

Exploring Comics & Nationhood in Argentina

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BACKGROUND

- Comics were first introduced at the beginning of the 20th Century
- Tits-Bits** helped direct a shift from being marketed towards the highly literate upper class to the being aimed at a middle class that was becoming more literate due to immigration and public schooling policies (Godolfo & Turnes 2019)
- The ease of access and highly-readable content led to the Golden Age of Comics in the 1940s-50s
 - One estimate from 1954 claimed comic magazines published 150,000,000 copies per year (Vazquez & Jackson 2020)
- The coup of the 1966 resulted in a shift to censorship and political undertones
- Strong decline in popularity due a variety of factors including the invasion of Fanzines



Mafalda learns the definition of "Democracy" <https://blogs.ubc.ca/repasionalatina/2020/10/03/laughing-like-mafalda/>

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“Indeed, the nature of the comics market has meant that during the time of political upheaval and in its aftermath, **comics have often been able to respond with great speed and actuality to historical events and debates in the public sphere.** The relatively low cost of production, the manner in which comics are often shared with enthusiasts, and the bened of the visual and the written that makes up comics means that they have the potential for fast distribution and dissemination among a large, and often diverse, reading public”

Comics and Memory in Latin America, Carasco, et al., 2017

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METHODS

- Analysis of cultural material
- Synthesis of existing academic research with analysis to produce a research paper

KEY WORKS EXPLORED

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- Synthesis of existing academic research with analysis to produce a research paper

Tits-Bits
1909-1957
<https://magazines.tbn.com/magazines/tits-bits-magazine/>

Patoruzú & Patoruzito
1928-1977 • Dante Quinterno
<https://car.toonresearch.com/index.php/argentine-animated-features/part-5-2000-2003-2/>

El Eternauta
1957-1959 • Héctor Germán Oesterheld & Francisco Solano López
<https://www.comics.comics.com/issue/2019/08/08/osterbergomez-latam-american-comics-archives.html>

Mafalda
1964-1973 • Quino
<https://www.ebay.com/itm/382935004829>

Latinoamérica y el Imperialismo: 450 Años de Guerra
1973-1975 • Héctor Germán Oesterheld & Leopoldo Durañona
https://books.google.com/books?id=Latam9C39A8rca_y_eI_mperialismo.html?pg=PPVMBAAACAAJ

Fierro
1984-1992 & 2006-2017
<https://comicvine.gamespot.com/fierro/4050-44352/>



PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

MEDIATED NATIONHOOD

Defined as “the ‘putting together’ of cumulative pictures of the social totality by the media in which the existence of the nation seems conspicuously to emerge from and be embedded in everyday social ties and activities rather than organized politics or the state” (Frosh & Wolfsfeld 2006) and “can also be creatively and self-consciously deployed and manipulated by ordinary people” (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008).

Through this combined definition, the construction of national identity is found in the mundane, the social activities and connections that are embedded in everyday life and impacted by particular media, in my argument, comics.

Rather than simply acting as a stagnant historical telling, the comics seeks to present the reader with a “new, trustworthy version of history” (Carrasco, et al. 2017) that shows both the nation and its opponents as they are. This ties into the construction of nationhood or how to determine who gets to be included when it comes to the belonging.

WHO BELONGS

In *Latinoamérica y el Imperialismo: 450 Años de Guerra*, the real heroes are the “indigenous caciques, ‘orilleros,’ ‘gauchos,’ ‘negros,’ ‘soldaderas,’ and ‘montoneras’ (Carrasco, et al. 2017). In another iconic work, *Mafalda*, the main character Mafalda “embodied the identity of a progressive middle class person” as the “intellectualized girl,” while her companions include “Susanita (the ‘housewife’) and Manolito (the immigrant who aspires to climb the social ladder)” (Carrasco, et al. 2017). In the long running *Patoruzú* and its child-aimed spinoff magazine, *Patoruzito*, the titular character is an indigenous character who is “the paragon of virtue and innocence” (Godolfo & Turnes 2019). While Patoruzú was not the most positive representation due to colonial narrative influence, it is one of the earliest examples of an Indigenous hero within comics.

The three examples showcase that the citizen in its various forms. Combining *450 Años* and *Patoruzú* gives the clear message that the hero of Argentina is an indigenous person, while combining *450 Años* and *Mafalda* shows that the ideal citizen also stands up against oppression in its many forms.

RECLAIMING HISTORY

The name for comics, ‘historieta’, is a diminutive, pejorative form of the Spanish word for (hi)story, ‘historia’. Comics have struggled with gaining legitimacy as a genre, but Feierstein points out, “there is a difference between humour in general and political humor, and that the latter, especially in authoritarian societies, assumes the supportive function of survival and ethical conciliation” (Feierstein 2015). Comics can be humorous, but the humor serves a greater purpose than just to entertain. For a country that has had to overcome a history of dictatorships, state-sanctioned “disappearances,” and various forms of censorship, comics provide a way for both the artists and the readers to engage with current events while maintaining a sense of distance from it.

Carrasco et. al discuss two particular works by Héctor Germán Oesterheld, stating that the “comics can be read as a strategy to interact with the pressing issues of the present by reappropriating the past” and that there is “dialectical relationship” between the comic and the greater societal structures that surround it (Carrasco, et al. 2017). *Latinoamérica y el Imperialismo: 450 Años de Guerra* covers the imperial history of Latin America, addressing a complex legacy defined by war and imperialism. *El Eternauta* is a science fiction comic that contains metaphors for military-led coups and dirty war. Both works allowed the author and public to engage with history.



A panel from *Latinoamérica y el Imperialismo: 450 Años de Guerra* shows three contemporary acts of imperialism in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay to connect present with a history of imperialism in Latin America. Oesterheld argues that imperialism is the great thief and continue to steal from the people of Latin America.

Writer Héctor Germán Oesterheld & his family became some of the at least 30,000 “disappeared”



“How to Make a Revolution with Words (And Drawings): History, Memory, and Identity in Oesterheld’s Comics.” (Carrasco, et al. 2017)

Comics have been able to not only tell stories of the past in a simple reproduction, but they have been able to shift how people view these events. In “Imagining the dictatorship, Argentina 1981 to 1982,” Anne Magnussen looks at the way identity is made and changed based on the stories told about the past, specifically that “Memory is a dynamic concept that changes from person to person and over time according to different contexts and uses in which the reference to a specific past is activated” (Magnussen 2006).

In the case of Argentina, the dictatorships and disappearances of individuals is a collective trauma that is still being worked through and has shaped and is shaped by comics. For the former, while there is no concrete evidential link between the “disappearance” of acclaimed artist Oesterheld and his work, many draw the connection between the increasing political nature of his work and his subsequent murder. Mafalda’s creator Quino has actually placed his titular character within the reality of “disappearance,” suggesting “the possibility—published first in Spain and then in Argentina—that overshadowed all the others: that the ‘intellectualized young girl’ might have been one of the thirty thousand disappeared” (Carrasco, et. al 2017).

Comics allow both artist and reader to engage with historic and current events, to negotiate meaning out of tragedy, and to see who represents them and their nation within the media. In Oesterheld’s case, the artists’ disappearance has led to new interpretations of his work (for example, the “Nestornaut” adaption of his classic *El Eternauta*), as well as the fact that the comic industry lost one of the greats. In terms of *Mafalda*, the comic character found a new voice and symbolism after it had been discontinued in the early 1970s and has become a symbol bent to political ideologies (Carrasco, et. al 2017). Another example is *Fierro* comic magazine.

COMICS FOR SURVIVORS

First published from 1984-1992, *Fierro* got its full name from reference to an old gaucho cartoon, which ties its previous ideas of who belongs. It’s original subheading was “Historietas para sobrevivientes (Comics for survivors),” which showcases not only the national identity of “survivors” but also the ways in which survivors engage with previous events or trauma through comics. The second iteration of *Fierro* ran from 2006 to 2017 and showcased mainly Argentine works with the motto “The Argentine Comic,” which shows new ownership over not only comics but over the legacy. While this magazine may no longer be in production, I think it really showcases the evolution of Argentina’s comic industry, from a survival mechanism to symbol of nationhood.



100 editions of *Fierro* are available for download on the Historical Archive of Argentine Magazines website <https://ahra.com.ar/revistas/fierro/>

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“More than anything, the first appearance of the US strips highlights the hybrid and melting-pot-like situation in Argentina...**This was most noticeable in the way comic strips were modified by anonymous artists, adding Argentine political figures into the stories, using local slang and even producing crossovers between different strips.** The comics in this period seem to illustrate the eternal problem of Argentine development, which is caught between twin models of dependency: US and European”

Fresh off the Boat and Off to the Presses. Gandolfo & Turnes, 2019

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Mafalda and friends play “Nuclear War” in a critique from the 1960s <https://rational.org/radiation/NuclearExtinction/>

CONCLUSION

As James Scorer explored, “comics can be used as cultural and political currency to foment widespread cultural-political exchanged beyond print media” (Scorer 2020).

My research found that comics serve as:

- Dialectical discourse with previous traumas
- A lens that shapes and is shaped by the past
- A low cost way to communicate to the mass with varying literacy levels
- An effective way to engage with political and social culture

Comics, with their accessibility and ongoing shifts in aesthetics and storytelling, provide the perfect way to quickly address situations of past and present. They offer a chance to revisit trauma while maintaining a distance from it. They are constantly evolving and are a media built on being responsive to the social networks and political contexts that they are placed in.



Former Argentine president Néstor Kirchner was depicted as the Eternaut, a hero from the iconic series by Héctor G. Oesterheld

FURTHER RESEARCH

While I was able to synthesize information from existing research about comics in Argentina and apply an anthropological lens, I would love to further the research by:

- Reading an extensive amount of the original comic material (likely translated into English but comparing to original Spanish text)
- Research and apply theory about comics from outside of Argentina-specific works
- Apply a more critical lens to the representations of indigenous individuals within the comics

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