

LT338 Why Borges? Fiction and Writing as Cultural Reflection

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Office Hours: by appointment

Course Description

This course offers a new approach to the oeuvre of Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Setting out from his first three books of essays *Inquisitions* (1925), *The Size of my Hope* (1926), and *The Language of the Argentinians* (1928) –later excluded from his *Complete Works*– we will explore the degree to which these writings are informed by new philosophical ideas that were gaining currency in Europe from the 1920s onwards (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Mauthner, Vaihinger) and, at the same time, establish his “peripheral” positioning as a writer in regard to those “cultural fields” (Bourdieu). Taking into account this double character, we proceed to read his later books of essays and short stories –focusing mainly on *Discussion* (1932), *Fictions* (1944), *The Aleph* (1949), *Other Inquisitions* (1952)– as complex “cultural artifacts,” i.e. verbal artifacts that question the traditional understanding of notions such as genre, literature, philosophy, and culture through a transgression of their alleged limits and definitions. With this approach we intend to show how his texts, resorting to this insistent “hybridization” (García Canclini), stage a performative form of thought through literature that proposes the possibility of generating new meanings while setting in motion a complex set of procedures that allow us to rethink the notions of language, thought and culture.

Requirements

Class preparation

Preparing for class involves reading thoughtfully and engaging with the set text for each class. Students are expected to read those texts attentively, taking notes about difficult passages and cultural references. It is essential to pay close attention to the argument, in the case of essays, and to the plot, in the case of fiction, as well as to literary devices such as irony, word uses, humor, metaphors, etc. It is through the interplay of those elements that the more complex and far-reaching meaning/sense explored by the course can be born out. Borges’ texts are famous for their wide array of quotations and references (some of which are intentionally false or distorted). In most cases, however, they can be easily clarified or have been extensively studied, and hence available to the general reader. All of them ultimately contribute to the broader reading we are proposing in the course: that of Borges’ work as a form of cultural reflection.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement.

If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assessment

The assessment will be made based on two essays and class participation (See 'Grade Breakdown' and 'Essay Deadlines' below).

Writing Assignments

The deadlines for all writing assignments can be found under 'Essay deadlines.'

The midterm essay (2,000 words) should explore and develop some of the theoretical and fictional themes or problems studied in Borges's essays and fiction-essays. It should demonstrate your understanding of this particular approach to Borges's oeuvre. A list of

suggested topics will be provided by the instructor. The final essay (3,000–3,500 words) will consist of an analytical reading of two of Borges's short stories, highlighting how their implications extend beyond the surface narrative and thus operate as reflections on the workings of culture.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Classroom participation: 30%

Midterm Essay: 30%

Final Essay: 40%

Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction: Situating Borges in “glocal” context

Tues, 2 September: Introduction to the course, presentation of the syllabus, discussion

Reading:

Jorge Luis Borges: “The Argentinian Writer and the Tradition”

Week 2 – Rethinking Thought and Genres

Tues, 9 September

Readings:

Friedrich Nietzsche: “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (Excerpts)

Clifford Geertz: “Blurred Genres”

Week 3 – A glimpse into the Operations of Cultural Artifacts

Tues, 16 September: How to think about/with cultural artifacts (or literature, for that matter)

Reading:

Luis Miguel Isava: “What are Cultural Artifacts and What they Do?”

Week 4 – Borges and (his) Theory of Language 1

Tues, 23 September

Readings

J.L. Borges: “The Infinite Language”

J.L. Borges: “An Investigation of the Word”

Week 5 – Borges and (his) Theory of Language 2

Tues, 30 September

Readings:

J.L. Borges: “Verbiage for Poems”

J.L. Borges: “The Nothingness of Personality”

J.L. Borges: Excerpts translated from other early texts

Week 6- Borges and (his) Theory of Reality (or Art)

Tues, 7 October

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "John Wilkins' Analytical Language"

J.L. Borges: "The Postulation of Reality"

J.L. Borges: "A Profession of Literary Faith"

Week 7 – The Book or the Universe

Tues, 14 October

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "The Total Library"

J.L. Borges: "Kafka and his Precursors"

J.L. Borges: "Avatars of the Tortoise"

FALL BREAK Monday, October 20th- Sunday, October 26th,

Week 8 – This Outlandish Universe of Ours

Tues, 28 October:

Reading:

J.L. Borges: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

Week 9 – The Limits of Perception or Thinking of/Reducing Reality

Tues, 4 November:

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "Funes, His Memory"

J.L. Borges: "The Aleph"

Week 10 – Cultural (mis)Conceptions as World Making

Tues, 11 November:

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "Averroes' Search"

J.L. Borges: "The Writing of the God"

Week 11 – Language (re)Shaping the World

Tues, 18 November

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"

J.L. Borges: "The Library of Babel"

Week 12 – What Can and Cannot be Thought

Tues, 25 November:

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "The Lottery in Babylon"

J.L. Borges: "There are more things"

Week 13 – History and its Versions

Tues, 2 December

Readings:

J.L. Borges: "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"

J.L. Borges: "Three Versions of Judas"

Week 14 – Borgesian Ethnographies/Final remarks

Tues, 9 December

Readings

J.L. Borges: "The Ethnographer"

J.L. Borges: "Brodie's Report"

Mon, December 15 – Fri, December 19th, 2025

Completion week

Essay Deadlines

Midterm essay (2000 words), due 23:59 Saturday, October 18.

Final essay (3000 words), due 23:59 Friday, December 19 (December 7, for graduating students).

Library Resources and Book Purchase Suggestions

All materials for the course will be made available on-line.

Students who are interested in increasing their personal library *are encouraged* to purchase the following books:

- Jorge Luis Borges. *Collected Fictions*. New York: Penguin: 1999
- Jorge Luis Borges. *Selected Non-Fiction*. New York : Penguin, 1999

Both books, along with Edwin Williamson (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP: 2014), will be placed in the Reserve Shelf at the library.