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# THE CONTINUITY OF INTERPRETATION
## THE SEMIOTIC AND POETIC FUNCTIONS OF THE MISE EN ABYME IN PAUL AUSTER'S *THE MUSIC OF CHANCE*


The iconic notion of the *mise en abyme* has been that of incessant semiotic inquiry since its first introduction in literary discourse by André Gide's *Journal for 1893*.

> „(...) what would explain better what I'd wanted to do (...) would be a comparison with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield „en abyme" within it."[1]

This heraldic concept, originally put into print in Claude-Edmonde Magny's *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918*, was chosen as an emblem and instrument of interpretation owing to the fact that its characteristics represent, mirror a certain visual or textual structure both intensively and extensively. Its evolution into the Peircean counterpart of the Saussurean unicorn may explain its popularity and controversial nature. This paper aims at highlighting certain contexts in the semiosis of mise en abyme in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance* (1990) and by the same token attempts at exploring the narrative function of 'the shield within the shield'. Before examining the significance of the City of World (a miniature scale-model of a particular estate in Pennsylvania), it is necessary to revise some aspects in the general understanding of this paradoxical iconic device.

The unique position mise en abyme occupies in present day critical literary thinking is rooted not simply in post-modern preoccupation with self-reflexivity and mirror images but also in the semiotic problems this structure poses to scholars of the field. The deductive logical paradox inherent in its semiotic workings makes the mise en abyme an ostentatious example for the text's capacity to signify a point outside of its own universe. While critical thinking seems to have no aesthetic objections to repetition in the postmodern idea of 'the copy of a copy of a copy...',[2] the situation in the case of 'the copy on a copy on a copy' may be somewhat different. It is absolutely evident that the Saus-

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[1] Gide, A. 1967. *Journals 1889–1949*. Hammondsworth: Penguin. p 30.

[2] The set of illustrative examples could range from Erik Satie's serial music through Andy Warhol to contemporary pop culture.

surean insistence on the arbitrariness of signification can hardly accept the stress laid on mimetic functions of a form representing itself within the boundaries of the antecedent structure. Accused of displaying limited isomorphism and blamed for the futility of infinite regress and duplication, the concept of 'the shield within the shield' raises questions concerning the divisions and subdivisions in the Peircean apparatus of iconicity, which, in turn, chases us back to the problem of signs being motivated or inherently symbolic in nature. Peirce considers the metaphoric nature and symbolic iconicity of any given language system primordial and essential. In this respect (barring pure symbols) language is described as one entirely built on *symbolic* icons and *symbolic* indices, a typology that underlines the conventionality of the relationship between sign and object. On the grounds of this very system, one might even come to the conclusion that the mise en abyme is an indexical (having an existential connection with its object) icon (resembling, partaking in the characters of the denotatum). Are we to call it then a *symbolic indexical icon* (all three in one) so as to maintain the Saussurean premise and the Peircean description?

This daunting question was explored by Olga Fischer and Max Nänny, who set up a dichotomy that differentiated between two distinct modes of signification, namely *endophoric* and *exophoric* iconicity.[3] Exophoric iconicity stands for the traditional concept of 'form miming meaning' whereas its counterpart, 'the endophoric' is based on the idea of 'form miming form.'[4] Since the latter type describes sequence of elements operating in parallel on the same level, the symbolic principle of iconicity is reaffirmed here. A further consequence to this argumentation determines the autonomy of self-reference as the essence of literature, i.e. reference over depiction, existence over mimesis and meaning. The advantage of such classification emerges in the way this system renders the arbitrary equation of signifier versus signified and the iconicity of signification into two distinct categories, and so erases the conflict of exclusiveness.

Once this intra-lingual, endophoric mode of signification has been established, we may turn towards the rather vertiginous paradox of 'regression *ad infinitum*', which is present in the mise en abyme. Being the most opaque and at once the most transparent moment in the plot, this synecdoche, this structural point appears to be a narrative equivalent of J. Hillis Milller's linguistic moment.

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[3] Form Miming Meaning. Iconicity in Language and Literature (Benjamins 1990)

[4] The emphasis laid on the intra-lingual aspect of signification results in the extended interpretation of the stock example *'veni, vidi, vici'* assigning greater importance to the diagrammatic nature of iconicity over its imagic characteristic. Despite the phonological considerations (the gradual loss of sonority along with the repetition of phonemes expressing Cesar's rapid, intrepid offensive) it is the topology of the phrase that contains co-references, thus reinforcing the metaphoric arbitrariness of signification.

The "proliferation of figures" as Dällenbach describes it[5] is but a hole in the information-bearing sign system.[6] In effect, the machinery of gradual layering becomes a dynamic act with a result that could be best compared to an ever-diminishing palimpsest. The vertigo of possible synecdochic, hipertextual interconnections, the blackhole of metonymic, lateral thinking. Regression and progression *ad infinitum*.

The protagonists of *The Music of Chance*, Nashe ( a you-have-to-lose-yourself-to-find-yourself Don Quixote) and Pozzi the Jackpot (a poker wizard Sancho Panza) visit Flower and Stone (doubles, Doppelgänger), two eccentric, lottery-winning millionaires in their luxurious mansion to skin them in a game of poker. As expected, Pozzi's magic touch with the cards works perfectly but suddenly fails them when Nashe–roaming the rooms of the building–inadvertantly removes the models of his hosts from the City of World, the utopian miniature scale-model universe constructed by Stone. From then on they loose 10.000 dollars more than everything they had and finally become prisoners in the ominous confinement of the Four Realms.

> "The room was much larger than Nashe had imagined it would be,
> a place almost barnlike dimensions. With its high *transparent*
> ceiling and a *pale* wooden floor, it seemed to be all *openness and
> light,* as if it were a room *suspended in the middle of air.* (...) The
> only (...) object in the room was an enormous platform that stood.
> in the *center* of the floor, covered with what seemed to be a
> miniature scale-model rendering of a city." (my italics)[7]

The space encapsulating the mise en abyme is described here as the white space of signification, where the inevitable laws and forces of semiosis are suspended in mid air. This paragraph announces not simply a suspension of disbelief for the sake of narrative argument, but also the subversion of any kind belief in systematic cohesion. The center of the mise en abyme could not be any more dead then this. This is the transparent vortex of signification.

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[5] Dällenbach, L. 1989. *The Mirror in the Text.* Oxford: Polity.

[6] If the miniaturised version of shield 'B' is placed (mise) in the abyss, in the dead center (en abym) of shield 'A' (supposing that shield 'A' is a replica of shield 'B'), then shield 'B' occupying and covering a certain territory and thus modifying the structure of shield 'A' will formulate an image of shield 'C' (i.e. 'A' containing 'B'), which, in turn, will have to contain a presentation of shield 'D' displaying shield 'C' in the center and so on.

[7] Auster, P. 1990. *The Music of Chance.* New York: Penguin. pp. 79. From now on the reference is 'MC'.

"It is called the City of World," (...) "I like working on it," Stone said, smiling tentatively. "It's the way I'd like the world to look. *Everything happens at once.*"

"Willie's city is more than just a toy," Flower said, "it's an artistic vision of mankind. In one way, it's an *autobiography*, but in another way, it's what you might call a *utopia – a place where the past and future come together,* where *good finally triumphs over evil.* If you look carefully, you'll see that many of the figures represent Willie himself. There, in the playground, you see him as a child. Over there, you see him grinding lenses in his shop as a grown man. There, on the corner of that street, you see the two of us buying the lottery ticket. His wife and parents are buried in the cemetery over here, but there they are again, hovering as *angels* over the house. That's what you might *call the private backdrop, the personal material, the inner component.*" (my italics)[8]

By way of displaying representations of the author in the artifice, the model as a simulacrum directs its vertical extensions both outwards and inwards. The result is an endless chain of 'prime' movers creating an infinite number of universes. Relying on the medieval tradition of representing the diachronic through the synchronic, the mise en abyme also spreads horizontally along the time line. The prophetic function in the prefigurations of the author fades into downright mockery, once you catch the satiric tone of the amatourish mental note in the last sentence.

"But all these things are put in a larger context. They're merely an example, an illustration of one man's journey through the City of the World. Look at the Hall of Justice, the Library, the Bank, and the Prison. Willie calls them the Four Realms of Togetherness, and each one plays a vital role in maintaining the harmony of the city. If you look at the Prison, you'll see that *all prisoners are working happily at various tasks, that they all have smiles on their faces.* That's because they're all glad they've been punished for their crimes, and now they're learning how to recover the goodness within them through hard work. (...) Evil still exists, but the powers who rule over the city have figured out how to transform that evil back into good. Wisdom reigns here, but the struggle is nevertheless constant, and great *vigilance* is required of all the

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[8] MC p. 79

citizens – each *of whom carries the entire city within himself.*
William Stone is a great artist, gentlemen (…)." (my italics)[9]

This rather distopian then utopian vision of protestant providence serves didactic purposes, the message represented by the entire scenery is inprinted in each of the participants – according to the saint augustian tenet of a system incorporating a larger system within itself.

> "Stone looked up, stared at the empty space space for a moment, and then smiled in contemplation of the work that lay ahead of him. (…)"
> "I'm thinking about doing a separate model of this room. I'd have to be in it, of course, which means that I would also have to build another City of the World. A smaller one, a second city to fit inside *the room within the room.*"
> "You mean the model of the model?" Nashe said.
> "Yes, a model of the model. But I have to finish everything else first. It would be *the last element, a thing to add at the very end.*"
> "Nobody could make anything so small," Pozzi said, looking at Stone as though he were insane. "You'd go *blind* trying to do a thing like that. (…)"
> "But if you did a model of the model," Nashe said, "then theoretically you'd have to do an even smaller *model of that model. A model of the model of the model.* It could go on forever."[10] (my italics)

The description of the model merging a microcosm with the macrocosm folds into several directions covering all of the five interpretative fields inherent in the mise en abyme:

– the prophetic meaning, prefiguration (representing the diachronic through a synchronic model),
– the didactic meaning (preaching normative morality, evil becoming good),
– the satirical effect (protestant vigilance,[11] smiling inmates in a concentration camp, mockery autobiographical material, the "blind" optician as an artist, art as life),
– the cognitive meaning (self-reflexivity, regression *ad infinitum*, duplication and triplication, art as work-in-progress), and

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[9] MC p. 80
[10] MC p. 81.
[11] The prisoners of the inmates in the City of the World are guarded by 'Calvin'.

– the mystical, magical control (transparency, whiteness, levitation, the uncanny, which makes the familiar strange, the strange familiar, Nashe destroying the puppets of power).[12]

In the 'Partial Magic in the *Quixote*'[13] Borges ruminates on the possible effects generated by the presence of a mise en abyme, and arrives at the conclusion that the fascination of the beholder watching a character becoming a spectator (as in *Hamlet, Don Quixote, The Arnolfini Marriage* by van Eyck or in several Borges short stories) is rooted in the sensation that he himself may well be just as fictious in character. The blending of epistemological interrogations with ontological statuses destabilizes the arbitrary and this way static relationship between signified and signifier. In Peircean terms the process of signification is a threefold system divided into object, interpretant and representamen.[14] This system places the focus on the role of the interpretant, due to its function to interpret the object as dynamical (a real thing on which an idea is based) or immediate (the idea of a cognized object). As Greenlee commenting on Peirce put it: "the possession of an interpretant [is] the essential condition of signification."[15]

When the workings of semiosis are pushed to the extremes, to its very limits, the seemingly stable role of the interpretant starts unfolding in this loophole of exegesis. If the ontological position of the self becomes undecidable within the framework of infinitely multiplying surfaces and identities, it is the *continuity of interpretation* that offers an epistemological paradigm and guarantees the linguistic existence of the disintegrating subject.

Based on the differences and similarities created while dissecting the signifiers from signifieds in the mise en abyme, the subject re-establishes his symbolic interirorization of the Imaginary (in the Lacanian sense), rearranges the accessible set of immediate objects. The self is referred to a hipodiegetic level, outside of the continuum of narration–or in other words, the reader is told a story and understands something that is not in the story. In *The Music of Chance* the ongoing process of interpreting the differences and similarities between embedding and embedded work is marked by the differing conclusions of the two protagonists. Nashe as an exhausted Don Quixote instinctively chooses the satiric aspect over the prophetic and didactic functions, the cognitive direction instead

[12] White J., John. 2001. In: *The Motivated Sign, Iconicity and Language and Literature 2.* Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing Company. p. 34.

[13] Borges, J.L. 1989. "Magias parciales del *Quijote*". Barcelona: Emecé. In *Obras Completas.* p. 47.

[14] Peirce, C. S. 1931–59. *Collected Papers.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. p. 228.

[15] Greenlee D. 1973. *Peirce's Concept of Sign.* The Hague-Paris: Mouton.

of mystical. He tempers with the laws of this microcosm, though he couldn't care less, since he is already lost in the most foreboding sense of the word. His companion, a soldier of fortune type of Sancho Panza decides on the opposite, in a way a naïve reader would. In his mystical, magical interpretation tempering with the laws of the simulacrum is like

> "(...) violating a fundamental law. We had everything in harmony.
> We'd come to a point where everything was turning into music for
> us, and then you have to go upstairs and smash all the instruments.
> You tempered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does
> that, he's got to pay the price."[16]

Everything that happens after this point in the novel stems from the intertextual game these two interpreters/interpretants play with each other and their shared object: the conundrum of the mise en abyme. In the maelström of uncertainity, in the exile of doubt Nashe, who interprets the City of the World by cognitive means, gradually lures himself into sinking lower and lower down the depths of the same abyss Pozzi warned him about.

> "Sometimes, powerless to stop himself, he even went so far as to
> imagine that he was already living inside the model."[17]

And it is at this point that Nahe burns the symbols of his sin, the two figures torn out from the space of simulacrum. From Pozzi's point of view this could be understood as an act of revenge (and so he dies a violent death), but Nashe's cognitive aspect makes it an effort to break the continuity of interpretation, to suspend the ongoing cycle of signification. In the final scene the last words emanating from Nashe's focalized view dissolve into the pure white nothingness that pours from the headlights of a car he intently drives into. As an interpretant, sign and interpreter the protagonist ceases to exist outside the sphere of interpretation.

In conclusion, we can state that the semiotic apparatus of infinite regress which is inherent in the mise en abyme generates a gap in signification and information, which abyss, in turn, is to be filled by certain functions, which destabilize the interepreter's presuppositions and systematic believes. If we accept Beckett's comment that what the artist of the day should look for is but a form that encapsulates the chaos,[18] than probably the reader will agree with the author of this essay that the mise en abyme might just do the trick.

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[16] MC p.138

[17] MC p. 178

[18] "(...) it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. (...) To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now." Auster quoting Beckett in his *Hand to Mouth*.