

ONE MORE TIME ABOUT READING:
CONSIDERATION SINCE THE
RECENT HISTORY AND THE NEW
VIRTUAL SCENARIOS

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— *Abstract*—

Today, facing the realm of the virtual and the fear of the predominance of the image over the writing, practices and habits of reading seem to be in a paradigm shift. However, and beyond detractors and Web supporters, reading in Mexico seems to be stalemate. This short journey, about the reading in our country, which takes as a point of reflection the Porfiriato, seeks to debate about practices and habits readers and some of their imaginary. I also want to emphasize that, above triumphalism's or gloomy omens, it is necessary to increase the quantitative and qualitative studies around all the variables that are involved in this act called reading, placing the current subject as the main axis of the investigation.

Keywords

Reading, History, Readers, Written Culture, Mexico.

1° ACT

The power of the letter -whether it be papyrus, from a book or flickering on a touch screen-, its influence in proposing models of behavior, reiterating or defending concepts and ideals, or its role in generating (and even silencing) debates on these and other matters has been the subject of many reflections. It has been praised for its ability to guide and train the individual; it has been condemned for being a source of evil and perdition; it has been branded as soul food or poison for innocence, but since the appearance of writing, reactions and even contradictions have been present, as Anne Staples points out in reference to nineteenth-century Mexico, despite being «a country with a large number of illiterates, the weight of the written word was such that it aroused real fears as to its influence» (2005: 120).

Kings, leaders from different religions, nobility members or the upper bourgeoisie, elements of the middle class or members of the «people», have been protagonists, witnesses, victims, or perpetrators of this power –something that until this day it's hard to specify– in several times in history. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which for four centuries had a category of ecclesiastical law from the Catholic Church, was not only an index that allowed pointing heretics or persecute the ungodly, it is also a good example that confirms the scope and dangers that were attributed to the written word. Most of the times the same texts include the anecdote, just as Julio Sesto narrates: «and in the customs of Veracruz, a prepared employee stopped the second consignment of The Mexico of Porfirio Díaz believing it was a book against the government, like the one from Carlo di Fomaro (Díaz, czar of México)» (1910: XI), and thus could be followed by a long list of examples, since:

Those who burn books, who ban and kill poets, know exactly what they're doing. The undetermined power of books is incalculable. It's undetermined precisely because the same book, the same page, may have totally disparate effects on its readers. It can exalt or deface; seduce or disgust; appeal to virtue or barbarism; magnify the sensibility or trivialize it. In a way that cannot be more disconcerting, it can do both, almost at the same time, in a impulse response so complex, so fast in its alternation and so hybrid that no hermeneutics, no psychology, can predict or calculate its force (Steiner, 2007: 59).

It is true that in Mexico, in its diverse historical moments, can be found attempts and initiatives to teach people how to read and write. During a good part of

the colonial period, and even during the first part of the XIX century, the teaching of reading was prioritized over that of writing. The primers, the syllabus and the cantons, all of them focused so the person could learn how to spell, first only letters, then words and finally sentences, are part of this history that, like all, have moments of success and complete failures.

In the first half of the XIX century in several sectors of the population agreed on the idea that educating a major number of individuals would be a sort of lucky magical elixir to fight all ills (real and imaginary ones) that the country was facing –economic challenges, alarming social inequalities, precarious hygiene and a high mortality (mainly among new borns), political chaos, etcetera–, but it was during the Porfiriato (1876 – 1911) that most of the plans could be transformed into projects. However, the vast majority of them remained only in good intentions or did not have the desired effects, which means, we are far from talking about an ideal period of time.

In Mexico, before the adventure of becoming an independent nation began, there were people who read write and published. Although in general terms, reading was a restricted area, first to the clergy, then to the nobility members and the Novo-Hispanic elite, religious text were a majority,¹ and the oral culture predominated, the role that the print and the manuscripts played amongst the diverse social fabric went beyond of just transmitting information or narrating daily and extraordinary events.²

The so-called Letter's Republic, alluding to the multiplication of forms, authors and literary genres during the Porfiriato, is probably a good reflection point to navigate between the concepts of appropriation, engagement and

1 While doing a classification of works in a library of the XIX century (724 books), according to its content, Clara Elena Suárez finds that, out of 313 titles, 39.3% corresponded to religious themes, 10.64% to medicine, 10.32% to history, 6.45% language and literature, 6.12% laws and jurisprudence, 3.87% politics, 2.9% philosophy, 2.25% veterinary, 11% of difficult classification. (Suárez Argüello in Castañeda, 2004: 195-216).

2 What has been given the name of the first report made in America, printed in the city of Mexico by Juan Pablos in 1541, as a leaflet, is a good example of information, but is also a sample of the values of the time, as well as of social practices or imaginaries. The letter reads: "Relation of the frightful earthquake that has now happened again in the Indies in a city named Guatemala is a matter of great admiration and great example so that we may all amend our sins and be ready for when God would serve to call us". Consult: http://www.revistadeluniversidad.unam.mx/ojs_rum/files/journals/1/articles/12064/public/12064-17462-1-PB.pdf

access (Kalman, 2003) when talking about reading and readers. In the parenthesis that will open more than thirty years with the same political leader, concerns and obsessions for hygiene, morality and the role (public and private) of each of the genres appeared from different social groups; but in these interstices of peace and a certain economical balance, books and manuscripts will find eco in a certain group of society, especially by those who among their many interests was to educate and appear educated.³

Jesús Galindo y Villa mentions that, regarding the national periodic publications, «the Republic's Yearly Statistics corresponding to 1899, which has just been printed, registers about 201, only in this Capital» (1901: 76).⁴ But at the national level, the document gives an account of many subjects that were treated in an equal number of newspapers, magazines, yearbooks, journals and bulletins.⁵

Texts/manuscripts and society are interconnected worlds and not only in a providers-consumers circle. The link that appears between the participants, talks about an outline of groups of readers, places of socialization of texts and prints, forms of reading and transmission of information, literary associations, writers, journalists or playwrights, plays, literary movements, literary genres, production agencies, amongst other, and all together represent a circle in constant traction.

3 Although they never reached the limits of Julio Torri's imagination (and irony) in his 1917 tale: «It was a poor country»: «Then a curious phenomenon was first noticed, much later quoted by the writers of Political Economy: the literary peak produced a rise of values in the foreign markets. What a surprise for businessmen! Who would suspect that the books of poetry and deception possessed such useful virtues! [...] A law was issued that placed literature and other arts under the jurisdiction of the finance minister.... On the stock market, there was talk of realism and idealism, of problems of expression, of the Memoirs of Goethe and the Reisebilder of Heine. By Christmas, the finance minister presented a budget for the Parliament for the probable literary production of the following year: so many novels, so many poems [...] the government majorities were for the prose genres, while the opposition left always demanded greater copy of verses». (Torri, 2008: 18 – 19).

4 In all cases of citations of texts from the XIX century, it was adapted the orthography to the present time.

5 The author gives account of 71 texts, from *El Abogado Cristiano*; the *Annals of the Mexican Society of Surgery*; the *Fiscal Statistical Bulletin*; the *Semanary of Economic and Statistical Affairs*; the *Monthly Pass-Partout Guide* (tariffs, railways, etc.); *The Mexican Miner*; the *Journal of Legislation and Jurisprudence*; *Illustrated Literary Time*; *The popular*; the *Courrier du Mexique et de l'Europe*; *The Mexican Herald* to the *Deutsche Zeitung*. (Galindo y Villa, 1901: 76 – 79)

During a good part of the nineteenth century the newspapers, along with their owners and employees, suffered many onslaughts not only from the government's part, since the paper's shortage; the typography service expenses; the lack of dynamism in politics; a deficient cable information and very few readers, encountered unwanted characters, such as the one who at the time exercised a funnel in the sale, Trinidad Martínez (bought the publications at half the price), who also controlled a large part of the "paper workers", who will later be known as «speakers», who played an important role in the transmission of information, precisely in their ability to get the attention of passers-by through exaggeration and misrepresentation of information.⁶

In spite of it all, the periodical press was the biggest penetration tool in society of the time. To researcher Milda Bazant, «the journalism was the only type of publication that reached all social classes and stimulated the reading's development» (2006: 17). In a country where by 1895 barely a 14.39 percent knew how to read and write and by 1900 just a 16.06 percent (Secretary of Economy, 1956), it is necessary to emphasize the affirmation that newspapers reached all social classes. One of the possible ways, but not the only one, was that newspapers could be read from a public open space all the way to the house, the canteen or the hairdresser, but in any case it allowed the multiplication of information between the listeners, who in turn replicated it to other groups in different spaces.

In 1910, Julio Sesto, claimed that the newspaper *El Imparcial*'s director, Reyes Spíndpola, was the one who «taught the people of this country how to read». Sesto attributes the journal's popularity to its low price and goes as far as to credit there all «cultural evolution of a town» (1910: 17). Beyond the fact that Sesto's text was an advocacy on behalf of the Porfiriato, it is true that the different problems that the Mexican press faced during a big part of the nineteenth century made the public generally limited and less faithful to these

6 «Trinidad Martínez, who was nicknamed The General, was the first to promote the circulation of newspapers by the proclamation or speak procedure, as he delivered the leaves of the day, still moist, [...] announcing them loudly and in a scandalous manner. To inflate the news, these devilish youngsters had no reputation for shattering or crime that did not raise the utmost horror. In a few cries they stripped the most honorable of their honor, made the most meek murderer or bankrupt the wealthy. The ponderous disregard of these «paper-makers» came to such outrages that the authorities were compelled to force them to simply mention the title of the printed paper offered for sale by them». (Ceballos, 2006: 155 – 156).

publications, which resulted with some of them lasting less than a year in the market. Although the case of *El Imparcial* –who’s most revealing fact is that by 1910, fourteen years after its apparition, it had a circulation of one hundred thousand copies– is important, let’s not forget a part of the Mexican people was already an accomplice of the newspapers from long ago.⁷

In the middle of the century, and even in the midst of mockery of a figure such as the «countet» (counter poet), Frías y Soto, y Rivera, coincides in talking about the one who worked as a teller or a wine store, like so: «So far the poet has formed himself with readings of novels and newspapers: those are his main study, the secret of his science, the nod of its fecundity, the source of its verbosity, and the juice and substance of its verbs» (Frías, 1974: 120).

Virginia Woolf, in *The years* (1937), set in 1880, narrates one of the characteristics that, I believe, are a cornerstone to understand this long-winded associations game between readers and newspapers: «That man (who writes an editorial at *Times*) always said exactly what Mrs. Malone thought, which comfort her and gave her a sense of security in a world that, according to her, went from bad to worse» (2001: 91). Every newspaper had and has its own public, the one that identifies (precisely in that sense of security) and demands the information according to its ideas, opinions, values and unorthodox knowledge.⁸

In addition to newspapers, the novel was the strongest protagonist in the likes of Mexicans. Mílada Bazant assures that: «more than any other literary genre, the Mexican had a preference with novels. This is reflected in the memories of some people of that time, private libraries, readers of public libraries, and printed catalogs in bookstores» (2005: 228). Ciro B. Ceballos, at the same time as he recalls Pedro Castera and his novel *Carmen: Memories of a Heart* (1882), writes: «the romantic novelist [...] author of a badly-written novel [...] profusely soled to the readers of the cheesy society»

7 See: Abramo Lauff, Marcelo and Yolanda Barberena Villalobos (1998). *El estadio. La prensa en Mexico* (1870 - 1879). Mexico, INAH. Pérez-Rayón, Nora (2001) *Mexico 1900: percepciones y valores en la gran prensa capitalina*, Mexico, Porrúa, UAM Azcapotzalco. Adriana Pineda and Fausta Gantús (coord.) (2013) *Miradas y acercamientos a la prensa decimonónica*, Mexico, Michoacana University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Network of Historians of the Press and Journalism in Latin America. Of the latter, visit the website <http://reddehistoriadoresdelaprensa.blogspot.com.es/>

8 As Walter Benjamin reflected: «the arbitrary assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with the equally arbitrary assimilation of the reader, who suddenly becomes the collaborator of his newspaper» (2009: 239).

(2006: 238). The incisive writer seems to share his opinion with Amado Nervo, who recalled that «Dumas said that half of the letters that are lost must be lost, and I think that three-quarters of the books we read should not be read» (1991: 581).⁹

Bookstores are an important part of the link between the nineteenth-century society and the written culture, not only as a space for storing, distributing and selling books, but because they have long become places where problems and ideas of the time were discussed, in addition to selling books, one could buy from theater to travel tickets, as well as articles of perfumery, medicine or jewelry.

For both contemporary and old school researchers,¹⁰ and according with the traveler's manuals, the Bouret Bookstore was the best-stocked library in Mexico City. After analyzing the two volumes of the *General Catalog of the collection of works from the library of the Ch. Bouret's widow* (1909 – 1910, and the one from 1912) that I found in the National Newspaper of Mexico, I emphasize the points that I consider most important.

The work is divided in 21 sections. The themes they work with go from Agriculture, Architecture, Commerce, Electricity, Geology, Gymnastics, Magic, Mathematics, to love affairs. The subject dedicated to *Literature* is the the one with the highest number of titles, with 1,492, followed by those in the *Teaching* area with 996 titles. The literature section occupies 124 pages with a variety of authors from different countries; the genres: novel, theater, poetry and essay..

In the catalog of 1909 - 1910 a number of novelists, both foreign and Mexican, are grouped together in twelve «Libraries». These libraries include classic authors and writers of the time. Cervantes will be a recurring presence,

9 While reviewing the works that were announced in the newspaper *La patria ilustrada* of July 7, 1884, there are authors such as Ireneo Paz (*Cardos y violetas*), José Negrete's novel *La niña Mártir y la mujer verdugo*; Emilio Zola's *La Ralea y Una página de amor*, Balzac's *Maese Cornelio*, Alexander Dumas' *The adopted daughter*, or José Peón Contreras' poetry. In summary, out of 27 works that were announced, 15 were novels, 3 poetry and 9 of various subjects. From the printing press of the Diario del Hogar (January 4, 1885), the novels by the Colombian Jorge Isaacs (*Maria*), or the Mexicans Vicente Riva Palacio (*Calvario and Tabor*) and Hilarión Frías y Soto (*El hijo del estado*) stood out.

10 See also: Zahar, Vergara, Juana. (1995). *Historia de las librerías de la Ciudad de México: una evocación*, Mexico, UNAM. García Cubas, Antonio.. (1904). *El libro de mis recuerdos: Narraciones históricas, anecdóticas y de costumbres mexicanas anteriores al actual estado social. Ilustradas con más de trescientos fotograbados*. Mexico: Printing of Arturo García Cubas, Successors Brothers.

as well as Shakespeare, Machiavelli, Homer, Plato, Virgilio, San Austin, Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, Zorrilla or Alighieri. Leon Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are authors with a large number of works in the catalog, especially when comparing the more than a dozen titles both of them have against two of Stendhal or three of Flaubert (which does not include *Madame Bovary*).¹¹

Poetry occupies a fifth of the texts, with Juan de Dios Peza and his *Songs of the home* (1884) as one of the most enduring Mexican works within the widow's catalogs (a success among the Mexican middle class at the time), or Manuel Acuña's poems, without forgetting Amado Nervo's production. For the case of children's literature -included within the area of *Teaching* -, highlights the entire work of Hans Christian Andersen.¹²

Roughly speaking: the European literature dominated most of the catalog's titles. And within this literature, the novels were the undisputed queens. The so-called classic texts appeared in both expensive and very economic versions, almost always as part of the group: *essentials*. The Mexican authors could be found with little presence and aloof.

The diversity of titles, as well as the mastery of the area of literature, can be read as part of the reading practices and the variety of interests of the Mexican public. It can also be seen as one of the reasons why this bookstore was so famous and as a sample of what the publishing industry of the time produced for the Spanish-speaking market.¹³

11 Other authors that appear are: Goncourt, Daudet and E. Zola. Alexander Dumas, Nietzsche, Balzac, Ibsen, Schopenhauer, Maupassant, Víctor Hugo, Voltaire, Edmundo de Amicis, Calderón, Emilio Castelar and Spencer Herbert. For the Mexican case: Ignacio M. Altamirano, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, José López Portillo and Rojas, Amado Nervo, Federico Gamboa, Justo Sierra, Pedro Castera, Manuel Carpio, Francisco Bulnes, Julio Guerrero, Lucas Alamán among others.

12 Although not included in the catalog, it is worth mentioning the stories for children and manuals of urbanity written by José Rosas Moreno, whose productions reached several reprints. For example (1878) *Fábulas*. Mexico: Printing of the Vda. and Sons of Murguía. 4th edition. (Guadalajara, León and Mexico City). (1877) *La ciencia de la dicha. Lecciones de moral en verso*. Mexico: Printing of the Vda. and Sons of Murguía. 3rd edition. (Guadalajara, León and Mexico City). (1877) *Nuevo amigo de los hijos*. Mexico: Old Imprint of Murguía. 6th edition. (Guadalajara, León and Mexico City). (1889) *Un libro para mis hijos: últimos pensamientos, máximas, consejos, fábulas y poesías. La moral verdadera al alcance de los niños*. Mexico: Murguía Bookstore. 3rd edition. (Guadalajara, León and Mexico City) (1892) *Nuevo libro Segundo para uso de las escuelas*, edition number 25.

13 It is true that the area of literature is the one with the largest number of copies, but other types of writing do not lose their brilliance. Matters about race, education, and sociological issues had a good

The fact that there are so many libraries of classics, as well as versions for all the pockets of these *essentials*, tells us about the need from the middle class to present themselves as cults (and thus distinguish themselves from their own class) and educated, that is to say: civilized; but also as a necessity of the time, since, as Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera reflected in 1893: «tevery father aspires that his son rises on the social ladder a step higher than what he has climbed. The craftsman wants his son to be a merchant, the merchant expects him to be a lawyer, doctor or engineer» (2007: 369), and for this, reading, *ergo*, general culture, was (and is) considered as the best form of access to these changes of social level.¹⁴

2º ACT

It wouldn't be a bad idea to rethink the ways in which the Mexican population acquired information and knowledge, since to assume a direct relationship between literacy and the capacity to receive information or knowledge is to simplify the complexity of individual training processes, as well as to eliminate everyday variables which allowed the development of networks between individuals and the environment.

In this sense, prints with particular characteristics such as loose pages and sheets –known as string literature– are an important piece of the puzzle. In addition to being very economical (as accessible to the majority of the population), these writings included content, images, rhymes and short stories, which seemed to bring readers and printmakers together more easily, and improved a greater circulation of content and information.¹⁵

One of the characteristics of this model is that they played songs that interested most people, and did it in verse, tenths or runs, using «a simple

presence in the catalog (in quantity and variety). Again, it is striking that the plurality and number of printed works of the time do not coincide, in a first approximation, with the low percentage of literate people at the time.

- 14 It is never unreasonable to revisit the work of Peter Gay (1992). *La experiencia burguesa. De Victoria a Freud*, 2 volumes, Mexico, FCE.
- 15 «Sheets and loose-leaves, with scandalous headlines and illustrations from Manuel Manilla and Jose Guadalupe Posada, who gave news of facts and miraculous apparitions, phenomena or natural disasters, political events and sensational crimes, as well as entertain their readers with the marital fights and the adventures of Don Chepito Mariguano ... They usually opened with a prose writing and closed with verses or corridors, that synthesized the content of the story or reaffirmed the message of the narrator». (Speckman, 2001: 68 – 69)

and pleasant language, full of idioms that they took up from the same town» (Flores, 2003: 171). These loose pages, booklets or sheets played «sometimes an important role in the interpretation of historical events and in the diffusion of ideas» (Gilard, 2005: 310).¹⁶

Reading aloud,¹⁷ and reading quietly, have a long history. In the first case, their practice and the spaces where they took place went from the exercises in the schools –as part of the teaching method of reading (syllabus, booklets, etc.)– as well as churches, family, athenaeums and literary or scientific associations, even within some groups such as the militia, as recalled by the Mexican writer and diplomat Federico Gamboa, on December 11, 1896, regarding his third novel published: «Nárrame Sánchez Azcona that during the statutory excursion [...] undertaken by the Military College [...], the cadets carried up to five copies of the *Supreme Law*, which they read aloud, grouped together at night, next to the fires of the bivouacs» (Gamboa, 1908: 279).

José M. Rivera, in 1855, describes the typesetter¹⁸ as a «hman of letters, just as the shoemaker is a man of lasts and the writer one of feathers» (1974: 167), since these characters possessed information that they gladly shared with their environment and who wanted to listen to them, that is, multipliers of printed content. For the author, these characters had information about the bulls of the bullfights in the same way that they did theatrical or dance chronicles: «The *Typesetter*, in short, is a being to whom nothing escapes him; he sees everything, he investigates everything, he knows everything, and it would be a magnificent *Guide of Strangers* if it were possible to place a *Faith*

16 The taste for this type of print within the Mexican public also speaks of a way of coexistence that would have to be investigated in more detail, especially in the readers' spirit to taste the falls of others or to recreate the vices and defects, real or imagined, of others, of all those who were subjects and objects to be exhibited in print. For example, during the commemoration of the deceased, as Ceballos recalls, anyone with a little ingenuity and access to a medium of print, they would publish it with illustrations, almost always, "quartets, acrostics or tasteless spinels, alluding to personal defects of the victim, or defaming them in their private life, or else, insulting them in a gratuitous way as well as profanity... the more rudeness they contained, the more solicited they were"(Ceballos, 2006: 273).

17 Frenk, Margit. (2005). *Entre la voz y el silencio. La lectura en tiempos de Cervantes*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica. Ong, Walter J. (2006). *Oralidad y escritura. Tecnología de la palabra*, Buenos Aires, FCE.

18 «With the types ordered in the cases began the composition or task of «caser» that consisted of placing type to type, line after line, until completing the page in a metallic frame called branch. The composition, once united and strongly fixed on the branch, was ready to be placed under the press» (Grañén, citada en Castañeda 2007: 87).

of erratas: it would be an excellent *diary of warnings* if he wanted to make himself responsible editor» (1974: 169). But they were not the only ones, among the other components of the social fabric, M. Rivera calls the Barber: «a living gazette, or what is equal, the *newspaper man*» (1974: 26), we could continue tracking these spokespersons by conviction, which I doubt very much that they were diluted at the end of the Porfiriato.

The pleasure of talking, criticizing, sharing printed ideas, turning them into topics of discussion, reflection or mockery, allows subjects to get information directly, without forgetting that this information did not arrive in its original state, since in addition to the spirit of misrepresentation, transmitted by word of mouth suggests that it suffered from modifications, increases, omissions or exaggeration according to the particularities of the speaker and the possibilities and dispositions of listening.

Reading within the Porfirian family environment finds an ally in the *mothers-wives*.¹⁹ Women, especially those of the middle class who wanted to adapt to the norms of behavior and values of the moment, were assigned the role of educators of the children in the first years of life, mainly to introduce them to the first letters, the basic rules of urbanity, but above all to instill religious concepts and practices (Catholic in this case). This was supported by catechisms, hagiographies and other printed matter, which were not erased from the mental map by an anticlerical or positivist assertion, for «the fading of the hegemony of Catholicism was neither massive nor linear during the nineteenth century [...] (in addition), the Church (relied on) women to perpetuate their influence» (Corbin, 2005: 57).

In the formal educational environment, as part of the pursuit of modernizing the country in the Porfiriato, several attempts were made to modify the teaching models. As of 1883, with the modern method, in which it was taught simultaneously to read and write, had to adapt the contents of the textbook.²⁰

19 I got the term from the text: Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela (2003). *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*, México, UNAM.

20 “Since the first pedagogical congresses in Mexico, warned about the existence of foreign books poorly translated and without attachment to the country’s ideas and aspirations [...] by the end of the XIX century a small group of publishers dedicated to publishing for primary school’s education had been established. In Spain appeared the publishing houses of Calleja and Spanish Magisterium, along with those of Hernando and Gómez Fuentenebro, and the Catalan ones of Bastino, Dalmau Carles and Salvatella. Their works circulated in Mexico, in addition to the branches that were established in Mexico

One of the objectives was for children to learn how to read, understand and develop their ability to express themselves, therefore, «the subject of textbooks was at the center of the educational debate of the Porfiriato, it was a source of controversy and disagreements among different groups of intellectuals, educators and even parents [...] the government of Díaz considered them as basic materials for the training of future citizens, and thus encouraged their publication and reading» (Menéndez, 2004: 101).

Nevertheless, several investigations indicate us that, in spite of the ignition of many speeches from the intellectual elites or the attempts impelled from the government, and even above the quantity and variety of printed matter that appeared at the time, the good intentions were not enough. We can argue that the vast majority of individuals at that time had to meet other needs rather than learn to read or encourage reading among their children, or that aspiration for culture was a field for the middle class, but in any case, and a general way, it can be said that the reading among the inhabitants of nineteenth-century Mexico was a minority exercise, and there are many complaints and bad omens about what that left, those who did not always read but did write, in an extensive line of forms.

3° ACT

Today, from a distance, we can infer that many of the educational plans and projects proposed during much of the nineteenth century, and especially in the Porfiriato, were permeated by the hopes, yearnings and fears of that society «proud of its own virtues and eager to reform their vices»(Staples, 2005: 11). But it also allows us to suppose that this insistence on education as the panacea found in the stubborn reality its worst enemy.

No one doubts that the twentieth century Mexico left a trail of great advances in all areas of knowledge; and that despite the tragic pauses for internal wars, it will continue to fight against illiteracy. But again, there are cases of success and pathetic setbacks. Just as literacy or reading promotion campaigns were orchestrated by government and schools, there were also heated debates over the contents of textbooks (the thorny themes of sexuality and

as that of Herrero Brothers, Vda. of Bouret and the Appleton, these were the ones who were in charge of modernizing the textbooks, since they responded to the pedagogical suggestions of the time” (Martínez, 2004: 133)

religion as the best example) or plans for study. The desire to increase the number of readers remained alive throughout the century, as well as the regrets of not achieving it.

In spite of everything, we reached the XXI century. And now we are facing other educational paradigms, but we continue with the same pending issue: the low percentage of readers in Mexico. So, as a way of contributing to the debate, I begin the closure with some reflections.

It is true that yesterday, in a majority, the letter adhered itself to a leaf (to use a generic) and today many of them float in the virtual. I think it is valid to say that we are no longer in the Republic of Letters, but in the Republic of Screens. As Lipovetsky and Serroy reflect it:

The century that we have left behind and the one we have begun has taught us [...] that there is such a power on the screen. This power comes from birth: the canvas of the cinema screen (the first moment) [...] immediately exerted a sort of extreme captivation, because it attracted and subjugated the spectators, who could not take their eyes from it [...] Television (second moment) captured on its own the magic of the screen. The attraction that it produced at the beginning [...] has been greatly attenuated [...] but it still exerts that power that makes us turn it on every day in an almost mechanical way [...] It is lawful to think that thanks to the personal computer we have entered a third moment. The immediacy, the interactivity, and the access to every click are aspects that generate a new seduction (Lipovetsky, 2009: 312 – 314).

Day by day, electronic devices multiply beyond the timid classification of fixed and mobile. There are screens for tablets, video game devices, e-book readers and the so-euphemistically-called smart phones.

It is worth remembering that, before what Lipovetsky and Serroy call the third moment, there were debates about the disappearance of the book and the low number of readers due to the emergence of media. Cinema was, in some part of history, reading's main enemy, due to the idea that it was more entertaining to see a film than to read a book, which caused a gesture of pain in more than one reading lover and promoter. The case of television was something similar: the accusations were several and, in any case, the book, the reading and the subject (almost always young) rhymed badly against the dissuasive power of the «silly box's» images. But it must not be overlooked that these media can, at certain moments, swing from one end to the other, as they have more than once proven their capacity to produce masterpieces

of emotion as well as new categories of banality or even to overcome their own stupidity, and in others, to place themselves in each of the shades from black to white with its usual variants of gray.

The travel route that links the cinema with television and electronic devices tells us that many of the surfers reached the beaches of the Web with a rather heavy baggage, and that many others, by age especially, have learned to surf in the three waves with great ease, carrying with it some characteristics from one medium to another to the degree that today it is difficult to determine who lends to whom.

Television and radio programs (news, political analysis or shows) tend to take the pulse of social networks, especially to Twitter or Facebook, accounts for the loans that are made between each other, as well as mutual dependencies if what is sought is to influence the public agenda of the debate, reach out to a larger number of people or simply cooperate to the noise of a new scandal.

It is a fact: the trending topics in Twitter have achieved notoriety and have managed to permeate in a greater number of homes thanks to the complicity with other media. And it is common to find that television or radio play the role of receivers and echoes of a tweet's information, and likewise, it is a daily practice for someone to tweet some news that has been published in a printed medium or in the various sites of the Web (newspapers, magazines, television channels) or on video platforms such as YouTube. That is to say, all these media function as suppliers and consumers at the same time in a circle that generates synergies of different kinds.

I think the screens' world has proven its extraordinary ability to adapt to the times and, above all, to use everything that is within its reach, either because it is fashionable, because it is a rugged subject, because of its permanence in time or by personal searches or by certain groups. A good example is the cinema, which for many years has been the par excellence reproducer of the so-called classics of literature: as proof there can be found the multiple versions of *Hamlet*, *Jane Eyre*, *Romeo y Julieta*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Ana Karenina*, *Drácula* or the novels of Jane Austen, which are even able to cohabit with the zombies' fashion.

The editorial area has not been immune to these communicating dynamics between the screens. On the contrary, from the confessions of writers who admit the influences of film directors or of particular films to the publicity

accompaniment of certain books, both printed and digital, that emphasizes the text as the primordial material for such a film or for that TV series.

Similarly, some of these books usually present film or television script features: the short scene, the characters easily identifiable (stereotyped), the objective and the obstacle go hand in hand and there is more weight in the action than in the dialogues. Many of the texts that go into the best-seller lists are a good example. *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Pillars of the Earth* or *50 shades of Gray*, share the maxim: «we must give more importance to the story that is told than to tell it» (Viñas, 2009: 105) and hold some reading certificates that speak of obscene quantities of printed copies and, most importantly, multitudes of people who read and are fond of these authors and consume all that of these works can be derived.

Whether we like it or not, best-seller books, magazines focused on show business or sports, comic books, low-cost illustrated magazines or those "aimed" at the female or male audience, erotic-romantic novels, tabloids newspapers, self-help books, self-published books or so-called religious literature, to mention just a few examples, are also part of the reading practices and habits of the general population.²¹

The dividing line between cultured literature and popular literature has shown over the years its porosity and, in some cases, a misleading character. And this serves the same equally to cinema, the TV and it is not surprising that it is present in the virtual environments. The insistence on establishing dichotomies, on some occasions, has drawn false antipodes. From the art cinema to the commercial cinema, as the TV-trash to the series (mainly of American manufacture, that today find their public even among the intellectuals.

But that is not all. Today, more and more subjects are demanding the Network, the cinema and the television, immediacy, excess (of sound, im-

21 It is true that such works do not enjoy good criticism among certain social groups, but it should not be forgotten that, as David Viñas points out, «without the seductive power of a literary work, marketing, however sophisticated, does not have anything to do [...] (and) without subtle commercial strategies there is no best seller, however seductive a work may be» (2009: 17). Also, it should be thought that most of these best-selling books are originally written in English. The case of the best seller written in Spanish, although it exists, is in second place very far from the Anglo-Saxon case.

ages and color)²², speed, shallowness and brevity (in dialogues and stories). Once again, the publishing market is no stranger to these demands. Books also respond to fads, and the emergency of certain groups of readers, as has happened in recent years with children and teenagers, who have become devourers of stories like *Harry Potter* or the trilogies of *Twilight*, *Divergent* or *The Hunger Games*.

¿And how does all this affect the area of reading? Lorenzo Soccavo, for example, speaks of a reading revolution much more significant than the one happened by the appearance of the press. The author believes that the «great mutation in the book and reading environment», is present on four levels. The first level focuses on reading and documentary practices.²³

Today we can see a change in reading practices at three levels. 1st level: a less linear and more fragmented reading, fruit of the reading that we call «enriched» or «augmented», hyper textual and interlayered with multimedia contents. 2º level: a social reading, fruit of the development of social networks, a commented, shared and potentially enriched reading with the writing of so-called collaborating readers. 3º level: a connected reading, the result of the development of cloud computing, a real-time reading (streaming), as with listening to music or videos on demand (Soccavo, 2013: 9).

The apparent advantages of using the Network and video games, such as the alleged ability to perform or attend several activities at the same time (multitasking), appears as a competition generated in consumers, which will allow enriching reading habits. But for the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, «multitasking attention does not mean a progress for civilization [...] it is rather a setback. In fact, multitasking is widely spread among wild animals. It is an essential heed technique for survival in the jungle » (2012: 33 – 34).

But beyond the accumulation of new definitions, or the readjustment of the old scenarios, the news does not end there. For Soccavo, "the book, and in general printed media, is no longer the main way of accessing knowledge

22 And «its components: the exaggerated, the hyperbolic, the multiple, the superabundant, the overflowing, the excessive» (Lipovetsky, 2009: 82)

23 The second level of mutation would be the reading devices, the third, the book market and the fourth language and literature.

in 2013, not even the main support for writing" (2013: 10). And although the author points out that this transition is likely to be consolidated until the next generation, I believe that this kind of statement requires passing through the sieve of verification and reflection more than once before being taken as a medicine prescribed by the specialist physician.

Likewise, it is advisable to read them as a healthy provocation to generate more questions around the subject and not to increase the list of motifs that celebrate the appearance of the Net as if it were a miracle or a paradise dorr, because as any anticipated celebration is directly proportional to the degree of disappointment. And this is not an invitation to become the enemy of the Network. I simply think that we need to continue to do studies and analysis about practices and reading habits in virtual or electronic environments, instead of being busy announcing with great fanfare the (definitive) disappearance of printed books or reading's death.

I am convinced that an approach to the virtual world without so many prejudices or hopes can give better answers, because, as reflected by Byung-Chul Han, «we limped behind the digital medium, which, under conscious decision, decisively changes our behavior, our perception, our sensation, our thought, our coexistence. We get drunk today with the digital medium, without being able to fully appreciate the consequences of this drunkenness» (2014: 11)

THE CURTAIN FALLS

The Network is one more tool, but it is not the origin of farewell to books, nor the solution to the problems of educational models, nor the end of social disagreements. To praise, as well as condemn, more than transitive verbs are extreme verbs, which makes us think of *res judicata*, and in these matters of virtuality and reading we are barely at the stage of presentation of evidence. In addition, the fact that many people have changed reading's format does not dissolve the convoluted phenomenon.

It should not be forgotten that «in human experience there is no more complex phenomenology than the encounters between text and perception» (Steiner, 2007:59). Does the idea sustain if we change print for screen? I think, in general, yes. In addition as Michèle Petit points out, «awhile reading, in our time, one isolates himself, keeps himself at a distance from his peers, in a self-sufficient interiority. Reading is a room of its own, to use the words of Virginia Woolf. One separates himself from whatever it is closest, the evidences of the everyday. One can read on the banks of life» (1999: 26).

¿Can it be said that the same thing happens when reading on the Net? In any case, both ideas can help us to put the subject in the center of the debate and, from there, study the relationships and links that can be established with the reading's format(s), without forgetting such important issues as «the alchemy of reception, (since) it is never possible to really control how a text will be read, understood, interpreted» (Petit, 1999: 25).

The most complex part of this marriage lies in the person, in the pact he signs with words, with those sentences that say something from the ink or on a screen, because, despite the «appealing of best-seller books [...] and of the blockbuster films, the tastes and practices of individuals, are irremediably particularized, diversified, differentiated» (Lipovetsky, 2015: 317). Moreover, when one comes in contact with the beliefs, ideas, prejudices or suppositions of the one who reads, the words cease to be of the author to be part of a new text, since «the reader does not passively consume a text; it appropriates it, interprets it, modifies its meaning, slips its fantasy, its desire, its anguish between the lines and intermingles with those of the author» (Petit, 2001: 28).

At the moment, it is still accepted that the transition from the print edition to the digital edition will change reading practices, and it is assumed that all those who want to read will choose to do it on the Net or by an electronic device (and perhaps for tomorrow through spectacles or hearing aids). But research on the subject, whether from the field of sociology, literature or directly from neurology, warns us that paper has a long life, and that readers, surely, will have the last word.²⁴

24 «The glare that produced the new electronic reading devices has stabilized. They stopped being fashionable to become, as a fact, a phenomenon that came to stay. The threat many publishers saw at the beginning of the century in the e-book has changed in appearance. It hides inside the mobile». Joseba Elola's article, «I want to read on paper», *El País*, October 9, 2016: http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/10/07/actualidad/1475841443_203357.html

«We know as readers, that reading on a screen is not the same thing as in paper. But we also know the benefits of being able to find one or the other device according to access possibilities, conveniences and motivations. The good thing, in any way, is that reading is there. That is why, the key is, rather than in the instrument, the support and channel of words, in the development, critical capacity and the reading's brain well-being». Facundo Manes, artículo «El cerebro persigue las palabras», Facundo Manes, article "The brain pursues the words", *El País*, October 9, 2016: http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/10/07/actualidad/1475868260_813583.html

Consult the electronic edition of the journal *Scientific American* the text «The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens», de Ferris Jabr (11 of April of 2013) <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reading-paper-screens/#>

Having access to books (electronic, printed or virtual) does not in itself guarantee increased reading. There are as many variables as race, gender, age, socioeconomic level, among many other, that speak about the formation of a subject, and are also the desires and the pursuits of these same ones, as well as external influences (the media as the maximum representative), without leaving aside the time, geography or economy variables.

The virtual space is presented as a free environment, without borders, in which the individual can get all kinds of literature, as well as consulting news in several languages, searching virtual libraries from all over the world, sharing essays, articles or personal writings. It is commonplace to say that, thanks to digital media, anyone can create their own virtual library with the most diverse world's thinking or the latest best sellers. But I do not think that is the nodal point of reflection.

More information is not necessarily greater knowledge. Accumulating eBooks does not guarantee that they are read. The emergence of, say, opinion leaders in spaces such as YouTube (known as the Booktubers), tell us that, among the tangle of variety and quantity, people often seek support points not to succumb to vertigo, the same way that some readers (or possible readers) do with the list of best-selling books or those who tend to bow before the texts that have prizes, or those who do not want any complication and opt for the "essential" that, as we saw in the case of the catalogs of Ch Bouret's widow's library, drag the aura of necessary (as illuminators) and that ability to give luster to whoever dares to approach them.

In this sense, Enrique Serna's reflection comes very closely, since a gigantic assumption has been made that in order to read the classics, «it is necessary to know the bibliography and the socio-cultural context of the author, to know how to fit him into the literary currents of the time, to have studied his precursors and to be familiar with the style of his works» (2013: 213), but as Serna himself reminds us, «if it were necessary to have a prior preparation for the readings that change our lives and you know locating them on the map of universal letters, no one would ever have started as a reader» (2013: 213).

But let's get to the data. According to IAB Mexico, Millward Brown and televisa.com, in its 8th edition of the Study of Media Consumption between Mexican Internauts (2016), 57 percent of the Mexican population, are Internet users (about 68 million). Of this group, the segment Millennials (Mexican men and women between 24 and 30 years of age) are the most time spent connected to the Internet, with an average of more than 7

hours a day. This segment reviews their social networks 5 times a day. Late Millennials (women and men aged 25 to 34) excel by consuming health videos (67%) and exercise (59%).²⁵

In the National Reading Survey of 2012, carried out by the Mexican Foundation for the Promotion of Reading, A.C., it was concluded: «in Mexico people read less [...] reading is still a strictly educational issue [...] and access to the written culture is seriously restricted for the majority of the population».²⁶ In the National Survey of Habits, Practices and Cultural Consumption conducted by CONACULTA in 2010 the results speak of similar situations: 27 percent read at least one book in the last twelve months and 68 percent did not read any.²⁷

Along with surveys, numbers and statistics, complaints and lamentations often appear about the lack of taste that subjects generally show in a book and the arrival of the new electronic messiah. It is and has been a constant, to mark the differences. For example, Federico Gamboa, in what will be his first newspaper, writes: «September 26, 1896. It is legion that in «a invite for drinks» is spent more, but much more than a book» (1908: 273). In the XXI century, Guillermo Sheridan states in an article: «It is no longer subjective appreciation but scientifically proven: the Mexican is not interested in books». (2007). And the Mexican writer Jorge Volpi warns: «The dominance of the electronic book could become the greatest democratic expansion of culture since the invention of the printing [...] booksellers and distributors will disappear and few libraries will store bound titles. Change is drastic, immediate and irreversible. We will have to overcome our nostalgia». (2011).

There are many more examples, but for now let us stay with those three. What I want to point out is that, on one hand, it seems that some intellectual class has been stuck for years in the lamentation pit for the lack of readers. And although complaints often vary in form, the book (still in its digital version) continues to appear as the representative object of culture and

25 <http://www.iabmexico.com/estudios/consumo-medios-2016-infografia/>

26 <http://www.caniem.org/Archivos/funlectura/EncuestaNacionaldeLectura2012/EncuestaNacionaldeLectura2012.html>

27 http://www.cultura.gob.mx/encuesta_nacional/#.V9mqjfmLSaE

reading as a way for personal and social improvement. On the other hand, *education* appears as the formula that nobody dares to concretize because then it loses its hope and its quality of magic formula.

When it is said that Mexicans are not interested in books, you have to ask yourself what do they refer to when using the generic books? Do those who do read are not Mexicans? Perhaps we must overcome other things than overcome our nostalgia as supposes the anxious gravedigger Volpi; for example, that wall which so comfortably divides the cults from the others, the barbarians, aliases the functional ignorant. We must not ignore that «the book remains. The challenge is here of the first order: to touch it is to touch a pillar of our civilization, hence the condemnatory nature adopted by the Casandras' forecasts that the world's tomb is becoming more and more visible in the growing power of the screen» (Lipovetsky, 2009: 311).

Reading is an animal of many faces, which almost always leaves two traces on its gait: «the absolute power attributed to the written word, and on the other, to the reader's irreducible freedom» (Petit, 1999: 21). Correct, but now we are facing the virtual word. Do we attribute that same power to the word when it appears in a blog, such as a comment on a social network or on the official page of a prestigious university? Is this type of reader an Internet subject who is a prisoner of hyperactivity, fleeting emotions and saturation of information?

Society has changed; let's say that the governments also have, but despite insisting from their particular trench with campaigns of promotion and foster of reading, which have been from fun to pathetic, have not managed to have a direct impact on the increase of readers.²⁸

Individuals, who read from books to chats, are the result of many evolutions. They are no longer like those nineteenth century subjects, nor are they like those of the twentieth century, that century that left its wounds and its achievements, as well as the outlined path to hyper-individualism. Today, the millenary snake hisses directly into the ear of the individual of late modernity and proposes: strip yourself, you have returned to paradise, and

28 See: Yanet Aguilar Sosa, "With lemmas read more?", *El Universal*, January 29, 2011, <http://archivo.el-universal.com.mx/cultura/64677.html>

they agree to unveil their entire life, looking for something: «The hyper-individualistic regime of consumption that unfolds is less stationary than experiential, hedonistic, emotional, that is, aesthetic: what is important in the future is to feel, to live moments of pleasure, discoveries or evasion, not living according to codes of social representation». (Lipovetsky y Serroy, 2015: 23)

This type of subject, with his anxieties and desires, who sniffs in the abyss of the Web with fear but excited, is the one who reads today, touches with letters or looks for them, and is also the one who will want to read tomorrow, or will be tempted to flipping through a book, listening to it, browsing the Internet, or looking over his favorite screen.²⁹

Perhaps, as Viñas Piquer proposes, we should take more seriously the variable of pleasure when thinking about readers (current and future), because «it is not that we try to win readers at any price; is about the readers end up winning. And only if they experience the pleasure of reading does this seem possible [...] or the only right that will end up exercising will be the right not to read». (2009: 129)

It is extremely worrying that Mexico is not a country of readers, and will never be, because such a survival in time seems very comfortable for some sectors, both from the government and from the intellectual elites, who do not seem willing to yield not a single iota of what they have defined as their field (the literary field, Bourdieu would say). I insist: it is necessary to continue plowing on the subject, and it must be done with all the participants of the game, but without losing sight of the individual, which is the unequivocal axis of this story.

29 To philosophers like В-чн Han (2014), we are faced with a society more addicted to the fleeting and intense emotions, as sheltered, a tired society and incapable of coming to action, disinterested in public and political life, and little empathic with the problems of others. In the same way, they speak of the fact that in a space that was supposed to be free, autonomous and where everything was going to be possible, a multitudinous choir of individual voices has been gathered, isolated, obsessed by themselves, enemies of intermediation, longing to be heard among the noise of the Web through the display of intimacy. Like any reflection, it can help the moment of thinking about subjects of the new millennium.

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