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The comics scene in Colombian cities

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Introduction

Colombia has recently entered what could be considered a new era after the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the oldest guerrilla movement in the world, the FARC. This historical moment has been accompanied with other changes in many other areas of Colombian society, from film production – now with tax exemptions for foreign productions produced in the country – to the inclusion of the country in the OECD and as a partner of NATO. Moving away from an image of crime and despair in relation to the war on drugs, even despite the fictional worlds evident in series such as *Narcos* (2015), Colombia has become a site of renewed hope, whether in the creative industries – as the recently elected president, Iván Duque, has openly admitted – or tourism. The peace dividend is expected to start paying off soon.

Colombia has not been very famous for its comics. Ana Merino (2017), for example, dedicates most of her recent overview of 'Comics in Latin America' to the historically dominant markets of Argentina, Cuba and Mexico. Colombia is only referred to in relation to Colombian/ Ecuadorian artist Powerpaola's fame and the cultural importance of the Entreviñetas festival. Nevertheless, despite the general lack of scholarly recognition, the recent nomination of Lorena Alvarez to the Eisner awards in 2018, the release of the animated film version of Powerpaola's *Virus Tropical* (2017), and the gold medal given to Pablo Guerra and Henry Diaz's *Two Aldos* at the 2018 Japan International Manga Award, have started to turn the spotlight on an art form and communication medium seldom discussed, even in Colombia. These achievements echo

the sentiment expressed by comics connoisseur Felipe Ossa (2019, 243) who states that 'it can be said that the development of comics in Colombia is only beginning'.

Such achievements have come about owing more to the dedication of the creators of comics, graphic novels and festivals rather than to any concerted national effort to valorise comics. Nevertheless, shifting conditions in the consumption and presence of comics in Colombian cities have also influenced the growth of comics production. Over the past 40 years the main four cities in the country have witnessed renewed interest in comic-book reading. This process has seen the decline of the kiosk as the site of comic display, trade and acquisition and the concurrent rise of specialised bookstores and of comics at festivals and fairs. Universities have also played an important role, promoting courses in graphic design and similar areas and educating professionals in the possibilities of using comics as relevant media for expression and communication. All of these elements constitute the comics scene in Colombia.

The comics scene in Colombia: Stores, clubs, festivals and events

As part of our research into new urban spaces for comics consumption, we interviewed comic-book artist Fernando Suárez, known for his work as a cartoonist for the newspaper *El País* in Cali in the 1980s and 1990s and a famous collector; managers of comics-related events, namely César Ramírez – recently in charge of the academic elements of Comic-Con in Medellín and Bogotá – and Santiago Suescún – head of FICCO, a festival for independent comic-book artists in Bogotá; and managers of clubs and stores, including Boris Ríos and José Barbosa – owners of Valkyrias y Dragones in Barranquilla, a site for comic-book sales and events – and Champe Ramírez – co-founder of El Cómic en Línea and manager of Casa Friki in Medellín. We put their memories and experiences into dialogue with our own to set out a panorama of the events, stores and festivals where comics were to be found. We also draw on information taken from various documentary sources to develop a historic memory of the many places, activities and initiatives that have placed comics at the heart of the cityscape. Although we limit most of our discussion to the four largest cities in the country – Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla – their cases are symptomatic of other Colombian cities. In fact, even small cities such as Armenia have been important in the development of a comics culture, as will be discussed below. Taken together, we hope to

present a broad perspective of all the diverse elements that constitute the comics scene in Colombia.

In this chapter we think of comics in relation to the city in terms of a 'scene'. We understand scene here in the sense presented by Woo et al. (2015, 288), who argue that 'such "scene thinking" can map (always incompletely, to be sure) how social and cultural life are lived in space', as well as in relation to other groups, institutions and works. Thinking about the comics scene in Colombia shows how different groups of people or communities become integrated. As Woo et al. go on to argue, 'like networks, scenes enable, mediate and constrain action, emphasize the relationality of their members, and have an emergent, decentralized order' (290). The scene requires spaces of gathering or encounter, which may be physical or virtual, and which enable interaction with the comic book as a product. Those places of gathering include events, stores and festivals. They may extend to other types of places, where comics have a role within a larger array of objects. Within the scene, 'the possession and accumulation of social capital, the network of relationships that the agent builds in different spaces, enable contact between disseminators and instances of mediation, all of which allows social capital to be reproduced as a medium of cultural appropriation' (Fernández and Gago 2012, 88).

The scene is a conceptual category to promote a holistic perspective of the relationship between comics and the city. It is not a closed concept but rather a prism through which we can connect different elements that would not usually be brought together. To that end, we explore the places of the city where comics are relevant and the people who pass through those places, based on the memories of a group of people who have a long-standing engagement with comics. Of course, this approach cannot give us the whole picture, but we believe that this current chapter opens up a set of issues related to the Colombian comics scene that might be used as the starting point for a deeper study of such interactions and oral histories.

Comics disappear from the cityscape: Magazine kiosks and trade-in shops

In the early 1980s, as throughout the 1970s, comics were big sellers in Colombia. At the end of the 1960s most of the market was cornered by Mexican comics, which continued to dominate during the 1970s and early 1980s, alongside comics from the US that were translated

into Spanish. Pareja (1982; 1985), in fact, issued a warning about the potential risk for children who were consuming too many imported comics, both because of the extreme commercialisation of these products, and because of the topics covered in them. This moral panic, as would be the case for other media, emerged simultaneously with an expansion of comic-book consumption throughout the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. Probably as the consequence of the moral panic, comics started to be heavily taxed, something criticised by Ossa (1984) in the Sunday supplement 'Tiras Comicas' (Comic Strips) of the national newspaper *El Tiempo* on 6 May 1984: 'Today it's comics, tomorrow it will be other magazines, and then books, films, albums . . . . All for a "handful of dollars". I do not believe that prohibiting the import of illustrated magazines will prevent the squandering of our dollar reserves.' The tax brought expansion to a halt and caused the gradual disappearance of most of the comics scene until the tax was overturned in 2013.

Comics imports were sold at magazine kiosks that proliferated during the period prior to the comics tax. Similar to newspaper stands in the US, these kiosks offered a variety of newspapers and magazines, as well as small candy bars and bubblegum. Two dynamics of consumption were often carried out among kiosk customers: the first consisted of acquiring new comics; the second was to engage in exchanges and trade-ins. The trade-in tended to be more common in working-class neighbourhoods, in which kiosks worked as an exchange hub for avid comics readers. Although none of the Colombian-made comics were very successful, often ending after a first issue, kiosks provided a variety of products that were mostly consumed by young people, including Disney titles and *Archie* alongside the Mexican publications *Kalimán*, *Memín* and *Águila Solitaria*, and the Chilean *Condorito*.

Aside from formal trade at kiosks and magazine stands, an informal trade took place inside private dwellings or neighbourhood shops, where people would also buy, exchange and sell comics (akin to the exchange or barter clubs in Argentina referred to by Laura Vazquez in this volume). The informal neighbourhood comics stores were often found in the garages of houses. Similar to early video rentals, families could rent magazines for on-site reading for a small fee. Kiosks and informal neighbourhood shops became the principal spaces for reading and trading comics. Most customers were children who had little money to spend and would thus limit their acquisitions to a few issues and then engage in trade-ins once they had read the whole magazine.

As far as kiosks were concerned, it was possible for comics enthusiasts to keep their personal collection on track by visiting these sites regularly, and they became a recognisable part of the urban landscape. Such kiosks were present in the four largest cities in Colombia – as well as in some of the smaller ones – turning them into an urban experience common across the country. For Fernando Suárez, who grew up in the small town of Pradera, near Cali, the place to get comics as a child was the kiosk on the main square, and when he moved to Cali to study at the School of Fine Arts he states that he bought comics:

> [...] at the Librería Nacional bookstore and a few kiosks there. There was one [kiosk] near the bus station, on the side of the Estación Avenue, a small kiosk, next to a Clinic that is still there . . . there was this guy that sold comics, and another in the city centre, diagonally across from the Bank of the Republic, on Eighth Street.
>
> (Interview with Fernando Suarez, 2018)

This experience was similar to Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed's in Cali, where he would go with his grandfather to buy newspapers and comics at the kiosk near the city centre, at what is now Jairo Varela Square. Fernando Suárez adds:

> When I was a little kid I remember seeing kiosks everywhere. And also in [neighbourhood] shops, where they sold everything from buttons to plates, as well as comics.
>
> (Interview with Fernando Suarez, 2018)

That kind of 'miscellaneous shop' was key to the informal market mentioned above. It existed in houses or neighbourhood stores where comics readers would exchange or trade in comics with other attendees or the business owner. Trade-ins were carried out by handing over old editions, or volumes, and adding a small amount of money to buy a new comic. Even though kiosks were present in most areas of the cities connected to public transport networks, trade-in shops were located primarily in middle-class and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods. In these places, it was also possible to rent a comic to be read on the sidewalk or the front porch of the house for up to an hour. In warmer cities – Medellín, Cali and, in particular, Barranquilla – sidewalk reading was very common (such reading practices were not as usual in Bogotá because of the colder and rainier weather). César Ramírez remembers:

I was living in Envigado [near Medellín] back then. They sold comics at a place called *El Ocio*, and they did trade-ins, so you would read a comic and the week after you could take your comic book with you and, giving over something extra [money], you could get the next instalment.

(Interview with César Ramírez, 2018)

Similarly, in the city of Barranquilla kiosks based on trade-in dynamics were widely accepted in the popular sectors of the city, where inhabitants could increase and update their personal collections of '*paquitos*', as comic books and magazines were commonly called in the northernmost regions of Colombia.[1]

By the end of the 1980s kiosks started to disappear as the tax on imported comics took hold. The early 1990s saw comics retreat from open-air kiosks and move into supermarkets that only offered comics from the Disney catalogue, all of them in Spanish, and the Chilean *Condorito* and its catalogue, which meant Mexican comic books were absent. Comics also appeared in select bookstores, some of which became quite specialised, offering primarily North American and European comics, in big, sometimes luxurious, formats. Bookstores tended to concentrate on larger format European comics (e.g. translations of *Tintin* or *Asterix*, for example, or *Mortadelo y Filemón* and the like), compilations in small format (e.g. *Olafo, el amargado* (Hagar, the horrible) or *Garfield*, also translated), small format Argentinian compilations (e.g. *Boogie el aceitoso*, and *Mafalda*), and US comic books that were not translated into Spanish (e.g. Marvel Comics). When kiosks disappeared, trade-in shops in middle- and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods continued to provide a space for comics consumption. Bookstore customers were usually upper- and upper-middle-class children who could afford their merchandise, which highlights that the dynamics of trade-ins had a significant class connotation in Colombia.

Kiosks and neighbourhood shops were spaces where working- and middle-class children could buy and trade in comics, and supermarket stalls and bookstores were the place for middle- to upper-class comics consumption. The decline of kiosks brought about the disappearance of an important space of cultural exchange for comics in working- and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods. Comics became more highbrow, and with the concurrent rise of graphic novels, the comics fan base moved further away from the mass consumption of classic Mexican comics. Slowly but surely, with the move from public spaces to specialised

shops, bookstores, festivals and book fairs, the consumption of comics in Colombia became increasingly elitist. Unlike in Argentina, where magazine kiosks still abound in cities like Buenos Aires, they are no longer seen in Colombia. The traditional space of comics was no longer in public spaces but private stores.

Specialist stores and hobby clubs: The 'nerd culture' of urban comics consumption

The changes enacted by the 1991 Constitution had an ambiguous impact on comic book consumption and the presence of comics in urban settings. On the one hand, a cultural fund established by the government promoted projects such as *ACME* magazine. On the other hand, in 1993, the so-called 'book law' classified comics as culturally irrelevant, placing them in the same category as pornographic and crossword puzzle magazines, which meant they were unable to receive the tax exemptions introduced for scientific and culturally relevant printed works (Suárez and Uribe-Jongbloed, 2016). Through this categorisation, the tax on comics from the 1980s continued during the 1990s and 2000s. Unsurprisingly, during the 1990s there was a shortage of comic books and magazines. Editorial CINCO, which was the largest importer and distributor of comics, stopped bringing comics to Colombia altogether. The book law, which made other books tax-free and raised the tax for comics and graphic novels, had a significant impact on the market – and on the disappearance of the kiosks. Comic fans and enthusiasts soon found themselves without many opportunities for accessing graphic stories, other than in the weekend funnies of newspapers.

During this period the specialised comic-book store and the hobby club replaced the kiosk as a space of interaction. The kiosk disappeared from Colombian streets and squares in the early 1990s almost simultaneously with the disappearance of national comics publications. Unlike in the US, where the lack of comics at newsstands led to the development of specialised comics bookstores (Pustz 1999, 6), in Colombia comics that were no longer available at kiosks or newspaper stands were found only in second-hand bookstores or magazine re-sellers, such as El Loco Pensante in Bogotá – a shop that is still open for business. The comics then found in established bookshops were usually expensive European large-format comics (such as *Tintin* and *Asterix*) or translated Marvel and DC comics.

Bookstores also bought into another trend at the beginning of the 1990s: the cultural scene that brought together comic books, sci-fi novels, role-playing games (RPGs) and, more recently, collectable card games and collectable figures. The main bookstore in Bogotá which sold all of these in one space was Librería Francesa. At that time, it was the centre of Colombian 'nerd culture', a term understood to refer to:

> [...] a set of interests and hobbies that includes reading or collecting comic books; playing certain kinds of games (e.g. role-playing games; collectable card games; miniatures games, 'German' board games and to a lesser extent video or digital games); engaging with science, technology and other scholastic pursuits; and participating in fandoms for certain genres and texts (e.g. science-fiction and fantasy; horror and cult media).
>
> (Woo 2012, 261)

Nerd culture was centred around sci-fi, fantasy and RPGs, which became popular in the early 1990s, mainly among children who brought TSR products (such as Dungeons & Dragons books) from the US. The growth in Librería Francesa's sales correlates with two important developments. On the one hand, Gilles Fauveau, the manager of the bookstore, was a dedicated RPG fan and comic book aficionado. He was also a comic-book artist and alongside Bernardo Rincón – an academic and comic-book fan himself – created the cult magazine *ACME*, which has been hailed ever since its inception in 1993 as the most important point of reference for comics in Colombia (Suárez and Uribe-Jongbloed 2016, 55–6). Librería Francesa expanded its business and opened a shop called *The Hobby Store* in the mid-1990s, with more comic books, RPG books and sci-fi toys precisely to cater for this specific audience. Most books, including comics, were found in their English version, setting a high cultural capital barrier for consumption. Also, as these works were imports from European countries and the US, the prices were considerably higher than those of the kiosk comics of the 1980s. Most patrons were university-level students, many of whom were linked to a new hobby club called Trollhattan, founded by some of the regular customers. Trollhattan members met weekend nights at an old mill, which was a restaurant by day, near the city centre of Bogotá, where a number of private universi-ties are located. Trollhattan lasted two incarnations in as many sites in the city but always concentrated its activities around RPGs, with Librería Francesa acting as their site for acquiring new products. When Trollhattan closed its doors, Librería Francesa opened a new, larger locale, which

included a back room – by 2018, an upper floor – for playing collectable card games (CCGs) such as Magic, the Gathering. In the late 1990s, a variety of coffee shops and bars near the universities started offering RPG nights to cater for this new interest. Simultaneously, in 2001, a new club was created, following Trollhattan's footsteps. Escrol was the new place to play board games, RPGs, CCGs, and it offered access to comics and other books lent or donated by members. Escrol also moved sites and eventually included MMORPGs as part of their entertainment offering, closing its doors for good in 2007. Librería Francesa ended up closing the Hobby Shop and the other branches, keeping only the larger one, which still houses large comic-book offerings, and spaces for playing different games. The activities of Librería Francesa with Trollhattan and Escrol highlight the intertwined experience of nerd culture with comics consumption.

In a similar fashion to the way Woo describes the context in the US, in Colombia too 'comic shops are indeed central to the practices of comic fans and collectors, but most are also game shops and toy stores and purveyors of t-shirts and miscellaneous licensed merchandise' (Woo 2011, 129). Hobby and comic-book stores, such as Too Geek in Bogotá, have become the sites for gatherings and small events, which also cater to the needs of the current 'nerd culture'. Librería Francesa was a space that allowed for the discussion of related hobbies, among them comic-book collection. Comic-book stores also 'act as a space for people to argue over the intricacies of their favourite heroes and villains, various plotlines and reboots, and to discuss how the comic-based movies are similar, but also different, than the original pulp publications' (Herrmann 2018, 4). In Colombia, clubs became spaces of interaction that, except for Librería Francesa, eventually started to distribute comic books, rather than the other way around. The heyday of RPGs at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s went hand in hand with the expansion of 'nerd culture' in Colombia. Clubs have come and gone in all the cities, but today *Casa Friki* in Medellín and *Valkyrias y Dragones* in Barranquilla remain as evidence of the lasting effort of dedicated individuals who have brought together comic book fandom and other elements of 'nerd culture'.

Comics in events and festivals: Book and hobby fairs, universities and public libraries

At the beginning of the 1990s, in different universities in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla, students, professors and graphic

artists began to organise spaces to present and exhibit their own work. Gatherings with talks about comics and caricatures began to grow in number. Such events were important for increasing the visibility of comic fanzines sold independently without ISSN or ISBN identifiers, and whose existence is largely only documented from the testimony of those who read them at any given moment. As in Peru (see Carla Sagastegui Heredia's chapter in this volume) and Argentina (see Vazquez's chapter in this volume), self-published and informally distributed fanzines and single-issue comics became the norm in the 1990s (Suárez and Uribe-Jongbloed 2016).

In the late 1980s, the Cali Departmental Institute of Fine Arts – then called the School of Fine Arts – created a bi-annual exhibition of graphic art, consisting primarily of comics and caricature. One of the first of its kind, this event inaugurated the growing presence of comics in academic contexts. The exhibit was promoted and managed by the artists Ricardo Potes, León Octavio, Jorge Saavedra, Marco Aurelio Cárdenas, Wilson Ramirez, Hans Anderegg and Gilberto Parra, who organised the magazine *Click* in 1985 and 1986 (Ossa 2019, 242–3). Fernando Suárez remembers:

> I joined the School of Fine Arts [in Cali] in '87, and then I started to meet people. It was hard to know who the comic-book artists were, because you could pick up the comics, but there was no contact information.
>
> (Interview with Fernando Suárez, 2018)

This did not stop Suárez, who joined a group of eager students and alumni in 1994 to create the Salón de Historietas y Caricatura (The Comics and Caricature Assembly) in Cali, a yearly event that started with the support of the Cali Chamber of Commerce. Later, in the mid-2000s, it became Calicomix, an annual event that is still running. Originally an exhibition of artwork with a few talks by guest speakers from different countries and with a handful of comics being sold on site, it has grown in size and importance and is now one of Colombia's main comics events.

Medellín had a similar experience, with students of the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana (UPB) and graphic artists working together to make their work visible through an event called *Visiones*. These events allowed artists to establish and collaborate on projects which were published years later, such as *Agente Naranja* and *Zape Pelele*. César Ramírez remembers finding these magazines:

> [...] right there, at the Bolivariana [UPB], because the main artists graduated from there, after they'd studied Advertising and Design. So the group from *Zape Pelele* were the group that all came from Advertising, whereas those from *Agente* [*Naraja*] were from Advertising and Design.
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with César Ramírez, 2018)</div>

Zape Pelele lasted longer than other magazines and had a wider distribution in cities other than Medellín because it was more marketable, not least because its content was more family-friendly than the other publications. Although it contained some comic strips and pages of comics, it was rather like a Colombian version of *MAD* magazine.

In the late 2000s, Salón del Cómic started gaining prominence and relevance in Medellín and it became a permanent fixture that would be followed by other artists and event organisers in other cities of Colombia.

> At that time, we had Salón del Cómic. Then I was organizing Salón de Cómic y Manga de Medellín [Medellín Comic and Manga Assembly] in the latest instalments of Fiesta del Libro [The Book Fest] . . . I joined Salón del Cómic around 2006 or 2007, the day I met Granda[2] and he invited me to work with them, but they had been at it for some time.
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with César Ramirez, 2018)</div>

Just like Fernando Suárez, César Ramírez grew up reading comics in the 1980s. They both support Bernardo Rincón's (2013) claim that the children who grew up reading comics in the 1970s and 1980s became the university students of the 1990s, and it was their dedication and interest which initiated some of the more interesting comics projects that developed subsequently. In fact, Jorge Peña, well known for his comic book *Maku* in 1967 and *Tukano*, released in the weekly publication *Los Monos*, lectured at the School of Graphic Design in the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá for over 25 years. Rincón has also lectured there since the early 1990s, having created a course on comics in 1993 (Peña 2000, 15). In 2009, the 29th exhibit of the School of Graphic Design focused on national comic-book artists, presenting honours to Jorge Peña for his contribution. This event was held at the Architecture Museum in the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá.

In the early 1990s, Colcultura, the state institution in charge of promoting cultural production, started to support projects which eventually became volumes of comics compilations from a variety of national artists. It was one of those grants which allowed for the creation of *ACME*, the most popular and renowned comics publication of the period. In 1992, Bernardo Rincón, alongside Gilles Fauveau of Librería Francesa and other enthusiasts, collected the work of national and international comic-book artists into one magazine with high production standards. *ACME* quickly became the comic magazine that had the widest reach within the almost nonexistent comics market in Colombia, and it lasted for about four years (1992–6) (Suárez and Uribe-Jongbloed 2016, 55–6). *ACME* started by presenting the work of graphic artists from Colombia and some guest artists from Venezuela and Argentina, whose work was known via earlier publications that had limited distribution. *ACME* presented short stories by artists clearly influenced by Moebius, not only in the style of the drawings, but in the way the sci-fi stories were told. For many readers, *ACME* formed comics readers for whom other comic magazines, such as *Heavy Metal* or *Métal Hurlant*, were unaffordable as a result of the high prices at specialised bookstores.

Universities were fundamental as places to encounter the new generation of comic-book artists and enthusiasts. Schools of graphic design were hotbeds for these artists who, slowly but surely, began bringing comics back to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a trend that suggested that the 1990s marked a new future for comics in Colombia (Rabanal 2001). There has been a steady growth in the readership of comics, a change in the status of comic consumption and, though there is still no fully fledged Colombian comics industry, a significant change in momentum in terms of production, all of which has meant many more academics working on the subject (Suárez and Uribe-Jongbloed 2016). Just as in Peru (see Sagástegui Heredia's chapter in this volume), some comic-book artists became professionals, but there was no developed industry, in contrast to, for example, Argentina (see Vazquez's chapter in this volume).

The late 1990s also saw the creation of university guilds and clubs based around elements of 'nerd culture', including RPGs and comics, which also integrated patrons of the larger clubs mentioned above, such as Trollhattan and Escrol. Three former members of Escrol created El Cómic en Línea, which started as a website highlighting comic production, hoping to become a network of creators, and which eventually became a non-profit organisation that supported the

creation of two of the *Exogen* comics. El Cómic en Línea also organised Los Monos de Oro at one of the Bogotá Chamber of Commerce offices, a contest and event that brought together local comic-book creators with international academics and artists, granting a symbolic prize to winners in several categories.

This period also saw growing interest in Japanese manga, which was introduced in Colombia in the 1970s through public television, which broadcast anime shows, such as Heidi, Doraemon (known in Colombia at that time as the Cosmic Cat), and Mazinger Z. During the 1980s, anime shows took up more TV screen time, particularly family-oriented shows like Tom Sawyer or the Tales of the Brothers Grimm. During the 1990s, with the appearance of national private TV channels and satellite TV, anime took over prime time, and small children became more and more interested in the anime aesthetic. By the start of the twenty-first century Colombia had a huge number of anime and manga enthusiasts who soon started to look for, and to create, spaces to share that particular type of art and comics. Manga and anime clubs started popping up in neighbourhoods in similar fashion to the trade-in shops of the late 1980s and early 1990s. These clubs started importing manga and pirated copies of anime videos, which would also be shown via small-scale video projections for a small fee. This growing interest has prompted events such as the Shinanime Festival (https://shinanimefestival.com) in Cali, the Matsuriken collective in Medellín, and the large gathering in Bogotá at the yearly SOFA (Showroom of Entertainment and Leisure), all of which gathered together many elements of 'nerd culture'. The success of *Two Aldos* could be predicated upon this interest in manga, and some bookstores – like Librería Nacional – also began importing manga books just as some national artists began to reproduce the aesthetics of manga comics in their artwork. On the whole, however, manga comics still do not have a large turnover in Colombia.

By the year 2012, there were collectives that focused on creating series of stories to secure continuity of publication. Examples include: *Bogotá Masacre Zombie*, produced by Go Up Comics; *Ana Crónica*, produced by the Greiff Brothers; or *Saic*, produced by Ave Negra, a company led by the García brothers. These collectives, though small, were designed to ensure that their comic books lasted more than one or two issues. At the same time, they managed to organise distribution channels that were strengthened using web sites and fan pages. The quality of such products was higher than it had been 20 years earlier, and their prices were more accessible, to the extent that even school-age

students could afford the magazines. These works were almost always available at the national book and hobby fairs throughout the country and through direct sales via Facebook and Instagram fan pages.

Other events have also had an impact on the social milieu. Highbrow gatherings and events include El club de lectores de Cómic (started in 2009 in Armenia), a reading club sponsored by Banco de la República in its libraries, including the Luis Ángel Arango Library in Bogotá; and Entreviñetas, an academic and artistic gathering that started in 2010 focusing on comics and graphic novels (Correa 2010, 136–7). The brainchild of Daniel Jiménez Quiroz, the Entreviñetas festival started in Armenia, alongside the magazine *Larva* (Guerra 2010, 39), but is now held in Bogotá and Medellín as a yearly event that brings together renowned artists, publishers and academics, hosting discussions about comics to open audiences, and including talks, conferences, exhibitions and workshops. Although both El Club del Cómic and Entreviñetas are open to the general public, they tend to be attended by people with significant cultural capital and academic interests. Entreviñetas has become particularly relevant because it has helped to raise the perception of comics and graphic novels to a level and status approaching that of high-end prose literature.

A more commercially oriented event is Comic-Con Colombia. Comic-Con started in Medellín in 2013 in a shopping mall but also recently took place in Bogotá. Now Comic-Con has yearly events in both cities. Although this event tends to concentrate on many other aspects of entertainment, comics remain at the core of the event and César Ramírez makes certain that there is a comprehensive number of talks and workshops that focus on them.

Finally, we should mention recent work undertaken by Santiago Suescún and volunteers of the Festival de Cómic Colombiano, FICCO, which has started to gather momentum. Inaugurated in 2016, FICCO is a gathering place for young comic creators with regular bi-monthly meetings that include talks and comic-book sales. FICCO usually partners with public libraries and specialised shops, including Too Geek, and uses their spaces for the gatherings. Although originally established in Bogotá, FICCO meetings have also taken place in Medellín and Barranquilla, bringing together young artists and hosting talks that are free to attend. FICCO has also participated in the Bogotá International Book Fair (FILBO) and in SOFA, both of which are annual events that take place in the capital.

Final remarks: The Colombian comics scene

Several key elements emerge from the transformation of the comics scene in Colombia that we have described above. The disappearance of kiosks certainly changed the overall presence of comics in the streets. The impact of kiosks can perhaps now be seen in the extensive murals and graffiti that are present in most Colombian cities today. After the social action that led to the constitutional court reinstating comics as cultural goods in 2013, making them exempt from value-added taxes, high-end bookstores started selling more comics and including Colombian graphic novels as part of their stock. Nevertheless, the loss of kiosks is still deeply felt among certain sectors of society, not least as it has resulted in more limited access to comics as a form available to all, turning it instead into a more elitist manifestation of cultural consumption.

Perhaps in response to the aforementioned limitations in terms of access to comics, universities have emerged as key spaces for comics consumption and for making visible the work of local graphic artists, in many cases via events that are co-sponsored with private sector companies or local government bodies. University courses have also brought together students who subsequently became leading figures within such activities, working alongside specialist academics who also created and promoted many such initiatives. Simultaneously, the involvement of public libraries in fostering comic-book reading clubs and participating in or promoting events such as Entreviñetas and FICCO, indicates that some public institutions are realising how comics can be used to promote literacy.

While it is true that there is still no national Colombian comics industry as such, the country does have a long tradition of caricature, mainly of a political nature and with ample exposure in printed media. When academic spaces of exhibition and reflection around comics began to develop, it was, at least to begin with, linked to an interest in political cartoons and visual satire. Organisers also recognised that more people were familiar with caricature and that such familiarity would bring in larger numbers to the events. Caricature was used as a hook for attracting new enthusiasts into the world of comics and particularly national comic production. The lack of a comics industry has made it difficult for artists to make a living out of producing comics alone – a situation similar to what was happening in Peru (see Sagástegui Heredia's chapter in this volume). The fusion of comics and caricature has also meant some artists and followers moving from one field to the other. Cases like that of

Fernando Suárez, who drew single-panel cartoons in the Cali newspaper *El País,* but who is also a comic-book creator, is symptomatic of such movements. Many of the cartoonists of the 1980s and 1990s were also part of the comics movement, including Bernardo Rincón, Grosso, Jorge Peña, Ricardo Potes and others, and most were also involved in university teaching.

During the decades that followed, the demand for comics fell significantly and, at the same time, the number of anime programmes imported from Japan and with Mexican or Iberian-Spanish translation grew in number, and young people became increasingly focused on television series rather than reading comics. With the growing popularity of anime, however, came a growing demand for manga among young readers, a demand that was reflected by the decision of commercial bookstores to start importing manga books.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, large publishing companies entered Colombia, distributing their collections in commercial bookstore chains. The high prices of comics meant that only a small number of buyers were able to afford volumes edited by DC Comics, Vertigo or Marvel. Stores also imported comics linked to major film series, such as X-Men, Iron Man, Spider-Man, etc., but as these are mostly only available in English they are also difficult to sell on a large scale.

In the 1990s, magazines such as *ACME*, *TNT*, *Zape Pelele* or *Agente Naranja*, among others, allowed middle-class readers to access national comics, developing a new type of habitus, in the sense set out by Pierre Bourdieu (2012), since few middle-class college students could afford to buy expensive French or North American comic books and magazines at the specialised book stores or hobby centres. Simultaneous to this growing demand for national comics, role-playing started to find a place with college and university students, partly due to the fact that both comics and RPGs were offered in the same places. Thus, playing games and reading comics turned into a manifestation of class habitus, and a material expression of a new type of cultural capital. They became the markers of a 'nerd culture' that was associated with a certain level of sophistication and a middle to upper-middle class of college-educated, bilingual (or even multilingual) consumers of foreign-language comic books. Such a trend highlights that the disappearance of kiosks and Mexican comics is not only a visual change in the city landscape but also a transformation in comics consumption from the working and lower-middle classes into a very bourgeois pastime. In a relatively short period

of time, access to and consumption of comics went from being popular to being a means of distinction, to use Bourdieu's concept.

The cases of Librería Francesa – as the most important comic-book store for many years – and the clubs that now have a dual existence as gathering places and sources of novelty and collectable products, still show how exclusive this market is. Nowadays, even though people in Medellín can attend Casa Friki, where a wide range of national and foreign comics are available to be read on-site, and patrons at Valkyrias & Dragones in Barranquilla can acquire comics at reasonable prices, they are also indicative of how limited the comics scene has become in their respective cities.

The comic-book scene in Colombia has thus moved from the public space of street kiosks to a more private sphere. Although comics are evident in universities, bookstores and public libraries, comics are also associated with large-scale events that garner more and more international attention. In that sense, comics are not as widespread as they once were in the 1970s and 1980s. The cities discussed in this chapter range from 1.2 million inhabitants in Barranquilla to more than 2.4 million in Cali and Medellín and 8 million in Bogotá, according to the projections for 2018 (DANE 2018). If we compare these sizes to those undisclosed Canadian and US cities where Woo (2011, 2012) and Herrmann (2018), undertook their research,[3] then the presence of comics in Colombian cities is a small-scale phenomenon. As comics became targeted at the middle class, and Mexican comics disappeared along with the kiosks that stocked them, comics became an increasingly niche product. Nevertheless, the demand for comics in Colombia is starting to grow, due in part to the growth of that same middle class, and the concerted efforts of many artist collectives, events and festivals. The disappearance of the kiosks is symptomatic, in that sense, of wider urban transformations and, akin to what has happened with other media, suggests a shift in Colombian culture away from a Mexican-led influence, towards a more US-led one. It remains to be seen whether these recent expansions in the production of national comics manage to reach the same people who used to participate in trade-ins and sidewalk reading around kiosks.

Notes

1   The word *paquito* or *paco* became synonymous with the words 'lie' or 'con' in everyday slang in Barranquilla, and continues to be used to this day to refer to elaborate stories that no one believes.

2   Granda (full name Carlos Granda) is one of the most famous Colombian comic-book artists, known for his work for Marvel and other international comics publishers. He also has the largest collection of Superman comics and collectable figures in Colombia. He has been a big fan and supporter of many comics events in Colombia.

3   There is no direct reference in either of their articles to the cities where the stores they analyse are located. It seems that those mentioned by Woo are in the Burnaby/Vancouver area, but there is not enough information to make an estimated guess in the case of Herrmann, although it would seem to be in a smaller town.

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