

José Eduardo González
University of Nebraska

Borges and the Classical Hollywood Cinema¹

Although there are already a few articles written about the influence that Borges's interest in cinema had on his fictional work, this still remains a largely understudied area of his aesthetics, especially in comparison to the attention given by critics to Borges's use of other products of mass culture. It is widely accepted, for example, that many of his tales borrow the structure of the detective short story, but his appropriation of cinematic techniques is less known and often misunderstood. One of the problems with the existing studies on Borges and film is that the influence of the latter has always been analyzed in isolation from the emerging culture industry in Argentina. It is necessary to see film in his work as related to his interest in other elements of popular culture, such as the adventure tale and the detective fiction. It was not by chance that when Borges wrote his first collection of stories, *A Universal History of Infamy*, cinema was mentioned in the preface as a source of inspiration, alongside the names of Chesterton and Stevenson. Departing from previous studies on Borges's use of film, which traditionally focus on the influence of a specific technique (montage) or a film director (Von Sternberg), I will study the function of cinema within a general Borgesian strategy to erase the boundaries between high and low culture by appropriating modes of narrative organization from popular culture.

To a certain extent, Borges's interest in cinema was a reaction to the early attention that the introduction of new means of communications and the emergence of a culture industry received in Argentina. In the Argentina of the first decades of the century, large groups of people became immediately fascinated with the possibilities that new inventions such as radio and television offered. In *La imaginación técnica*, Beatriz Sarlo has shown how the introduction of the radio in the 1920s created a legion of followers who were initially attracted to the technical aspects of the medium (building, repairing, inventing), and it was only later in that decade that a different group emerged, one composed of people only interested in being listeners and for whom the radio represented simply a new form of entertainment. The creation of a radio audience was the result of the sudden availability of radios at a lower cost and of the establishment of new broadcasting stations. The story of the reception of film in Argentina was somewhat different. Unlike what happened with the radio, the higher prices of movie making and the small amount of technical information available

turned the great majority of those interested in films into mere *spectators* from the very beginning (Sarlo 109-28). The possibility or at least the illusion of intervening in the development of the technical means of film creation was never there; only a few inventors in Argentina tried to contribute to its development. From spectators, many moviegoers quickly moved to the category of *fans*. The great number of publications dedicated to cinema that appeared during the 1920s gives us an idea of the kind of attention the film industry was receiving from the general public. In 1919, *Imparcial Film*, the first magazine completely devoted to the film industry in Buenos Aires, appeared, and in the following years others soon began publication: *Cinema Chat* and *Hogar y cine* (both in 1920), *Argos Film* (1922), *Los héroes del cine* (1923), *Film Revista* (1924) (Sarlo 29). It was then under the impact of the early culture industry that Borges, as so many other modern subjects in the Argentina of the 1920s, became a movie fan.

Two aspects of Borges' aesthetics should be emphasized here because they will allow us to understand better the attraction that Borges felt for the products of the culture industry, especially film. The first one has to do with a way of structuring fiction that I will give the name of "geometrization" of narrative. The use of an excessive order or symmetry to shape the plot has always been recognized as one of the most distinctive characteristics of Borges's fiction. An important theoretical essay in which Borges explains this view of narrative structure is "Narrative Art and Magic." In this essay, Borges mentions that there are two ways in which one can establish connections among events in a fictional text: the realist and the "magical." The realist way consists in reproducing or mimicking the causality that one normally experiences in the world. The magical is the one that rules the novel of adventures: events are not connected because of any causative relation among them, but by means of the principle of "sympathy." By sympathy Borges means that events that occurred in different places and under different circumstances can be linked to one another through an indirect association, as in a resemblance in the way they took place (he calls this their "figure" or shape) or a previous and unimportant contact between two events. Borges gives the following example from Chesterton to illustrate his point:

Every episode in a painstaking piece of fiction prefigures something still to come. Thus, in one of Chesterton's phantasmagorias, a man suddenly shoves a stranger out of the road to save him from an oncoming motorcar, and this necessary but alarming violence foreshadows the first man's later act of declaring the other man insane so that he may not be hanged for murder.

(Reader 38)

Borges employs the same technique to write his short stories. Future events in Borges's stories are always foreshadowed by other, apparently insignificant, actions or elements within the text. For Borges, the literary text becomes an organically structured object in which textual elements echo one another in an apparently endless game of internal allusions: "[A narration] should be a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes and affinities" (Reader 38).

A second idea that led Borges to find similarities between literature and film is related to his view of the importance of tradition for the creation of new artistic works. Although his ideas about tradition can be found in many texts, it is in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" where he presents them most coherently. The essay's main theme is that Argentine writers should not limit themselves to work with local topics for the composition of their works but should consider the entire Western tradition as their own and feel free to use it. It may look as if Borges were really saying that no limits whatsoever should be imposed on a writer, as if he were arguing for total freedom of expression. The opposite, however, is true. Let us retrace his argument. In his search for the answer to the question of which tradition the Argentine writer should belong to, he rejects first the local tradition as having too narrow a scope and then the Spanish one because Argentines do not feel particularly close to Spanish culture. A last option, which he also discards, would be that Argentines have no tradition, that they are "alone." In rejecting the possibility that "in Argentina we are cut off from the past, that there has been something like a dissolution of continuity between us and Europe" (*Labyrinths* 177) and asserting that the tradition of the Argentine writer is the totality of Western culture, Borges is refusing to consider the idea that a writer could completely break away from tradition. This notion of a complete break with what came before was one of the main characteristics of Modernism and avant-garde movements, both of which regarded a violent break with the past as a necessary step to create an original work of art. In opposition to that view of literature, Borges is proposing that it is the existence of a tradition and the limits that tradition imposes on a writer that allow innovation to take place in the first place. Borges's argument is that Argentine writers, like Jewish or Irish artists, can use the Western tradition with freedom and create innovative works. In the Jewish and Irish traditions, the creation of unique works is not the result of having total freedom but of their coming from marginal cultures subordinated to the Western one. It was sufficient for Irish writers such as Shaw and Swift "to feel Irish, to feel different, in order to be innovators in English culture" (*Labyrinths* 184). They did not have to reject tradition to be able to change it. Likewise, the Jews "act within [Western] culture" (184), but feel free to modify it because it is not their main tradition. Borges grants Jewish, Irish, and Argentine writers the right to partial freedom, the right to a partial difference opposed to the absolute difference that, he argues, nationalist Argentines proclaim for themselves when they reject Western tradition.

Borges's views on the need for a "geometrical" narrative structure and his ideas about tradition were no doubt shaped by his discovery of cinema early in life. After spending part of his childhood in Europe, Borges returned to Argentina in 1921, where he soon started to attend movie houses with a frequency unusual among intellectuals in Buenos Aires at the time. In the Argentine intellectual climate of the 1920s, films were commonly despised as another manifestation of the emerging mass culture.² The young Borges went so frequently to see films during this decade, however, that when one looks at the articles and film reviews that he published between 1929 and 1945,

what is most impressive about them is the expertise he acquired about pre-1929 films. A large number of movie references, mostly to films from the silent period, clutter these texts. Borges's interest in cinema is a sign of the emergence of a "new" kind of intellectual: someone for whom movie going was an essential part of his or her intellectual life and not merely an occasional distraction. Looking at these film reviews (collected by Cozarinsky), it is easy to notice that Borges was not interested in all types of filmic modes. More than anything, Borges felt attracted to the cinematic style employed in Hollywood's films.³

From Borges's film reviews one can infer that in a movie theater nothing seems more enjoyable to him than a well-constructed film in which no image is wasted. This is evident in his review of *La fuga*, a 1937 Argentine film, in which Borges complains as he has before about the lack of unity of certain films, especially European ones. "There are numerous films that never go beyond mere photographic anthologies [...] and perhaps there is not a single European film that does not suffer from pointless images. In contrast, *La fuga* flows limpidly, the way American films do" (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 47). Borges's preference for Hollywood movies is a constant in his writings about cinema. In one of his early film reviews he attacked both German Expressionist cinema and French movies for their highbrow approach to filmmaking: the "one and only desire [of the French] has been not to resemble the Americans—a risk, I assure them, they do not run" (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 23). It is interesting that Borges disagrees here with what he sees as a general rejection of Hollywood movies within the intellectual community. What for the French directors is a positive quality, that is, not to create popular films such as the ones being produced in the United States, for Borges becomes a negative one. What he "promises" them here is that they will never be able to match the higher quality of North American films. In his film reviews, Borges became an unconditional supporter, one could also say a fan, of Hollywood style of cinema.

The attraction that he felt for this type of film production can be better understood in relation to the theory of narrative structure presented in "Narrative Art and Magic." In his attack against the realist novel, Borges presents as an alternative to this writing style the geometrical plot construction that he discovers in adventure and detective fiction and also in "the endless spectacular fictions made up in Hollywood, with the silvery images of Joan Crawford, that are read and reread the whole world over" (*Reader* 37). Hollywood films thus become another example of a narration controlled by a rigorous scheme of "attentions, echoes and affinities" (*Reader* 38).

The North American mode of film production that Borges so much admires has been given the name of "classical Hollywood cinema" by film theorists, who have defined it as a standard form or style that "reigned supreme between 1915 to 1938 and which is still influential today" (Andrew 174). Although some critics have challenged these dates and argued that the period of classical cinema lasted longer, a fact that cannot be contested, however, is that Hollywood created a powerful and unique mode of film practice composed of a set of norms about how films should look like. André

Bazin was one of the first film theorists who made serious contributions to understanding the characteristics and appreciating the value of the classical Hollywood film. For Bazin, classical cinema was as much the result of the studio system as of the personality of the film director:

What makes Hollywood so much better than anything else in the world is not only the quality of certain directors, but also the vitality and, in certain sense, the excellence of a tradition [...] The American cinema is a classical art, but why not then admire in it what is most admirable, i. e., not only the talent of this or that filmmaker, but the genius of the system, the richness of its ever-vigorous tradition, and its fertility when it comes into contact with new elements. (Qtd. in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 4)

It is this idea of a tradition to which filmmakers adhere that Borges is alluding when he talks about Hollywood being a “vast and complex literature” (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 27). David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson have explained the specificity of this tradition in their study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. My own analysis of the influence of film on Borges will depend highly on their (as well as Bazin’s) attempt to define classical cinema and understand its evolution. Following Bazin, Bordwell describes the Hollywood style as a “fairly coherent aesthetic tradition which sustains individual creation” (4). But this is not a system of movie making that imposes an inflexible formula on film directors; it is more precisely a “group style” and as in any group style there are always several alternatives available for achieving the same results: “there is always another way to do something,” notes Bordwell; “a group style [...] establishes what semiologists call a paradigm, a set of elements which can, according to rules, substitute for one another” (5). In his analysis, Bordwell studies the norms that control the narrative logic and the representation of time and space in classical film. I will not try to summarize his conclusions because I am less interested in the specifics of those norms (e.g., the happy ending, continuity editing, the subordination of time to causality, the fact that a typical Hollywood film lasts between 80 and 120 minutes) than in the idea of a system or tradition within which the film creator must work.

Borges seemed to have understood perfectly well the advantages and disadvantages of being tied to a cinematic tradition:

For many years, Hollywood (like the Greek tragedians) has stuck, in effect, to ten or twelve plots: the aviator who, by means of a convenient catastrophe, dies in order to save the friend whom his wife loves; the deceitful typist who does not refuse the gifts of furs, apartments, tiaras, and cars but who slaps or kills the giver when he “goes too far”; the unspeakable and renowned reporter who seeks the friendship of a gangster with the sole motive of betraying him and making him die on the gallows. (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 59)

The passage is at the same time a condemnation and a celebration of the limitations imposed by the studio system. Borges ridicules the typical Hollywood argument, especially those aspects where it reveals its origins in nineteenth-century melodrama, but comparing it to the Greek tragedy, praises the idea of a set of themes that are constantly revisited. As it happened with the spectators of Greek tragedies, the audiences of a Hollywood movie “already know” what they are going to see. It is the

variations of the old paradigm that attracts them to the movie theater. By drawing a parallel between high culture and popular art Borges implies that even if the content of Hollywood movies cannot be compared to the plots of the Greek tragedies, in both artistic forms one can find the same idea of a paradigm that offers the authors a limited number of alternatives within which they have to work. For Borges, the challenge comes in creating an "original" work with such a limited range of possibilities. While making fun of the typical plots of Hollywood classical cinema by emphasizing its melodramatic elements, Borges lets us know that he is interested in a film form that is a consequence of this cinematic tradition and not in claiming that Hollywood produces high art. Precisely because he is not interested in "content," Borges can assert that the tradition he is defending is "brought to happy fulfillment in all genres, from the incomparable comic (Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harry Langdon) to the purely, inventively fantastic: the mythology of Krazy Kat and Bimbo" (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 27). What matters is the general classical paradigm, and not how artistically weak are some of the elements (such as the predictable plot with its also predictable happy ending) that form it.

Thus, the same interplay between tradition and innovation that Borges observes in his theory about tradition in literature discussed earlier is valid for that other "literature" that Hollywood creates. There is a corollary to Borges's axiom that one must work within tradition in order to innovate, to change tradition; it is that to challenge tradition from the outside, a complete break with tradition, as for example, avant-garde artists tried to do, is ineffective in bringing about any changes. Whether one accepts Borges's view, it certainly seems to apply to classical film tradition. The Hollywood paradigm is so powerful that one can only realistically attempt to change it from within the system itself: "In Hollywood cinema, there are no subversive films, only subversive moments. For social and economic reasons, no Hollywood film can provide a distinct and coherent alternative to the classical model [. . .] Really problematic Hollywood films become limit-texts, works which, while remaining traditionally legible, dramatize some limits of that legibility" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 81). An example of a "limit-text" is Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Although it is considered a film that challenged many of the classical norms, especially about the psychology of characters, it still had more in common with other Hollywood films than with alternative film styles. As for the latter, those films that proposed a mode of film practice not bound by Hollywood rules have been ineffective in defeating them.⁴

Comparing Borges' notions of narrative structure and tradition to Hollywood's can help us explain his initial attraction to this type of film production. Because the classical Hollywood cinema is composed of many stylistic features, it is necessary to provide specific examples of the film techniques that Borges appropriated for his short stories. Two of them in particular were often employed by Borges as part of the basic structure of his writings: montage and parallelism.

Critics who have studied the influence of film on Borges's work have normally focused on how the technique of montage was decisive in the formation of his writing

style. It has become almost a commonplace to say that Borges's fragmentary prose is somehow the result of his mimicking this technique in his stories (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 18; Christ 64). But when one looks carefully at his style in his early prose works such as *Evaristo Carriego*, it is obvious that even if it does not have many of the features of his mature style, it still shows a certain "fragmentation" in it. Clearly, Borges is already beginning to eliminate causative links and replace them for a comma, a period, or a semicolon. Whatever the source of his parataxis, it has nothing to do with montage. Literary montage was not a model for his narrative style, but an artistic device that the author could easily employ because its fragmentation fits the already fragmented style that he was developing.

It is then necessary to rethink the question of how montage "influenced" Borges's prose. So far, the studies of this topic have been very uncritical in the use of the term *montage*, never differentiating clearly between the avant-garde's and Hollywood's versions of the same technique. In 1932, in a short critique of Eisenstein and the Soviet cinema, Borges once again prefers the orderly composition of the Hollywood movies to the Soviet school's experimental montage sequences. Unlike the German and the French modes of film production that Borges feels he can easily reject, the Soviet school, given the extraordinary quality of the films that it was producing, presents for him other problems. But although it is not mentioned in this article, elsewhere Borges again argues that lack of coherence is the reason for his rejecting Soviet cinema. Describing the movies coming from this school as having the defect of being nothing more than an "anthology of images" (Cozarinsky, *On Film* 23), Borges's attitude signifies a rejection of a very specific notion of montage that Eisenstein and other Soviet directors were promoting.

Soviet cinema presented a powerful challenge to the classical cinema in terms of narrative unity, narrational voice, point of view, and spatial and temporal continuity (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 73-74). But if Borges understood perfectly well the intentions of Soviet directors for breaking away from other forms of movie making, he was not attracted to their experiments. He disliked what became one of the most influential forms of montage created by the Soviets, Eisenstein's intellectual montage. Although Eisenstein's ideas about film form were always evolving, we will simplify his theory to say that intellectual montage occurs when two opposing shots collide with each other to create a juxtaposition of images. The consequence of that juxtaposition in the mind of the spectator is the creation of a new image or idea (different from the two that initially collided) (Eisenstein, *Film Form* 238). But these attempts to create visual metaphors in cinema did not impress Borges, as his criticism of Chaplin's use of intellectual montage shows:

Chaplin shows a crowd of workers entering a factory; then a second horde, this time of sheep, entering a pen. "Ah, the human flock!" the enraptured audience murmurs, quite satisfied with having recognized this daring cinematic avatar of a literary commonplace.

(Cozarinsky, *On Film* 42)

One could try to link Borges's well known aversion to metaphors with his lack of enthusiasm for intellectual montage, but what seems to me more important is that the view of montage promoted by Eisenstein is closer to Borges's own aesthetics than is Hollywood's editing technique. Eisenstein's theories went against the creation of films that faithfully mimic reality. His technique of montage constantly reminded the spectator of the artistic character of film. One would think that Borges, whose short stories are always laying bare the device, would feel affinity towards the Soviet editing style and its continuous disruptions of the spectator's suspension of disbelief.⁵ But Borges was interested not in the one employed by Soviet films, but in Hollywood's version of montage sequences.

Completely different from Soviet montage in form and purpose, the classical editing techniques of Hollywood were designed to "give us the illusion of being present at real events unfolding before us as in everyday reality" (Bazin, *Welles* 77). In giving the name of *découpage* or shot breakdown to this technique, André Bazin meant that the shots in the film are ordered in such a way as to have a dramatic or psychological effect (*Cinema* 132; *Welles* 77-78). If there is a corpse lying on the floor, for example, a close-up of the murder weapon that has been left next to the corpse will follow so that the audience can infer a cause and effect relationship from the images. Similarly, a shot of a character anxiously waiting for someone, followed by a shot of a hand knocking on the door, and then the same hand turning the doorknob is an example of a series of shots composed to follow the thoughts of a character or of the audience. The main characteristic of classical narration is that both time and space are subordinated to the story line. Most of the time the audience is not aware of this technique. Because one is more interested in what is going to happen than in how the story is being told, a spectator gets caught up in the drama and the logic of the narration.

To a certain extent one could argue that sections of some of Borges's short stories have been structured in direct imitation of Hollywood's *découpage* sequences. Such is the case of the description of Juan Dahlmann's accident in "The South." A story whose relation to film I will study in detail later, it uses montage to achieve a dramatic effect.

In the obscurity, something brushed by his forehead: a bat, a bird? On the face of the woman who opened the door to him he saw horror engraved, and the hand he wiped across his face came away with red blood. (Ficciones 167-68)

In a paragraph from "The Garden of Forking Paths," Borges's style imitates the movement of a camera slowly approaching an object. Each sentence adds more information about the objects in front of the narrator in a sequence that gives the impression of following at the same time the thoughts of the main character and the reader.

[From] the end of the avenue, from the main house a lantern approached; a lantern which alternately, from moment to moment, was crisscrossed or put out by the trunks of the trees; a paper lantern shaped like a drum and colored like the moon. A tall man carried it. I could not see his face, for the light blinded me. (Ficciones 72)

Borges did not like to include descriptions in his short stories and these imitations of *découpage* are rare in his texts. But there are other uses of montage that Borges learned from watching Hollywood films; one such is the summarizing of a character's life in a few sentences. He mentions this technique in his preface to *A Universal History of Infamy*: one of the tricks exploited in this book's short stories, he says, is "the paring down of a man's whole life to two or three scenes" (*Infamy* 13). I think it is possible to show here that Borges is employing literary montage to evoke a sense of the epic. In the opening paragraph of Borges's rewriting of the legend of Billy the Kid, for example, very clear is the connection between this use of montage and the epic.

An image of the desert wilds of Arizona, first and foremost, an image of the desert wilds of Arizona and New Mexico—a country famous for its silver and gold camps, a country of breathtaking open spaces, a country of monumental mesas and soft colors, a country of bleached skeletons picked clean by buzzards. Over this whole country, another image—that of Billy the Kid. (*Infamy* 61)

The same type of montage sequences was often employed in Hollywood as a way of suggesting an era or place, or compressing several years into a few moments by showing brief symbolic images. This imitation of Hollywood's style in Borges's first fictional tales became later one of his most distinctive narrative techniques. In his fantastic stories, Borges often talks about the diversity of his main characters' adventures but does not describe the events themselves as they happen. One often comes across succinct catalogues of the different events experienced by a person/character in his/her life. In "Story of the Warrior and the Captive," for example, the adventures of an Englishwoman living among the Indians are summarized in a few lines:

[B]ehind her story one could glimpse a savage life: the horsehide shelters, the fires made of dry manure, the feasts of scorched meat or raw entrails, the stealthy departures at dawn, the attacks on corrals, the yelling and the pillaging, the wars, the sweeping charges on the haciendas by naked horsemen, the polygamy, the stench and the superstition. (*Labyrinths* 130)

Once again the epic character of this woman's life is evoked by mentioning a few symbolic images. The presence of these catalogues in Borges's fiction is often seen in traditional Borgesean criticism as the result of his "poetics of briefness," that is, his preference for allusions rather than description (see Christ). I believe that in many of his short stories (e.g., "The Immortal," "The Dead Man"),⁶ it is also related to an epic tradition that, in his view, Hollywood had preserved for the modern world (see Accaria-Zavala 75-77).

Another aspect of the classical cinema style that Borges adapted for his short stories and one that is also closely related to Hollywood's editing techniques, is the use of "parallelism." To explain this way of organizing narrative structure and Borges's appropriation of it, I wish to go back again to an essay that I have mentioned a couple of times already, "Narrative Art and Magic," and specifically to a second reference to Hollywood movies that appears in that text. It is a passage often quoted in the critical literature dealing with Borges's use of cinematic techniques, but one that I have

intentionally not mentioned before in the belief that a full appreciation of its meaning depended on first identifying Borges's preference for classical cinema and providing a clear definition of that style of filmmaking. Towards the end of "Narrative Art and Magic" Borges gives another example of the orderly structure that attracted him to this particular mode of movie making:

This teleology of words and episodes is also omnipresent in good films. At the beginning of *The Show Down*, a pair of adventurers play cards for a prostitute, or a turn at her; at the end, one of them has gambled away the possession of the woman he really loves. The opening dialogue of *Underworld* concerns stool pigeons, the opening scene is a gunfight on an avenue; these bits foreshadow the whole plot. In *Dishonored*, there are recurring themes: the sword, the kiss, the cat, betrayal, grapes, the piano. (Borges, *Reader* 38)

The bringing together of the beginning and the ending of a film is in fact a common trait of classical cinema. But it is in the use of motifs that are repeated and echoed throughout a film, not only at the beginning and the end, that the connection between Borges's writings and classical cinema is more obvious. Clearly, Hollywood films were an early and important influence on Borges's developing the idea that in fiction one event should prefigure another, that a work of art should be composed of internal analogies and symmetries. In their book *Film Art*, Bordwell and Thompson give an example of how the use of parallelism works in a typical Hollywood movie:

Film form utilizes general similarities as well as exact duplication. To understand *The Wizard of Oz*, we must see the similarities between the three Kansas farmhands and the three figures Dorothy meets along the Yellow Brick Road; we must notice that the itinerant Kansas fortune teller bears a striking resemblance to the old charlatan posing as the Wizard of Oz. The duplication is not perfect, but the similarity is very strong. This is an example of *parallelism*, the process whereby the film cues the spectator to compare two or more distinct elements by highlighting some similarity. (37)

One can probably trace back the origins of parallelism in film to the pre-classical period. Kristin Thompson has noticed that in the transition from primitive cinema to the classical mode there were two narrative models available to filmmakers. One of them, the one that was to be adopted by classical cinema, was linear causality; the other was a parallel narrative that used "contrasting lines of actions to create a conceptual point" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 176). A well-known example of parallel editing as a way of organizing a film's narrative is Griffith's *Intolerance*; there, different periods of time (and civilizations) are contrasted to one another. "The parts thrown together by parallel montage," says Gilles Deleuze, explaining how this film is constructed, "are the civilizations themselves [. . . T]he convergent actions are not just the duels proper to each civilization—the chariot-race in the Babylonian episode, the race between the car and the train in the modern episode—but the two races themselves converge through the centuries in an accelerated montage which superimposes Babylon and America" (31). By 1916, when *Intolerance* is released, this alternative narrative mode is no longer being used. In the end, linear narrative won out easily over parallelism as the preferred system to organize film images probably because it was an easier way to present complex plots to an audience. Parallel

narrative apparently disappeared. Borges's comments about the use of parallelism by Hollywood cinema to organize a story, however, make us realize that parallel editing did not go away; rather it was "absorbed," integrated into the inner form of the typical Hollywood film. While the two narrative models coexist side by side in classical cinema, obviously one is subordinated to the other. One could go as far as adding that Hollywood's extensive use of parallelism in the construction of the plot was a possibility latent within the original concept of parallel montage. For his part, Borges was in reality less attracted to Griffith's parallel montage or parallel narrative actions than to the internalization of parallelism by classical cinema.

In the example from *The Wizard of Oz*, for an audience to understand the film, they must see the similarities among different events, they must perceive the presence of parallelism. What the audience must understand is that the main character's visit to the land of Oz is nothing but a dream and that, as it supposedly happens when one dreams, she has transposed to it elements from her real life: hence the similarities between the people she meets during her travel and people she knew in Kansas.

One could compare the use of parallelism in *The Wizard of Oz* and Borges's version of the same dream-reality topic in "The South." In this semi-autobiographical story, Juan Dahmann is a librarian who all his life has bemoaned the fact that he was not going to have a heroic life like that of some of his ancestors. After suffering an accident at the beginning of the story, he is taken to a hospital and there, while dying in bed, he dreams of a romantic death in the pampas, of having a knife duel with a gaucho. As in Dorothy's dream, though elements from Dahmann's real life reappear in his dream/hallucination, they do so in a different context. In the same way that the fortune teller reappears as the Wizard of Oz in Dorothy's dream, one of the hospital employees becomes the owner of a bar in Dahmann's. The reader then has to be able to see this parallelism or any of the others in the story in order to understand that Dahmann is really dreaming and that the last scene takes place only in his mind before he dies in the hospital.

The use of parallelism to organize the structure of his short stories is one of Borges's most characteristic writing strategies. Besides the blurring of the distinction between dream and reality, most of the cases of parallelism in Borges can be reduced to two versions. One is the type of historical parallelism favored by Griffith in *Intolerance*: "It has been said that Alexander the Great saw his iron future in the fabled story of Achilles, and Charles XII of Sweden, his in the story of Alexander" (*The Aleph* 83).⁷ The other one is a peculiar brand of pantheism that we find in such texts as "The Theologians." This is the story of the intellectual rivalry between two theologians, Aureliano and Juan de Pannonia, at the end of which Aureliano is hit by lightning and dies in a way similar to the death of his rival, who had earlier been accused of heresy and burned alive. They are both the same person, we are told by a narrator who calls our attention to the parallelism between the two theologians. The same narrator, however, "forgets" to tell us (he lets us discover it in the same way the audience of *The Wizard of Oz* discovers the similarities between dream and reality) that Juan's fate is also

similar to that of Euforbo, the heresiarc whom both Aureliano and Juan de Pannonia were combatting at the beginning of the story and who was also burned alive. In fact, because this parallelism is so much more obvious than the one the narrator is pointing out to us (Euforbo and Juan are both burned at the stake for their heretical beliefs), we *cannot* fail to see it. After noticing that, one could then interpret this series of parallelisms as meaning that all the characters are the same person, that “all men are one man,” as Borges would say. Moreover, the interpretation is supported by small details within the text: for example, the only sentence preserved from Juan de Pannonia’s writings is found quoted in Aureliano’s (who is also Pannonia, therefore all of Aureliano’s writings are also Pannonia’s), and that sentence was addressed to Euforbo.

Reading his film reviews, one finds time and again that for Borges it is more important to employ non-disruptive editing techniques in film than to have an original plot. A spectator, he seems to believe, derives pleasure from the form of the film, not the content. Seeing films, he looks for analogies, symmetries, coherence, and these also are what he gives to his readers. As it happens with Hollywood films, in Borges’s texts noticing a parallelism between two events is one of the first—and most important—levels of interpretation.

Notes

¹ This article is a version of the third chapter of my forthcoming book, *Borges and the Politics of Form*. I am grateful to Garland Publishing for allowing me to republish this material.

² See, for example, the comments made by an important Argentine writer from that period, Horacio Quiroga (1216-18). See also the article by Carlos Dámaso Martínez on Quiroga’s use of film in his fiction.

³ Of the fifty-eight films mentioned—some of them more than once—in the reviews collected by Cozarinsky, forty-one are American, six British, five Soviet, three Argentine, two French and one German.

⁴ This was the case of the experimental cinema that was produced in Europe from the 1920s to the 1950s, which created new artistic techniques that initially seemed totally incompatible with classical cinema style of filmmaking. Hollywood was always quick to assimilate—and neutralize—alternative styles, and it did so by selecting those elements from avant-garde movements, in film and other mediums, that could be more easily incorporated into the classical paradigm.

⁵ This is not to say that Hollywood movies do not have moments of self-referentiality; these, in fact, are more common than one would expect. But in classical narration, causality is so important that baring the device constantly cannot be allowed because it would interfere with the story being told and, perhaps more important, with the capacity of the film to entertain the audience.

⁶ Another example of a montage sequence used to create an epic view of history can be found in the "The Immortal." In his immortal life the main character in the story does almost everything, from composing the *Iliad* to being the owner of an antique shop in early twentieth-century England:

I traveled over new kingdoms, new empires. In the fall of 1066, I fought at Stamford Bridge [...] In the seventh century of the Hegira in the suburb of Bulaq, I transcribed with measured calligraphy, in a language I have forgotten, in an alphabet I do not know, the seven adventures of Sinbad and the history of the City of Bronze. In a courtyard of a jail in Samarkand I played a great deal of chess. In Bikaner I professed the science of astrology and also in Bohemia.
(*Labyrinths* 116)

⁷ Historical parallelism of this kind is used extensively in "Theme of the Traitor and Hero." In this story an Irish hero Fergus Kilpatrick is executed for treason. In order to use the execution as an instrument for the liberation of Ireland, Kilpatrick's "assassination" is staged in a way that parallels scenes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. Years later, Kilpatrick's great-grandson notices these parallels (like a member of the audience in a movie theater) and discovers the truth (*Ficciones* 98-101).

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