

# Argentinean Science Fiction

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## 1. Introduction

Argentinean SF is not very well known either within Latin America or outside the region. Despite the many prizes Argentinean SF writers have won, it is considered by many critics and readers a fringe narrative within the Argentinean cultural field. To a certain extent, it is an understandable situation. It is very difficult for many SF writers to get published by major, well-established presses, and editions tend to be small and destined for the national market, rarely leaving Argentinean borders. As we shall see in this presentation, this circumstance does not apply to the few major names in Argentinean SF, which creates a paradoxical situation that we will discuss in a few moments. A second issue is the lack of translations of primary SF works written in Spanish into other languages, which has given rise to the idea that SF production from Latin America is marginal. Moreover, translations sometimes label SF writers as fantastic or marvelous in order to address marketability issues that have little to do with literary studies. However, the perception of SF's marginality has other roots. On the one hand, many Argentinean writers who cultivated the modality followed Jorge Luis Borges' path, and avoided the label due to both issues of cultural field politics, as well as the primacy of historical and political realism (and later on, of the fantastic) as the privileged *locus* of ideological enunciation. If realist forms triumphed as the almost exclusive discourse of the lettered intellectual as described by Angel Rama in his famous 1984 essay, SF was perceived by many as an escapist form, devoid of political engagement, particularly since the mid-1960s. Despite the lack of evidence to sustain such perception, literary critics have not helped the situation. As expressed by Bell and Molina Gavilán in their now well-known study, "Little help has come from local academic circles, which have generally ignored the genre since it does not fall within the still-dominant paradigm of high modernist writing" (2). A year later, another critic still had to underline the same issue when he remarked that

In Latin America, perhaps more so than elsewhere, science fiction has long been considered to be a lesser form of literature. This, in spite of the fact that Latin American writers have long been practicing (since at least the eighteenth century) the genre as a means of cultural expression. (Lockhart viii)

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Although there is an increased interest in the topic, there are very few studies about Latin American SF in general, and about the Argentinean type in particular. In spite of the rich, varied, and long standing local tradition that can be traced all the way back to the early 19th century, critical approaches either outline the historical roots of SF back to the fantastic, or deal with the influence of English translations upon Argentinean SF. These readings had a great deal of influence both in the labeling of many works and the creation of a proper, distinctive *corpus*. Critics had a chance to open the field of SF studies early on, but failed to do so. For example, in the now famous *La literatura fantástica en Argentina* (1957), Barranechea and Speratti Piñero recognized the presence of texts that did not fit the classical Todorovian definition of the fantastic and that operated clearly within the realm of SF. As a matter of fact, the authors talked about a "rétorica científicista" (2) that, according to their view, was neither relevant nor important for it 'drowned' the writer's creative ability. Even though it is a lucid meditation on the fantastic, this book is remarkable for its paradigmatic mistrust of SF, to the point that it denies proper labeling of books such as *Las fuerzas extrañas* (1906) by Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938). Several of the stories in this collection clearly deal with questions of evolution and the transformative power of science upon human society, but above all, this book is a Malthusian reflection on social development, one of the core topics within Argentinean SF, whose very existence is denied in this analysis. This mistrust extends also to Borges' short stories, for although Barrenechea and Speratti Piñero recognized Borges' ongoing meditation on the nature of time and the epistemological search which many of his short stories engage in, the book is more concerned with an ontology of Latin American literature that cuts it off from world literatures. Pablo Capanna's foundational study *El sentido de la ciencia ficción* (1967), and its many revisions was very different in scope and critical approach, but it yielded similar results because it relied heavily on the historiography of SF in the United States and drew most of its *corpus* from English translations. Only its last chapter analyzes Argentinean SF, and it does so as a derivative, imported genre. Subsequent essays would be tainted by these views and would analyze SF as a random event at best, as an offshoot of the fantastic, and somewhat pegged to the historiography of the SF's Golden Age in the US. Only by the mid-1980s would this perspective start to change in Marcial Souto's *La ciencia ficción en Argentina* (1985).

In this article, I would like to take a very different approach. First, I am not going to talk about genre, but modality. Samuel Delany once said that a definition of SF has "the same ontological status as unicorns" (148), and I rather share that point of view. This is particularly important when studying Argentinean SF, which is increasing its corpus through a complex retro-labeling process, on the one hand, and on the other, is incorporating within its realm of study all sort of

artifacts and discursive forms, from novels to comics and movies to art. As a result I am going to do a quick overview of Argentinean SF through a variety of texts and artifacts. Secondly, I am going to take into consideration the reflections on SF that its main producers have offered. Argentinean SF writers developed somewhat of a collective meta-discourse in prologues and in essays published in magazines throughout the 20th century. And even though it is true that Argentina did not have an editor that could be compared to the legendary John W. Campbell, the character and main issues of Argentinean SF were first developed in its magazines. Therefore I will explore some of these magazines and their roles. And thirdly, I am not going to discuss SF as a poorly developed branch of the fantastic, but instead will read it as the most extreme form of realism, by following Argentinean SF's first critic, and probably most subtle writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who early on described SF as work of "reasoned imagination" ("imaginación razonada"; Borges, Ocampo and Bioy 12). In his prologues to the works of Bradbury and to Stapledon, he would later argue that SF is a branch of realism that rigorously explores possible futures by anchoring texts in the reader's cultural and social experiences. Hence, it is not surprising that writers like Elvio Gandolfo (1947) subscribed to James E. Gunn's description of fantasy:

fantasy enchants and horrifies by the power of its vision or the rapture of its words. SF persuades with logic and explanation. SF presents a strangeness the reader did not imagine could exist in his world; fantasy tells the reader that the world is strange beyond his imagining. (140)

This view would become the dominant theoretical perspective of the vast majority of SF writers in Argentina, despite issues of vocabulary. And, as the proper historiography of SF proves, realism was everything – for it provided a critical approach to ideology.

I also would like to make a quick note about the historiographical issue. At this point in time it is very difficult to organize the proper historiography of SF in Argentina or, for that matter, in Latin America. This is an ever-evolving field that is still debating the very nature of its corpus and its theoretical approaches. Historically, though, most critics have followed the American SF historiography as a matter of convention, which has generally been proven ineffectual or inadequate. A second group of critics have more recently followed Pablo Cappanna's proposal into seven distinct periods. In view of the complexity and incompleteness of the material at hand, I would like to take a modified approach, provided that it is understood that such approach can only be contingent on and subject to modifications. In this article, I will thus be even broader, so that I can frame the main issues SF has addressed over long periods of time.

And lastly, it will be quite obvious that I will only mention Jorge Luis Borges in passing even if he is considered one of the key figures in the development of Argentinean SF in the 20th century. I am not going to have the space nor the time to talk about him, but the bibliography provides an excellent analysis of his relationship with SF (cf. Abraham).

## 2. The True Foundation

Most Argentinean SF is 'soft SF' in the sense that it is organized around sociological, epistemological, psychological, and political issues. Historically, it has consistently approached its own materials from a politically engaged, fiercely critical point of view. This assertion is also true for its foundational 19th century narratives. Despite its interest in sciences and a very clear and updated perception of the scientific discussions of the day, these novels were critically reading the political development of 19th century Argentina. From Luis Pestarini's research we know that the earliest SF story published in Argentina was "Delirio" by Antonio José Valdés (cf. Pestarini; Molina-Galiván). It appeared in 1816 (a month before the signing of the Declaration of Independence) in the newspaper *La Prensa Argentina*. It was a Voltairian criticism of an imaginary, backwards, future Argentina whose habits and traditions were a betrayal of any political civilizing project. The story inaugurated a sort of dystopian, parodical view of society that will be one of the trademarks of Argentinean SF in years to come. By the turn of the century, dystopian narratives that explored a failed Argentinean future would criticize the on-going, foundational project of the nation state which was the political and ideological cornerstone of 19th Century thought. This criticism came from within: those who created these dystopian visions of a failed and at times ridiculous Argentina were the very same intellectuals engaged in creating the laws and institutions that sustained what will be known as the lettered city. In 1875, Eduardo L. Holmberg (1852-1937) published *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic Nac* and *Dos partidos en lucha. Fantasía científica*, followed a year later by *Insomnio* and in 1879, by *Horacio Kalibang o los autómatas*. Also in 1879, the French journalist and writer, Aquiles Sioen (1834-1904), published *Buenos Aires en el año 2080*, with a dedication to Costumbrist and Naturalist writer Eugenio Cambaceres (1843-1888). In 1891, Eduardo Ezcurra (1840-1911) also reflected rather ironically on the course of the nation state project in yet another futurist dystopia, *Buenos Aires en el siglo XXX*. Although none of these books were singular in their endeavor (the practice was a widespread tendency throughout Latin America), they showed an early concern with the ideological agenda of the cultural and political elites and their skills in managing the country. Most of these novels are

built within the Naturalist paradigm (both aesthetically and culturally) and provide sound reports on the scientific debates of their time, particularly when addressing issues of evolution and Darwinism. No matter what can be said about these books from our contemporary perspective, these are narratives with a deep confidence in the nature of reason. And in that sense, these novels, which can be satirical and dry, offer a collective counter-reading to the so-called novels of the stock market ("*Ciclo de la Bolsa*"), which plainly blamed early globalization and immigration for the fall and failures of the Argentinean traditional elite, on the one hand, and on the other, the pessimistic, blatantly racist, and authoritarian view of writers such as José Ramos Mejía (1840-1914) and Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918), whose political views would rule education and health policy well into the 1960s.

Therefore we can say that the late 19th century became the foundational moment of Argentinean SF. It was a time when the borders between science and quackery were still unstable and when the fantastic was still developing. The relationship between science and literature made critical political thought legitimate, for it was based upon something other than perception or opinion, and therefore was not "simple" satire, though satire was a constant in these narratives. This relationship also showed the Positivist Generation's unflinching faith in continuous progress, in the linearity of history, and in the evolution of society that would translate even into the illustrations of popular magazines. Moreover, these novels offer a chance to reflect on the violent debates that divided Catholics and liberals over matters of education, marriage, law, and women's rights, hence disputing the hegemony of the nation-state project. So, the first wave of SF novels came to fill in the symbolic space of the liberal and freethinking point of view in a rather traditional society that was trying to define itself as an independent country in the larger international arena.

### **3. A Turn of Century, a Turn of Events**

At the turn of the 20th century, Argentina went through an accelerated process of modernization, fueled by favorable grains and meat prices in the international markets, an influx of workers through immigration, and a visible transformation of the urban space that included the expansion of paved roads, a complex public transportation system (that included trains, subways and buses), and the development of a middle class through massive public education. All artistic expressions of the period account for this transformation in one way or another. However, the optimistic and rationalist bent that had characterized SF during the previous century gave way, maybe because of an ingrained cultural skepticism about

technology that can be traced to the Modernism movement (ca. 1870-1926) and its centerpiece essay, *Ariel* (1900) by José Rodó Piñeyro. For starters, narratives abandoned strictly realist conventions and veered into the fantastic. SF slipped from the prescriptive and didactic language of sciences into the realm of superstitions and the blue worker's technical dexterities: the new narrator of SF was still an intellectual, but s/he was speaking with a new language. The explosion of pseudo-sciences as both a scientific question and also as a public spectacle, gave an aura of legitimacy to phrenology, occultism, spiritism, theosophy, and hypnotism. There was curiosity as well as a certain thirst for novelty and for the alternative. But above all, narratives started to show disenchantment with the modernization process that was now displaying its shortcomings (all manner of social services and new laws were necessary in order to accommodate the tripling of the population) and early, unforeseen results (such as the rise of the middle class and the unions.)

Contrary to all expectations, most SF produced during this period was written by well-known intellectuals who either had a deep-seated distrust of the modernization process or looked at SF literature as a cheap, albeit entertaining trick to earn a living in the increasingly popular political and satirical magazines of their time. So, a Uruguayan writer like Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) published some of his stories in the magazine *Caras y Caretas* (1898-1941) between 1908 and 1911 under the pseudonym S. Frago Lima. The early 20th century saw the arrival of absurd machines and deranged characters in Quiroga's short stories, a preference for the pseudo-sciences and irrationalist searches in Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938), and an eschatological technologicism in Roberto Arlt (1900-1942.) Although many of these writers came from diverse social backgrounds they all shared similar cultural baggage. And even though none of these writers dealt full-time with SF as a modality, they all explored it at least tentatively, thus renewing its early corpus of issues and themes, and adding to the vocabularies and perspectives about the country's historical development. However, their take was tainted by a negative view of history, by an anti-democratic understanding of the political process, and by a clear lack of understanding both of the conceptual frame and of the uses of science and technology. If the previous generation of SF writers were medical doctors and researchers, this generation was made up of dilettantes and popular science aficionados. The case of Lugones, as I already mentioned, is paradigmatic, for his short stories would be the best example of these operations. His stories are a mix of pseudo-sciences, Christian thought, and esoteric ideology in the service of a completely negative view of the historical process of modernization that denies free will. His view of science, tainted by a Spencerian, deterministic view (Herbert Spencer was one of the most important thinkers to leave his intellectual mark upon the Argentinean cultural field during

the turn of the century) proposes a veiled return to the archaic through a quasi-scientific language that quotes both magic and Einstein.

By the mid-1920s a series of magazines such as *Narraciones Terroríficas* (1939-1950), *Leoplán* (1933-1967) or *Tipperary* (1928-1960), as well as presses like *Tor*, started to translate *pulp* into Spanish and to distribute it to Latin America quite successfully. Translations from classic works by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells had circulated in the Argentinean market for a while, sometimes in pirated editions and poorly translated, but now there were all sorts of materials coming primarily from American magazines. Their Argentinean counterparts rarely published original material in Spanish, but we cannot underestimate their importance for they became the main venue for popular consumption of SF not only in Argentina but in all Latin America, and their role as taste-shapers is yet to be studied.

If one wanted to attempt an historiography of Argentinian SF written from within its own production, it would be useful to close this period with a rather late (or early) novel by Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914-1999), *La invención de Morel* (1940). From the point of view of SF, it is a hinge: it is both the last novel of the turn of the century and the first novel of contemporary SF. The novel still dwells in the imaginary of pseudo-sciences, but its main goal is a reflection on the nature of time, on the relationship between mankind and technology, on desire as an impossible cipher, and on human mortality. These topics, and the particular approach so masterfully designed by Bioy Casares, can be also traced in books as different as *Falsificaciones* (1966) by Marco Denevi (1922-1998) and *La muerte y su traje* (1961) by Santiago Dabove (1889-1951). But it will not be until much later that Argentinean SF will finally acquire a name.

#### **4. What's in a name? SF comes of age**

Many critics believe in SF's foundational myths and organize their reading agendas around the apparent "newness" of the modality, which seemed to have emerged fully formed after the mid-1950s when one the best known SF magazine, *Más Allá* (1953-1957), was originally published. Although the magazine's role was certainly important, as we have already mentioned, it was by no means the first of its kind. Nevertheless, the magazine synthesized the spirit of Argentinean SF and provided it with its first organic program. The core of SF's ideological take on Argentinean politics was born in this magazine and SF owes much of its contemporary vocabulary and vision to the people who worked there. The magazine reinstated a serious dialogue between sciences and literature, made an effort to publish SF written in Spanish (although in very small proportion), and gave voice to a very active and involved *fandom* that was identifying as a community

for the first time. Even when the activity of the magazine was truly marginal and very enclosed, *Más Allá* was a landmark in the cultural field and signaled a point of no return. One of its editors, Héctor Germán Oesterheld (1919-1978), was instrumental in this process and created what we can consider one of the most important SF artifacts in Spanish language, his character, the Eternauta. The comic book *El Eternauta* (1957-1959) is a co-creation of Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López (1928-2011). The most important twist of the comic is that it installed an SF story in present-day Buenos Aires, making the characters and the environment easy to recognize and culturally close to its readers. It is also a seminal work for it summarizes not only the politics but also the agenda of the left wing of the Peronista movement and synthesizes several key ideological notions such as the relationship between us/them, group identity politics, the relationship with the leader, etc. It is a counter-reading of the liberal, progressive take on politics of writers like Julio Cortázar and even Jorge Luis Borges. It narrates history as an apocalyptic process from the point of view of the banned Peronista movement and it brings into light all its political desires. The apocalyptic narrative will become dominant in SF comics over the next fifty years, and will not disappear entirely until the early 2000s, even in the visual imaginary of creators like Agrimbau and Ippóliti.

By contrast, the 1960s will bring a complex process of renewal to narrative. Its seed was in the publication of *Eternauta*, but its political and ideological aim was completely different. For starters, a new magazine, *Minotauro* (1964-1968) directed by Paco Porrúa (1922-) would bring in a new vision about what SF could or should do as a modality. *Más Allá* had translated most of its materials from *Galaxy SF* (1950-1980) and reflected on soft issues in SF. *Minotauro* would pick up on this tradition and underline Argentinean preference for the New Wave's concerns and writers such as Philip K. Dick, Frank Herbert and Robert Silverberg. Hence, starting in the 1960s and 1970s, narratives built social dystopias, which dealt with issues of nationalism, authoritarianism, and the transformation of the social sphere due to the impact of radical leftist politics, youth movements, feminism and other social movements. Industrialization and technological development were rarely issues, although the ideas that brought forward scientific and technological advancement were sometimes explored. Therefore, local SF used the myths and mannerisms of other SF traditions to its own advantage, somehow becoming an extremely self-reflexive, sheer political modality. In that sense, Argentinean SF became one of the few cultural spaces where it was possible to think about ideology outside the realm of the liberal legacy of the 19th century that shaped Argentina, and above all, a place from which to rework political models without having to pay dues to any of the teleological dictums that had organized the cultural field's hegemonic discourse. Probably, the first novel to announce



this transformation was *Opus Dos* (1967) by Angélica Gorodischer. It is not her best novel, but it clearly foreshadows the program for SF over the next forty years. It is a meditation on racial violence, social hypocrisy and the role of the intellectual elite in social and political movements. It is a disconcerting and uncomfortable book, for it is not very forgiving nor does it allow for the intellectual elite to look for any self-exculpation route. Gorodischer's raw, frank, and articulated view of Argentinian politics is one of those very few truly original forces in an otherwise gregarious cultural field.

The early 1970s also saw the migration of several poets into the realm of SF. Poets like Alberto Vanasco (1925-1993), Juan Jacobo Bajarlía (1914-2005), and Elvio Gandolfo (1947) started a prolific production around issues of language and its relationship with reality in many of their short stories and essays. This concern would establish one of the main lines of work in Argentinean SF for years to come and cement its relationship with the late surrealism and with pataphysics. Nowhere was this relationship more evident than in the illustrations and covers of the magazines. Artists like Carlos Nine (1944-), Carlos Killian (1947-2011), and Raúl Fortín (1939-2000) were paramount in the development of a distinctive SF aesthetic that was well-known worldwide and remarkable for its complex visual vocabulary.

## **5. From the 1980s to date: "So Say We All"**

The political crisis ensuing from the collapse of the public sphere during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, and the re-evaluation of the cultural field's ideological materials during the 1980s, came clearly into view within SF. Frederic Jameson says that SF makes clear our ideological experience of the present by an estrangement process (cf. *Archaeologies* 286). This explains why political and sociological experimentation became paramount within Argentinean SF production. Whether by accident or by design, narratives attempted an ideological critique of the cultural field's politics developed since the mid-1960s as well as the political failures of the lettered elites' hegemonic discourse. Within this discourse, the concept of otherness had been converted into the vanquished left of the 1970s, creating an identity of Otherness that was ideologically defined by recent historical experiences but was not firmly attached to the ever-changing politics of the day. The identity of this oppositional self was built around absolute utopia, and therefore shares its politics and markers: this was a male, white, who belonged to an indefinable yet uncomplicated, homogenic left, both a One and a Many, devoid of any identity but its own defeat, which was made heroic by virtue of its good will, and therefore, righteous. The Otherness at the core of the Argen-

tinean literary production was rarely questioned or problematized, for it was the voice of the oppressed and, therefore, the People's voice. For example, in the very few cases in which indigenous populations re-appear in the canonical production of the 1980s and 1990s, they are very stylized, symmetrical versions of an intellectual elite who chooses the virtues of barbarism instead of those of civilization as a way to define the politics of the People. It is only a conversion of positive/negative values within the liberal discourse that had expelled from the People those who did not 'fit' the idealized model of the 19th century nation state project.

SF artifacts produced since the mid-1970s either took issue with the cultural and political revolutionary agendas described in the above paragraphs, or had serious difficulties when trying to fit aliens and hybrids within such a rigid model, for (as Derrida would say) any form of monstrosity makes us aware of what is different. The very presence of such strange creatures showed the inability of any teleological program to understand diversity and plurality, on the one hand, and on the other, a very skewed view of the meaning of open society. Thus, topics such as the new social and cultural movements, family structure, intellectual identity, narrative of history, madness, etc., had a privileged space of debate in the production of Argentinean SF. Although these themes were part of Argentinean literature's shared language, SF deconstructed its ideological basis, and generally had increasing degrees of difficulty to attach itself to any form of built-in ontology. Although SF production increased considerably since the 1980s, fueled both by the publication of magazines (such as *El Péndulo*, *Sinergia*, and the second period of *Minotauro*), and by the stimulus provided by a myriad of small presses and fanzines, three writers deserve our special consideration. The triad formed by Angélica Gorodischer, Marcelo Cohen and Carlos Gardini constitutes an unprecedented phenomena in Argentinean SF, not only because of the quality of their work, but because they were able to crossover into mainstream culture not as SF writers but just as writers (they hold Fulbright scholarships, Konex prizes, etc.) Though Gardini is a rather unknown writer outside cultural circles, this is not the case for Gorodischer and Cohen. Their work is well-known, so I will not go over it in detail here except to mention a couple of things. First, these are writers that break all sorts of reading expectations; their narratives are dense, with complex cultural references that generate what J. Andrew Brown has called a literature of 'sampling' for it requires a vast library of knowledge in order to access the texts. Secondly, these are writers that understand that literature cannot serve as an analysis of their time, just as a reading. But what a reading: the dystopias created here speak of a world in flux and denounce economic, political, and social inequities as unacceptable within democratic societies. Yet they do

not provide an agenda or a solution. These are narratives that articulate critical thought as politics.

This interpretation does not permeate all SF production of the last few years. Only lately comics have started to articulate a similar view, and movies are still searching for a language of their own. However, Argentinean SF keeps growing and developing its own vocabularies and strategies.

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