

(RE)INVENTIONS AND NARRATIVES OF (UN)CERTAINTY: MYTH,  
IMAGINATION, AND SPECULATION ACROSS LITERATURE AND THEORY

## **Labyrinths of Understanding: Epistemological Uncertainty and Speculative Thinking in Literature from Borges, Lem, and Eco to the Age of Post-Truth**

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### **Section language:**

English, Italian, Polish, Spanish

### **Call for Papers:**

The year is 2026, and a set of pressing questions persists: what is real, what is not, how can we tell the difference, and what happens when we cannot? These questions emerge amid overlapping crises—ecological, economic, political, and social—alongside rapid technological change and the growing influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence on our worldviews and cognitive habits. At the same time, resurgent conservative politics and market logic increasingly capitalize on online behavior. Described as both “postnormal” (Sardar) and “post-true,” our present moment is marked by a paradoxical cognitive crisis: an overabundance of data and tools that promises understanding while simultaneously undermining it, perhaps calling for a renewed epistemological framework (Bernecker, Flowerree, and Grundmann).

Such conditions are often framed either through apocalyptic narratives or through naïve techno-optimism. In fact, one key issue is that contemporary imaginaries of technology and the future often rely on conventional science fiction patterns that may limit, rather than deepen, our understanding of current challenges. While technological developments tend to provoke strong affective responses, such as awe, fear, or greed, we propose instead to foster critical reflection on their actual functioning and on the conceptual frameworks through which they are understood. A privileged space for such reflection is offered by literature—and, perhaps surprisingly, not only contemporary, nor exclusively science-fiction literature.

In their 2023 essay “Borges and AI,” Léon Bottou (Meta) and Bernhard Schölkopf (Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems) argue that making sense of phenomena such as algorithms and large language models requires more than technical knowledge: it requires mental imagery capable of rendering complex processes intelligible through analogy. While public discourse on AI is dominated by science fiction tropes, the authors suggest that Jorge Luis Borges’s work provides more productive models for thinking through the entanglement of fiction and reality, inviting us to understand generative AI not as an oracle or an enemy, but as a “fiction machine.”



Borges, however, is not alone in offering such conceptual tools.

The year 2026 also marks a number of important anniversaries for contemporary literature, namely those of the passing of three of the most relevant and appreciated writers of the 20th century, including Borges (1899–1986), as well as Stanisław Lem (1921–2006) and Umberto Eco (1932–2016). The conceptual focus of this panel, however, is far from coincidental, since all three authors are well known for their exploration of human knowledge and its limits, the speculative depth of their writing, as well as their love for literary apocrypha, and their sustained engagement with the problem of interpretation itself. While the genres and forms of writing in which each writer excelled may vary (from Borges's short stories to Eco's lengthy novels and academic essays and Lem's classic works of science fiction), they all share a number of interests and motifs, focusing on humankind's understanding of reality (or lack thereof), the labyrinthine nature of the world and of human knowledge, and the complex relationship between fact and fiction, with reviews of imaginary books serving as a means for both erudite literary games and weighty intellectual speculation. All of these themes and issues appear particularly relevant today, in a world where truth appears more and more fleeting and subjective, while our understanding of reality has to face an increasing number of challenges, from misinformation and political propaganda to the ubiquitousness of social media and the rise of artificial intelligence. Works such as Borges's *Fictions* or *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Lem's *Solaris* or *Imaginary Magnitude*, and Eco's *The Name of the Rose* or *Foucault's Pendulum*, then, can provide us with the mental imagery and intellectual tools to face the many complexities, contradictions and epistemological crises of the 21st century.

We invite scholars to contribute papers dealing with Borges, Lem, and Eco's literary and philosophical legacy in the present world. While a comparative analysis of all three writers' works is planned as a prominent feature of the panel, contributions on single authors are also welcome, as well as reflections on other authors who engage in similar literary-philosophical discussions, providing us with ideas and imageries that allow us to better conceptualize and understand our contemporary reality.

Some of the **possible topics** and research paths are listed below:

- “Influences” and dialogues between Borges, Lem, and Eco (and other writers).
- Mental imagery and abstract thinking in literature: critical reflection and imaginative interpretations of the past, the present and the future. Including, but not limited to: Borges, Lem, and Eco vs. conventional dystopian/utopian imageries.
- Crisis of knowledge? The limits of human comprehension and epistemological humility in Borges, Lem, Eco and others.
- Literary reflections on knowledge systems and paradoxes, from philosophy to intellectual games and conspiracy theories.
- Reading as cognition: Borges, Lem, Eco and other literary models of sense-making.
- Literature and the aesthetics and implications of information overload.
- Books, Encyclopedias, Libraries, and other Information Networks in literature.
- Literary metaphysics? Reality and truth, facts and fictions in Borges, Lem, and Eco.
- Semiotics, information, entropy, and speculation: the paradox of meaning and incomprehensibility, order and chaos in literature, philosophy, and the sciences.
- Minor genres and major ethical and philosophical questions: vindication of crime fiction, the fantastic and science fiction (such as in Borges, Lem, and Eco)



- Post-truth and postnormal epistemologies in narrative and fiction (literature of uncertainty, facing ignorance).
- The ethics of interpretation in times of misinformation and algorithmic mediation.
- Encountering radical otherness and other intelligences.
- Ludic seriousness: from Aristotle's lost book on comedy (Eco), through Borges's "heresies" to Lem's paradoxes of space travel, and beyond...

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