Little, if any, critical writing takes up the question of the complex relationship of mutual exchange which occurs between film and contemporary Spanish American fiction. Several articles have been written regarding cinema as a theme in the works of writers such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig and others, but virtually no bibliography exists which examines how narrative structures could be informed by film. Much has also been written about Spanish American writers’ exposure to films, mostly as an anecdotal footnote to criticism about their texts. More interesting to me is that many of these writers began writing fiction as an outgrowth of their frustrated dreams to work in movies. In fiction they could realize their fantasies left unfulfilled by incursions into the world of cinema.

In creating filmic texts contemporary Spanish American writers are encouraging new ways of reading. Their texts induce readers to think differently about language and about literature. These writers violate the laws of genre imposed by their predecessors. They push the limits of the novel to show just how far the novel can go. They also use language in a way that is revolutionary, not in a political, but rather in a literary sense. Readers are compelled to “see” the texts, not as transparent descriptions of another reality, but as artifices, graphic configurations, visual compositions of letters which simultaneously denote and exist as artistic objects. Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s interjection of a page that is the mirror image of the one facing it in Tres tristes tigres serves as a clear example; other configurations are perhaps less obvious, but equally as compelling, as we shall see.

In both film and modern fictional literature, time is spatialized into what amounts to a perpetual present. The illusion of the passage of time is created through verb tenses in literature, through flashbacks in film. Some argue that literature has easier access to the past than does film because of the flexibility of tense. Yet the past in literature is still an illusion, as much as is the past implied in film through the flashback, since the reality described through literary fiction is just that: fiction; it exists only between the pages of the book.

The principle of montage, borrowed from the cinema, informs much of contemporary fiction on a variety of levels. Some self-referential literary texts, on a thematic level, characterize the artistic process in terms of montage. Others derive their structure from a montage of fragments of previous texts through intertextuality. Still others are constructed of disembodied narrative voices interconnected through montage. In all of these texts, fragments of an image, echoes of previously existing texts, and multiple narrative voices collide and combine to form a new text whose whole is equal to yet greater than the sum of its parts.

Many fictional texts create strong visual images through language, giving rise to probably the most controversial aspect of the film/literature debate: the contrast between visual and verbal forms of expression. Many critics argue that the visual images presented in film are more compelling and direct than those conveyed by literature through description. Yet, in much of contemporary fiction, the visual images projected into reader memory (on that “inner screen of the mind’s eye” described by Herbert Read) are analogous to film images. The mental images which the reader creates, consciously or unconsciously, while reading can be just as specific as the film image.

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1 One must be careful to distinguish the type of films which filled these writers’ childhood dreams: they were not indigenous productions, but the fabrications of Hollywood of the nineteen thirties and forties. Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig, Garcia Marquez, Cabrera Infante all were taken with the films of Humphrey Bogart, Rita Hayworth, Orson Welles, John Houston and the like. Each of them may have seen films produced in their native countries, but their common experience, the one which transcended national boundaries, was that of the Hollywood “dream factory.”

2 One could also argue that these writers’ preference for literary expression over cinematic reflects their social and economic condition, a condition which prohibited them from making the kind of films that would satisfy their personal need for artistic expression. Making movies is an expensive enterprise, especially when one has high standards, and few Latin Americans can afford to make the kind of films they desire.

3 According to Herbert Read, film is “imagination embodied. . . If I were asked to give the most distinctive quality of good writing, I should express it in this one word: VISUAL. Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals and you come to this single aim: to convey images by means of words. But to convey images. To make the mind see. To project on to that inner screen of the brain a moving picture. . . That is a definition of good literature. . . It is also a definition of the ideal film” (231).

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1 RLA Archive, 1992 (600-609)
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Many critics have pointed out the way in which "Las ruinas circulares" can be understood as a metaphor for artistic creation.5 Jaime Alazraki sees it as "una expresión más de ese tópico borgeano de origen agnóstico que ve el mundo como un sueño de una divinidad que es a su vez otro sueño" (295). His view is shared by many including Stanton Hager and Dan Smulian. So far, however, no one has suggested a link between "Las ruinas circulares" and the cinema.

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Thus another paradox presents itself: nadie, as sign, precedes and creates an eventually existing entity, nadie, that cannot exist (it is no one); it therefore marks both a presence and an absence. This graphic fusion of two entities into one sign mirrors the fusion of dreamer and dream-creation which occurs in “Las ruinas circulares.” The man who arrives at the circular temple ruins comes from the South, from a town that is upstream. When he completes the task of dreaming another, he sends his creation to another broken down temple, just like the one where he has labored, which is downstream, in the North. When the dreamer receives news of “un hombre mágico en un templo en el Norte capaz de hollar el fuego y de no quemarse” (68), he thinks of his “son.” But when we compare the spatial descriptions surrounding each figure, we discover that they coincide: both are in the North (the dreamer “came from the South,” implying he is now in the North), both are downstream (the dreamer came from a town upstream, implying he is now downstream), both inhabit circular temple ruins, both are immune to the ravages of fire. The two locations as well as the two “men” are separate but equal. They are juxtaposed in such a way that one dissolves cinematographically into the other. Time is spatialized through the coincidence of two “generations.”

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Even a film like Hitchcock’s Rope is pieced together. The joints are artfully concealed, but the director was limited by his medium and had to construct his film from pieces of celluloid that were only as long as his camera could hold. Borges’ dreamer also realizes the limits of his medium. He cannot create a whole being in one “shot,” even when he tries to start by using an already existing being: one of his students.

The way in which the dreamer creates his “son” through a montage of images is cinematic and acts as a metaphor for artistic creation in general. “El propósito que lo guiaba no era imposible, aunque sí sobrenatural. Queríasoñar un hombre: quería soñarlo con integridad minuciosa e imponerlo a la realidad” (62). In order to carry out his task, the man must forget his own existence in favor of the one he is trying to bring forth. “[S]i alguien le hubiera preguntado su propio nombre o cualquier rasgo de su vida anterior, no habría acertado a responder” (2). The creation takes on more importance than its author as the latter begins to exist merely to service the former: “(ahora también las tardes eran tributarias del sueño, ahora no velaba sino un par de horas en el amanecer)” (63-64).

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In another context Borges has written of the bond between reader and writer:

If the pages of this book offer some felicitous line or other, may the reader pardon me the discourtesy of having claimed it first. Our inconsequential selves [nuestras nadas] differ but a little; the circumstances
that you are the reader and I the writer of these exercises is accidental and irrelevant. (1923, *Pervor de Buenos Aires*. Translated and cited by Suzanne Jill Levine)8

Thus, for Borges, reader and writer are separated only by "accidental and irrelevant circumstances," but have much in common, just like the dreamer and his creation in "Las ruinas circulares."

According to Bellour,


"Las ruinas circulares" is cinematographic not only because it contains visual images "seen" by the reader, but also their creation. The reader watches as the dreamer imagines his "son"; simultaneously the reader sees that creation embodied in the word "nadie." *Nadie* acts both as signifier and grapheme in the story; when read narratively, it refers to both the man who arrives at the sacred temple and to the being he creates, both of which elide away upon the discovery that they are but dream creations of another. When read visually, however, the two *nadles* dissolve into one another, duplicating within the text the fusion which occurs between text and reader. On all levels, this story functions cinematographically by inscribing visual elements in the writing itself in addition to creating visual images and problematizing the process of artistic creation in terms of montage.

Jorge Luis Borges’s story "Las ruinas circulares," then, provides a compelling example of how the visual and the verbal interact. In this text the juxtaposition of the two "nadies" and the space(s) they inhabit is not unlike a cinematic lap dissolve fusing two spaces and two times. We also find in this text an emphasis on images: the way the dreamer creates a being (or, indeed, the way the writer creates a text) is through imagining images, dreaming images; through the process of montage he puts those images together and creates a being, an artistic construct, which is his so-called "son." That same creative process is also mirrored in the language used, in the actual writing of the text. The use of the word "nadie"—the grapheme—to describe both the narrator and the reader visually represents within the text the artistic, narrative process.

Borges is perhaps the first Spanish American writer to use cinematic devices to create a text which reflects his view of the fractured nature of reality. In doing so, his story underscores as well the dual nature of language—both its plasticity and its transparency. This preoccupation with language, as well as the desire to represent a fragmented reality through fiction, is shared by other Spanish American writers who follow Borges. The writers of the so-called "boom" have created a literary style of metafiction which calls attention to language and seeks new forms of literary expression by combining intertextual elements from other realms of artistic creation. In developing new modes of fiction, these writers demand new modes of interpretation from their readers. A cinematographic approach to these texts affords the reader a deeper understanding of what is at stake both artistically and linguistically in contemporary Spanish American fiction.

**Works Cited**


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8The editorial remark "[nuestras nadas]" belongs to Levine.
FILMIC FICTION: JORGE LUIS BORGES’S “LAS RUINAS CIRCULARES”

Carol Thicksten
Lake Forest College

Little, if any, critical writing takes up the question of the complex relationship of mutual exchange which occurs between film and contemporary Spanish American fiction. Several articles have been written regarding cinema as a theme in the works of writers such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig and others, but virtually no bibliography exists which examines how narrative structures could be informed by film. Much has also been written about Spanish American writers’ exposure to films, mostly as an anecdotal footnote to criticism about their texts. More interesting to me is that many of these writers began writing fiction as an outgrowth of their frustrated dreams to work in movies. In fiction they could realize their fantasies left unfulfilled by incursions into the world of cinema.

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The juxtaposition of the two nadies at the beginning of the text serves to foreshadow the juxtaposition of the two dream-creations which are, in reality, nadies since they have no objective physical existence but reside only in the imagination of another. This coincidence also exists between the writer and reader. Never physically present simultaneously, both, however, are present (if only as "phantoms" or "imaginations") at the moment meaning is created within the text.

In another context Borges has written of the bond between reader and writer:

If the pages of this book offer some felicitous line or other, may the reader pardon me the discourtesy of having claimed it first. Our inconsequential selves [nuestras nadas] differ but little: the circumstances that you are the reader and I the writer of these exercises is accidental and irrelevant. (1923, Fervor de Buenos Aires. Translated and cited by Suzanne Jill Levine) [8]

Thus, for Borges, reader and writer are separated only by "accidental and irrelevant circumstances," but have much in common, just like the dreamer and his creation in "Las ruinas circulares."

According to Bellour,


"Las ruinas circulares" is cinematic not only because it contains visual images "seen" by the reader, but also their creation. The reader watches as the dreamer imagines his "son"; simultaneously the reader sees that creation embodied in the word "nádie." Nádie acts both as signifier and grapheme in the story; when read narratively, it refers to both the man who arrives at the sacred temple and to the being he creates, both of which elide away upon the discovery that they are but dream creations of another. When read visually, however, the two nadies dissolve into one another, duplicating within the text the fusion which occurs between text and reader. On all levels, this story functions cinematographically by inscribing visual elements in the writing itself in addition to creating visual images and problematizing the process of artistic creation in terms of montage.

Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Las ruinas circulares,” then, provides a compelling example of how the visual and the verbal interact. In this text the juxtaposition of the two “nadies” and the space(s) they inhabit is not unlike a cinematic lap dissolve fusing two spaces and two times. We also find in this text an emphasis on images: the way the dreamer creates a being (or, indeed, the way the writer creates a text) is through imagining images, dreaming images; through the process of montage he puts those images together and creates a being, an artistic construct, which is his so-called "son." That same creative process is also mirrored in the language used, in the actual writing of the text. The use of the word "nádie"—the grapheme—to describe both the narrator and the reader visually represents within the text the artistic, narrative process.

Borges is perhaps the first Spanish American writer to use cinematic devices to create a text which reflects his view of the fractured nature of reality. In doing so, his story underscores as well the dual nature of language—both its plasticity and its transparency. This preoccupation with language, as well as the desire to represent a fragmented reality through fiction, is shared by other Spanish American writers who follow Borges. The writers of the so-called “boom” have created a literary style of metafiction which calls attention to language and seeks new forms of literary expression by combining intertextual elements from other realms of artistic creation. In developing new modes of fiction, these writers demand new modes of interpretation from their readers. A cinematographic approach to these texts affords the reader a deeper understanding of what is at stake both artistically and linguistically in contemporary Spanish American fiction.

Works Cited


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11One must be careful to distinguish the type of films which filled these writers’ childhood dreams: they were not indigenous productions, but the fabrications of Hollywood of the nineteen thirties and forties. Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig, García Márquez, Cabrera Infante all were taken with the films of Humphrey Bogart, Rita Hayworth, Orson Welles, John Houston and the like. Each of them may have seen films produced in their native countries, but their common experience, the one which transcended national boundaries, was that of the Hollywood “dream factory.”

12One could also argue that these writers’ preference for literary expression over cinematic reflects their social and economic condition, a condition which prohibited them from making the kind of films that would satisfy their personal need for artistic expression. Making movies is an expensive enterprise, especially when one has high standards, and few Latin Americans can afford to make the kind of films they desire.

13According to Herbert Read, film is “imagination embodied. . . . If I were asked to give the most distinctive quality of good writing, I should express it in this one word: VISUAL. Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals and you come to this single aim: to convey images by means of words. But to convey images. To make the mind see. To project on to that inner screen of the brain a moving picture. . . . That is a definition of good literature. . . . It is also a definition of the ideal film” (231).

14For an excellent discussion of Huidobro and the cinema see René de Costa.

15See Carmen R. Rabell, Guillermo Arango, and Geoffrey Green.

16Carmen Rabell has found a parallel between the dreamer (“hombre X”) whose existence is suggested by the end of the story and both the author (“Borges”) and the reader. “En ‘Las ruinas circulares’ el lector, junto al escritor, es autor de la trama. . . . El hecho de que el narrador finalice el relato introduciendo la existencia del hombre X . . . introduce también el momento de la escritura y de la lectura como elementos literarios en el relato” (98).

17As cited in Arango 249.

18The editorial remark “[nuestras nadas]” belongs to Levine.