Borgesian Libraries and Librarians in Television Popular Culture

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Since ancient times, the library has existed as a place dedicated to the preservation of knowledge. Librarians have aided in that preservation, taking care of book collections, and facilitating readers' access to those collections. One such librarian was Jorge Luis Borges, who, after a short career as a county librarian, ended up serving as the head of Argentina's National Library from 1955 until 1973. Although few may contemplate Borges the librarian, many study his writing, and the fictional representations of libraries and librarians contained in those writings. As W.H. Bossart points out, "the image of the library is the central philosophical metaphor of Borges's work, for it populates so much of his writing and his life and unites his concern with words, languages, literatures, the Word and the Book" (21). Lisa Block de Behar would agree as she states that "the question of the library … does not cease to be a quest, a 'question' and, according to Borges, the greatest, so much so that the objective is assimilated into the nature of the Universe" (153). Borges takes the images of the library and its librarian and transforms them into metaphysical metaphors, posing questions about the nature of language, time, life, and the universe itself. This study examines the way in which Borges's library metaphor has entered into the world of television popular culture today by examining two episodes of the BBC series *Doctor Who* entitled "Silence in the Library" and "Forest of the Dead," the three movies released here to date that comprise the TNT franchise *The Librarian*, and several episodes of Joss Whedon's cult series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

The Library episodes of *Doctor Who*, a television series

revolving around travel through time and space, utilize the space of the library to discuss, among others, the metaphysical question of infinity. Borges's short story "La biblioteca de Babel" (1941) "The Library of Babel" opens and closes posing, but not quite answering, a similar question regarding the infinity of the universe/library: "El universo (que otros llaman la Biblioteca) se compone de un número indefinido, y tal vez infinito, de galerías hexagonales" (558) 'The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries' (Hurley 112). The same question of infinity ends the narration as the aging narrator contemplates:

> Acabo de escribir *infinita*. No he interpolado este adjetivo por una costumbre retórica; digo que no es ilógico pensar que el mundo es infinito. Quienes lo juzgan limitado, postulan que en lugares remotos los corredores y escaleras y hexágonos pueden inconcebiblemente cesar – lo cual es absurdo. Quienes lo imaginan sin límites, olvidan que los tiene el número posible de libros. Yo me atrevo a insinuar esta solución del antiguo problema: *La biblioteca es ilimitada y periódica*. Si un eterno viajero la atravesara en cualquier dirección, comprobaría al cabo de los siglos que los mismos volúmenes se repiten en el mismo desorden (que, repetido, sería un orden: el Orden). Mi soledad se alegra con esa elegante esperanza. (565-66)

> I have just written the word "infinite." I have not included that adjective out of mere rhetorical habit; I hereby state that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in some remote place or places the corridors and staircases and hexagons may, inconceivably, end – which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of possible books is *not*. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: *The Library is unlimited but periodic*. If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder – which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. (Hurley 118)

Infinity, then, in this Borgesian world, becomes a never-ending pattern of repetition, an infinite arrangement of finite material. The finite in the infinite is an example of what Jaime Alazraki means when he states that "the common denominator of all of [Borges]'s fiction can be defined as a relativity which governs all things and which, by being the result of a confrontation of opposites, takes on the appearance of a paradox" (45). The Library in *Doctor Who* is likewise both finite and infinite at the same time. We originally see it as a finite world, confined by the size of the planet and the finite albeit vast number of books on the shelves. At the same time, a little girl who sees the library in her dreams tells her doctor "it's always different, the Library goes on forever" ("Silence in the Library"), suggesting an infinity in both time and space. The problem of infinity here is solved thanks to what appears to be an idea borrowed from Borges's short story "El Aleph" ("The Aleph"), published in 1949. While the library is not an image associated with the story, the Borgesian idea of infinity of both time and space contained within a tiny, finite physical space is best explained through the concept of the Aleph:

> Vi una pequeña esfera tornasolada, de casi intolerable fulgor. Al principio la creí giratoria; luego comprendí que ese movimiento era una ilusión producida por los vertiginosos espectáculos que encerraba. El diámetro del Aleph sería de dos o tres centímetros, pero el espacio cósmico estaba ahí, sin disminución de tamaño. Cada cosa (la luna, del espejo, digamos) era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo. (753)

> I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. (Hurley 283)

Guillermo Martínez explains the Aleph in mathematical terms: "éste es el tipo de paradoja que maravillaba a Borges: en el infinito

matemático el todo no es necesariamente mayor que cualquiera de las partes. Hay partes propias que son tan grandes como el todo. Hay partes que son equivalentes al todo" (19) 'this is the type of paradox at which Borges marveled: in mathematical infinity the whole is not necessarily larger than the parts. There are certain parts that are as large as the whole. There are parts that are equivalent to the whole.'[1] Jon Thiem attributes the possible future existence of a Universal Electronic Library to the Borgesian idea of an "Aleph:" "The mythical aura surrounding universal libraries owes a great deal to the alephic principle, of which they can be an embodiment" (65). Thiem's futuristic Universal Library is electronic, and very possible with the invention of data storage. Many critics have, in fact, viewed Borges as a visionary who was able to predict the existence of computer-related technology. David Ciccoricco points out that "the advent of digital technology has radically foregrounded the dynamic processes that Borges explores metaphysically, mathematically, and poetically in his texts" (77). It is precisely through the digital technology of electronic data storage that the Library planet in *Doctor Who* can be physically finite, yet hold seemingly infinite amounts of data: "the whole core of the planet is the index computer. The biggest hard drive ever" ("Silence in the Library").

The Library planet's computer, however, much like Borges's Aleph, does much more than hold an infinite amount of catalogue data; it also raises a number of Borgesian metaphysical questions by storing human beings and keeping them alive in a digital world, thus giving them a certain sense of timelessness and immortality, while at the same time leading them to question the reality of their existence. Questioning reality is a favorite theme of Borges's and appears in several of his short stories, most well-known in "El Sur" (1944) "The South," where the reader is left to wonder whether or not the protagonist dies of septicemia in a sanatorium or in a gaucho knife fight on his way to visit an old family house in the South. Bossart points out that the two possibilities do not "conflict with one another from a Borgesian point of view, for throughout his writings, Borges maintains that fiction and reality interpenetrate one another and there is no clear line of demarcation between them" (17). Similarly, the little girl who frequently sees the Library in her dreams is at one point informed by her doctor that the world is not

real and the library is, causing viewers to question the ontological status of the one world over the other. The connection between the little girl and the Library is mysterious and unclear at first. At one point, she sees the Doctor and the Library on her television screen. Later on, books begin to fly in the Library as the girl pushes the buttons on her remote control. The mystery is finally solved when a character reveals that she is the daughter of his grandfather whose mind has been digitally connected to the library's hard drive. She becomes the hard drive, CAL (Charlotte Abygail Lux), the computer that runs the library. Her father built the library for her in order to preserve her existence and give her an infinite number of books to occupy her mind for eternity prior to her body dying from a mortal illness. In a way, the little girl in the computer is frozen in time much like Jaromir Hladík from Borges's short story "El milagro secreto" (1944) "The Secret Miracle," for whom time stands still for a year as he mentally finishes a play he is writing prior to the executioners' bullets penetrating his body. Martin Stabb argues that "'El milagro secreto' presents a nearly perfect blending of Borges's finest prose style with one of his principal philosophical concerns, the ever-present problem of time" (136). For CAL, time will stand still, and she will be a perpetual little girl as long as the computer continues to function.

Borges's preoccupation with the nature of existence and reality is best known by his short story "Las ruinas circulares" (1944) "The Circular Ruins" in which an entity dreams up a son only to realize that he, himself, is the result of another entity's dream. Mark Frisch points out that "this story, in which a wizard dreams a 'son' into existence and then realizes that he too is an apparition that has been dreamed ... emphasizes that we are dream images, that we exist because we are perceived, and that the line between sleeping and waking is indistinguishable" (51-52). Although CAL may be too young for such philosophical questions, the adult characters she saves from the Vashta Nerada by downloading them into her core do come to question the reality of their existence in the core. While the Doctor's companion, Donna Noble, is digitally stored in the core during "Forest of the Dead," she marries, has children, and leads a seemingly normal life, coming to believe that all else was unreal and a part of her imagination, until another download

points out the inconsistencies, such as the fact that Donna's two children look exactly the same as all the other children around. As Donna ponders what is real and what is not, she once again raises the metaphysical question of the reality of existence. Unlike Borges's negative view presented by the man who realizes he is but a dream of someone else's, the view in *Doctor Who* is much more optimistic. Donna returns to reality, as do the 4,022 others who have been downloaded. By preserving their existence as digital files, CAL turns out to have not only saved them as files, but also saved their lives, preserving them for a safe return to reality. Furthermore, for CAL, as well as for the five characters who die during the episode, the computer provides an everlasting existence frozen in time, a type of heavenly afterlife in the library. According to Gordon Calleja, "items and experiences in virtual worlds are no less real than items and experiences in the material world" (102). This digital existence in the library's hard drive, however, is limited not only by the lifespan of the physical computer, which, like most man-made machines may not be infinite, but also by the amount of data currently stored in the hard drive. Just like Donna's two children are the same two data files that repeat themselves for every child born in the digital world of CAL's head, other elements of this digital reality may also be limited by the amount of data available. Like the library of Babel, this library may be an infinitely repeated finite pattern made finite by the number of possible memories and books stored in CAL's head. Furthermore, CAL no longer exists as a person in the physical world that surrounds her hard drive. Donald Shaw points out, in discussing the death of Beatriz at the opening of "El Aleph," that "we wish to confer 'everness' on emotions, beliefs, events. 'El Aleph,' with its anticlimactic opening, implacably reminds us that all is change, that nothing is fixed, that reality goes on producing its ever-altering kaleidoscopic patters despite our pathetic attempts to freeze the temporal flow" (71-72). Evidence in support of Shaw's argument lies in the fact that seeing the Aleph does not bring Beatriz back to life for the narrator. Rather, her death is repeated endlessly in the Aleph. The question, then, would be, does creating a computer out of a girl's neural pathways bring that girl back to life?

Another utopian library in popular culture is the one represented in the TNT franchise *The Librarian*. The three movies

that currently comprise the franchise are *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear* (2004), *The Librarian: Return to King Solomon's Mines* (2006), and *The Librarian: Curse of the Judas Chalice* (2008). The protagonist is Flynn Carson, a character with numerous university degrees who, much like Borges, loves books more than anything else: "These aren't just books," Flynn tells his mother early in the first film, "These books are slices of the ultimate truth… and they speak to me… like nothing else." The film opens with Flynn's dismissal from school mid-semester, when the professor grants him his twenty-third university degree. Shortly afterwards, he receives a letter written in a seemingly Borgesian script that allows gold letters to flow, appear, and disappear on what appears to be a magical piece of paper, inviting him to apply for the job of "The Librarian" at the Metropolitan Public Library. Upon accepting the job, Flynn enters a Borgesian world of a secret library hidden within the public one, a library that houses not so much every book ever written, but every mythical artifact in existence that comprises both the historical and mythical search for knowledge and an explanation of our existence: it is a Total Library of human existence. Among the artifacts found in the library are items such as Excalibur, Pandora's box, the Fountain of Youth, and the Ark of the Covenant, and, unbeknownst to Flynn, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Each artifact is filled with metaphysical significance.

The Librarian, much like Borges's Yale librarian in the short story "El etnógrafo" (1969) "The Ethnographer," who learns the secret doctrine of an indigenous tribe that would make Western science seem silly in comparison, is privy to secrets most mortals cannot fathom: secrets that would provide answers to the most basic metaphysical questions about the nature of time, space, and the universe. Flynn, furthermore, has a special ability with languages, which introduces one of Borges's favorite themes, language. Borges uses the library to comment on the nature of language in several of his short stories and essays. In an essay entitled "La biblioteca total" 'The Total Library' which he published in *Sur* magazine in 1939, Borges poses the following questions: Is language a random combination of signs that can be reproduced at will, or is there a pattern behind the combination? Can the entirety of that pattern be held in a total library that would house every possible combination

of letters and words in every possible language? What starts out at the beginning of the essay as "El capricho o imaginación o utopía de la Biblioteca Total" (24) 'the fancy or the imagination or the utopia of the Total Library' (Weinberger 214), becomes at its conclusion "un horror subalterno: la vasta Biblioteca contradictoria, cuyos desiertos verticales de libros corren el incesante albur de cambiarse en otros y que todo lo afirman, lo niegan y lo confunden como una divinidad que delira" (27) 'a subaltern horror: the vast, contradictory Library, whose vertical wilderness of books runs the incessant risk of changing into others that affirm, deny, and confuse everything like a delirious god' (Weinberger 216). In "La biblioteca de Babel," the narrator questions the ability of the very text he is writing to transmit meaning to its readers:

> No puedo combinar unos caracteres
>
> *dhcmrlchtdj*
>
> que la divina Biblioteca no haya previsto y que en alguna de sus lenguas secretas no encierren un terrible sentido … (Un número *n* de lenguas posibles usa el mismo vocabulario; en algunos, el símbolo *biblioteca* admite la correcta definición ubicuo y perdurable sistema de galerías hexagonales, pero biblioteca es pan o pirámide o cualquier otra cosa, y las siete palabras que la definen tienen otro valor. Tú, que me lees, ¿estás seguro de entender mi lenguaje?). (565)

> There is no combination of characters one can make – *dhcmrlchtdj*, for example – that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance.… (A number *n* of the possible languages employ the same vocabulary; in some of them, the *symbol* "library" possesses the correct definition "everlasting, ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries," while a library – the thing – is a loaf of bread or a pyramid or something else, and the six words that define it themselves have other definitions. You who read me – are you certain you understand my language?). (Hurley 117)

Borges seems to suggest that each combination of symbols we use to produce words in one language, hides behind it countless possibilities

of meanings in others, and that there is a danger behind our lack of awareness of those meanings. Sylvia Molloy affirms that "para Borges el nombre … significa claramente un peligro. Nombrar sería detenerse, fijar un segmento textual, y acaso creer excesivamente en él." (141) 'For Borges the name … clearly signifies a danger. Naming would be stopping, pinning down a textual segment, and perhaps believing in it excessively.' Whereas Borges writes of a world where language is arbitrary, naming is to be avoided, and meaning varies according to culture, Flynn learns "the language of the birds," the mythical original language that united all of humankind prior to the destruction of the Tower of Babel. Were this language to exist, the Borgesian confusion resulting from multiple other tongues would disappear, meaning would be fixed on the text and one would not be afraid of naming, because naming would include an original meaning that is not ambiguous. It is as if, by learning the original language, Flynn becomes aware of all the possible combinations and hidden meanings that the Borgesian narrator suggests may be out there, gaining a total knowledge of the infinite possibilities.

Just like the graduate student in "El etnógrafo," Flynn comes to possess knowledge that would defy the laws of science. Most artifacts contained in the secret Library cannot be explained through science. Rather than casting doubt on the ability of science to explain the universe like Borges does, *Quest for the Spear* proposes that it is not science that is the problem, but the fact that our brains are so small, we have not yet come up with the appropriate laws. Borgesian time that can be slowed down, stopped, and manipulated is then possible, as, in *Return to King Solomon's Mines*, King Solomon's power came from a secret book whose flowing letters allowed him to connect with other dimensions and bend both space and time. In fact, Flynn is tempted to use the powers of the demonic book and bring back his father, who was killed in his youth. During the time of temptation, the scene turns nightmarish, as Flynn, in a demonic trance, appears to conjure up ghosts from another dimension. In the end, he overcomes temptation and destroys the book. The power of a mythical book and the fear that comes from reading it are themes that appear in Borges's short story "El libro de arena" (1975) "The Book of Sand," where the narrator receives an infinite book, but upon reading it "comprendí que el libro era monstruoso.

De nada me sirvió considerar que no menos monstruoso era yo, que lo percibía con ojos y lo palpaba con diez dedos con uñas. Sentí que era un objeto de pesadilla, una cosa obscena que inflamaba y corrompía la realidad" (90) 'I realized that the book was monstrous. It was cold consolation to think that I, who looked upon it with my eyes and fondled it with my ten flesh-and-bone fingers, was no less monstrous than the book. I felt it was a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality' (Hurley 483). Critics, such as Guillermo Martínez, see this monstrous book as a collection of all the pages of the books found in the library of Babel (28). While Flynn destroys the powerful book in his possession, Borges's narrator hides his on the shelves of the National Library, thus allowing the infinite book an infinite future of infinite possible readers. Nataly Tcherepashenets argues that in "the infinite/impossible book [is] a metaphoric representation of the universe in its totality. The place as an object/metaphor, which incorporates infinite objects, and as a concrete geographical location, illustrates the tension between the concepts of infinity and finitude" (24). The same tension is echoed in *The Librarian* as Flynn, upon discovering a whole new part of the Library in *The Curse of the Judas Chalice*, asks "how big is the Library?" only to receive the indefinite answer of "as big as we need it to be," suggesting that much like a Borgesian library, this one has the potential of being infinite, although it is not necessarily so.

Although Flynn's character is privy to special knowledge, he is not the god-like figure that appears in "La biblioteca de Babel," a hypothetical figure of a librarian who has found the secret cipher that would explain all and give perfect knowledge to its reader. Unlike Borges's hypothetical librarian, Flynn does not hold all the answers and does not always understand his situation. There is, however, another character by the name of Judson, who appears to be a representation of such a figure. Judson does not seem to be limited by the size of his brain and appears to defy the laws of science. He breaks the scientific laws of space and matter by walking through walls, placing himself in other people's bodies such as a barber and a client at a barber shop where Flynn goes, and popping up on a street car that just ran him over in front of Flynn. Furthermore, *Curse of the Judas Chalice* suggests that Judson is, in fact, Yehuda, "the greatest librarian of all," the one who built the library and is the keeper of

all its secrets. He is over two thousand years old and is somehow able to continue his existence through time, suggesting the theme of eternity. It is through the revelation of Judson's identity that Flynn learns that the Library is "pitched in a larger battle between good and evil." Flynn learns this significant piece of information from a vampire who has joined the forces of good in order to protect the mythical Judas Chalice, an object that is said to have the power to restore life to vampires.

Vampires also happen to be major characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), a television series that has already captured academe's attention. A number of journal articles and several essay collections have taken Joss Whedon's show out of the realms of the purely popular and into the realms of the scholarly. Currently there is an entire refereed online journal entitled *Slayage* that dedicates itself to studies of *Buffy* and other Joss Whedon programs. Although Rupert Giles, the librarian, is mentioned in many of the existing studies, the library as a space and the significance of Giles's job as librarian are points that have heretofore escaped most critics' attention. Both Giles and the Sunnydale High School library are key elements in the series that continue the Borgesian tradition of raising metaphysical questions through the metaphor of the library, specifically in the early seasons of the series, prior to the library's destruction at the end of the third season.

The location of the Sunnydale High School library is a key feature in bringing up metaphysical questions. In "The Harvest," (1997), we find out that it is located on a "Hellmouth," a "sort of portal between this reality and the next," or a place where the boundaries between dimensions weaken and demon creatures, which, in the Buffyverse are said to have preceded human existence, are able to enter our world. James Lawler states that

> while our human constitution obliges us to represent different worlds as separated from ours by great distances, in reality different densities and dimensions of the cosmic order may in fact impinge on one another in more proximate ways. Portals into other space-and-time dimensions may therefore really lurk in the recesses of high school libraries. (105)

Although demons and vampires may be of little interest to Borges,

the idea of multiple dimensions contained in a single physical space closely resembles the notion of the Aleph and its ability to contain the entire time and space of the universe in a single location. According to the metaphysics of the "Buffyverse," which Giles explains in the library, demons lived on this planet long before humans, and were eventually driven underground into the infinite number of different dimensions that make up Hell. The show breaks with Christian tradition, just as Borges does by casting doubt upon the existence of meaning behind the universe of his Library. Furthermore, Borges's metaphorical demonic library depicted in "La biblioteca total" becomes a literal demonic setting in *Buffy*. This library has to be destroyed in the series, just as the Aleph is destroyed in the Borges story. Upon the library's destruction, the gap between dimensions closes and the world is safe, at least for a time. In "El Aleph," however, the narrator suggests that other Alephs may exist. Similarly, in *Buffy*, other ways to cross dimensions appear, thus allowing the series to continue for four seasons following the library's destruction and further beyond the television screen into the world of comic books. However, although they are forced to destroy the library, the characters are careful to save the books that it holds, and these books continue to serve as sources of knowledge and revelation. These books are objects that can also be dangerous like the Borgesian book of sand or hold the secret answers like the hypothetical cipher in the library of Babel.

In *Buffy*, the library is also the main setting for revelations. Similarly to "El milagro secreto," where Hladík goes to a library in order to receive a divine message from another world, Buffy finds herself entering the library in order to receive a reminder of her calling. Although she is already aware of her position as Slayer based on the film that precedes the series, the calling has to be reiterated in the series and the place to do so would be the library. Forced into the library by her need for textbooks, Buffy encounters Giles who hands her an antique looking book bound in black leather, on whose cover appear the golden letters VAMPYR. Buffy's immediate reaction is to run away. It is not until a dead body with vampire piercings on the neck appears in the locker room that Buffy reluctantly returns to the library. This time, Giles explains to Buffy that she cannot abandon her duties: "Because you are The

Slayer. To each generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world. A Chosen One. One born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth"). Once Buffy accepts her duties, the library becomes the central setting of her operations.

Toby Daspit confirms the library's importance, arguing that "at Sunnydale High, the most common setting for *BtVS* is the school library (located on the Hellmouth), which although institutional, is subverted by Giles (who somehow finds room for his multiple resource texts and weapons as well as space in which to 'train' Buffy) and the Scooby gang who hold meetings and research sessions there" (128). Giles is the key figure in the library. By being Buffy's Watcher, Giles is given a place above the Chosen One—he is the one who is to guide the Slayer, the brain behind Buffy's physical ability. He is the one that will train and educate the Slayer, and he does an excellent job. Keith Fudge points to Giles's education skills, stating that he "seems to be the kind of educator we are told to be in all those education classes" (209). He is also a sort of Borgesian special librarian, one who is privy to secret knowledge that defies the laws of science. Not surprisingly, Giles's knowledge comes from books, and in the very first episode of the series, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Buffy compares her Watcher to a textbook with arms. Whenever a new situation arises, Giles usually goes to the bookshelves, pulls out a volume, and finds the answer. It would be appropriate to argue that rather than subverting the library, Giles completes it. Every library needs its librarian, and by making room for weapons, training sessions, and texts, Giles simply adds another level of totality to the multidimensional library. It is through the library that Borges poses a majority of the metaphysical concerns that define his writing. It is also through the library that some contemporary television programs have chosen to express their own metaphysical concerns. Some programs like *The Librarian* appear to echo Borges's metaphysics, while others such as *Buffy* suggest a metaphysics all their own that is quite different from that of Borges. Lisa Block de Behar reminds us that "Borges's library multiplies, in parts, the books of others in his books and his in those of others, accumulating the potential of a partial, endless literary play" (1). As a result of this literary play, Borges's library now exists independently of Borges. It has acquired its own presence that

stretches into the world of television and is thus accessible to many viewers who may never have the opportunity to read Borges and learn of the original metaphysical library.

Endnotes

1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

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