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Borges and Popular Culture

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Abstract

The 'greatness' of Jorge Luis Borges is something of an invention of the 1960s and after, based on the reception, often through translation, of a relatively small body of work from the 1940s (most notably the stories collected in *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* [1944 and 1949]). It was in this decade that 'Borges' was created: the cosmopolitan, erudite, philosophical but ingeniously playful weaver of cerebral, labyrinthine, and slippery narrative puzzles. This version of Borges is hugely reductive, as there is a strongly referential dimension to his short fiction. This interest in reality rather than fiction and in the local as well as the cosmopolitan paves the way for an understanding of Borges's deeply felt connection with what one might call popular culture. The focus of much of the author's life and work is the popular or even the vulgar: the gaucho code; the exploits of Buenos Aires hoodlums; pirates, cowboys and gangsters; detective stories and other genre works; classical Hollywood movies; tangos; and so forth. This essay explores the notion of the *orilla* to investigate the ways Borges's literary and other outputs constantly straddle opposing impulses: the rural and the urban, the local and the universal, the abstract and the referential, the 'high' and the 'low', the traditional and the modern.

KEYWORDS: Jorge Luis Borges; *orilla*; Buenos Aires; Argentina; popular culture

Resumen

La ‘grandeza’ de Jorge Luis Borges es, en cierto sentido, una invención de los años sesenta y después, basada en la recepción, a menudo por traducciones, de un corpus de trabajo relativamente pequeño de los años cuarenta (más notablemente los cuentos recogidos en Ficciones y El Aleph [1944 y 1949]). En esta década, ‘Borges’ fue creado: el tejedor cosmopolita, erudito, filosófico, pero ingeniosamente lúdico de rompecabezas narrativos cerebrales, laberínticos y escurridizos. Esta versión de Borges es inmensamente reductiva, ya que hay un elemento fuertemente referencial en sus cuentos. Este interés en la realidad en vez de la ficción y en lo local además de lo cosmopolita abre el camino a entender la conexión profunda que siente Borges con lo que se podría llamar la cultura popular. El enfoque de una gran parte de la vida y obra del autor es lo popular o hasta lo ordinario: el código del gaucho; las hazañas de rufianes y matones porteños; los piratas, los cowboys y los gánsteres; los relatos de detectives y otras obras de género; las películas clásicas de Hollywood; el tango: etcétera. Este estudio explora la noción de la orilla para investigar los modos en que las diversas realizaciones de Borges se extienden constantemente por impulsiones opuestas: lo rural y lo urbano; lo local y lo universal; lo abstracto y lo referencial; la cultura ‘alta’ y la cultura ‘baja’; lo tradicional y lo moderno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Jorge Luis Borges; orilla; Buenos Aires; Argentina; cultura popular

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Sacrilegious as it may sound, the ‘greatness’ of Jorge Luis Borges is something of an invention of the 1960s and after, based on the reception, often through translation, of a relatively small body of work from the 1940s (most notably the stories collected in *Fictions* and *The Aleph* [1944 and 1949]²). Now his works came out in English and other languages, he won a string of high-profile international prizes, he enjoyed a series of honours and invitations to speak at prestigious world universities and cultural gatherings, and he was profiled in a range of media outlets. It was in this decade that ‘Borges’ was created: the cosmopolitan, erudite, philosophical but ingeniously playful weaver of cerebral, labyrinthine and slippery narrative puzzles. This inevitably involved a degree of perceived de-latinization of the Argentine writer. In the previous decade, the 1950s, the French critic Roger Caillois translated *The Aleph* as *Labyrinthes* (a title that was to become deeply associated outside of Latin America with Borges’s fiction) and reinforced the sense of intellectual abstraction in his work by removing certain overly ‘Argentine’ stories from collections published in France. As Jason Wilson has pointed out, Caillois’s promotion of the author in Europe ‘was responsible for making Borges far more cosmopolitan than he really was’ and set in motion the fabrication of the reputation alluded to above (Wilson 2006, 122–123).

¹ A version of this article was also published in Williamson 2013. Cambridge University Press has kindly granted permission for the present version to be published in the *Hispanic Research Journal*. English versions of titles and quotations are used throughout.

² Unless otherwise stated, references to individual collections of stories and collections of poetry are taken from *Collected Fictions* (1999a) and *Selected Poems* (1999b) respectively. Individual collections mentioned in the text are listed in the Bibliography after the aforementioned titles.

Herein perhaps lie the roots of the tendency to reject Borges in his native Argentina, which gathered momentum (not without some justification, it must be admitted) in the 1970s, as an out-of-touch reactionary disconnected from the social and political realities of his native land and of the general trend in late twentieth-century Latin American criticism to dismiss him and the New Narrative he was often thought to have (at least in part) fathered as Eurocentric. ‘Borges’, in short, was projected as a high-cultural elitist.

This version of Borges is, of course, absurdly reductive. Critics like Daniel Balderston (1993) and Beatriz Sarlo (1993), amongst others, comprehensively punctured this myth in the early 1990s, drawing attention to the intensely referential nature of his work in historical terms and bringing out its engagement with real and imagined notions of Southern Cone identity. This apparent interest in reality rather than fiction and in the local as well as the cosmopolitan paves the way for an understanding of Borges’s deeply felt connection with what one might call popular culture. After all, if Borges nods constantly to the likes of Heraclitus, Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and Dante, he equally (and probably more so) acknowledges his core debt to a gallery of really remarkably second-division figures such as Carlyle, Collins, Chesterton, Kipling, Stevenson or Wells — not to mention a host of minor Hispanic writers and thinkers. The philosophical ideas in Borges’s work are not actually always that challenging and their elaboration is hugely repetitious throughout his career. He may have anticipated the notion of the ‘death of the author’ and the key thrusts of early literary theory that came to prominence in Europe and the USA in and around the 1970s and 80s (as well as the early manifestations of postmodernism around the 1980s and 90s), but the questioning of the nature of reality and realism, the re-positing of the relationship between reader and author, and the conceit of a story like ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote’ are, once grasped, fairly banal propositions. It is

revealing but not at all surprising, then, to notice that the focus of much of Borges's life and work is the popular or even the vulgar: the gaucho code; the exploits of Buenos Aires hoodlums; pirates, cowboys and gangsters; detective stories and other genre works; classical Hollywood movies; tangos; and so forth.

Of course, the notion of 'popular culture' is a problematic one. There have been huge debates in Latin Americanist criticism about the idea of the 'popular' and its relation to the idea of 'mass culture', usually explicitly ideologically driven and situated somewhere along the (clear or muddy, according to perspective) border between — roughly speaking — the indigenous, the folkloric and the proletarian on the one hand and the middle-class and the foreign (especially US) dominated mass media on the other.³ It is not the aim here to reheat those now tedious and often pedantic debates. However, it is obvious that Borges's engagement with what is nowadays called popular culture is very selective. There is little about football or other sports, for example, in his work, the disdain for mass movements is palpable (often in the form of a virulent anti-Peronism), and the attitudes to the folkloric or displays of earthy sexuality are distinctly ambiguous. Yet this ambiguity is crucial. The distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture is really a false one, and the categories are increasingly seen as porous. Not many who indulge the pleasures of the intellect conscientiously avoid those of identification, emotion or the flesh. Most of us are able to segue comfortably from academic study or a night at the opera to a TV quiz show or a soccer match. And much literature and cultural production straddles or fuses both poles of the equation anyway. One would be hard pressed to claim that Don Quixote was not 'high' or not 'popular', just as one would struggle to define Hitchcock or Orson Welles as categorically of one or the other. Indeed, it is my view that it is precisely in this undecidability

³ For a taste of some of these debates, see, for example, two contrasting books: Rowe and Schelling (1991) and Swanson (1995).

that the appeal of Borges (as a writer of literature) lies. He is tantalizingly and provocatively ‘in-between’, or, as Sarlo would put it ‘on the edge’, in the shady yet unspeakably alluring territory of the orillas.

The orillas is both a literal and imagined or conceptual space in Borges. It refers to the edge of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century, the frontier between the city and the pampa, the open countryside. By the 1920s Buenos Aires had been and was still being transformed by modernization, fuelled to a large extent by immigration (especially from Europe). The sometimes romanticized rural past of nomadic gauchos and vast open spaces was being overtaken by the reality of modernity — a kind of complex and uncertain culmination of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s postulation of the clash between ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’ in which modernity is both a triumph of progress and a loss of tradition.⁴ The city limits or suburbios were characterized by Borges as streets without pavements or sidewalks on the other side (the famous ‘calle sin vereda de enfrente’), that is facing the grasslands of the interior. Instead of the gaucho, here one would find his urban successor, the figure of the *compadrito*,⁵ a sort of flashy wiseguy whose toughness and prowess with a knife became the stuff of legend. Legend is both an appropriate and inappropriate term. Base, tawdry creatures were to some degree glorified in tangos and in Borges’s own works. Moreover, they were figures of the imagination as much as reality, if not quite vanished then probably largely subsumed into everyday urban life by the time they were being written about. On top of this, Borges’s fascination with these men lies alongside his tendency towards *criollismo*, an admiration for the values associated with a line of longstanding Argentine families untainted by immigrant blood. The identity of the *compadrito* is in reality fractured along these lines of purity and contamination, while the supposedly *criollo*

⁴ See Sarmiento’s seminal 1845 text, *Facundo*, subtitled *Civilization and Barbarism* (Sarmiento, 1998). For more on the Civilization-versus-Barbarism ethic, see Swanson (2003).

⁵ *Compadrito* is the diminutive form of *compadre*, the latter meaning something like ‘buddy’ or ‘one of the lads’.

rural past is as threatening as it is seductive. And the chubbyish sedentary man of letters, Borges, is about as far away from both as it is possible for an admirer to get. This mixedness is equally reflected in the cultural conflicts of the 1920s and 30s in Buenos Aires. The key fault line in these culture wars is often presented synecdochically in terms of a clash between the literary posh old Argentines of the Martín Fierro group (to which Borges technically belonged) and the immigrant-tainted leftist orientation of the Boedo group, this rivalry usually grafted onto a version of the tension between the artistic avant garde or vanguardia and a species of social realism. Again, the picture is much more diffuse. The cultural history of 1920s and 30s Buenos Aires is really about the intersections or hybridities between these seeming opposites. Indeed, Borges's own affected criollismo was tempered by his attraction to the underworld of the slums and their lurid inhabitants, while his championing (initially at least) of literary experimentation and, later and more dilutedly, literariness was matched by a fascination with tradition, the popular and economy or simplicity of expression. As the writer of the orillas, Borges did invent a sort of new cultural nationalist myth for Argentina, but one which was far from straightforward, combining as it did a kind of deep populism with a sort of nervous patrician distance.

Two important early manifestations of Borges's fascination with the Buenos Aires subculture are his 'biography' of Evaristo Carriego (1930 [1984]) and his first book of 'stories', *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935). Carriego ([1883-1912], again a minor figure who would probably be largely forgotten were it not for the Borges connection) was a dissolute poet who fancied himself a pal of the compadritos and the toughest of them, the guapos; he even got somewhat close to the notorious Palermo godfather Don Nicolás Paredes (whom Borges would later get to know himself while researching his book). A very young Borges was actually initially

attracted to Carriego by his flamboyant recital of poetry (cultural mixture once more), but soon became taken by his association with the shady local underworld.⁶ Indeed the first chapter of Evaristo Carriego is a rather romanticized contextualization of the poet, concentrating on the history of the old neighbourhood of Palermo and the tales of *compadritos* and *cuchilleros* (knife-fighters). Yet Borges's prologue to the 1955 edition of the biography brings out the imaginary dimension of this history:

For years I believed I had grown up in a suburb of Buenos Aires, a suburb of dangerous streets and showy sunsets. The truth is that I grew up in a garden, behind a fence of iron palings, and in a library of endless English books. [...] What was going on, meanwhile, on the other side of the iron palings? What everyday lives were fulfilling their violent destinies only a few steps away from me in some unsavoury saloon or ominous vacant lot? What was Palermo like then [...]? (Borges 1984, 33)

The biography, then, even in the chapter on Carriego's own life, is something of a fantasy. The author in fact characterizes the book as 'less documentary than imaginative' (Borges 1984, 34). Two chapters focus on Carriego's collections of poems, *Heretic Masses* and the *The Neighbourhood's Song*, the titles of which suggest extolling the pleasures of a sinful excursion into the *arrabales* or suburbs on the fringes of the city (Carriego, 1913). These sections are hazy reflections rather than analyses *stricto sensu* and often descend into a species of imagined memories of the pseudo-legendary deeds of a group of men whose exploits can really only be known second hand. Carriego is lionized as 'the first observer of our poorer neighborhoods', but

⁶ Edwin Williamson, in his remarkably comprehensive and winningly interpretative biography of Borges, offers a fine sketch of their relationship and its psychological significance (Williamson 2004).

as such is both ‘the discoverer’ and ‘the inventor’ (Borges 1984, 105). The implication is that he (and Borges) are creating a myth as much as recreating a reality. But this myth has meaning. Borges’s embracing of Carriego also has much to do with his and his group’s rejection of modernismo, particularly as embodied in Argentina’s once fabled late modernista poet Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938).⁷ Though Lugones was a right-wing polemicist, modernismo was associated in the minds of many with empty aestheticism. Thus, Carriego comes to embody a strain of earthy authenticity, yet one still channeled via poetic imagination. What Borges seemed to see in him was the chance to renovate criollismo by creating a new poetics of the city rather than one of rural tradition, a modern myth for the new Argentina based not just on the land and its lost gaucho inhabitants but in the concept of the orillas. Though Borges sees himself and Carriego as breaking with a conventional fad for picturesque costumbrismo or local colour, he seeks to use the myth of the barrio or neighbourhood to fabricate a new kind of cultural nationalism which is not backward-looking but keen to modernity. The project is impossibly flawed, but poetically quite compelling.

Borges’s own seminal contribution to the legend of the compadrito would be his first real short story published in a book, ‘Man on Pink Corner’ from *A Universal History of Iniquity*. However, the bulk of the stories in this collection are not centred principally on Argentina and are not really stories in the usual sense. They are basically a series of short riffs on established biographical accounts (the sources are given in the text) of a series of lowlifes: hoodlums, conmen, cowboys, pirates and so forth. The link to the Palermo guapos, though, is most definitely there. Even in the stories about North American rogues, the narrative voice keeps

⁷ Modernismo was a fineseccular literary movement whose poetry had its roots in French Symbolism and Parnassianism and was commonly connected with the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’. Lugones was more of a transitional figure, his sense of irony and mortality prefiguring the rise of the avant garde. Borges’s attitude to Lugones was, in reality, shifting and ambiguous. The cultural picture in the Buenos Aires of the 1920s and 1930s was complicated and often characterized by contradiction.

situating events in relation to Latin America. The first piece, about the Mississippi horse-thief and trafficker in falsely emancipated Negro slaves, Lazarus Morell, begins with a digression on the Dominican priest, Bishop of Chiapas, and champion of the indigenous natives of the Spanish Crown's so-called 'New World', Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566). The second entry, on the famous nineteenth-century legal case of the Tichborne claimant, begins with an allusion to his assumed name on the streets of Santiago de Chile and Valparaíso, Tom Castro. Most strikingly, the account of New York gang leader Monk Eastman starts with a direct anticipatory comparison with a duel to the death between two knife-wielding *compadritos*, a scenario that is said to encapsulate 'the story of the Argentine underworld' (Borges 1999a, 25). Yet Eastman, like some of the other rogues featured in the book, is ultimately diminished. After a staggeringly violent career in which he once led a gang of twelve hundred men, he is caught by the police, packed off to Sing Sing for ten years, and dies anonymously and unexplainedly (here at least) in a downtown street, his inert body being sniffed over by an uncaring cat. Lazarus Morell, meantime, 'contrary to all poetic justice', is not swallowed up by 'the river of his crimes' but dies, prosaically, 'of pulmonary congestion in the hospital at Natchez' (Borges 1999a, 12). And Billy the Kid, in the story 'The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan', after a slow and undignified death, is said to have 'that unimportant sort of look that dead men generally have' — the degradation completed by the dressing and making up of his corpse to be 'exhibited to horror and mockery' in a shop window (Borges 1999a, 34). There is a definite uneasiness, then, about the aggrandizement of scoundrels and even a strong hint of the extreme epistemological and ontological scepticism of some of Borges's fiction of later decades. For example, in reference to a series of Monk Eastman's multiple aliases, the comment is made that: 'Those shifting "dodges"

... fail to include the man's true name — if we allow ourselves to believe that there is such a thing as “a man's true name” (Borges 1999a, 26).

Though more of an obviously Argentine atmosphere piece about guapos and the esquinas or street-corner bars they used to frequent, there are similar existential undertones in ‘Man on Pink Corner’ as well as a similarly deflationary technique. While the story does not really recreate the local slang, lunfardo, it does capture the cadences of barrio speech and is told by a young narrator purportedly directly to a gentleman called ‘Borges’. A Northside tough known as the Yardmaster, Francisco Real, bursts into a bar outside his territory and challenges the guapo Rosendo Juárez (alias the Sticker and described as one of Don Nicolás Paredes's men) to a knife fight. Juárez refuses to fight and his disgusted moll, La Lujanera, goes off instead with the interloper. Later that night Real is stabbed to death by a stranger. The trick ending of this clever little tale implies that the apparently green narrator is not just an onlooker but the probable killer, and the story ends with him heading to the bed of la Lujanera.⁸ The celebration of courage is clearly not as straightforward as some proponents of Borges as admirer of tough guys might like to think. The story is a re-working of two earlier versions (‘Men Fought’ and ‘Legend of a Crime’), but as Donald L. Shaw has pointed out the revisions actually replace a duel for the sake of it with a refusal to indulge a violent whim — or could it be mere cowardice? — and a rather sordid killing motivated by petty jealousy (Shaw 1992, 22–28). (An equally downbeat account is offered from the Sticker's perspective in ‘The Story from Rosendo Juárez’ in a much later story from *Brodie's Report* [1970].) And, as with some of the cases from *A Universal History of*

⁸ There may be an element of compensatory sexual fantasy here, linking masculinity to virility. By all accounts, Borges was sexually timid and traumatized by an early encounter with a prostitute. Williamson (2004) offers the most dogged exploration of this theme, emphasizing in particular the author's possible obsessive love for Norah Lange (1905–1972).

Iniquity, the macho fighter is much deflated in death. As a bystander comments: ‘Man thought so highly of himself, and all he’s good for now is to draw flies’ (Borges 1999a, 51).

That the tension between heroic fantasy and grubby reality is so enmeshed in this tale is perhaps explained by its roots. Though he did meet people like Paredes, Borges’s experience of the underworld is largely through other sources, often cultural products like stories, poems or songs. Behind much of Borges’s mythology of the *arrabales* lies a fascination with *gauchos* and tango. The *compadrito* or *guapo* is really a semi-urban version of the rural cowboy or *gaucho*, a figure equally famed for his manliness and prowess with a knife. Yet by the 1930s, the *gaucho* was most definitely a phenomenon of the past, now only truly alive in any pure sense in literature and the public imagination (and Borges’s fictional *compadritos* were often also a dying or even dead breed by the time he was writing about them — certainly no longer a part of an essentially Argentine identity but increasingly characterized by immigrant Italian blood). Many of Borges’s stories from the 1940s onwards feature *gauchos* and references to (and even characters and episodes from) the great national literary epic on this theme, *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (by José Hernández, 1872 and 1879). The point is that the sources are literary rather than real. Juan Dahlmann, the protagonist of Borges’s most famous story on this theme, ‘The South’, from *Fictions*, is a clear echo of the author: a bookish, sedentary city-dweller with a heroic Argentine family line and a penchant for a cultivated *criollismo*. His journey to the south is presented as a journey deep into Argentina’s rural past, but Dahlmann is compelled to recognize that ‘his direct knowledge of the country was considerably inferior to his nostalgic, literary knowledge’ (Borges 1999a, 177). Indeed when he enters the dangerous store-cum-bar where he will be challenged to a duel to the death by a local and egged on by an old *gaucho* who ‘seemed to be outside time’ (Borges 1999a, 178), he is rather affectedly struck by its resemblance to an engraving from an

old edition of *Paul et Virginie*!⁹ His romanticized (fundamentally literary) vision of the past, then, in which he appears to imagine in his mind a dramatic and deeply ‘Argentine’ death in a knife fight, is really masking a crude history of mindless violence.

Borges himself was clearly something of a fantasist about the ideal of gaucho heroism and dedicated himself on occasion to co-editing anthologies of gauchesque poetry (poetry celebrating the gaucho tradition but not written by gauchos themselves). Yet his criollista impulses often suggest a sense of the feared barbarism of the countryside and its role in the nation’s past, sometimes linked to more contemporary concerns about the direction of a modern urbanized Argentine society. A brief glance at one of his more renowned poems illustrates this tension. ‘Conjectural Poem’, from *The Self and the Other* (1964), speculates on the final thoughts of Borges’s ancestor Francisco Narciso de Laprida, a major figure in the Independence movement who died violently in 1829 at the hands of a band of gauchos operating under a traditional caudillo (a kind of rural boss or mob leader), José Félix Aldao (1785–1845). Laprida, ‘who studied law and the civil canon’, sees himself as a force for civilization, but:

... victory goes to the others,
to the barbarians. The gauchos win. (Borges 1999b, 159)

Nonetheless, as the enemy dagger slides into his throat, he realizes that:

... At last I come face to face
with my destiny as a South American. (Borges 1999b, 159)

⁹ *Paul et Virginie* is a novel by Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1787). A story about two children growing up far away from France on the island which is now known as Mauritius, the book prompted the production of a whole series of visual illustrations.

In other words, Laprida realizes that his life's achievement actually lies in the exemplary sacrifice of dying at the hands of Latin American barbarism and the lesson this teaches to future generations. What is perhaps most interesting though is that the poem, at its end, is very specifically dated 1943.¹⁰ This was the year in which power was seized in Argentina by a fascistic nationalist military junta, which modelled itself on the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793–1877), the embodiment of barbarism for liberal thinkers from Sarmiento onwards. This was a prelude to the rise to power of Juan Perón (1895–1974) and the rise of Peronism as a popular urban mass movement. Borges had 'Conjectural Poem' read out in Montevideo, where he was lecturing at the University, just days after orchestrated demonstrations by the unions and Eva Duarte's (later Perón) *descamisados* or 'shirtless ones' (the urban poor of the capital) in October 1945, events that formed the platform for Perón's election to President in February 1946.¹¹ Far from celebrating the culture of the masses, Borges here seems to see the popular classes as a decidedly menacing rabble prone to manipulation and mobilization. By implication too, the now fading *criollo* class to which he sees himself as belonging is the last bastion of European-influenced and Enlightenment-driven liberalism — a value system based on the taming of the near innate barbarism of the ordinary people by a process of civic education from a privileged, civilized elite.

Borges's liminal world of the *orilla*, then, contains all the inevitable contradictions of what is essentially a fabrication of the human imagination. When the young narrator swaggers out of the bar on 'Pink Corner' in the story from the 1930s, he sees what look like hardwood trees (*ñandubay*) on a hill, though they are really posts tied together by wire. The rural *gaucho*

¹⁰ This date is not included in the edition cited here.

¹¹ See Williamson 2004, 286.

past and the urban present are merging here in a landscape that is both real and imaginary. He had also earlier seen lying outside some cheap guitars that had been strummed near the start of the story. This may evoke memories of the fireside songs of the gauchos, but inside the bar the customers are dancing to the tunes of tangos and their prototypes, milongas — a relatively new hybrid form of song and music of the suburbios danced suggestively in and on esquinas (street corners or taverns). The tango is just as much a source of Borges's versions of popular culture as is gauchesque literature and is generally associated by him with the evocation of the exploits of the guapos. Borges is really interested in milongas or early, traditional forms of tango, not the sophisticated dance or jazz-influenced musical style into which it would later morph. Indeed, Borges's biographers often point out his lack of any musical sensibility, which suggests that what matters to him is what the tango represents as much as what it is. Some of his own milongas (actually poems to which the reader is asked to imagine the musical accompaniment) are collected in *For Six Strings* (1965 [Borges 1986]). Robert Folger has described these milongas as evoking 'a Homeric past from the point of view of a lyric subject that glorifies gauchos, soldiers and compadritos' (2001, 414). The title of the opening poem, 'Where Can They Have Gone?', sums up this cod nostalgic tone and echoes a much better poem from *The Self and the Other*, entitled, 'The tango'.¹² This poem presents itself as 'an elegy' that asks 'of those who are no more': 'Where can they be?' Recalling the motiveless machismo of guapo knife-fighters, the poem complains that 'a mythology of daggers' has today been replaced by the sordid realities of crime reports. Yet these distant 'heroes' somehow survive:

Today, beyond time and fateful

death, those dead men live on in the tango.

¹² The translations of this poem are my own. For the original, see Borges 1979, 209–211.

They are in the music, in the strings
of the obstinate, labouring guitar,
which insinuates into a spirited milonga
the celebration of innocence and courage.

The tango transcends time and allows the reader the sensation of effectively experiencing the heroics of the *compadrito*:

... The tango creates a hazy
unreal past which is in some sense true,
the impossible memory of having died
fighting on a street corner in the slums.

This perhaps gets close to the crux of Borges's relationship with the popular. His tales of the *compadritos* are the compensatory fantasies of an everyday modern man: the pleasure, as in an adventure film, lies in the momentary identification of the reader or viewer with a dramatic or exciting life that he (or maybe she) will never live in reality. The irony is that, in one of his supplementary essays on the tango included in the 1955 edition of Evaristo Carriego, he had already complained that the myths fostered by certain tangos (and his own earlier readings of them) were already revealing 'a clear symptom of certain nationalistic heresies that later swept the world' (Borges 1984, 146). The myth was too strong for Borges, though, and he continued to rework tangos, even collaborating in 1965 with the very non-traditional modernist tango

composer Astor Piazzola (1921–1992). The ensuing recording contained a suite called ‘Man on Pink Corner’: Borges’s work was beginning to exist as much ‘outside time’, it seems, as the old gaucho from ‘The South’.

Gauchos and lowlife city slickers, however, are probably not what international readers of the cosmopolitan ‘Borges’ promoted abroad from the 1960s would associate with the author. If such readers were to see a link with popular culture, it would probably be with the detective story and his rather cerebral reinvention of the genre. Borges is clearly an admirer of the genre per se. Detective fiction (imported and home grown) has a very long (and continuing) tradition in Argentina. Borges himself reviewed vast numbers of detective novels and, together with his friend and collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914–1999), founded and directed a crime series called *El Séptimo Círculo* (The Seventh Circle) which published 366 titles between 1945 and 1983 (120 chosen by the friends during their stewardship of the collection between 1945 and 1955) (Brescia 2000, 146). The pair defended such popular fare by claiming that ‘some critics deny the detective genre the status it deserves simply because it does not enjoy the prestige of being tedious’ (Lafforgue and Rivera 1996, 250 [my translation]). The appeal of the detective story for Borges is in part its classical construction, that ‘it is safeguarding order in an era of disorder’ (Borges 2000, 499). Those readers who characterize Borges as a ‘difficult’ high modernist might do well to remember this: his stories, while in many ways complex, are usually linguistically straightforward and formally very tightly constructed. Even so, Borges does seem to favour the analytic detective, distanced and detached, who eschews ‘physical risk’ and, in a distinctly non-realist way, prefers ‘the fact of a mystery that is solved by the intellect, by an intellectual operation’ (Borges 2000, 112, 495). The model for this detective is, of course, C. Auguste Dupin, the protagonist of what is widely regarded as the first ever detective story, Edgar

Allan Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) (Poe 2005). The potential for the cerebral exploitation of Poe's detective is reflected in the many well-known theoretical analyses of 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) (Poe 2005) by the likes of the two Jacques (Lacan and Derrida) and Barbara Johnson, as well as in the mercilessly dense study of Poe and Borges by John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution* (1994). Borges's most famous detective story, 'Death and the Compass' (from *Fictions*) features the ace gentleman-amateur sleuth Erik Lönnrot, 'who thought of himself as a reasoning machine, an Auguste Dupin'. However, the sentence continues: 'but there was something of the adventurer in him, even something of the gambler' (Borges 1999a, 147). Borges's detective or spy stories do not, of course, always avoid the threat of physical risk and, in any case, the analytic detective usually gets his comeuppance. This is the case here, where Lönnrot's Sherlock Holmes-like rationality actually leads him into an elaborately laid trap plotted by his arch enemy Red Scharlach. The story ends with the undermining of the analytical explanation of the mystery and the murder of the detective. It is not the intention here to add to the leagues of print already expended on this story. Suffice it to mention once more the extreme ambiguity of Borges's fiction, his utterances on literature and culture and, of course, his relationship to the popular.

Borges also produced crime stories that were presented more directly as collections of detective fiction rather than being smuggled, like 'Death and the Compass', into a series of metaphysical 'ficciones' — though ambiguity is still rife in such tales. Together with Bioy Casares, he created the detective Isidro Parodi, who appeared most famously in *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi* (1942 [Borges and Bioy Casares 1981]) written under the pseudonym of H. (Honorio) Bustos Domecq (the characters from these stories would reappear in 1946 in the novella *Un modelo para la muerte* [A Model for Death], written by the pair under the nom de

plume of B. [Benito] Suárez Lynch)¹³ (Borges and Bioy Casares 1970). The detective figure, unsurprisingly, is not straightforward at all. As his surname implies, he is a parody, and his character and adventures grew out of Borges's and Bioy's regular evenings of chatting and joking in the latter's home. Parodi, a former barber from Barracas in the Southside of Buenos Aires, languishes in the city penitentiary having been framed for the gang murder of an Italian butcher felled by a blow from a seltzer bottle. 'Now in his forties, sententious and fat' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 18–19), he sits in his prison room and solves, with thought alone, the absurd mysteries told to him by a cavalcade of eccentric visitors to the now celebrated Cell Number 273. In a sense, as the spoof introduction to the Six Problems suggests, 'Parodi's lack of mobility is the symbol and epitome of intellectuality' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 12), though his circumstances are rather less salubrious than those of his prototype, Auguste Dupin, who cracks his cases from his gentleman's quarters armchair in the comfort of Paris's Faubourg St. Germain. Nods to the classic detective genre abound. For example, the stolen letters in 'The God of the Bulls' or the location of the missing precious stone right before everyone's eyes in 'the one place ... beyond suspicion' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 157) in 'Tai An's Long Search' are clear allusions to 'The Purloined Letter', while the revelation in 'The Nights of Goliadkin' that the crime on the train was masterminded by a whole group of travellers using false identities is an unambiguous echo of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Yet the idea of a jailbird hairdresser detective is surely a joke, and the book's (again, spoof) afterword actually states that, in these stories, Bustos Domecq 'attempts to combat the cold intellectualism in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Ottolenghi etc., have immersed this genre' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 160). The stories are, in fact, exaggeratedly colourful and linguistically playful, offering the reader a gallery of rogues who unintentionally effect a pretty

¹³ The double-barrelled surnames are taken from the names of ancestors of Borges and Bioy Casares.

wide-ranging satire on contemporary Argentina¹⁴ (though, more seriously, there is also something of an underlying pro-Allied subtext that was timely given the country's problematic technically neutral position during World War II). The resolution of the mysteries is really at the service of this humorous social satire, the apparently elaborate riddles all being reduced in the end to rather mundane examples of venal motivation. In the opening story, for instance, the baffling tale of a secret 'Druse' sect and their obsession with the signs of the zodiac turns out to be a prosaic case of embezzlement and arson (one red herring is an overheard discussion about books: rather than a literary debate, it transpires that it is an argument over a firm's fiddled accounts books!). And the comic style used to tell the mysteries is often largely a means of satire too: one randomly chosen example, from 'Free Will and the Commendatore', is the description of a meeting set up with murder victim Pumita as 'more rigged than a Rioja election' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 104–105). The satire is fairly good-humoured, however, and not much punishment or retribution is usually meted out to the perpetrators (such an outcome is specifically repudiated by Parodi [eg, Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 108, 158]). Indeed, Parodi's power as a character possibly lies in his unreal nature. Though his name and some other references might suggest immigrant roots, his values and comments (not to mention, in one of a number of echoes of Evaristo Carriego, his berating of Italians) link him, despite his humble background, to a species of Argentine tradition. It is through time in prison that Parodi 'had become an old established Argentine' (Borges and Bioy Casares 1981, 109), we are told in 'Tadeo Limardo's Victim'. The implication may be, as Cristina Parodi has already suggested¹⁵,

¹⁴ It is a commonplace of criticism of Latin American detective fiction to contend that a widespread lack of faith in social justice is what explains the tendency to subvert the classical form. There is certainly an element of this in Borges, but his manipulation of the genre lacks the more overtly ideological underpinning that characterizes a good deal of self-consciously radical detective fiction from the region. For more detail on this, see Swanson 2005.

¹⁵ Parodi 1998. The critic calculates that the barber was imprisoned in 1919 and that the first mystery must be set in 1933.

that the sleuth — confined to his cell — lives outside of time and inhabits another kind of orilla, therefore embodying a sort of ideal Borgesian Argentine identity aware of but relatively uncontaminated by the onward march of urban modernity.

One aspect of modernity (and, indeed, popular culture) that Borges does seem to embrace from early on is the cinema (and a feature of *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi* is that it is replete with references to the so-called seventh art). Borges and Bioy Casares collaborated on a number of screenplays, their first being about the Buenos Aires underworld, *Los orilleros* (*The Hoodlums*, 1955, released 1975). The detective genre also made its way into their films, most notably in Hugo Santiago's *Invasion* (1969), though the format disintegrates into a fantastic fable in which a Buenos Aires-like city is taken over completely by a powerful outside force. However, Santiago (1939–) and Bioy himself would later complain of Borges's over literary style and his penchant for monologues (Oubiña 2007, 141–142). This is an interesting position, given that Borges's career as a prolific film reviewer suggests a preference for westerns, gangster movies, and classical Hollywood cinema rather than the art-house variety. Borges appears to appreciate the formal simplicity of such movies and the very generic nature of studio system productions.¹⁶ This is reflected in his own writing of fiction, which, albeit often subversively, uses genres, employs strict narrative forms and even imitates the technique of cinematic montage (though José Eduardo González persuasively problematizes this latter view by associating montage with fragmentation in Borges [e.g. González 1998, 129 ff]). In his 1931 essay 'The Postulation of Reality', Borges emphasizes the importance of selectivity in reading, 'the conceptual simplification of complex states' (a foretaste here of the dilemma described in 'Funes, His Memory' from *Fictions*) and expresses his admiration for what he calls 'the

¹⁶ José Eduardo González has an excellent chapter on Borges and the cinema in *Borges and the Politics of Form* (1998, 98–141), in which he explores, amongst many other things, the relationship between cinema and Borges's own narrative style in terms echoed here.

cinematographic novels' of director Josef von Sternberg (1894–1969), which are 'made up of significant moments' (Borges 2000, 61, 63). This cinematic style is probably most transparent in the early stories of *A Universal History of Iniquity*. What feels like a cut to the cat next to the protagonist's dead body in the final scene of 'Monk Eastman, Purveyor of Iniquities' is like a piece of classical editing for effect, while the opening of 'The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan' offers the reader-cum-viewer a pair of 'image(s)' (Borges 1999a, 31) in which the narrative cuts from an establishing shot of the arid Arizona landscape to one of Billy the Kid, the rider seated on his horse. But the technique is also present in the more technically complex mature stories: one has but to think, for instance, of the cuts, as in a montage sequence, that characterize the more dramatic moments of a tale like 'The Garden of Forking Paths' from *Fictions* or 'Emma Zunz' from *The Aleph*.

However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Borges's relation to cinema, particularly for an author so repeatedly associated with ideas like 'the death of the author' and intertextuality or with the function of the reader in recreating new versions of prior texts, is the question of his role in it, his 'influence' on it. There have been a number of Argentine and other Latin American adaptations of Borges's stories, though none of them especially notable. The best-received high-cultural translation to the screen is Bernardo Bertolucci's self-conscious political meditation on the fluidity of identity, *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970), based on 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' from *Fictions*. However, the most satisfying adaptation is, without doubt, Alex Cox's garish punk fantasy from 1992, *Death and the Compass*. Steeped in the imagery of 1980s pop culture (reinforced by a synthetic soundtrack by Pray for Rain), the movie, nonetheless, does not shirk complexity and shows considerable familiarity with Borges's literary universe. There are a series of clever embedded allusions to other stories (like 'The Garden of Forking Paths', 'Emma

Zunz', 'The House of Asterion' and 'The Aleph') and a cameo featuring a blind detective called Comandante Borges (played by Cox himself in a witty auteurist nod), whose actions are said to set in chain events that would come to envelop everyone — a fairly clear reference to Borges's concepts of interlinked destinies and intertextuality *avant la lettre*. The latter link is reinforced by the knowing use of the popular film motif of a spinning newspaper front page, coming to a halt to reveal a dramatic headline: in one case, the paper's title happens to be *The Postmoderna*. There are also plenty of examples of non-postmodern movies based on the life of Borges in which he appears as a character. None are particularly distinguished, though it is perhaps worth mentioning in passing, for its curiosity value, Javier Torre's *Un amor de Borges* (*A Love of Borges's* [my translation], 2000), inspired in part by the 1989 penetrating if uncomfortable memoirs of Estela Canto, the object of Borges's largely unrequited desire in the mid-1940s. More significant in cultural terms, though, are the less mimetic representations of Borges in film, such as Cox's tribute mentioned above. The most notorious homage is, perhaps, Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's dark, labyrinthine, swinging-sixties romp through identity crisis, *Performance* (made in 1968, but released in 1970), starring Mick Jagger and featuring various allusions to Borges, including a more-than-subliminal on-screen shot of him during a peculiar montage sequence. A cheekier insertion comes in Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1986 film *The Name of the Rose* (after, of course, Umberto Eco's splendid 1980 novel) in which the key to a very Borgesean murder mystery is revealed to lie with the blind old librarian, the venerable Jorge de Burgos! There is, moreover, almost certainly a surfeit of less clearly identifiable Borgesean connections in a whole range of popular as well as art-house movies. For example, Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002) echoes Borges's Monk Eastman story (the film's source is the one quoted by Borges as his, Herbert Asbury's 1928 book *The Gangs of New York*).

However, it is impossible to pin down a clearly identifiable connection. Nonetheless, while the adjectives ‘Borgesean’ or ‘Borgean’ have not yet become as decoupled from their original referent as terms like ‘quixotic’ or ‘Kafka-esque’, there can be little doubt that (as is obviously the case with the figure of Don Quixote) there is a chain of metonymic influence or association linking Borges or the Borgesean to anterior and posterior texts. Without necessarily wishing to suggest direct or consciously transferred influence, one can surely identify traces of Borges in a whole host of mainstream Hollywood movies. Could films like David Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995) or Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* from the same year, with their twist-endings revealing the villain’s secret scheme, really exist without ‘Death and the Compass’? Could even a TV movie (albeit one celebrated by film buffs) like Steven Spielberg’s first feature *Duel* (1971), with its story of a city man imperilled in an alluring yet terrifying landscape of the interior, complete with tense scene involving urban visitor and rural folk in a roadside diner, exist without ‘The South’?¹⁷

Such an intertextual understanding of cultural production would actually chime perfectly with Borges’s own poetic creed. In his ‘Ars Poetica’, from *The Maker* (1960), he casts a poem in the light of, presumably, Heraclitus’s river (always the same yet always different) and observes that poetry is ‘immortal and poor’ (Borges 1999b, 137). Originality is a form of reproduction, then, and identities and images repeat themselves endlessly throughout time and culture. ‘Borges’ continues to exist in culture in all sorts of seen and unseen ways and has even

¹⁷ A couple of examples of Borgesian allusions in film and television that have come to light since the completion of this essay serve to illustrate the ongoing and potentially infinite nature of such borrowings or interconnections. For example, Tom McCarthy’s screenplay for Johan Grimmonprez’s movie *Double Take*, released in the UK in 2010, is based on ‘August 25, 1983’ from *Shakespeare’s Memory* (1983): it echoes Borges’s fantasy of an encounter with his death-bed self in a story of Alfred Hitchcock’s visitation by his double on the set of *The Birds* in 1962. This hint of different possible temporal outcomes is also taken up in Episode 17 of Series 1 of the popular ABC TV show *Flashforward*, first broadcast also in 2010. The episode is entitled ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’. In its account of an elaborate trap laid for ethnically Chinese FBI agent Demetri Noh by arch enemy, supreme trickster and time-twister Dyson Frost it, calls to mind both the Borges story of the same name and, in the debate on possible future killings, the final encounter of Lönnrot and Scharlach in ‘Death and the Compass’.

penetrated the everyday life of the popular. At the end of 'Death and the Compass', Lönnrot asks Scharlach to employ an alternative labyrinth with which to snare him 'when you hunt me down in another avatar of our lives' (Borges 1999a, 156). One suspects that, in another incarnation, Borges might not be just the purveyor of puzzling literary-philosophical abstractions, but perhaps a man of popular pleasures and actions, that Borges might be not just one of an elite, but a man of the people, one of the boys. In another life, Borges would be a compadre.

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