Bandes dessinées, comics, historietas, quadrinhos, the transnational circulation of comics throughout the Americas

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The very first cultural event for the promotion of comics was the Exposição Internacional de Histórias em Quadrinhos which took place on June 18, 1951 in São Paulo, fourteen years prior to the Bordighera salon (in Italy) usually cited as the very first comics festival. The specificity of the event in Brazil was that it presented not local but US productions. There had previously been various “exhibitions” on comics in the US (1944, 1948), in France (1948) and Italy (1950), but these had been didactico-critical in nature whereas the Brazilian event was the first to combine exhibits of reproductions and originals with reviews and debates on comics as a means of expression with the aim of reaching a better understanding of the phenomenon as opposed to diabolizing it.

There is a parallel here with the comics biennial organized in 1968 by the Instituto di Tella in Buenos Aires, a major event in the history of comics, though one little known outside of Argentina. The Bienal Internacional de la Historieta was a highly ambitious project, brainchild of Oscar Masotta, must-see theoretician of the genre in Argentina (and pioneer of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the Spanish-speaking cultural area). It exhibited 180 comics representative of the seven countries invited (United States, England, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, Brazil) as well as local productions. It displayed reproductions in aluminum frames on screens disposed according to a plan devised by the architects Rodolfo Möller, Antonio Gaché and Augusto Brengio. The entire exhibition was designed and carried out by Masotta together with the filmmaker David Lipszyk. Its scope reached beyond the biennial itself in that it aimed to set up an archive and a documentary base on comics at the Instituto di Tella. Concomitantly, the theoretical study of comics was gaining ground in academia, in particular via the
institution of a professorship of comics at Buenos Aires University. Masotta set up the journal *LD Literatura dibujada* (today held in all the reverence due to a “cult” production), offering critical articles and comic strips. He went on to publish *La historieta en el mundo moderno*, a foundational work for the theory of historietas. These emblematic 1960s projects suffered greatly from the period of political instability which led into the 1969 coup d’état by Juan Carlos Onganía. The comics market deteriorated badly, with the departure of several artists for more prosperous conditions — in Europe, particularly Great Britain (the example of Fleetway editions is eloquent here) and the United States — constituting a symptom of this decline. It was the end of a period of expansion for Argentinian comics, now remembered as a “golden age”.

Part and parcel of this industrial crisis was a north-south shift in the form of the irruption into Argentina of magazines produced by the Mexican publisher Novaro, very well priced and of superior printed quality, which resulted in unsustainable competition. This is one instance among many of the massive introduction of US comics into Spanish-speaking countries via Mexico, the gateway, in terms of translation and publishing, for US cultural products into Latin America as a whole.

Comics have been on the scene in the Americas since the 19th century. However, the history and the dynamics of their circulation between the languages, nations and cultural zones of this vast continent have yet to be mapped or even documented in any detail. The movements involved are characterized in general by considerable asymmetry due to different sized markets (for example, the US as opposed to Canada), by the impact different political regimes can have on cultural production and diffusion (e.g. democracy as opposed to dictatorship) and by more or less marked discrepancies between cultural ecosystems (of which linguistic barriers constitute one variable among others), all of which eases or hinders the acclimatation process for comics imported from elsewhere. It is frequent in multilingual zones that comics published in one language are marketed concomitantly with those in the dominant local language: in Quebec, American comic books have long been widely available in the original and, between 1968 and 1980, were so alongside Quebec translations published by Héritage editions. In the same way, since the 1950s at least, many press stands in Florida and south western States have been selling Spanish language comics from Mexico. In some cases these are local versions of *historietas* originating in other Latin American countries (for instance *Condorito*, a weekly published in Mexico from 1983 through 2000 by Novedades Editores featuring the celebrity baby condor character created by the Chilean comics writer Pepo in 1949 and popular throughout Latin America).

In Latin America the existence of a common language is a major advantage, a unifying factor between the different territories. However, this ease of communication between some forty countries (with comprehension being fluid between Spanish and Portuguese speakers) is not always enough to counteract certain forces of fragmentation either exterior or interior. The existence of arbitrary political frontiers in relationship to cultural spheres, the intervention of the US and international financial corporations in the political, economic and social dynamics of the region has fractured continental unity. This unfortunate state of affairs is echoed in the situation of comics, where, with just a few notable exceptions — long popular icons such as *Condorito* (Chile), Ptoruzú, Mafalda (Argentinia both), Mônica (Brazil) and some others — non-Anglophone comics did not have large circulations in Latin America throughout the 20th century. It was not
until the 21st century that proper intra-American synergies began to emerge, moving beyond characters and stories to encompass associations of writers, copyright markets between independent publishers, comics festivals and salons. The latter now play a central role in a new age where Latin-American comics circulate with hitherto unprecedented speed and dynamism. A graphic example of which is the festival “Viñetas con altura” in Bolivia which, as Raphaël Barban explains in the interview here, has set up a transnational space for creation, exchange and support for young authors throughout Latin America.

US comic strips, circulated either by syndicates serving the press or by comic book publishers, have been part of the scenery in Latin American mass cultural consumption since last century. Long considered as pure entertainment (even more so than cinema and that is saying something!) comics were a part of US soft power strategy during the Cold War, spreading a euphemized and consumerist world vision in evident contradiction with the ideologies of class struggle and revolution arising in various countries. The most expressive (and, seen from the 21st century, caricatural) example was the repression deployed in Argentina in the early 1970s against the authors of a pamphlet targeting the capitalist ideology of comics featuring ultra-famous Walt Disney characters. In 1971, Ariel Dorfman, professor of comparative literature at the University of Chile and cultural advisor to President Salvador Allende, co-authored over ten days with Armand Mattelart, a Belgian sociologist established in Chile, a pamphlet entitled *Para leer al Pato Donald* stigmatizing the expression of American cultural imperialism in comics featuring Donald and his filthy rich uncle Scrooge McDuck. In sprightly prose, accessible to a wide public, the book went through three successive editions before being publicly burned on television alongside other subversive works in the immediate aftermath of Pinochet’s *coup d’état* of September 11 1973. As often with censorship, the attempted suppression on political grounds had the reverse effect and Dorfman and Mattelart’s work became a classic of ideological deconstruction and the intercultural analysis of Disney comics adapted for a Chilean readership at the outset of the 1970s.

Comics, like other vehicles of expression, have proved capable of accompanying and representing political and historical evolutions in Latin America. Back in the 1950s during the Cuban revolution, comics and other cultural forms were very much party to the hot debates on policies and memorial practices. In the present day, the recent elections in Chile, pitting the left-wing and self-proclaimed ecologist, feminist and regionalist parliamentarian Gabriel Boric against the far right candidate Antonio Kast, occupied much comic strip space; all the writers active in the field weighed in and communicated energetically against the threat of a return to fascist rule. In the weeks prior to the vote, the pro-Boric camp went transnational with several comics authors in Argentina, Peru and Bolivia expressing their support.

With comics as with many other cultural fields, the United States occupies a dominant position, influencing the entire continent. But though the sheer volume of their production has swamped Canada and Latin America alike since the early 20th century, the US have played a paradoxically small role in the circulation of comics from elsewhere in the Americas, nor have they enabled non-US writers to become established in the US market. The rare exceptions that come to mind are Sergio Aragonés (Hispano-Mexican, born 1937) and Antonio Prohías (Cuban, 1921-1998) both mainstays from the 1960s of the satirical magazine *Mad*, or again, the very talented...
Argentinian author José Luis Salina (1908-1985) who illustrated from 1951 through 1968 the highly popular daily “Cisco Kid” strip for King Features Syndicate. On the Canadian side, two immigrants built a career in the US: Harold Foster (1892-1982), who, with “Tarzan” in 1929 and “Prince Valiant” in 1937, created two of the most memorable comics characters, and Joseph Shuster (1914-1992) originally from Toronto before his family emigrated to Cleveland and co-created Superman with Jerry Siegel in 1938. More recent examples are the Brazilian authors Marvel and DC have employed since the 1990s, authors such as Roger Cruz (born 1971) and Mike Deodato (born 1963).

Comics imported on to the US market from beyond the frontiers to the north or to the south were also a marginal affair. One happy exception in the early 1940s was the appearance in the progressive New York daily PM and a handful of other newspapers of Patoruzú by Dante Quintero, the most popular comic strip in Argentina. However, when the Argentinian weekly Patoruzito started to appear in October 1945 (it remained in publication for seventeen years), fifteen of its twenty-five strips originated from the US, reflecting post-war economic reality where the abundant availability of cheap-to-import US comics meant that magazines could provide content while awaiting the emergence local productions capable of filling the void: in 1952 there remained only four non-Argentinian series in Patoruzito. Indeed, as far as comics are concerned Argentina has, since the 1930s, been to Latin America as Belgium to Europe! The great scriptwriter Héctor Germán Oesterheld (kidnapped and probably murdered by the military junta in 1977) was convinced of the need to join battle for a national comic strip industry bearing its own distinctive signature and organized on a co-operative basis. He practiced these principles in his own work and also in his publishing activity with Frontera, a mythic publisher where Oesterheld, a geologist with a passion for fiction, gave the full measure of his potentialities as a scriptwriter by working with all the greatest cartoonists of the time.

One should be wary of looking at the circulation of South American comics in the US through the prism of their presence on the other side of the Atlantic: for amateurs in Europe it is inconceivable that Americans had to wait until the 21st century to discover Quino’s Mafalda (1964-1973), that beacon of Argentinian comics already in European circulation by the 1970s, or Mort Cinder (1962-1964), drawings by Alberto Breccia and script by Héctor Germán Oesterheld. In the States, it was not until the 1980s that various alternative publishers of comic books began sporadically to issue strips from Latin America, mainly Argentinian, sometimes adopted because they had previously made their mark in Europe. The most eloquent example is the case of Alberto Breccia: the task of translating and publishing his work in English was undertaken only a few years ago. The publisher Fantagraphics, having acquired the requisite rights, launched the project of publishing the greater part of Breccia’s work in the States. Breccia’s accession in 2021 to the Eisner Hall of Fame — a sort of honorific areopagus of comic strip authors designated yearly at the San Diego Comic-Con — marked a waypoint in the “belated” process of recognition of this key author in the history of 20th century comics.

Apart from the fact that comics only became constituted as a subject for academic research at the dawn of the 21st century, the still numerous dark areas in this field of study can be ascribed to identified, well-known factors affecting the history of other forms of expression over the last two centuries, i.e. the overbearing preponderance of English, and to a lesser extent of French in relationship to Spanish and Portuguese in...
the spread of research; the strong correlation between public visibility and academic “interest”: the more “recognized” a cultural production is, the more it becomes a subject for academic research. As soon as one steps outside the historical loci for the production of comics, that is the United States, Argentina and, to a lesser extent, Canada, the rest of the continent, Caribbean included, comprise a group whose comics literature production is still undiscovered territory for the North. The process of cultural legitimization of comics, set in motion half a century ago, is still only in its initial phase in much of the developing world. As the article by Chris Reyns in this issue shows, Canada, a country where multiculturalism is institutionalized, provides a striking example of a national space in which the circulation of comics is both unequal in extent and dissymmetrical as regards practitioners’ original language and cultural identity.

The aim of this issue of IdeAs is

1. to provide a picture of the diversity of a cultural form which, throughout the cultural space of the American continent, is not restricted to the overblown visibility of the US comic books, but is equally to be found in Spanish language historietas (especially those from the two heavyweights, Mexico and Argentina), in Portuguese language quadrinhos and comics in French;
2. to highlight the ways in which the circulation of comics occurs throughout the American continent via works, authors, publishers and corpora in English, Spanish, Portuguese or French.

NOTES

2. The Instituto Torcuato di Tella (ITDT) was an unprecedented artistic endeavor which left its mark on Buenos Aires in the 1960s. It’s founding mission was the furthering of high level study and research with the aim of modernizing culture and the arts in Argentina. It became a breeding ground for artists and avant-gardist practice.
6. For instance: Sinner (Fantagraphics, 1987-1990) by José Muñoz (dr) and Carlos Sampayo (sc); Evaristo: Deep city (Catalan, 1986) by C. Sampayo (sc) and Enrique Breccia (dr); The Moving Fortress (4 Winds, 1988) by Ricardo Barreiro (sc) and Enrique Alcatena (dr), New York: Year Zero (Eclipse, 1988) by Ricardo Barreiro (sc) and Juan Zanotto (dr); Perramus (Fantagraphics, 1991-1992) by

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Alberto Breccia (dr) and Juan Sasturain (sc). A further addition to the list would be *Fallout 3000* (Caliber, 1996), a Brazilian strip by cartoonist Mike Deodato and his father, Deodato Borges.

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