

Resistance, Deaths and Ideals in an Argentinian Graphic Novel

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Abstract:

On the borderline of opposing ideological positions that gave rise to fierce confrontations, the graphic novel *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero* [The Communist Girl and the Guerrilla Boy] of María Giuffra was conceived.

The voices of ten children –witnesses and victims of violence of the civic-military dictatorship developed in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, in which 30,000 activists were killed in clandestine circumstances and their bodies hidden– take shape in this publication.

The book deeply mobilizes its readers, citizens who are sensitive to the institutional violence exerted in these latitudes. According to the Aesthetics of Reception (Iser, 2000), this occurs when there is a convergence between the structure of the work and its interpretation, two aspects that we analyse in this presentation.

The author intends to be loyal to what she heard. In her aesthetic proposal, the expression of voices of the narrators are represented in different graphics; filled with violence and death, her images move across the pages without respecting limits. The bodies of the children in the foreground are the counter part of their missing parents, and their love for the children is glimpsed in the profuse symbolism of tear-streaked faces and profuse little heart drawings.

Once the book was completed, four decades after the dreadful events, when the fires of passionate enthusiasm of their parents' ideological and partisan struggles are fading away, the narrators express an interesting version of "revenge": be happy. The message of the book in which violence is shown without extenuations seems to inspire in readers a hope of happiness, an essential transformation, perhaps the only valid one for social change: never more hatred, but love for life.

Keywords: Literature, Politics, Graphic Novel, Literary aesthetics

Introduction

La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero [The Communist Girl and the Guerrilla Boy] by María Giuffra (2021) is an Argentinian graphic novel which slims down the borders between literature and politics.

There is a gloomy colonial history in Latin America; for this reason, writers in this hemisphere matured a long tradition in testimonial literature, in which narrators embody real persons who endured harsh circumstances in unfavorable political situations (Fortinito, 2016). In *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero*, the voices of ten children, now adults, present their testimonies as witnesses and victims of violence of the civic-military dictatorship developed in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, when 30,000 activists, the *desaparecidos* [disappeared], were killed in clandestine circumstances and their bodies hidden. In the graphic novel, the narrative is structured as a frame story, in which María Giuffra introduces the work, tells her own experience and announces the other nine voices. The text shares many features of the testimonial literature.

Political literature has been developed in graphic novels for several decades in Argentina. The most important antecedent was *El eternauta*, the script of which was written by Héctor Oesterheld in 1969. This book was a referential point for the practice of art and politics, in which the artistic work and the militant political practice converge (Fernández, 2012). The graphic novel we analyze follows this artistic trend. However, until now, the statements of children of disappeared activists were important with regard to their parents; crimes against children were not made visible.

One striking characteristic of this book is that it deeply mobilized its readers; one of them was amazed since the book paradoxically conveys deep love. On the occasion of the book presentation, one of the declarants said that an important pending commitment was accomplished: the transmission of the horrid reality to new generations. And now she would seek happiness. The book seems to involve readers' community in a kind of hope of happiness.

This reception led us to inquire, on the one hand, how this graphic novel could inspire happiness or hope out of accounts of extreme violence, in which children were witnesses and victims; and, on the other hand, how it impacts in political ideology of readers 40 years afterwards.

The goals were: to focus on readers' emotions, to identify and categorize them; and also to know their feedback in regard to the present social and political context. To better understand the reader's feeling, we would need also to gain more in-depth knowledge on aesthetics of literature.

The starting point was a survey aimed at knowing the reader's reception, according to Wolfgang Iser's theory (2000), which focuses on cultural factors that might have an impact on the interpretation. We applied quantitative methodology to know not only the recurrence of similar interpretations, but also the influence in the conception of a new way of doing politics that might have been induced by the novel. Jacques Rancière asserts that literature makes politics, which he defines as "the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common word" (2004, p. 10). And literature intervenes in politics since it allows readers to think different "ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking" (Rancière, 2004, p.10).

As a second step, trying to understand the aesthetic activity produced, we included in-depth studies on the relationship between the author and the autobiographical character by Mikhail Bakhtin (1990). But we still found it necessary to approach two philosophical aspects: the concepts of happiness and of "oneness of subject and the environment" (Soka Gakkai). The latter would help us better understand how an idea can become a reality.

Reception

As mentioned previously, our survey was based on Wolfgang Iser's approach to the Reception Theory (2000), which considers essential to focus on the actual readers' response that varies in accordance with each one's knowledge in different fields, ideology or personal experience.

La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero caught the attention of a wide range of readers: teenagers, young people and older adults. The survey was responded by 42 readers, majorly adults. It was also sent to many more teenagers, high school students, who had read and enjoyed the book; unfortunately, less than five of them responded.

In the survey, readers were invited to list words of the graphic novel that came to their minds, which they considered representative. The words collected by one reader evoke the wide spectrum of different situations developed in the novel: the shootings of machine gun in an activist's home

and the plaster that was wracked; also a baby's eardrums that were blown up in an episode in the novel that showed the assassination of a baby. Violence against children of activists is also made explicit in the enquiry by policemen in which they could not reveal any data, the mention of fear of going back home and the wish to escape. The remembrances of farewell kisses, wishes of happiness by their parents, the scent of *alfajor* (a traditional Argentinian cookie), also the fear that memory could be wiped away denote homesickness. And two readers remember an expression by one of the narrators who was surprised that she had never wished vengeance; three important retained words were: "happiness", "justice" and "memory".

The readers were also invited to inform how long it took them to read this book in comparison with other literary texts. In the survey the options were: much, regular or very little time; they should also mention the reason why. 95% of the receivers mentioned that reading was intense. Among them, 29% experienced such strong sorrow that they had to stop reading and resume later. Surprisingly, for an equal percentage, 29 %, it took them very little time because they wanted to know how stories would end¹. And for 32%, it took them a regular time.

Another significant aspect is that people enthusiastically recommended the book to friends, family members, teachers, students. In the survey we asked how many adults and teenagers they recommended it to. According to the responses, approximately 50% of the readers recommended the book to more than 10 adults. And 27%, to more than 10 teenagers; among them, two high school principals who promoted the book among all students.

Emotions in the survey

One of the objectives of the survey was to know which emotions the novel aroused: happiness, sadness, love, hatred, hope or hopelessness. Readers were invited to select all emotions evoked, even if they seemed contradictory. 97% of the readers felt sadness due to images of death and sorrow. Even though violence is clearly being denounced only 29,4% felt hatred.

¹ In regard with this point, María expressed that her objective was to balance the dreadful narrations, with "beautiful" drawings, that could catch the reader's attention. She wanted the reader "could enjoy reading the book page after page" (Pavón, 2022).

The book also shows lovely familiar scenes, cosy meetings and caring attitudes among activists and friends, which inspired love in 61,8% of readers. One of the readers was deeply moved by the images of love within families, which were very vivid, although these families would be torn apart later. Another one mentioned that the book allowed readers to find the child they were four decades ago and heal old wounds; for this purpose, it was necessary to go back into their own history, face these harsh experiences and embrace the child they were, who needed a hug. Another reader mentioned enthusiastically that the graphic novel conveys hope and love.

At the end of the survey, about 90% of the readers marked the option “yes” when asked about the sensation of hope of happiness when reading was concluded.

Readers’ reflexions

Since, according to Jacques Rancière (2004), literature is a way of doing politics, we invited readers to present the reflections arisen after reading the book in regard with their conception of social justice, and if they could make a new decision concerning their role as Argentinian citizens. One of them mentioned that to preserve memory is the best way of doing political activism. Another one mentioned the necessity of focusing on people’s real needs, and providing aid accordingly. The wish of building a society without violence was also mentioned. We point out that none of these reflections had been expressed in the book by any of the narrators. So we can infer that the report of violence in *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero* majorly raised awareness and sensitized the readers (instead of promoting hatred or wish of vengeance).

This indicates an important shift in regard with the radical revolution that the *desaparecidos* aspired. The 70s decade in Argentina was the most revulsive one in the 20th century. Violence was exercised by military and civil dictatorship against workers, students and popular activists who claimed a general anti-capitalist alternative and social justice. They struggled based on the concept of revolution –what implies the use of forceful methods focusing changes in a brief period of time– guided by a strong theoretical axis and low conscience of cost in human lives. Forty years afterwards, after reading *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero*, readers will not seek theory; for them, conscience of the value of life is the axis. And life

means to care for people, means a growing awareness of the integrity of body and mind. What really matters is to combat political decisions in a way that can help people's real life. Readers of this novel are inspired to struggle for social justice focusing on happiness and life preservation.

Aesthetics of literature

Wolfgang Iser, when developing the Reception Theory, mentioned that there are aesthetic processes that constitute the meaning, as a result of an interaction between text and reader (Iser, 2000, p. 301). To deepen this aspect, we drew on studies by Mikhail Bakhtin on the aesthetics of verbal works.

One important aspect, which María Giuffra stresses, is that the whole text in the graphic novel is no fiction. We point out, however, that even though the notion of truth is emphasized, the way it is expressed is not unique. According to Bakhtin, people perceive themselves, even if they are alone, as if they were in interaction with other people, in different contexts and influenced by different social and political factors. So, in an autobiographical text, the issuers become other ones in relation to themselves. They look at themselves through others' eyes; they may tell their experiences according to certain values that characterise their lives towards other people, but such values may be completely different when they live their own life for themselves. So, autobiographical authors choose the adequate words to tell their own lives and this leads to different aesthetical responses (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 24).

Bakhtin states three typical attitudes which define the character; in *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero* prevails one in which the character adopts the author's conclusive image, but can excel the author¹. According to Bakhtin, this kind of character is infinite to the author, it can reborn and require new forms (Bakhtin, 1990, p.28). This happens with Alba Camargo, daughter of a militant of a communist party. Her presentation stands out for her graphic features: she is depicted as an adult woman with a splendid face:

¹ Other kind of characters are: when the character takes possession of the author; in this case the character has so much prestige that the author depends on it. The other type is the character that is completely defined by the author; in this case there is the possibility of being satirized or ironized (pp. 26-28).

wide eyes and a bright smile. Episodes of violence are shown: gun shooting, assassination, persecution. One day, her father said farewell. In a big drawing of Alba as a child, she was hugging her father with a bright smiling face. He urged her to be happy and tried to convince her that he would come back (Giuffra, 2021, p.49). Both knew he would die. Since then Alba felt that she has had a kind of obligation to be happy. She faced many other hard moments: police interrogation, extreme economic situation, rejection in many areas. At the age of 19 she got married and had a baby, this was the last event she told about her life.

The aesthetic effect was produced, on the one hand, by Maria Giuffra's artistic interventions: the drawings representing Alba. And, on the other hand, by Alba-character when she mentions her father's "be happy" message, which was addressed to the child, but which Alba as an adult seems to hear for the first time. When Alba-declarant faced disappointing experiences she would try out the meaning of being happy. This implicit dialogue between Alba-character and Alba-declarant is the aesthetic instance that makes these words transcendent.

At the end of this chapter, María Giuffra pondered Alba's father's message. The author considers that she herself could grasp the message too. She wonders that somehow all of them have tried to go that way (Giuffra, 2021, p.55). So a message that seemed a private one was valid for a whole community.

Philosophical aspects

Happiness

Generally defined as a state of mind or a condition of the soul or spirit, the meaning of happiness is linked to some kind of sentimentality and is usually understood as pursuit of pleasures. But for the philosopher Daniel Haybron¹ (2002) the concept of happiness has, as a central aspect, the tendency to develop positive moods. Happy people are usually concerned with improving their emotional life; they develop a kind of emotional resilience (Haybron, 2002, p. 507). So, it is possible that people experience a great deal of negative circumstances; nevertheless, acknowledge that the conditions of

¹ D. Haybron is a PhD researcher who works in ethics, moral psychology, and political philosophy.

their life are good. It is in this way that we can understand the sense in which Maria Giuffra and Alba Camargo understood the concept of happiness.

This meaning of happiness is similar to the one promoted by Buddhist philosopher Josei Toda: a state of life where, no matter what circumstances people may encounter, people can feel that life itself is a joy (Ikeda, 2020). Another explanation, by his disciple Daisaku Ikeda, is: “Happiness is not a life without worries or struggles. Happiness is the robust sense of fulfilment one feels when bravely confronting hardship” (Ikeda, Happiness).

Oneness of life and environment

This concept, oneness of life and environment, may help us understand how the sensation of hope of happiness could be conveyed among the readers.

In general, the perception of reality in the occidental world is of a life structured in terms of dualities: self/other, internal/external, body/mind, spiritual/material, human/nature. According to Buddhism, everything, including work and family relationships, is the reflection of our inner lives (Soka Gakkai). Our words, attitudes and actions provoke responses from the surrounding world accordingly. Thus, if there is a change in someone’s life, circumstances will also inevitably change. The principle of the oneness of life and its environment clarifies that individuals can influence and reform their environments through inner change (Soka Gakkai).

In the final epilogue by Maria Giuffra, she states that it was absolutely necessary to tell her story; and for each fellow, theirs. When she met each declarant to collect their accounts, the conversations were loving, caring; Maria freely made drawings or wrote down what they were saying. She concludes that the whole process was very gratifying (Giuffra, 2021, p. 149). Her attitude denoted very high regard and also affection not only for each fellow declarant, but also for readers. The very last words written in block characters are a dedication of the book to every human rights defenders (Giuffra, 2021, 150). We may think that perhaps there are few people struggling for human rights. But we can also think that this book awakes in the reader the wish of becoming a human rights defender.

This sense of purpose –to defend other people’s rights– was the core of Giuffra’s work. According to the Buddhist principle of oneness of life and environment, we can infer that her strong sense of defence of people’s rights generated an atmosphere that involved every fellow and finally all readers.

This sense of purpose guided her mind, heart, voice, hands in actions to accomplish her goal: the defence of rights, what may be understood as happiness for all. So, even though the wording corresponds to ten different declarants, there is a strong unity that creates the atmosphere to communicate deep emotions to the reader. This is, we believe, the origin of hope of happiness originated by reading the book.

Discussion

An important contribution received was to compare this graphic novel with films on the same topic by the children of political activists of the 70s in Argentina. One of the recommended films was “Los rubios” (The blond ones) directed by Albertina Carri (2003). The protagonist is a young woman who tells her own story by means of memories of the past. One important characteristic of the film aesthetics is that it exposes its artificiality; this artistic resource softened the fierce emotions experienced in childhood.

Another film in which protagonists are children of activists in the 70s in Argentina is *Infancia clandestina* [Clandestine childhood], directed by Benjamin Avila (2012). It presents the story of a family that was exiled to Cuba and that decided to come back to Argentina during the years of dictatorship as part of a plan to continue an activist struggle. *Infancia clandestina*, shows how a love story puts in danger the protagonist’s safety.

The great difference with *La niña comunista y el niño guerrillero* is that the screen exposes a lot, but reveals little; there is no privacy. None of the mentioned films could recreate the climate of the strong emotions experienced during the 70s in Argentina. Instead, when we read the graphic novel, we feel the story is true and words create an intimate atmosphere. The illustrations use innovative procedures: the images do not respect limits, vignette disposition is often lacking, there is profuse symbolism (bones and skulls are presented as were found in mass graves, hearts), bodies of children in the foreground that may be understood as the counterpart of their missing parents (Battaglini, 2021). All text is handwritten, with different letter sizes in the same phrase. Innovations in the drawings, paradoxically, help recreate the climate of the emotions experienced.

The scenes narrated in the graphic novel are perceived as true, as memories of a harsh past where the ideals do not fade behind the aggression. The artistic beauty denotes a wish to be sane, to create a new future in

plausible lovely ways. The films are very interesting, but have a different objective, they aim to produce some kind of intellectual reflection.

Conclusion

This graphic novel demonstrates that literature can be a strong way to exert influence on the readers, and so, to play a political function. This happens when the author feels responsibility towards society. According to Bakhtin, art and life are not the same, but they must convert in a unit within the author's responsibility (Bajtín, 2008, p. 14). María Giuffra and the nine declarants felt so. Their narratives have an important mission: to reconstitute the history of Argentina and to raise awareness among people.

In 1976, María Giuffra's father wrote a letter to his wife, in which he invited not to cry for him if he were killed, that much more important than his single life was people that were dying of starvation (Giuffra, 2021, p. 9). And Alba's father urged her to be happy. Forty five years later, having endured extreme suffering, instead of hatred, sorrow or hopelessness the voices of the ten declarants and the artistic work by María Giuffra inspire love for life: 90% of the readers could feel hope of happiness. And also, they promote a new way of doing politics: not through theories or revolution, but by caring each other, being conscious of the value of life and body's integrity.

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