

YOU GO to a movie. You sit passive, uncomplaining through the usual snippets of the usual things, bit of violence here, bit of copulation there, tinny dialogue, discordant mutterings of rock.

The camera pans in on a beach, or a bedside table, here a character has put down a book. You get a close enough look to see the title: Fictions by Jorge Luis Borges.

Ah-ha! So the movie is, after all, a subtle thing on several different levels; it doesn't at all mean what it appears to; the great problems of metaphysics are being unravelled under the surface, and the banality is, of course, deliberate, a gesture, a device. You watch the rest of it with rapt attention.

Borges himself seems to be wryly amused at his transformation from a writer into a cultural talisman; asked why the stories in Dr Brodie's Report seem so different from the mirror-and-labyrinth-infested speculative mazes that have made him belatedly world famous, he explained that as everyone else was now writing "Borges stories," and doing it so much better than he could, there was no longer any need for him to do so.

The fact is that no one writes "Borges stories" better than Borges, or even as well, but it's certainly just as true that writers all over the world are trying to. Borges may well be the seminal influence on contemporary fiction, although his achievement took a long time to infiltrate the English-speaking world — it's surely odd that a writer whose first book was published in 1923 should suddenly become a sort of culture-hero in the 70s.

And yet he is, on the face of it, an unlikely candidate for the role — as I'm not the first critic to note. An old, blind Argentinian, totally surrounded by books, obsessed by unfashionable authors (Stevenson, Chesterton, Kipling . . .) and books nobody reads (the Kabbalistic

Borges returns to the surroundings of his youth

texts, arcane orientalia, bestiaries, forgotten encyclopedias, minor idealist philosophers) — where does such a reclusive mandarin fit in a vociferously "committed" world?

Well, it would seem (to generalise intolerably) that we may have entered upon a phase where we don't any longer want our writers or our sages to tell us things. We don't want to be hectored; and if we are to have systems at all, let them be new ones — that is to say, very ancient or very exotic ones rediscovered. Or no systems at all.

No one caters to this need better than Borges. He knows all the systems, the philosophies, the mythologies — and believes in none of them. He clothes a deeply pessimistic scepticism in a glittering mail of learning, in couplings of style.

It is, in fact, full circle: just as it was an alleviation of your intellectual malaises that Sartre, say, or Camus or Orwell did the thinking for you, told you what to think and supported you in thinking it, so Borges, under a new provenance, has manifestly done the thinking for you and decided that it was pointless anyway, since we can know nothing, believe nothing. Another crutch, in fact: his learning, concluding in a confession of ignorance, can be used to justify our ignorance unsupported by learning.

More than one writer has been destroyed, corrupted, by being placed in this sort of situation: Borges has not been affected at all. He has not even greatly changed his style or themes, except insofar as he has quite rightly diagnosed that he's already done all that he could do (which is virtually tantamount to: all that could be done) with his familiar constellation of symbols: the mir-

ror, the library, the labyrinth, the tiger, the knife.

But this turns out, to a surprising extent, to be a question of technique. What he's saying is still the same ("Yes, I am a very monotonous old man," as he says in Borges on Writing), only he is saying it less elaborately; if, that is, one can speak of elaboration in a writer for whom a 10-page story is notably long — but of course the complexities are more identical than stylistic.

Those familiar with his work will immediately recognise the themes being reworked (or rather, being enriched with fresh insights) in this collection of stories:

The Gospel According to Mark, with its re-enactment of the crucifixion in an isolated Argentine farmhouse, shadows forth again the idea of eternal recurrence that he used so well many years ago in such tales as Theme of the Traitor and Hero.

In Juan Murana we find again the proposition that an inanimate object can acquire

life and purpose from those associated with it. The Duel, apparently an account of the rivalry between two fashionable lady painters, is in fact yet another treatment of the theme that our whole lives may be devoted to some purpose of which we are utterly unaware.

And Rosendo's Tale is a Borgesian joke against Borges: a rewriting of his very first story, Streetcorner Man, in terms of what "really happened."

This is the key, of course. Nothing "really happened," both stories are precisely that: fictions. And so, to Borges, is anything: time, space, cause, personality.

Hence his playfulness, his fantastic intellectual prestidigitations, his prismatic colours, his dazzling disorienting shifts of front. What

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is there to do but, as he puts it, "play games with infinity?"

Gloomy, perhaps, yes — but heavens, it's refreshing. Like Denn Swift, come to think of it. And on about the same level: there is, as my friends are fed up of hearing me say, no greater writer alive than Borges.

Superb intelligence, paradoxical wit, immense erudition and, yes, passion; brief scraps of prose each of which can encapsulate half-a-dozen philosophies and their refutations; the embodiment, in fact, of multum in parvo. I sometimes feel that from one story by Borges — "the world in a grain of sand" — it would be possible to extrapolate the whole structure of human thought.

He would say that this is because there have only ever been a handful of thoughts, a handful of metaphors, indeed a handful of events; what easier than to express the lot in a few pages? And what more pleonastic than to pile up vast novels that can only repeat, vast libraries that are recapitulations of recapitulations? And so it doesn't matter that, in Dr Brodie's Report, Borges has returned to the surroundings of his youth, has relinquished Babylon and Babel for the backstreets of Buenos Aires or the feuds of forgotten bandits. The same event occurred at Golgotha and at La Colorada Ranch near Junin.

The idea is not fashionable, but it does make for dizzying intellectual acrobatics, and Borges has always avowed that all he tries to do is to entertain. That he also informs, intrigues and — yes — inspires is a bonus. Rarely in literature has there been such a bonus.

DR BRODIE'S REPORT by Jorge Luis Borges (Allen Lane 56)
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