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## CONICET INTERVIEW CYCLE

### **Argentine graphic novels: “The author-reader relationship has changed, forcing us to check old theoretical formulas”**

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A CONICET researcher analyses the history of the illustrated narratives and the place they occupy in the Argentine’s ordinary life

Laura Vazquez, who holds a PhD in Social Sciences and is an assistant researcher of CONICET at the Gino Germani Research Institute, studies comics and cartoons from a historical and cultural point of view. For her, this field, also known as illustrated narratives, is framed within a greater area of studies: visual and graphic arts and more generally, within the history of the media, art, Argentine and Latin-American culture.

Besides, the researcher is a scriptwriter and a graphic novel critic. In 2012, she published *Fuera de Cuadro*, a book that collects her monthly reviews of the *Fierro* magazine and other publications.

#### **How was the beginning of the Argentine graphic novel?**

It started in the early 20th century, as an import product following the style of comic and custom strips of the North American press. The local market began to develop in the twenties and that led to the rise of the golden age of Argentine comics in the forties. Thus, the productions of *Quinterno*, *Columba* or *Civita* became companies. These are pre-television times, with audiences that began to approach the theatre, the cinema, the radio or comics and that was part of an offer where entertainment and culture were not opposed options. We refer to a mass industry and a source of employment for thousands of cartoonists.

#### **Which were the influences?**

The cartoonists of the first decades did not develop an Argentine style, in most cases, they were Spanish and Italian immigrants that landed on our country and found a promising opportunity with graphic novel, cartoons and advertisement. Some of them, in different ways, introduced Argentine archetypes such as the figure of “el gaucho” or “el compadrito”, certain emblematic places of Buenos Aires or some custom idiomatic expressions. The stylistic form and technique of the cartoonists came from a method developed by the North American and English syndicates. In the 40’s, the figure of the graphic novel editor, with unique characteristics of the publishing and mass industry, appeared.

#### **Has the market changed over the years?**

Yes, it has. During the 60’s there was a downturn in sales due to different factors: mass access to television, economic and political crisis in Argentina, the decline of minimum wages, the cartoonists’ and scriptwriters’ exile and the arrival of foreign graphic novels. In the 70’s, when the

graphic novel becomes a cultural product, it developed a complex relationship between art and market and thus remarkable publishing projects such as *Satiricón* (1972), *Skorpio* (1974), *El Péndulo* (1979), *Humor Registrado* (1978) and *Fierro* (1984) emerged.

### **Which were the consequences after the drop in sales?**

The reduction of the print run is a significant phenomenon but not the only one. The editors developed strategies to keep the industry afloat. Essentially, they tried to transform that disposable magazine into a permanent product. During a stage of contraction of the market, distinctive features were incorporated such as the hardcover, the edition numbers and the collectible posters, deluxe editions, and the boxes to keep them. Some went beyond the newspaper store and started to be sold in book stores. Besides, the genre changed its identity and the name 'graphic novel' was coined appealing to literary circles.

### **How would you describe the market nowadays?**

On the one hand, I would say that there is a limited but solid market. On the other hand, there is a current feature called fandom or environment, which experiences exponential growth. Nowadays, the number of people attending graphic novel events is surprising. We could refer to an extended limited field where cartoonists have several employment opportunities ranging from the cinema, advertising graphic, visual arts or design. Furthermore, critical assessment and author recognition have become crucial since they determine success or failure of a piece. The author-reader relationship has changed, forcing us to check old theoretical formulas.

### **How was the role of the cartoonist in the different periods of Argentina?**

It has changed its regulations over the years. In the 30's and the 50's, to be a cartoonist was the opposite of being an artist. This art vs. market tension was an intrinsic quality of the media and, for some professionals it was a real affliction. There is one emblematic case that illustrates this issue and it involves Alberto Breccia. He had always thought the arts from an evolutionary point of view because he considered the graphic novel was the forerunner of painting but, at the same time, he despised the major arts circles. In his contradictions, he perfectly expressed the ambiguity and complexity of the media. It is important to take into account the fact that these cartoonists were labourers who were part of a fordist production line where the originals remained in the hands of the editors and intellectual property did not exist. In spite of all these limitations, graphic artists like Breccia broke the rules of the language and conventionality.

### **When did this change?**

From the 60's and 70's on, cartoonists and scriptwriters began to assume themselves to be artists because the rules had changed completely. Currently, symbolic capital is as important as economic capital. Instead of selling one million copies, they sell a thousand, but the most important fact is engaged with other issues.

### **You have recently published your book *Fuera de cuadro...* How do you deal with being a researcher and working as a critic?**

The book is a collection of my interventions in the *Fierro* magazine. It was a pleasure to write the Ojo al Cuadrado section and the reissue of that material allowed me to approach other audience. For me, research and critique go together and I address them with the same seriousness, or clumsiness. The difference lies in the register: in my critiques I consult sources and develop the narrative with experimentation and fluently. Furthermore, I am interested in working for different audiences and fields with detachment and freedom as if there were no last word.

## **Training**

Laura Vazquez is an assistant researcher of CONICET at the Gino Germani Research Institute (IGG). She holds a PhD in Social Sciences and has a degree in Social Communication at the University of Buenos Aires.

Currently, she is an associate professor and holds the chair of "Historia de los medios Argentina y Latinoamericana" at the University of Moreno. Besides, she is the director of the Congreso Internacional Bienal sobre historieta y humor gráfico "Viñetas Serias" and coordinator of the area of illustrated narratives, a course of studies of Communication Sciences, FCS-UBA.

The book *Fuera de cuadro, ideas sobre historieta* was edited by Agua Negra in September 2012 as part of the Drawn Languages collection.

As a scriptwriter, Vazquez published *Entreactos* and *Historias Corrientes*, both edited in Spain.

## **About the CONICET**

The National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) is the main organization in charge of the promotion of Science and Technology in Argentina. The principal objective of this agency is to boost and implement scientific and technical activities in the country and in all different fields of knowledge.

This institution has its own researchers and professionals. Thus, CONICET offers different grants and finances projects, institutions and national research centres in all parts of the country.

CONICET comprises general areas so as to enable comprehensive development of scientific and technological research. Thus, it is in charge of all social interest and productive areas of Argentina. Apart from that, this organization promotes different exchanges and stimulates national and international cooperative processes.

Areas of knowledge of CONICET:

- Agrarian, Engineering and Material Sciences.
- Biological and Health Sciences.
- Exact and Natural Sciences.
- Social Science and humanities.

Technology is present in all the areas and it promotes the implementation of knowledge.

Founded in 1958, CONICET is a national institution under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation of Argentina. Besides, this agency is considered as one of the principal assets for the national fund in terms of science and technology.

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