**An Interview with Istvansch**

**By Luciana Trocello**

At the Valle de las Sierras Chicas, the city of artists –Unquillo– is the perfect setting to meet with Istvansch, a multi-faceted artist.

A swirl of readings and readers was the appointment he had before the interview –as far as we could see, the colourful display at the Book Fair of Nuestra Señora de las Mercedarias was unforgettable. Everything suggested that we were trapped in the plot of the next story: artist, book fair... and María Teresa Andruetto in attendance: memorable.

The beige hues of fall in the hills started to be painted with colours with each thought of our interviewee, who is a model to construct, reflect, and keep on constructing.

**To paraphrase you, we thought of your “meaning layers” as illustrator, author, designer, and reader…**

**How would you describe yourself as a reader of literature?**

I think I have always been a voracious reader. Everything interests me, since I was a child. I was the typical boy who became excited about something and would read all night long. I am also a reader type that I call "untidy" (although I am not), but as I do not have academic training... That is the only thing I wish I had learnt from academic training: a reading line, a guideline, because I "jump" from one topic to the other”… if a book comes in my way that makes me take a detour... I am an anarchic reader. A while ago I realized (when I am pretty much of age, so to speak) that some people who had pursued a formal degree have a reading line. So I feel that I have "some gaps" and I think that I must read what I have not read yet. So I say to myself: "Ah, I need to read a lot!" (loud laughs). I have a need to read; I need to have a book in my hands; I feel empty if I don’t have a book in my bag, close to me. To go out without a book is like going around naked.

**What do you prefer reading?**

Everything. I read novels, short stories and, of course, picture books and children’s books; I like poetry very much. When I was a teenager, I read a lot of drama. I was member of a vocational drama group. In any case, I like a little bit of everything. When I was a teenager, I also read a lot of comics (I needed to have and buy them), although now I seldom read them. When I started to research into and to produce children's books, I sort of left comics aside. I believe these are paths we take, depending on our voracity at the time; one needs different things.

I also read literary theory and communications theory. I have read little about the theory of illustration in children’s books because there is little available. However, I did find theory and materials on visual communications that refer to books as integral objects that combine text and images. I then linked everything and I developed a novel theory.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**As author, what is your representation of readers?**

When you talk about “author”, you mean as integral author, right? (he refers to his work as author, visual artist and designer). I think of readers in a broad sense. I am aware that my works may be read by children and I am interested in those readers, of course, but I am also interested in "holding all readers in check" (children, adults, teenagers) and in blurring the target reader in my books. I would not say that I do not think of those readers (children), but I try to think of readers in the broadest possible sense. Even in the books included in collections for small kids, I stubbornly make this resolution: even when the book is targeted to small kids, I want to hold adults in check and to question themselves whether they fully understand it, and whether the kid can understand it –that creates a conflict. I am interested in a reader in conflict, who looks for his or her own answers.

**As illustrator, do you believe that your visual construction is your version, your interpretation of the text? Do you put yourself in the place of the reader?**

I am not sure of whether "version" is the right word; it is a *reinterpretation* of the text that re-signifies it and, at the same time, is re-signified by the text. Consequently, in that dialogue between text and image, another *discourse body* is created, namely, the book. I want to find that in all types of books. This is quite characteristic of picture books, but in other books, for example that are "plainly illustrated", one can add objects in the image that may play in counterpoint with the text in such a way that they may start a dialogue and may construct the final body that is the book, as a true work that gives rise to a new discourse and to new debates. And around this discourse, to questions and conflicts.

**All books read as cultural objects…**

All of them. Although there are some books that are clearly not picture books, they are illustrated; you would be able to take out the images and the text would continue to work as text with isolated illustrations, But what I try to achieve is that these illustrations –that other people may think are simple repetitions of what is stated in the text– are not such and that they establish a relation, not only with the text, but that they multiply the meanings, and that the book as object ends up being a product in which the illustrations are not something indifferent. In a book that we wrote with Laura Devetach, that is perfectly clear.[[2]](#footnote-2) That book might as well not be illustrated. But in the way that we produced it, a world is created. In that book, Laura and I are talking about the same thing, but we are not *saying* the same. The illustrations may seem many, but they are three large illustrations that are broken up as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that is finally put together. What I am saying there (he refers to his illustrations) is something that Laura says a lot in the intertexts of her writing, i.e. female characters that are broken up and are put together once again, and that are assembled and disassembled, like a jigsaw puzzle; and that is also put in images. A reader may note that or not, but an attentive reader will note that the images are not naïve, and that they do not merely *illustrate* the text.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***Diablos y mariposas* is a book that breaks with the traditional reading position and that may be read on a side, upside down…**

That is right. And those small drawings, side by side like in a cluster, appeal to the graphic value of drawing. In other words, the drawings may be read as the letters are read. One must decode them as we do with letters, and the meaning is created by reading each illustration together with the ones that are on its side, opposite to it or beside it... skipping the text and recognizing an image that is mentioned in the text, or another image that is not mentioned in the text. We must ask ourselves, why is this image here, if the book does not mention it? Maybe the reader notes that the image is in between the lines of the text.

**In fact, we have a single female character but the visual dimension opens up to many other characters.**

Indeed. I like to think of illustration like that: never as something naïve; never as something subsidiary. I do not mean that you cannot take illustrations out or the story would make no sense without them, but that *together with* the text, the body of the work is actually created.

Both as *integral author* and as *author of any of the components of the book*, to me it is exasperating when a book causes indifference. To me, that means the death of the book; it is the worst thing that could ever happen. And when someone tells me: “this thing, here, I think it doesn't work," I need them to explain why not. In any case, that "dislike" is a vivid critique, which implies an involvement with the book. Consequently, it is not indifferent; it is a position. As author, I want to appeal to a reader that does not remain indifferent. And there are books that produce excitement, but this excitement is lost right away and the books are left behind. My goal is that all my books have *something* so that –if someone passes by at a Fair and gives them a quick look (because there are many reasons why someone would give a quick look to a book)– the reader is left with something inside that tells him or her "I should go back." The reader may come back or not, but my goal is that the reader continues to think "I did not get it, I should come back, I should look it up..."

**We would like to come back to your idea of *aesthetic series*, a notion that does not necessarily require a collection *per se* or an editorial line...**

Tere [María Teresa] Andruetto and I are very interested in this notion, and we define it like that (if one must define it), because, generally, series or collections, at the editorial level (and this is determined by the market), are set up around a single format or a topic or a character that appears repeatedly, and in our books, that we call *aesthetic series,* this is not the case, but there is unity all the same. So, although there are no repeated characters and the books are not all the same in terms of format or typography, or they are not published by the same publishing house, there is indeed something that draws a line and that is the aesthetics. In other words, they are texts that define a way of working by seeking one aesthetics of writing, always with an epigraph as a starting point, which in a way acts as the tip of a wool ball that gives rise to the whole story, and, in turn, is a poetic language. On my end, I replicate this by illustrating with different materials, with extremely pure lines on the one hand, and with images on the other. This created the aesthetics of the images, an aesthetics that had never before been portrayed in my books. It was not deliberate; I felt that the book needed that format and, when I found the formula of ink lines on tracing paper, cut-and-pasted to create some sort of translucent transparency over the underlying collage, this is related to the different layers of meaning. To me, it was clear that the first layer is the one comprising the tracing paper and the drawings –which are quite visible but are merely the surface of the background that lies behind them. And it works. In a second book it also worked, and in that way we have something that is linked by the same aesthetics that may perfectly work in different places.

**I overheard one of the readers who asked you if the story of any particular woman was behind *La durmiente*[[4]](#footnote-4). And she was approaching you in some way, in that visual language that leaves room for uncertainty, although in the written language, many dare to find an (alleged) “single meaning”. Visual language, instead, has what we might call an apparent polysemy.**

It looked like it had gone unnoticed, but that is not the case. That was weird. Indeed, illustrations have some portions of a meaningful text but, by grace and work of collage –and that is aesthetics– a reader may consider them image, and may even skip them, because ultimately they create an image. There is something to read embedded in the illustrations and, curiously enough, it is perfectly clear which is the core text written by the author and that there is a dialogue between these texts. This stirs up a debate with a lot of substance in many directions. During the presentation, a girl asked whether we had written the book together. I did not want to anticipate my answer and, of course, both of us are the authors, and the text caused the images in the book to be *remade* and the illustrations caused the text in the book to be *re-written*. Actually, then, the "work was made by the two of us." And I added: the images contain text, so which is the text here? And how should the images be read? Should I read the text in the images and then the text written with a different typography? And suddenly one reader may ask himself or herself about the type font, which is something about which we do not usually think when reading a book. What is the shape of the type font?

**However, in Preschool Education and Primary Education, we must think a lot about this, of course from a teaching perspective. We think about italics, block capitals, and a series of factors that often times condition the selection of books.**

That is long past. Emilia Ferreiro and constructivism said a lot about those issues…

**The world is in block letters, and we must read the world.**

Absolutely.

**In another interview, we read that you leave gaps for the reader in each of your works. These gaps may be blank spaces or other elements.**

Yes, indeed. There is a relationship that many times falls into oblivion. In illustrated books, there is a reading triumvirate and there are basically three creators of readings: the writer, the illustrator and the reader. The reader is the creator of his or her own reading. That is accepted and widespread knowledge. The reader builds his or her own reading. Consequently, the reader is creating something. Now then, the illustrator and the writer are also reading what each other are doing. When they know about a reading by a reader and they go and see it, they are surprised because it is a creative and unexpected reading. In turn, both the writer and the illustrator read themselves. The reading that the creator makes of his or her own work is also a partial, biased reading, and one adds things that one had not noticed that were there. Therefore, there is a triangle in which these three creators intercept: each of them makes his or her own reading; each of them reads what the other created; and each of them reads what the other reads. This is a completely mobile construction. And in this construction, my interest is that the gears work seamlessly. The reader may flow in the construction of his or her own reading, and the illustrator or writer may introduce those blank spaces, which are not empty spaces but spaces in which the meanings are multiplied, and one cannot foresee what the reader will read in them. And that is extremely rich. That is when someone tries to read the other and is surprised to read something that the other did not mean to say. I like that –through some constructions of the images– these "gears are really oiled" and the readings flow from one to the other. Of course, the graphic designer also makes his or her reading, but with three actors, it is already too complex. You also have the editor; many individuals participate in the making of a book. Illustrated books are a new, complex, genre where different discourses are intermingled. Ultimately, what is it? Is it Literature, is it an illustrated book, is it Fine Arts? It is a *picture book*, a product characteristic of the 20th century. Never before had we had a genre in which so many discourses are mixed or interact.

**In a way, it is like the birth of film.**

Indeed, film is also typical of the 20th century. This had never happened before in the history of mankind. Painting, Literature and Music –and at a given point Mathematics– were considered arts. All of the sudden, in the 20th century there was an extremely clear crossing of different languages. At a given moment, film was also subject to the question “what is this?” The answer was "photography". But it was not. How should it be classified? The first photographs bore plastic-art traits that received their own name, and they were categorized as an artistic-plastic movement. These thoughts were typical of the second half of the 19th century, but photography evolved and it was said "that is not it; this is something new; it's photography."

Cartoons, which are closer and with which we are acquainted via our parents and grandparents, were initially categorized as “just drawings” and were exclusively addressed at kids. Of course, this was a new genre. In our days, I believe that no one would dare to say that "cartoons are just for kids." We have political cartoons, for example, that is a genre that deals with every topic.

Likewise, illustrated books and picture books are products of a century that has allowed for an intertwinement of many different languages.

This was clear-cut for me; I noticed it at an exhibition in Europe. The first photographs were considered a plastic-art genre, a plastic movement known as *Pictorialism*. In the beginning, these sets were made, people in pictures would pose, the pictures were coloured… it was a quest that was closely related to plastic arts, but it was photography. In the beginning, it was “unclassifiable.”

I believe that many discourses stir up debate, and picture books are one of them. There is a need to give them a name, and they attempt it with "the sixth art", "the ninth art"...

In the Middle Ages, the arts were Mathematics, Logics. Well, that changed, they were classified as sciences. The 20th century had a bold start, and the mass media allowed for the mixing of disciplines, and arts, and sciences, in an impressive, welcomed and beautiful way. However, humans are used to classifying everything, and they want to know what it is.

**In the school setting, something unclassifiable sparks off a crisis. We do not quite know how to read a picture book… it is a “very costly” object and the teachers wonder if they should give them to children; there are many questions around them.**

**Can you give us some clues as how to read images? We see a boom of images in Literature, and we must increasingly sharpen our understanding.**

What you say is real; it shows a contracture, and the best way to go is to relax and to decompress, and to let the work tell what it has to say, without trying to name everything. To let the book-as-object express what it has to say. One of the lines in a poem by Oliverio Girondo reads: "open your pores and scatter a little". The book will provide readers with a lot of answers, and a lot of questions, and the readers will start an investigation, maybe in an unconscious way. I believe the key is to try and let everything flow, even with the certainty that "I understood all this; I did not understand all this.” And maybe it is enough to let the book sit, to read other books where I can find the answers, to read it again, to read comics. At the end of the day, the potential answers may lie in unexpected places.

And as you specifically referred to school, you must relax and avoid thinking “how would I doubt, when I am supposed to always have an answer for everything?"

**A thought by Jorge Larrosa goes “do not teach me what you know; tell me what you think.”**

Indeed. Like child readers pose their questions when they do not understand something, or their confusion, by rejecting something, adult readers should do the same. Many say "children don't like this". And that is no use. Does that mean that children do not like something but all the same you are working with that in class? It would be interesting to say why they do not like it or by they are confused. In other words, one should start a debate with the conversational partner, irrespective of the age. I do not support the idea of “child-age-appropriateness.” Another word that is used a lot is “mediator”, and it invariably refers to an adult. A mediator can very frequently be a child! We must assume that the mediator may be anywhere. Adults are responsible because they are older, and often times it is important to be aware that there exists a responsibility towards the other individual who is there and also has information. We must never forget that we are all developing individuals at all times. Frequently the roles are switched in the classroom, or at a conference. They are switched and our counterpart is explaining and acting as a mediator.

**Thank you very much for our generosity.**

Thank you. I have been told that many times.

***Indeed, you are extremely generous. That is not the case of all creators. You are a giver. Other people are extremely sparing in talking about the details of their creative work. I believe this is linked to your role as trainer of illustrators, to your teaching. I believe that an artist may be a great artist, but not a generous one. A teacher, instead, is always generous –added the extremely qualified María Teresa Andruetto.***

1. Istvansch is precisely the autor of *La otra lectura. Las ilustraciones en los libros para niños* [A Different Reading. Children’s Books Illustrations]. Buenos Aires: Lugar Editorial/Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Diablos y mariposas*. Laura Devetach. Illustrated by Istvansch. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Eclipse, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, one of the meanings of *illustrate* is “adorning a printed text with pictures or engravings referring to the text”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *La durmiente* [The Sleeping Girl]. Text by María Teresa Andruetto. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)