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Caught Between Manga and the Graphic Novel: Two Cartoonists' Trajectories in Contemporary Argentinian "National Comics"

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What do Ignacio Minaverry and Berliac's trajectories say about comics in contemporary Argentina? By cross-referencing their bodies of work with the discourses surrounding them, this article explores both of them as a blueprint for two different positioning strategies within the comics field. Growing up in the early 1990s, they were brought up in a time of daunting change, as the remains of a once-mighty national comics industry finally disappeared and a nascent (imported) comic-book shop circuit exposed them to new graphic narratives, such as manga. After publishing what was labeled as the "first Argentinian manga", Minaverry "edited" his own biography/bibliography and phased out any overt mangaesque traits in his cartooning in order to fit into a field increasingly geared towards the graphic novel, and was rewarded for it. In contrast, Berliac publicly "transitioned" from cartoonist to "mangaka" in defiance of what he understood was the chauvinist establishment of Argentinian "national comics" in a (successful) bid to gain notoriety. As conclusion, contrasting both trajectories reveals the importance of the discursive and material tensions between national and foreign in a peripheral comics field, playing a hefty role in its mechanics of gatekeeping and the distribution of symbolic capital.

Despite being contemporaries, Argentinian artists Ignacio Minaverry (b. 1978) and Ciro Hernández (b. 1982), better known under his *nom de plume* Berliac, may be proposed as having polar opposite trajectories. Both were caught as young readers in the whirlwind of manga's global phenomenon during the tail end of the 20th century, which included Argentina, and both rose to prominence as cartoonists part of the "New Argentinian Comics'" generation of the 2000's. But the former managed to position himself as a *wunderkind* thanks to a strong work ethic, an ear tuned to the times in which he had to draw in and, no less important, a distinctive and powerful visual narrative, as can be seen in Dora Bardavid's celebrated adventures. The latter made of a nomadic life, a penchant for stylistic exploration and the capacity to theorize about art the basis on which he built himself as an avant-garde, controversial artist with such works as his mangaesque graphic novel *Sadboi*.

This article explores their trajectories as a blueprint of what Pierre Bourdieu (2010) would call symbolic capital accumulation strategies in the 21st century Argentinian comics field. On the one hand, we have each author's body of work, read here as a diachronical series. This includes serialization methods, publishing formats and other material aspects, an important dimension in this comparison. As we try to gauge manganime's influence in both their comics, two important concepts will be Jaqueline Berndt (2020) definition of the "mangaesque" and Claire Latxague (2018) proposal of a "trans" art style, for they allow us to think of manga beyond the geographical limits of Japan as it becomes a transnational reference for artists worldwide. On the other, we gathered a corpus of assorted complementary primary and secondary sources (magazine articles, interviews, blog and social network posts, etc.), that offer insight into their production process and the way in which they attempted to better their standing among peers that saw manga as lesser form of comics art. This counterpoint, we hope, grants a glimpse into the dynamics of a present-day comics field on the periphery of major publishing markets, torn in a constant tension between what is national and foreign, between creative renaissance and commercial survival.

Born at the end of an era, and the beginning of another

Both Minaverry and Berliac were born in Buenos Aires just in time to witness the comics field's transformation during the 1990s. They were part of the last generation of children who bought industrially produced Argentinian comics in newsstands, mostly reprints of old glories such as *Patoruzito* or Editorial Columba's anthologies. The local comics industry, which in its heyday reached print runs in the hundreds of thousands, had been in decline since the 1960s. A complex and multi-causal process, scholars highlight the industry's inability to compete in a different cultural climate and amid the rise of new media, such as television and rock music, as well as dealing with

the arrival *en masse* of imported Mexican magazines, mostly Editorial Novaro's cheap Spanish-translated American comics in full color (Vazquez 2010; von Sprecher 2009).

They were also part of the first generation of Argentinian readers who had access to comic-book shops. Spearheaded in the late 1980s by El Club del Comic, the specialized retail circuit grew exponentially (but mostly in and around Buenos Aires) during the following decade (Author 2023: 5), thanks in part to neoliberal economic policies that fixed a parity exchange rate between the American dollar and the Argentinian peso and eroded tariff barriers (Belini and Korol 2012). It was in this particular context that the 1990s manga and anime global phenomenon reach the country, facilitating for children's networks in nascent cable TV, such as Magic Kids, to fill their programming with Japanese cartoons and encouraging the import of Mexican and Spanish editions of superheroes and manga (Author 2023: 6; Martínez Alonso 2013: 173). For professionals cartoonists, this represented the last nail in the local comics industry's coffin, which undoubtedly colored their opinion of these new graphic narratives. For example, *CyberSix*'s penciler Carlos Meglia deemed the readership "confused" for liking Japanese comics that he judged "badly narrated", "90% badly drawn" and altogether a "product with many flaws" ("Juicio al manga" 1995: 34).[1]

For the confused readers in question, like young Berliac and Minaverry, imported manga and anime were formative (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika 2018; Rodríguez Minaverry 1999). Although he would rather you didn't know, the latter was among the many young artists who started drawing motivated by his taste for Japanese cultural products. For his part, a barely pubescent Berliac joined the ranks of late 1990s local fanzine resistance to the so-called import invasion, frequenting the recently founded Association of Independent Cartoonists (*Asociación de Historietistas Independientes*, or AHI), where he cultivated relationships that would be important in his latter career (Ruiz and Solanot 2021).

After 2001 economic collapse, which brought a traumatic end to the previous decade's neoliberal economic policies (Belini and Korol 2012), the field limped back into existence from the aforementioned DIY practices and sociability. Along the perennial events and comic-book fairs circuit, where (former) professional and amateur artists alike could sell their fanzines, emerged early digital comics' experiments, such as the influential daily blog *Historietas Reales*, that went on-line in the last day of 2005 (Mir 2024: 6). In the second half of the aughts, dozens of artisanal publishing ventures cropped up and the "small publishing company with print runs that do not exceed 2.000 copies in well-made books [...] distributed in bookstores and comics shops" model slowly consolidated (Acevedo 2019: 144). As Pablo Turnes states, "there is no industry, but there is production and work; everyone stands somewhere between the market and

[1] All original Spanish texts are translated by the author.

their art and the more official and more alternative circuits, without that having to be mutually exclusive.", i.e., a "post-industrial professionalization", in which few can make a living from their artistic work (Gandolfo et al. 2017: 131). Within the framework of a "progressively more autonomous [comics] field", self-publishing artist/editors configure "their own production norms" and "valorization strategies", increasingly distant "from the publishing space's more commercial extreme, where recognition depends directly on sales success" (Páez 2021: 3).

At the center of this process lies the anthology monthly magazine *Fierro* (2006–2017). A relaunch of a 1980s classic, the publication played a key role in Argentinian comics' shift to new stylistic standards and production methods, functioning as a marquee that granted visibility and symbolic capital to the artists it chose to publish. Studied in depth by Mariela Acevedo (2019), we are interested here in highlighting the publication's (re) introduction and (re)inforcement of the category national comics (*historieta nacional*) for a new generation of readers. Forged in the industry's twilight years of the 1970s and 1980s, Laura Vazquez (2010) defines this category native to the field as a discourse brought forth to interpret and/or explain the languishing of Argentinian comics' industrial production through the simplification of the above mentioned complex process into elementary dichotomies: art vs. market, national vs. foreign (25). *Fierro*, which claimed in its subtitle to represent the entirety of "Argentine comics" ("l*a historieta argentina*"), affirmed that *doxa* (Boudieu 2010: 190), championing national comics as an art form that fought back against industrially produced, doubly foreign imports (created in USA and Japan, printed in Spain and Mexico).

In the words of its editor, Juan Sasturain (2015a, 2015b), the magazine swimmed "against the market's vogue and its so-called trends" to "display the Ninth Art's infinite expressive possibilities". Through the inclusion of meta-discurse, like Sasturain's cited editorials or a regular column by the aforementioned Laura Vazquez, as well as "certain comics journalism" written mostly by *Fierro*'s managing editor Lautaro Ortiz and journalist Andres Valenzuela for its parent publication, the newspaper *Página/12*, the magazine aspired to "teach how to read and value the work" it published (Acevedo 2019: 87). In this respect, from a discursive and aesthetic point of view, *Fierro* was pivotal in the transit towards a high brow, artisanal and graphic-novel-centric production model.

The publication was also central to the field on a material level, as the editorial office freed authors to republish as books the comics bought for the monthly once its serialization was over. Demian Urdin (2018) has analyzed this process, that he calls Argentinian comics field's patrimonialization. Reconstructing "patrimonial discourses" from the past two decades, Urdin concludes that Argentinian comics' "resurgence" was not only the product of their "revalorization" by "a new wave of artists and readers" and a "proliferation of publications", but also of the "interest

shown by governmental institutions" (395). Milestones such as 2009 establishment of the "[Argentinian] Comic Day" by the City of Buenos Aires' Legislature (406) or 2012 creation of the National Library's Archive and Center for Argentinian Comics and Graphic Humor (*Centro de Historieta y Humor Gráfico Argentinos*), first of its kind in the country, are example of said interest and investment. It could be argued that among all the State-sponsored actions directed towards promoting comics, the most impactful was the indirect financing of *Fierro* through what is locally called *pauta official*, ad purchases in media made by State dependencies. As scholars point out, this was the reason behind the magazine's exceptional long life in newsstands at a time when none other comics publication could survive (Acevedo 2019; Mir 2024; Urdin 2018).

In light of this fact, *Fierro*'s role within the contemporary comics field must be reassessed as an indirect agent of the State's cultural sponsorship of comics. Through the publication's purchase of new material without exclusivity requirements on its reproduction, it subsidized both the emergent scene of small publishing houses that could print already existing yet novel work, and the production and subsistence of artists themselves. Acevedo (2019) states that this financing was not restricted only to the monthly, since being part of *Fierro*'s world meant having access to other State-sponsored publications or events (134). For example, participation in the weekly supplement *National Comics* (*Historietas Nacionales*) that Ortiz created in 2011 within the State's news agency Télam with a roster composed by *Fierro* veterans (135). To be left out of the magazine carried then not only a symbolic penalty, but also material one, as this State-sponsored financing circuit became out of reach.

Combined, the magazine's discourses and editorial policies delineated a very precise notion of what could (and could not) be considered an Argentinian "national comics", as both Minaverry and Berliac, who made important strides in their career as cartoonist in its pages, would soon find out.

Minaverry, the *wunderkind*

According to Acevedo (2019), Minaverry's "20874", which she calls "completely new and different", announced a new generation's arrival to *Fierro*, and to Argentinian comics in general (137). While other contemporaries present in the magazine were known for coming up in 1990s fanzine scene, the artist that signed only with a surname was an unfamiliar name. So much so that many readers thought at first that the author was a woman (Gari 2010). Who was Minaverry? Because of his "serious" and shy disposition (he "usually reject[ed] or ignore[d]" journalist's calls), and his love for old 20th century art styles (art nouveau and socialist architecture, psychedelia and pop art), Valenzuela (2009a) described him as a "young man of decades past" when he finally interviewed the secretive cartoonist two years later.

Developed further in *Fierro* with subsequent series "Rat-Line" and "Next year in Bobigny" ("*El año próximo en Bobigny*"), Minaverry's saga tells the story of Dora Bardavid, a young woman of Jewish descent who traveled in the late 1950s and early 1960s from Berlin to Buenos Aires province and back to Paris in order to bring those responsible for Nazi crimes against humanity before justice. She did this not by shooting and exploding stuff, as would be common in an adventure comic, but by interviewing survivors and reconstructing files which could hold as evidence in court. The work is celebrated for the research visible in the vignettes (Acevedo 2019; Latxague 2018; Saxe 2020). "I like to give graphic context", said Minaverry, recognizing the painstaking detail that goes into the cartooning of an historical accurate setting (Valenzuela, 2009a).

Although Minaverry was always upfront with his politics (Gari 2010), he shied away from listing his artistic influences (Valenzuela 2009a), nor does he talked about works prior to "20874", the first one with which he felt "broadly satisfied" (Valenzuela, 2013). Previous comics are even omitted in the biographies/bibliographies included in his books (Minaverry 2021). What is left out of his recognized *oeuvre*? *Red alleys* (*Callejones Rojos*), a 125-page graphic novel scripted by Silvia Debor which he draw as a work-for-hire published in 2005 by De los Cuatro Vientos, one of those houses that print at author's request. Also *Daigar's Return* (*El Regreso de Daigar*), his first professional work, published in 1999.

In a comics field where the line that separates amateurism and professionalism is tenuous at best, and the baptism of fire of self-publishing is regarded as an experience that builds community in the shared resistance to national comics demise, Minaverry's edition of his own artistic biography is a rarity. But not one without meaning. On the contrary, it can be interpreted as a deliberate act that says a lot in what it does not say. This editing can be interpreted as serving two objectives: to cement the cartoonist status as an auteur, and to align his body of work with the prevailing discourse in the comics field.

Much has been written by scholars on the concept of graphic novel (Murel 2018). In Argentina, comics writer and researcher Federico Reggiani (2010) uses an original concept to discuss the coming of comics that "would like to be literature": "shelf-ification" ("*estantificación*"), a reference to the bookshelves where comics are nowadays exhibited, instead of the magazine racks of yore. According to Reggiani, in 21st century Argentina there was a "radical modification of the publishing mechanisms and formats", which led to the "abandonment of the anthology magazine sold in newsstands" in favor of the "book", the bookstore as the new preferred commercial outlet and, consequently, a reconfiguration of "the corresponding reading contracts" (1). Comics now aspire to be perceived as "literature" and, especially, to bask in its

"social legitimacy". Besides the format change, shelf-ification also encompassed the introduction of "diverse paratexts typical of literary publishing", such as "prologues" or author biographies (3), like those Minaverry edited. Paratexts that not only attempt to elevate a comic in the reader's consideration, but also to build authorship in the strong sense of the term (Barthes 1977). To make auteurs out of cartoonists. That is precisely why "a commissioned comic" such as *Red Alleys*, a "mercenary" work as Valenzuela (2009b) called it, has no place in Minaverry's bibliography.

In the case of *Daigar's Return*, a 48-page black and white floppy comic-book published by Comiqueando Press, the problem was different. A science fiction story

Figure 1: Ignacio Rodríguez Minaverry (1999). *El regreso de Daigar*. In Comiqueando, 40, p. 26. © Comiqueando Press.

about a young girl named Elisa, who lives on the Moon in the year 2031 and receives his father's old robot as a gift, the comic embraces the visual and thematic styling of Japanese graphic narrative, going as far as to advertise itself as "the first Argentinian manga" (**Figure 1**). A 20-year-old Minaverry, who then signed as Ignacio Rodriguez (1999), was not shy in citing his influences: from *Patlabor* and *Evangelion* to "the Sailor Moon cartoons and, of course, Mazinger Z" (Rodríguez Minaverry 1999: 26). As the quote suggests, he not only partaken in a Japanized cultural consumption diet but was also fully embedded in otaku sociability. In fact, *Daigar's Return* was presented at a fan event called "Magnanimé II", which included a locally produced manga exposition and the screening of *Macross: Do You Remember Love?* ("Manganimé II" 1999).

Displayed as a series going from early sketches to Dora, passing through *Red Alleys* and *Daigar's Return* (**Figures 1–4**), it becomes apparent that Minaverry's work has a mangaesque inspiration. Mangaesque is defined by Jaqueline Berndt (2020) as an imitation of what is "prototypical manga", "'an assemblage of conventions' related mainly to a recognizable illustration style and specific character types", such as big eyes or giant robots. The series of Minaverry's cartooning even reveals in its development a mangaesque bent to Dora, which was previously not so easily recognizable.

According to Claire Latxague (2018), Minaverry's art style can be labeled as "trans", insofar as in it converge traits of those "early creations belonging to the manga register" with "Franco-Belgian *ligne claire*" and "a fascination" for both "*Belle Époque* prints and the graphic design of pop years" (1). But within this idiosyncratic trans art style, some influences are more valuable than others, as demonstrated in the meta-texts surrounding the comic. Chris Reyns-Chikuma (2021) shows how the reception of manga and a mangaesque

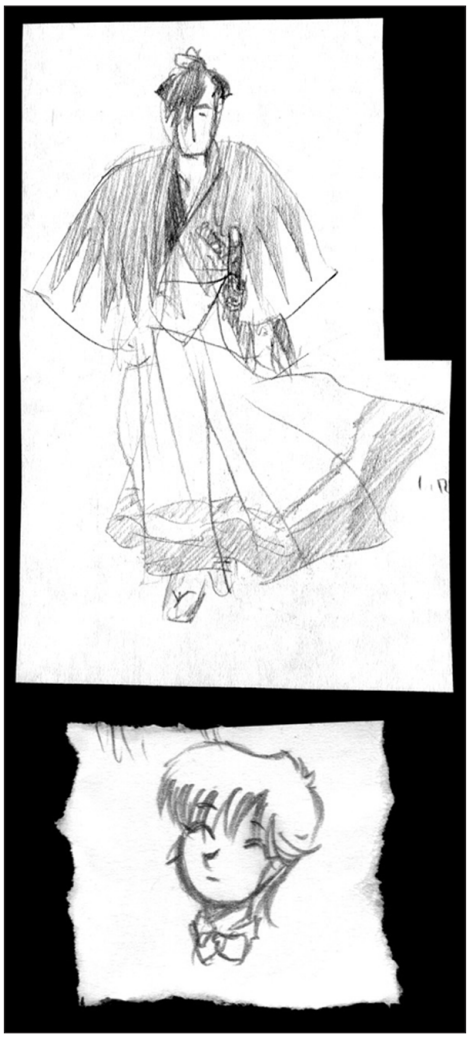

Figure 2: Ignacion Minaverry (2010), *El show del boceto*. Ginebra y Ska. Blog de Ignacio Minaverry. https://minaverry.wordpress.com/2010/10/10/404/ © Ignacio Minaverry.

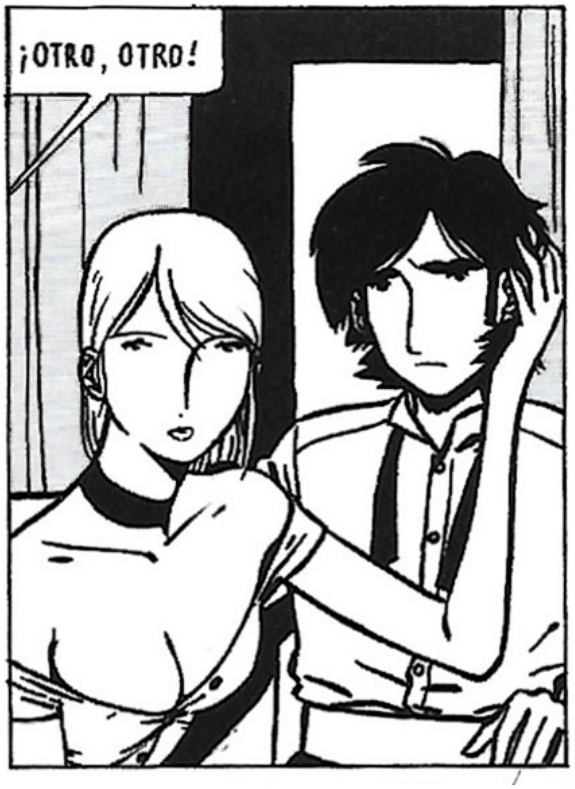

Figure 3: Silvia Debor and Ignacio Minaverry (2005), *Calllejones Rojos*. Buenos Aires: De los Cuatro Vientos, p. 25. © Silvia Debor and Ignacio Minaverry.

Figure 4: Ignacio Minaverry (2007), *20874*. In *Fierro*, 13, p. 24 © Ignacio Minaverry.

art style was informed in the "Franco-Canadian comics world" by a defensiveness from both scholars and artist geared to the protection of what they understood was "Québec nationalism and identity" (8). A similar thesis could be poised for the Argentinian case, for as we saw above, mangaesque influences clashed with similar prevailing discourses in the field, that of national comics as a resistance to the foreign imports and, particularly, manga.

Minaverry's cited biography/bibliography points that a consequent habitus, understood as "a principle that generates unconscious or partially controlled strategies that tend to ensure adjustment to the structures of which it is (partially) a product" (Bourdieu 2010: 136), was in his case fully at play. In this respect, *Fierro*'s meta-textual machine steered the course of interpretation. For example, one of the first installments of Vazquez' column ("*Ojo al Cuadrito*") was an essay with the untranslatable title "*Mina Berry, Kitsch nerista de primera hora*", where the academic narrows down his stylistic influences to a sober and eclectic Euro retro-style ("a third world aesthetic in which a

water tank meets a Vespa, a mod hairstyle, billboards and a forties' proletarian *chalet*"). Above all else, she highlights the work's political leanings ("Peronism would operate in the cartoonist's gaze almost like a fixation"), establishing clear ideological and visual coordinates by conjuring up a universe of Argentinian *nac&pop* cultural references such as Evita, Diego Capusotto's sketch comedy and Héctor Germán Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López' *El Eternauta* (Vazquez 2011: 50), a seminal Argentinian comic that has been politically charged in recent years due to its appropriation by Peronist activists (Gago, 2016). In Vazquez' essay, the word manga is totally absent.

In this respect, the potential tension between the publication's political and aesthetical nationalistic stance and Minaverry's influence by early consumption of imported products from Japan was diluted both by the cartoonist selective editing of his own artistic biography and *oeuvre*, as well as Sasturain, Ortiz, Valenzuela and Vazquez' meta-texts, some of them cited here, that taught readers to pay more attention to certain aspects of his comics than others.

Minaverry's current position in the field proves that the strategy was successful. Although it was Ortiz (2018) himself who declared Dora Bardavid as "the most important character to emerged in the last 10 years" of Argentinian comics, it would be difficult to find relevant actors that contradict him. Both its artistic accomplishment and, particularly, its dealing in themes of human rights and crimes against humanity during the 20th century attracted academic interest during a period of local comics studies' growth (Acevedo 2019; Latxague 2018; Saxe 2020). Lest we not forget that Art Spiegelmann's *Maus*, the archetype for shelf-ificated graphic novel, explores similar topics and themes (Chute 2022). The bounty was not only symbolical, as he gained stable employment from his incorporation in Ortiz' *National Comics.*

Also highlighted by scholars was the female protagonism in Minaverry's comics and the introduction of characters that do not fit within a heteronormative cast (Saxe 2020), which *a posteriori* resonated in a context of feminist effervescence in Argentina unleashed by the grass-root movement *#NiUnaMenos* (Gandolfo and Turnes 2020). This prominence of drawn women could be read as an influence of his formative consumption of Japanese cultural products. After all, already in *Daigar's Return* the cartoonist centered the story on a proactive and heroic female protagonist, whom he claimed to have created inspired by "Sailor Moon cartoons" (Rodríguez Minaverry 1999: 26). It is well researched how manga and anime's circulation outside Japan disrupted local comics fields by introducing stories made by women for women that broke preconceptions about who could make, star in and read comics (Erik Soussi 2015).

The same could be said of another central aspect to Minaverry's *magnum opus:* serialization. In times of shelf-ificated self-conclusive comics published directly

as books, the cartoonist cultivates a world that expands in its serialization, first in a monthly magazine and, then, as a series of graphic novels. In early interviews, Minaverry described the concept of "graphic novel" as a pretentious "horror". "For me they were always comics", whether intended "for boys, for grown-ups, for men, for women", but "comics" nonetheless. The "graphic novel is a kind of intellectual pose to sell it to people who are ashamed to read comics," he said (Valenzuela 2013). The times ended up imposing themselves on the artist, as today Minaverry produces the adventures of Dora in book format by commission of French publisher L'agrume (Urdin and Tamarasco 2018), latter published in Argentina by De La Maroma and Hotel de las Ideas (Minaverry 2021). However, even if he must produce graphic novels, he builds a series of them. A bet on serialized narrative, typical of industrial comics, of which manga remains its most close reference in a desindustrialized Argentinian comics field, where an ongoing production is a difficult commercial and artistic prospect.

As Latxague (2018) states, Dora and all of Minaverry's work is the product of a brilliant hybridization of styles and influences, not only visual but also material. However, when it came to positioning himself in the field and making a name for himself within it, as his contemporary Berliac would find out, some influences merited more symbolic capital than others.

Berliac, the convert

Like so many middle-class young people of his generation, Berliac emigrated to Spain after Argentina's 2001 crisis in search of a better future (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). When he returned to the country seven years later, he found himself in the midst of an emerging circuit of small DIY publishing efforts. As part of the Factum collective, he co-created two projects in 2009: a self-titled digital comics website (Valenzuela, 2009c), and print publisher La Pinta, whose first publication was Berliac's anthology *Rachas* (**Figure 5**). With an impressionistic *chiaroscuro* graphic style that garnered him comparisons to Argentinian comics giants Alberto Breccia and José Muñoz, the book attracted Ortiz' attention, who invited him to be a part of *Fierro* (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). He published four self-contained stories throughout the following year and, proving the magazine's power as a showcase, "from then on it [happened] all very fast", receiving invitations from "anthologies in South America and Europe" (Iñigo 2018). Much of that material would be compiled in three books published in as many years, all by La Pinta. However, per the artist's own loose account, shortly after he was "fired" from *Fierro* (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). An action that, when we take into consideration the publication's role in the field, carried not only symbolic, but also material consequences.

Figure 5: Berliac (2009), *Rachas*. Buenos Aires: La Pinta, p. 10. © Berliac.

In 2012, Berliac disappeared from the comics field, figuratively and literally. He moved back to Europe, where after some more experimental publications, such as his participation in the Latvian magazine *Kuš!* and the graphic novel *Playground* published in Spain by Ediciones Valientes in 2013, he quit drawing "for almost two years" (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika, 2018). When he returned to the scene, he and his art had gone through a transformation that, according to himself, had made him another: he was now a mangaka (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika, 2018; Iñigo, 2018; Ruiz and Solanot, 2021). What he called his "transition" could be appreciated in the visible contrast with his previous works, as he had adopted a clear mangaesque style (**Figure 6**). A not at all gradual change like the one Minaverry made in the opposite direction. Early examples of this new Berliac can be seen in a series of short stories serialized in *Vice* from 2015 and throughout 2017 (Ruiz and Solanot 2021), and the graphic novel *Sadboi* (2016), which he drew with funding from the Norwegian Culture Fund (Iñigo, 2018).

Fond of avant-garde gestures, Berliac reflected on his transition in a manifesto of sorts. The English-language polemic text, entitled "GAY-JIN: manga is not a genre. It's a gender", was graphically presented as a kanji-covered pamphlet in which the artist took advantage of his bilingualism. Firstly, he introduces "gay" in "gaijin" (外人), a Japanese pejorative term used to name foreigners living in Japan. Secondly, he plays with the concepts of gender and genre, both of which are contained in a single Spanish word: "*género*". In his wordplay, "making manga" is presented as the "artistic (i.e., existential) equivalent of 'coming out of the closet.'" The contentious intent behind the text, which proposed that recognizing oneself as "mangaka" can be compared to being "a male-born transsexual who calls herself 'she'" (Berliac 2015), was crystal clear. If Minaverry is the *wunderkind* of Argentina's 21st century comics, Berliac is its *enfant terrible*.

The image of a controversial artist, cultivated since the days of Factum and brought to the fore by the cited essay and its aftermath, was intended as a positioning strategy within the comics field. In different interviews, the cartoonist swore that he did not wanted to "offend anyone", but also recognized that he did seek to "shock". "It's a mess and for me it's great, conflict is my jam", he said (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). The stunt certainly did its job, leading into the cancellation of Drawn & Quarterly's announced English-language edition of *Sadboi*,[2] which bought him great media coverage within and outside the field, even in national media (Iñigo, 2018). The book ended up being published in eight countries and almost as many languages (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). Now the spotlight was on Berliac.

The manifesto and the controversy that surrounded it, which included allegations of "cultural appropriation" (MacDonald 2017), shed light on the unfathomable gulf built outside Japan between manga and local comics (Author 2021, 2023). One and the other were held not as dissimilar examples of the same thing, but as two fundamentally different things. So much so that, as Berliac dramatized in his text, in order to go from drawing the first to the second you must change to the point of becoming effectively another. The unspoken question at the heart of the matter was whether only the Japanese could make manga? The cartoonist's answer was no.

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[2] In 2017, Canadian publisher Drawn & Quarterly announced what was destined to be Berliac's highest-profile publication: an English-language edition of *Sadboi*, published in Norwegian the previous year by Jippi Forlag. The announcement brought to light a contentious exchange between the cartoonist and Sarah Horrocks over the cited text "GAY-JIN: manga is not a genre. It's a gender", in which Berliac replied with what the complainant identified as "transphobic and transmisogynist affirmations". Upon coming into this new information, Drawn & Quarterly apologized for not having done enough research about the author with whom they had signed a contract, affirm to not "agree" with the controversial essay "nor with his defence, nor with the tone and aggressiveness that [Berliac] showed in this debate", and cancelled the publication (MacDonald 2017).

Berliac coined the terms "gaijin gekiga" and "gaijin mangaka" to name non-Japanese manga and non-Japanese manga artists, a proposal well received by European scholars, especially in Spain (Manuzzato 2018; Santiago Iglesias 2020). He highlighted the transnational nature of manga and its animated counterpart, anime, a point well supported by existing academic production (Napier 2001; Ruh 2013). This nature, moreover, is reflected in his own cosmopolitan autobiography. As recounted in interviews, he (re)discovered manga in a comic-book store while living in Spain (De Tena 2018). This is also present in his work. For example, in *Sadboi*, an immigrant boy in an imprecise European country that goes from delinquent to conceptual artist is depicted watching *Akira* (**Figure 6**).

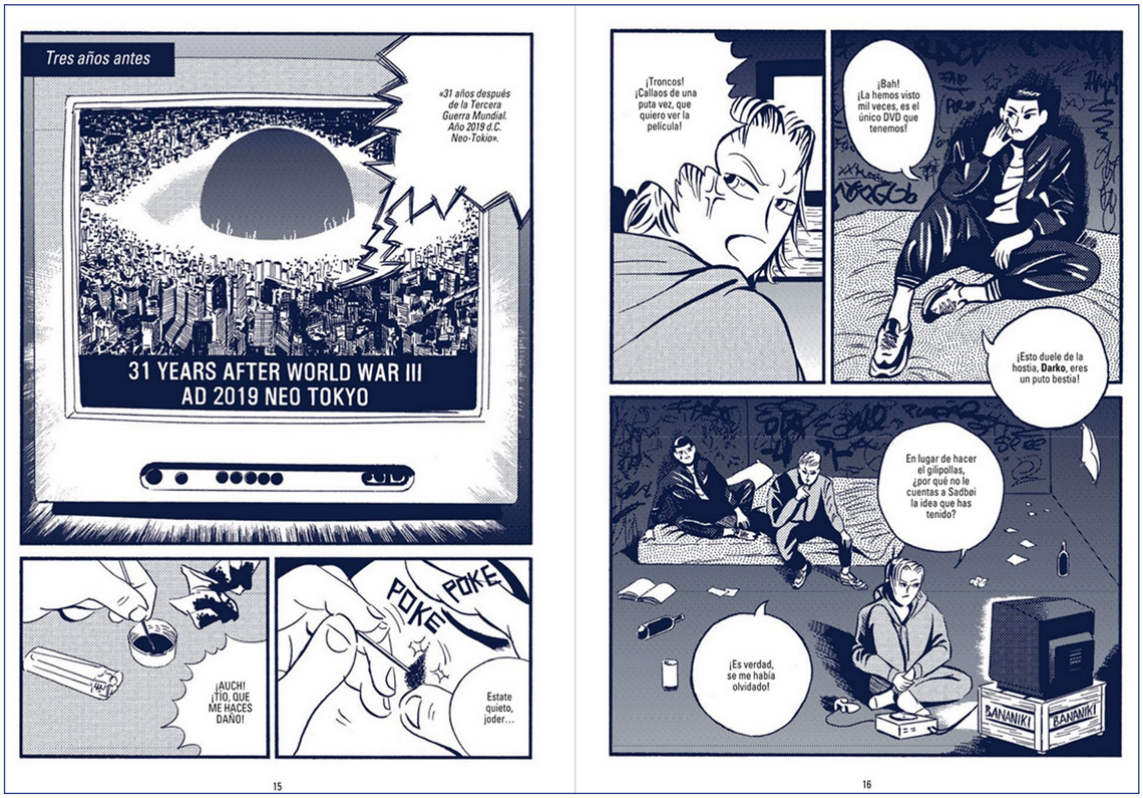

Figure 6: Berliac (2016), *Sadboi*. Buenos Aires: La Pinta, p. 15–16. © Berliac.

Berliac strongly disagrees with the prevailing nationalistic discourse within the Argentinian comics field. Where others see the painful demise of its comics industry under the unfair competition of cheap imports, Berliac sees "the final blow to an already weakened local industry", which fell at the hands of its own indolence and the inability to "keep up with readers' taste" (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). According to him, "liking manga in the Argentinian comics' scene" amounted to "high treason" (De Tena 2018).

Yet, when he felt artistically "lost" upon his return to Europe, he found the way home at the "source", in the manga and anime that "were the first thing that nourished" him (Iñigo, 2018). Going even further, the cartoonist affirmed that for all his "generation" the "true ground zero", those "first readings" that leave such a "deep [...] mark", were imported comics among which American superheroes and manga stood out. But while for actors in hegemonic positions within the field "it makes total sense that [*El Eternauta*'s home publication] Frontera was the fundamental identity marker for guys like Muñoz", the fact that for a new "generation it was manga seem[ed] strange, even unacceptable". "In my adolescence", he remembers, there were "only two options": either you "repressed" your "taste for manga" and "became a man", or you indulge in it and accepted to be left out by the "serious critique" and its legitimization power (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika, 2018).

This nationalistic stance, which Berliac insinuated, and Acevedo (2019) confirms includes a misogynistic gender bias (174), was according to the artist promoted in post 2001 crisis Argentinian comics mainly by *Fierro* (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika, 2018). As he denounced, actors in the field with a lot of symbolic capital, such as Sasturain or Ortiz, "do not like for the foundations" of what they consider "national comics" to be "shaken" (Ruiz and Solanot 2021). An accusation with serious implications if, as we pointed out above, this gatekeeping also implied being denied access to State-sponsored activities and resources.

In the previous section, it was shown how Minaverry gradually structured himself and his comics, whether consciously or unconsciously, to a habitus imposed by the field, and was rewarded for it. On the contrary, Berliac attempted to make of his breaking of said habitus a grand gesture that informed the narrative around his return. Hence, we find no editing in Berliac's biography/bibliography. In his personal blog's brief "about" section, the author lists absolutely all his production (Berliac n.d.). It is only from this complete perspective that the concept of a cartoonist in a state of constant change becomes fleshed out. He presents himself as a mangaka, but also as everything he was before and is no longer, for above all else he is an artist always open for the next transition. How can Berliac not rebel against what he understands as Argentinian national comics' static essentialism if, for him, the greatest value of art is to be in constant flux, to be nourished by what surrounds him and to mutate accordingly?

However, although Berliac openly defies the Argentinian cartoonist's habitus, in many aspects he does not. For example, he is fully aligned with the shelf-ification process in terms of his positioning as an auteur. In that sense, like Minaverry, Berliac adheres to the aspiration of having a strong authorial voice in comics. That is why in his quest to both legitimize himself as an Argentinian mangaka and as a comics

auteur he does not evoke the likes of Akira Toriyama. He resorts, as we cited above, to establishing his direct influence by gekiga (De Tena 2018), a countercultural and adult manga movement that sprung up around the Japanese magazine *Garo* (1964–2002) with artists such as Yoshihiro Tatsumi and Yoshiharu Tsuge as protagonists. As we have shown, like early 20th century avant-garde artists, Berliac is adept at the more performative gestures of authorship. One might even say that with his penchant for theorizing about the craft in manifestos and all together contrarianism, he is the auteur among a generation of comics auteurs.

Berliac also shares with Minaverry a disdain for the self-referentiality and publication cadence of contemporary shelf-ificated Argentinian comics (De Paoli and Sánchez Kutika 2018). As he explicitly said in his interview with Gonzalo Ruiz and Gonzalo Solanot (2021), he does not like the production pace imposed by the "graphic novel", to "disappear for 3, 4 years" and emerge with a whole book. He prefers "that people participate in real time in the production". However, even though he currently self-publishes his (for now) digitally-only comic series *Laowai Tango* (Berliac 2021), he has attained (symbolic) success, above all, as a graphic novel author. His most successful work is still *Sadboi*, which contains all the characteristics of a shelf-ificated comic, including being created outside the commercial circuit with a Norwegian government's grant for the arts. In this respect, as much of a contrarian as he is, he could not rebel against the material conditions of production in the current Argentinian comics field.

Conclusion

The turn of the century saw Argentina's comics field go through a dramatic transformation. The massive import of Spanish-language editions of American comics and manga, encouraged by new economic policies, destroyed the last vestiges of the old national comics industry. After the 2001 crisis, the field was (re)configured under a new paradigm articulated by small DIY publishing houses, the production of shelf-ificated comics with limited State-sponsorship administered by hegemonic actors, mainly the editorial staff of *Fierro*, and artists immersed in a post-industrial professionalization, where symbolic capital is the major (and often only) currency in circulation.

In this context, two cartoonists influenced by the Japanese comics and animation they avidly consumed during their formative years embodied different approaches in their attempt to position themselves in 21st century's New Argentinian Comics. Minaverry, who in his youth produced the self-proclaimed "first Argentinian manga", edited his biography/bibliography in interviews and paratexts to erase the mangaesque mark of his trans art style, reaping recognition by folding himself to the prevailing habitus in a field dominated by the

national comics *doxa* of resistance against the imported and foreign. Berliac, on the contrary, made of a defiance of said habitus and a controversial transition towards a mangaesque art style the defining gesture of his (re)introduction to the field, which garnered him visibility in specialized and even general media.

The success (or not) of their positioning strategies notwithstanding, we can conclude in both cases that their bodies of work, graphically and materially, are very much informed by the comics field's transformation process in which they became readers, first, and cartoonists, later, and how they navigated it. Analyzed as a series, their bibliographies express an open negotiation, with other actors in the field and with themselves, of both the imported influence of a commercially dominant manga and the symbolic and material conditions in a field that shifted out of necessity to the graphic novel production model.

In a more general scope, both Minaverry and Berliac's comics display the artistic and sociological complexities triggered in a peripheral comics field by the global circulation of manga established in the past thirty years. The Japanese comics boom neither totally replace nor extinguished local production, but it certainly transformed it, both as a formative influence and as a foil against which to resist and rebel. Are Dora's features mangaesque? is *Sadboi* a manga? These questions remain up for discussion. What is indisputable is that neither of them would exist if the imaginations of two Argentinian boys had not been captured by giant robots and sci-fi adventures that came from far away.

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