escape, hiding, repose, research, secrecy, self-abnegation... a capacious cartography of qualities, which register their historical texture, weave in and out and among one another, just as much as do the forms of the book” (Schnapp and Battles 26). Schnapp and Battles use a charged vocabulary to describe this change in the physical structure, layout or shape of the library (as both a space and a signifier), but they also emphasize the brute fact of mutation/shift over a moralizing perspective on what might otherwise be either pure degradation or pure elevation. In fact, they seem aware that both of the directions in the signifying shifts identified by Borges (“rebajados o elevados a símbolos”) are simplistic ways of contextualizing

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20 As the authors write: “The title of this volume is a provocation, not a description. It gestures toward a threshold being traversed at the time of writing, not toward an era when books will vanish and bookshelves will be seen only in virtual versions, brimming over only with e-books. The threshold in question is made up of interlocking components: changes in the nature and status of the document and the book; changes in practices of reading, research, note-taking and information sharing; changes in the architectural and institutional containers in which such practices are carried out and by means of which they are supported. It was arrived at not suddenly but slowly, not with the wave of a digital magic wand, but thanks to a century-long transformation in the culture of communication” (Schnapp and Battles 14-15).

21 “The information age started chipping away at the modern library’s walls almost from the start. It trans-
time’s mutations.

The library has mutated in a way that preserves written language and spatial organization while allowing new forms of visual knowledge and new connections across space and time. To wit, in the early material of the book, Schnapp and Battles sketch out an opposition between two extreme positions on the library that hinge on simplistic understandings of its physical space. On one hand—note the Borgesian resonance—there are “those who note that the world has become a library [...] The library qua physical container, they reason, like an icehouse in the era of electric refrigeration, is a relic of the past” (Schnapp and Battles 21). On the other, there are “those who note, more often than not with a modicum of nostalgia, that libraries continue to perform pivotal civic, educational, and economic roles” and that there is “the need for places of reflection and contemplation” (Schnapp and Battles 21). Ultimately, in the authors’ account there is no need for a return to the past—just as Smithson, Fernández Mallo and Borges all avoided uncomplicated nostalgia while asserting the brute reality of temporal, social and symbolic change. New and old media are co-present and overlap in the digital library. But the more interesting insight regarding space may be this: if the information age has arguably degraded the architectonic space of the library then it is somehow natural that space now reasserts itself not merely in the repository of knowledge but moreover as an elevated form of knowledge production in its own right.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century it is no longer possible to deny that the scope of literary production has mutated beyond its print form to include visual and geo-spatial forms of knowledge. As today’s librarians and humanities faculty know all too well, nostalgia for the forms of knowledge production that dominated the analog world has no place in digital scholarship, which brings new priority to visual and geo-spatial forms of knowing. Nevertheless, letters, written language, print and analog publication still have a place in the vast infinity of the digital library. In the end, the forces that unite Fernández Mallo’s approach to literature with recent theorizations of visual knowledge (Drucker) and the digital library (Schnapp and Battles) are the same: heterogeneity, mixing, borrowing, re-use, palimpsestic coherence, and convergence culture.22 The increasing prominence of digital, visual and geo-spatial forms of knowledge production is a sign that the library is becoming vaster than ever before. The commonplace invoked in passing by Schnapp and Battles that “the world has become a library—or at the very least, that the World Wide Web has become a library” (Schnapp and Battles 21) thus poses a return pathway to the work of Borges, who began his short story “La biblioteca de Babel” with this memorable sentence: “El universo (que otros llaman la Biblioteca) se compone de un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales, con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio, cercados por barandas bajísimas” (Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel” 73). The library is closer to becoming a universe than ever before—but we may not be any closer to understanding that universe than we were before.

22 Formed stack-centric libraries into data centers filled not only with books but also with workstation clusters, the deadly digital doubles of analog reading rooms. Initially tethered to local networks plugged into the digital catalogs stored on institutional servers, these dumb terminals were gradually opened up to the World Wide Web. In came a flood of access to new information and, with it, doubts about where a library begins and where it ends; about the library’s ability to serve as a filter and guarantor of quality information; about the role of physical holdings, rather than services and activities, as the foundation stone of a library’s sense of self” (Schnapp and Battles 20).

Note, too that Fernández Mallo’s closing analysis of Smithson’s final image refers to “todas las capas del tiempo” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 75) and “Tiempo palimpsesto” (Fernández Mallo, El hacedor 76), thus further resonating with the work of Drucker, Schnapp and Battles.
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