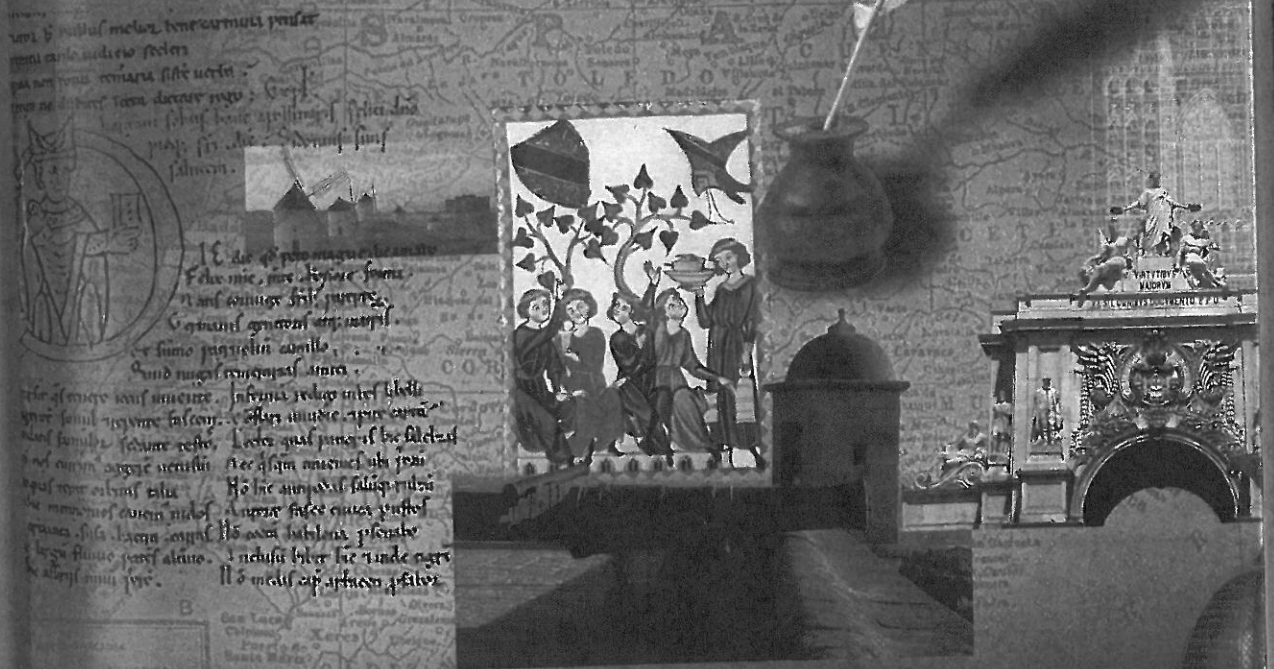


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Records, Projections, and the Dixie Flatline: Character Loops in *La invención de Morel* and *Neuromancer*

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In Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the protagonists encounter technical devices that create projections of characters who have previously died. In Bioy Casares' text, the device is part motor and part film projector, a machine that inserts past characters into the present tense. Similarly, in Gibson's novel, the device is a piece of software that captures the essence of the Dixie Flatline, a cyberspace cowboy who has already died at the novel's inception.

Both sets of artificial characters have limited interaction with the linear narrative because they, as projections, can neither form new memories of the real world nor fully interface with the present. In this way they differ from more traditional forms of circular time, including the flashback and dream, which both work in conjunction with linear forward motion.

Similar to a software program that has no end—or one that ends with "Goto 10"—characters like Bioy Casares' projections and Gibson's Dixie are looping entities, ones that repeat a series of actions that inevitably return them to a fixed start point. Such characters rub against the "real life" characters in interesting ways, often resulting in friction between the two, forcing the real-life characters—and the reader—to question life, death, and the entire concept of linear time. In this way these devices affirm Borges' concept of forking time, wherein a linear narrative is split into infinity and forward motion loses its place of privilege.

I. Circles and Lines

In both novels, character loops share space with more traditional structures of circular time. In the books' flashbacks and dreams, for example, we jump back in time in order to understand a later revelation, witness a character's development over time, or absorb expository information that will make the plot more fluid.

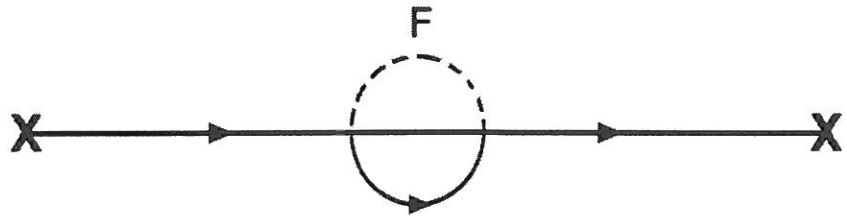


Figure 1. Flashback along a linear timeline

In both *Neuromancer* and *La invención de Morel*, flashbacks and dreams serve to affirm linear forward motion. In *La invención de Morel*, for example, the narrator flashes back to brief scenes that provide exposition. Although at the beginning of the text, we find him on a remote and supposedly isolated island, we soon learn through flashback that he has fled political persecution, faces life imprisonment, and that he has found sanctuary on "Lagoon Island" through the benevolence of an Italian drug dealer. By going back in time we receive the necessary clues to piece together the narrator's motivation for living on the island. Here the flashback acts as a sort of narrative grappling hook, one that secures us in the past and allows us to climb closer towards a future revelation.

Similarly, in Gibson's text, the main character Case has flashbacks about his former lover, Linda Lee. These flashbacks serve as exposition and go a long way to provide character motivation. From them, we learn of Case's mixed feelings about Linda Lee and his painful reaction to her death. We learn later in the text that because of these feelings, Case can be manipulated by the Artificial Intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer. Thus flashing back to Linda allows us to see Case's attachment to her,

thereby assuring that we will understand his dilemma later on in the story, when Neuromancer will make him decide whether or not he wants to spend an eternity with a Linda Lee construct in cyberspace.

Such information brings us back to our beginning with a revelation in hand — a new insight that the flashback affords. Thus the flashback confirms the linear time — it moves back only to propel the motion forward.

Dreams also serve linear time in *Neuromancer*. After Case has learned the identity of the first AI, for example, he has a dream-memory about burning a wasp's nest with a flame-thrower. Watching the insects burn within his dream, he is disturbed by the "blind jaws of the unborn moving ceaselessly, the staged progress from egg to larva, near-wasp, wasp" (126). Here in the dream, the signified is not inherent in the signifier. Case's disgust with the burning and mutilated forms has nothing to do with wasps. Its real meaning comes later, slips away from the signifying nest, and rests at some future point in the novel. We find at this future point that the dream indicates, not insects, but the Tessier-Ashpool family and its practice of cloning, freezing, and thawing its own members. Without the later revelation the meaning of the wasps' nest would remain hidden. The dream, then, although visually compelling, even disturbing, remains ultimately subordinate to the narrative's forward motion.

Both strategies, flashback and dream, are processes that move towards revelations. They are like curtains slowly drawing open to reveal a stage — or grappling hooks that pull us in and out of time. They encompass the past, present, and future — all in motion, all at once, since the reader begins with a point of departure (the now), even as she moves back in time (the past), in anticipation of the revelation (future). In this way it might seem that the flashback and dream express Borges' notion of forking time, creating a moment that is before-now-and-after in one instant.

Yet, while flashbacks contain various times in one moment, they still depend upon linear time for points of departure and reinsertion. In contrast, the character loops of the Dixie Flatline and the projections in *La invención de Morel* exist independently of the forward motion. Freed of linear time, these constructions allow their real counterparts to exist within the texts as multi-temporal beings. In this way, such characters are

perpetually unfolding, since we are no longer driven towards a final conclusion. And here, because of these character loops, the idea of forking time becomes more possible.

II. Morel's Projections and Mccoyp Pauly: Machine-Generated Character Loops

In both *La invención de Morel* and *Neuromancer* a technical device creates projections of characters who have already died. In Bioy Casares' novel, the projections include the machine's eccentric inventor, Morel; the beautiful Faustine, with whom the narrator becomes so beguiled; and many other of Morel's companions. In Gibson's book, the construction of the Dixie Flatline is a low-level artificial intelligence that Case uses to break into secure computer systems in cyberspace. Both sets of characters are thus established as loops from the beginning, since they have "returned" or been "brought back" to life. Additionally, once projected (as in Morel) or working (as with Dixie), these machine-generated characters repeat their actions as a result of their unique constructions.

However, these character loops differ from their more traditional circular counterparts. Whereas flashbacks and dreams affirm and inform linear time, machine generated character loops exist on a separate circuit, one that is divorced from the linear narrative (Figure 2). That is, while Case's flashbacks to Linda Lee take us back to the past and return us to the present, the Dixie Flatline loop stands outside the linear narrative, only intersecting at key moments.

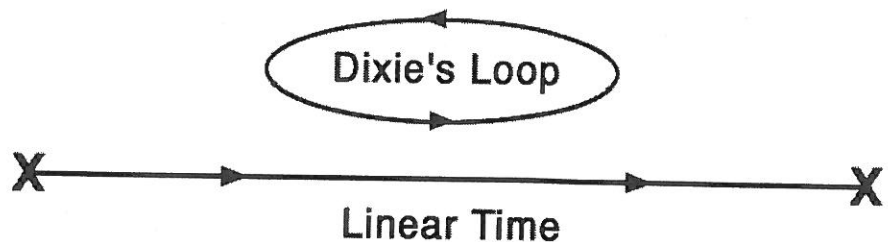


Figure 2. Line and loop in *Neuromancer*

Similarly, in *La invención de Morel*, the projections are completely independent of linear time, circling beside our narrator, but never interacting with him. In both texts the character loops result from a new technology that strives to capture immortality.

In *La invención de Morel* the device is a motley contraption that records sensory perceptions and experience. Part film projector, camera, radio, receiver, and engine, Morel's immortality machine records impressions of human beings and inserts these representations into the real world. Far from mere holograms, however, these projections have weight, depth, height, and appear as real people, engaging all five senses. And this, Morel argues in a projected speech about his projected creations, is tantamount to immortality:

Congregados los sentidos, surge el alma... Madeleine estaba para la vista, Madeleine estaba para el oído, Madeleine estaba para el sabor, Madeleine estaba para el olfato, Madeleine estaba para el tacto: ya estaba Madeleine. (60)

When all the senses are synchronized, the soul emerges... When Madeleine existed for the senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, Madeleine herself was actually there. (63)

Yet Morel's projections belie his words. The characters generated by Morel's invention are hollow creations, lacking any sort of totality; and there is no proof to support Morel's claim that his machine will capture the soul, since his existing creations are only the sum of their sensorial parts. What the machine does offer, however, is a presentation of reality that is fixed and unchanging, not dependent upon the shifting viewpoint of the subjective self. Although such a reality necessitates the annihilation of the subjective self through representation in Bioy Casares' text, the machine provides the narrator with an external world he may otherwise depend upon.

In *Neuromancer*, the projection is similarly hollow. The McCoy Pauly device is a piece of software¹ that captures the brain and character functions of the Dixie Flatline, a cyberspace cowboy who has already died at the novel's start. At the beginning of the text, we learn that Dixie's function in terms of the linear narrative is to help Case, his former protégé,

cut through Artificial Intelligence ICE (security) in cyberspace. We also learn that before his death McCoy Pauly was a legendary cyberspace cowboy nicknamed the Dixie Flatline, due to his Southern drawl and penchant for surviving brain death while jacked into cyberspace. We also learn that the Dixie Flatline has, ironically enough, died from heart failure:

"You know that the Dixie Flatline's dead?"

He nodded. "Heart, I heard...You know he died braindeath three times?... Flatlined on his EEG. Showed me tapes. 'Boy I was *daid*.'" (50)

Although Dixie's manner of dying is ironic in terms of his talent for surviving brain death (before his death, the other cowboys in the Gentlemen Loser shunned him as a "Lazarus of cyberspace" (78), the manner of his resurrection is also fraught with irony. The Dixie Flatline construction is a *digital* construction of McCoy's brain. Dixie's heart has died, but the cognitive functions of his brain remain in the construct. That is to say, what they have recorded and stored in the Sense Net Archives when Dixie died is not Dixie, but an algorithm that mimics Dixie's cognitive functions. McCoy Pauly becomes digital –existing only in binary as an entity whose sum is no more than the addition of its parts. The ones and zeroes are there, but Dixie is not. Thus his relationship to the outside world is no longer continuous, no longer analog, and the hollow mechanical laughter that Dixie gives when Case accesses him leaves Case cold.

In this way the Dixie Flatline construct conforms to the computational model of cognition. From what we know of his death and reconstruction, his patterns and habits will result from pre-given conditions and instructions –all cognition a form of computation. Although everything has been recorded, however, what emerges from the ROM construct lacks totality. This is especially confirmed when Case accesses the construct for the first time –and McCoy loops back to introductions:

"Dix? McCoy? That you man?" His throat was tight.

"Hey bro," said a directionless voice.

"It's Case, man. Remember?"

"Miami, joeboy, quick study."

"What's the last thing you remember before I spoke to you, Dix?"

"Nothin'."

"Hang on." He disconnected the construct. The presence was gone. He reconnected it. "Dix? Who am I?"

"You got me hung, Jack. Who the fuck are you?"

...

"Case."

"Miami," said the voice, "joeboy, quick study."

"Right..." (78-79)

Like Morel's projections on Lagoon Island, the Dixie Flatline construct is a hollow, looping entity that only tangentially brushes against the linear narrative.

In both books, the machine-generated characters repeat themselves, creating loops in action, loops in speech, and loops of life and death. Subsequently, their degree of reality is called into question by the living characters. The narrator of *La invención de Morel* becomes frustrated that he cannot speak to the beautiful Faustine. Similarly, Case is disturbed that the man who was once his mentor has been reduced to a piece of software, a shallow construct with no surprises, as straight and unsurprising as the "flat line" of his last name.

In the looping time of Dixie and Morel, the future is a known entity, not something that we are held in suspense over. Nor do these circles reveal fresh character insights, internal motivations, or revelations with the completion of each cycle. What these character loops do manage to achieve, however, is the subversion of linear time. And, by comparing them to their "real" counterparts, certain movements towards forking pathways begin to emerge.

III. Who Are the Hollow Men?

"How can we rid ourselves of ourselves, and demolish ourselves?" Deleuze asks in *Cinema I* (66). It is an interesting, perhaps impossible question. If the self exists as something that is above and beyond the sum of its bodily parts, then in our "real world," death would seem to be the only answer. Fiction, however, offers other potential responses. For example, Case and the narrator of *La invención de Morel* encounter emptied

selves –projections generated by Morel's machine and a ROM construct that was once a man. Such characters are empty and hollow constructions, yet their "real" counterparts are not necessarily demolished as a result of encountering them.

Perhaps in the face of such constructions Deleuze's question turns back upon itself, inverting, and becomes the following: How can we survive our empty selves? Can we continue living?

Such a question lurks behind the tension between the real and fake in both texts; and, if it is a tension between the empty projection and the flesh and blood, it is also a tension between line and circle, linear narrative and pre-recorded loop. What is the source of this tension, and how does it unfold throughout the text? What does it suggest in terms of the flesh and blood characters versus their hollow counterparts? Additionally, what does the character loop do to either affirm or deny the notion of the "real" character's authenticity?

In *Neuromancer*, Case's tension is two-fold. He feels sadness that his old mentor has been stripped of his humanity and replicated as a digital construct. This sadness, in fact, is one of the first emotional moments we have with Case. When he initially accesses the construct his throat tightens, suggesting tension or tears. This emotional moment suggests that Case is capable of feeling –that he has more to him than the shell (case) of his name implies. Later in the book, his discomfort with Dixie is expressed without ambiguity: "It was disturbing to think of the Flatline as a construct, a hardwired ROM cassette replicating a dead man's skills, obsessions, knee-jerk responses..." (76).

In *Neuromancer*, the tension between Case and Dixie is two-fold, but ultimately one-sided. Pauly cannot return this sense of unease, which is of course the source of Case's unease. McCoy Pauly is a series of repeated actions and empty memories, a mechanical entity who cannot affect emotion.

Yet the Dixie Flatline disturbs Case for another reason as well. By sharing space with McCoy Pauly, Case cannot help but notice that he and the construct have many things in common. At the beginning of the text, for example, we learn that McCoy Pauly has trained Case to be a cyberspace cowboy. They therefore share the same occupation. Because of this profession, both Case and Pauly also share a common culture, one that

scorns the body as "meat," an accessory secondary to the adrenaline rush that comes from punching deck and entering cyberspace. Furthermore, before his final death from heart failure, McCoy Pauly suffered brain death three times while trying to cut into the security of an AI. Similarly, Case's objective in *Neuromancer* is to cut into and disable the security of the Tessier-Ashpool family's mainframe, in order to liberate the AI. Finally, and most chilling, Case witnesses the Dixie Flatline as a hollow shell, a potential that he, Case, might become, if his skills are sharp enough and if someone has enough money to record him when he dies.

Simply put then, Case finds the construct disturbing because — by providing a mirror image in which Case can witness his various potential futures — Dixie represents Case himself, and Case's empty self. And Case, who confronts Dixie, also necessarily confronts the endless fact of Dixie's death. Because of this, he also confronts his own end. Like the character O in Beckett's *Film*, the two stand as doubles: Dixie as the "impotent motor effort of the one" and Case as "the sensitive surface of the other." By witnessing Dixie's emptied self, this hollow man, he, as Deleuze describes in his analysis of Beckett's *Film*, is "in the domain of the perception of affection, the most terrifying, that which still survives when all the others have been destroyed: it is the perception of self by self... This is what the end suggests — death, immobility, blackness" (67-68).

Yet in the face of the projection, Case is not destroyed. Case instead encounters all of the potential futures that the Flatline represents, varying fates that are fulfilled by the time of the novel's end. Like Dixie, Case has honed his skills to legendary perfection. Like Dixie, he has flatlined several times from communicating with an AI. Like Dixie, who exists only as a construct, Case exists at the end of the novel, not only as a flesh and blood being in the real world, but as a construction in cyberspace, an eternal companion to his late lover, Linda Lee.

He witnesses his hollowed self, while at the same instant remaining in his own body. He exists as himself, as a construct, and as a consummate artist with untouchable skills — a second Dixie Flatline. In this way Case stands beside his other selves, bears witness to his "emptied self," and is not destroyed.

Case's unease with Dixie's repetitive nature, however, in addition to stemming from his unease about his similarities with Dixie, is an ironic

commentary on Case's own tautologies. Case, for example, goes from cowboy to hustler to cowboy. He also repeats cycles of drug addiction (he starts out an addict, is imposed with a sort of "rehab," and ends up an addict). Additionally, his risks with the AI ICE result in his own flatlines and resurrections: McCoy Pauly's loop thus foreshadows Case's own trajectory. Circular time runs rampant around Case, but it is only through the face-to-face interaction with the McCoy Pauly construct that Case can see it.²

The narrator of *La invención de Morel* becomes similarly blinded to the circular constructions around him. The narrator, a convicted Venezuelan political criminal who takes refuge on the reputedly empty Lagoon Island, is initially horrified by these projections. It is through them, however, as it is with the Dixie Flatline in *Neuromancer*, that we see the looping structure of the protagonist's own life. At the novel's beginning, for example, we find the narrator on a deserted island. Cut off from the mainland and persecuted by the law, the narrator, like the projections he witnesses, also exists outside of linear time. He views himself as an outcast and even compares himself to a dead man when he attempts to woo Faustine, saying:

Mi muerte en esta isla has desvelado.
Un muerto en esta isla has desvelado. (23)

You have awakened me from a living death on the island.
You have kept a dead man on this island from sleeping. (29)

This is an ironic statement, since he finds out shortly afterwards that he, so recently awakened from a "living death," has been awakened by a dead woman.

Additionally, the tension he feels regarding the projected others has much in common with Case's feelings towards the Dixie Flatline. The first aspect of this tension, the narrator's uneasy fascination with the projections, occurs almost immediately. On the first page of the novel, he hears phonograph records being played at the museum.³ The narrator follows this music to its source and spies on the people from his vantagepoint of the marshlands:

Quién sabe por qué destino de condenado a muerte los miro, inevitablemente, a todas horas. Bailan entre los pajonales de la colina, ricos en víboras. (3)

I watch them unwaveringly, constantly, with the eyes of a man who has been condemned to death. They are dancing on the grassy hillside as I write, unmindful of the snakes at their feet. (11)

Fascinated and afraid, the narrator traces their movements and continues to spy on them. He becomes increasingly disturbed by their indifferent attitude towards his presence, and this tension reaches its crux when he recognizes their looping nature:

Los miraba, los oía. Sentí que pasaba algo extraño; no sabía qué era... Con lentitud en mi conciencia, puntuales en la realidad, las palabras y los movimientos de Faustine y del barbudo coincidieron con sus palabras y movimientos de hacía ocho días. El atroz eterno retorno. (30)

Watching Morel and Faustine, listening to them, I felt that something strange was happening; I did not know what it was... I began to realize that the words and movements of Faustine and the bearded man coincided with those of a week ago. The atrocious eternal return. (36)

Annoyed with the repetition, he nevertheless does not question their existence until after he falls in love with Faustine and attempts to woo her by making and dedicating a garden to her. She ignores his efforts, however, seemingly indifferent to his every move. Devastated, the narrator attempts to steal her away from another man, not realizing until the novel's conclusion that Faustine is not real at all.

Aside from finding the projected characters unnatural and repellent, the second aspect of his tension emerges from his inability to fully interact with Faustine. In addition to being a tension between lover and beloved, this is a tension between circular and linear time.

In *La invención de Morel*, two sorts of time progressions exist. The first is linear, encompassing the narrator's arrival on the island, his love for Faustine, his subsequent discovery of Morel's immortality machine, and his final insertion into Morel's projection of reality. The second is circular.

It is a projection of reality through Morel's device, one that repeats a series of events in a looping fashion.

Once the narrator recognizes that Faustine exists only in circular time, not even tangentially intersecting with his own time, he faces a decision: Should he kill himself? Should he build a boat and return to society? Should he endure his life of isolation? Should he figure out the precise operations of Morel's invention in order to take advantage of its unique capabilities? In a sense, the choice is simple. If he returns home he faces life imprisonment in Venezuela. If he remains on the island he will be agonizingly lonely. Since his love for Faustine has not waned, he decides to do everything within his power to approach her. Since she cannot extend beyond the loop of Morel's projection, the narrator must find another way to be with her.

Accordingly, the narrator stands before Morel's machine, discovers its operations, records his own image, and inserts his recorded self beside the beautiful Faustine, resolving his frustration with the projected world by joining it. At this moment, the narrator has come to terms with existence, willing to risk his own soul in order to achieve a nebulous yet mechanical immortality. In a sense, the narrator's final act represents another type of tension as well – the tension between the subjective self and the external world⁴ that Deleuze describes in "Essences and the Signs of Art":

Each subject expresses the world from a certain viewpoint. But the viewpoint is the difference itself, the absolute internal difference. Each subject therefore expresses an absolutely different world. And doubtless the world so expressed does not exist outside the subject expressing it (what we call the external world is only the disappointing projection, the standardizing limit of all these worlds expressed). (43)

The narrator recognizes that his external world (one marked by isolation, persecution, and the relentless circular motion of Morel's constructs) is indeed a disappointing projection. Yet, unlike his reality outside of the island, he has found *this* projection's source – not within his own consciousness, but in Morel's cunning machine, a device that promises to fuse him to the projected world forever.

The narrator chooses to become a hollow man. By doing so he hopes to achieve what he, as a real character, cannot – endurance through

time and the assurance of a certain, fixed reality. Through the projection reality no longer need be, like the narrator's real life, the uncertain or subjective existence that Deleuze describes. Within Morel's projection reality is fixed, continuous and certain. While it is also mechanical, formulaic, and monotonous, it leaves little room for surprise.

After recording himself, the narrator watches his own image beside Faustine's, satisfied that his soul will follow the projection of himself when he dies. Here, like Case standing beside the Dixie Flatline, the narrator exists as multi-temporal entity, watching his hollow self unfold. At this moment the narrator achieves, however briefly, existence in both realities. Before this moment the circular time has not intersected with the linear time, but the narrator, a prisoner of linear time, forces himself into the loop (Figure 3).

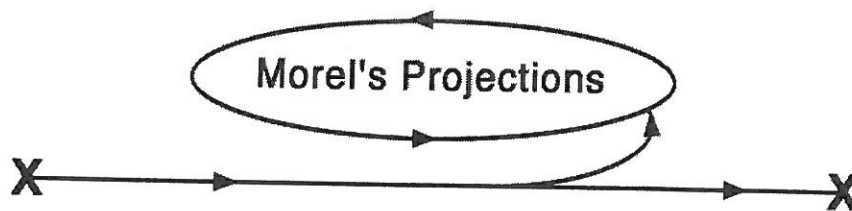


Figure 3. Linear and circular time in *Morel*

In this way the narrator brings circular and linear time together, existing for some time in each. Like Borges' description of forking time in "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan," the narrator of *La invención de Morel* stands side to side with his projected others, acting as a bridge between the circular and linear.

IV. Character Loops and Forking Time

In *Neuromancer*, the Dixie Flatline acts as Case's mirror image, offering a way for him to witness his own future, his own mistakes, and his own death. This acts as a fork in time, allowing the Case then, the Case now, and the Case of the potential future to stand side by side. At the same time however, such a character projection differs from a traditional

flashback because no revelation is certain. The Dixie Flatline loop does not propel Case's character development forward in terms of plot. It may suggest things to come, but it does not, like the flashback or dream sequence, move the narrative towards an ultimate revelation or conclusion. In this way the characters of the Dixie Flatline and Case exist side by side, perpetually unfolding, eternally becoming, without any chronological closure.

In *La invención de Morel*, the projections operate in a similar manner, providing a second, yet independent, diegetic structure to the text. This looping structure plays with the idea of a subjective reality and allows the narrator to leave linear time, to choose instead a certain and fixed reality, and to exist for some time in both circular and linear worlds.

Both the Dixie Flatline and Morel's projections allow their real counterparts to split apart from traditional, linear narrative times. In this way, the character loops in *La invención de Morel* and *Neuromancer* affirm Borges' concept of bifurcation, where the idea of linear time is de-hierarchized, branched, and split into varying and infinite potentials.

Notes

¹ Gibson refers to the Flatline as a "ROM Construct," but since Dixie carries out orders according to a pre-recorded set of instructions, he also functions as a piece of software.

² Other expressions of circular time in the novel include the orbiting and rotating cigar-shaped spindle that constitutes Freeside; the freezing and thawing of Jane, Jean, and Ashpool; and the labyrinthine wasps' nest that serves as a central metaphor for the Tessier-Ashpool enclave. Additionally, there are many playful allusions to Gibson's own time in the late twentieth century, including descriptions of Kandinsky tables, Japanese business domination, and Salvador Dalí clocks. There are even references to Gibson's own fiction, since Molly, with her silver eyes and burgundy nails, is the same Molly Millions featured in "Johnny Mnemonic," a story that Gibson published in 1981.

³ The phonograph provides a consistent metaphor for the constructed characters. Like a record that spins potentially forever, the characters dance to the same songs in the same space, regardless of the snakes and rain.

⁴ This tension may also be read as a metaphor for reader-novel interaction, in that each time a reader opens a book, the text remains set on the page, similar to the way the narrator stands in relation to his projected counterparts.

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