

*Drawing memories. The “Comics for Identity” project in Argentina as an ethical and aesthetical challenge.*¹

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The starting point is 1984, the year that marked the end of a seven-year military dictatorship (between 1976 and 1983) and the return to a democratic political system based on republican institutions in Argentina.

While military dictatorships were the rule in Latin America between the 1960s and the 1980s, it was during the 70s when the balance of power between a more or less revolutionary left and the right was definitely solved the way a Gordian knot is solved: with the edge of a sword. The Argentine *Process of National Reorganization*, as the regime decided to call itself, left a scarred, traumatized society that had to deal with the consequences of the high levels of violence the dictatorship had applied as a chastening measure. The Argentine society had been restructured in a deep way: terrorized citizens now seemed to wake up to a whole new series of truths about what had really been going on while most people choose not to ask questions and ignore that which, in many cases, had taken place right next to them.

Besides the economic crisis the dictatorship had left behind it, social demands were gathered around the Human Rights issue, and this issue was synthesized into one, extremely complex, figure: the *desaparecido*, the disappeared. While almost every dictatorial regime carries great numbers of missing persons - which translates many times into mass graves -, the Argentine dictatorship – and to some extent, the Chilean and the Uruguayan dictatorships– developed a systematized way to deal with those tagged as “subversives”. This accusation was basically a death penalty, and while there was no need to explain exactly what that meant, it was this elusive definition that made it all the worst: it could be eventually applied to anybody considered by the regime as a threat.

¹ This article is part of an ongoing postdoctoral research, which seeks to acknowledge how recent social trauma in Argentina in particular, and in Latin America in general, has been presented and represented in comics. A modified version of this text was presented at the ICAF conference, Washington University, November 2nd, 2017. I'd like to thank Tania Pérez Cano for her corrections, commentaries and feedback.

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Political and religious activists, revolutionaries, union delegates, lawyers, the low and sometimes even the high clergy – even though the Catholic Church as an institution kept very close, collaborative ties with the regime - . Or just people who had been in the wrong place or whose names were in the wrong notebook could “disappear” to never be seen again, without any official explanation. At the same time, mass media and government officials spread rumors that the *disappeared* were actually enjoying a pleasant exile in Europe, or that they had died as a result of internal clashes within subversive groups.

Between 1976 and 1979 repressive actions reached a peak that would cause thousands of *disappearances*. Even the regime itself did not know exactly how many people had been exterminated, but official calculations were around 22.000 even before 1979. A definitive figure has never been established – and this was part of the plan, the uncertainty about the extents of the extermination system -, but Human Rights movements have calculated the number of dead/disappeared in 30.000, a number that is not meant to be specific but rather a revealing expression of the horrible crimes committed by the dictatorship.

The conformist common sense upheld by a good part of the Argentine society started to weaken when the dictatorial version wore off and lost credibility. Some *true* explanation was needed, and this meant revising that which was, by definition, meant to be hidden. The immediate reaction was to start mounting that which was called – not without irony – “the horror show”: testimonies and tales of tortures, the miseries of life in captivity, the exhumation of bodies marked as NNs (unidentified bodies), suspected of being the remains of the disappeared.

While mass media profited from an anxious audience willing to *know*, the question remained: what had happened to the thousands of disappeared? What had happened with the children that had been taken along their parents and the unborn children carried by pregnant women who were among those disappeared? How can one claim the remains of a loved one who has left no remains? This was from the beginning a problematic issue posed to the Humans Right movements like Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

During a protest in Buenos Aires, in September 1983, a group of artists improvised the following device: people would “lend” their bodies so their silhouettes could be drawn

over paperboards or cardboards, a way of representing those whose presence and whereabouts were being demanded to the military: where are the disappeared? This event came to be known as *Siluetazo*, the big silhouette event (Fig. 1).



This kind of vanishing human figure, something that is not there yet is still present, would become a first approach to represent a radical form of absence. In the case of the *desaparecidos*, the absence is all that there is left (Longoni and Bruzzone, 2008).

We could say that, in the case of the disappeared, it was not possible to finish the social process of the configuration of their lives. The disappeared's *persona* in Latin America bears the profile of an unfinished existence. The silhouette and its interaction with the living would provide the necessary form for the definitive configuration of those other truncated and paradoxically incomplete lives (Burucúa y Kwiatkowski, 2014: 185).³

Another customary practice consists in showing the photographs of the *desaparecidos* (Fig. 2), something that can be problematic: these pictures are usually the same used in

³ “Podríamos decir que, en el caso de los desaparecidos, no fue posible terminar el proceso social de la configuración de sus vidas. La persona del desaparecido en América Latina tiene el perfil de una existencia inacabada. La silueta y su interacción con los vivos proporcionaría la forma necesaria para la configuración definitiva de esas otras vidas truncas y paradójicamente incompletas.”

the national documents, the legal evidence demanded and certified by the State that proves that we, as citizens, actually exist, the same State that denies the existence of the *desaparecidos*. Is there a way to better pose the question/demand about the truth, one that breaks the state-owned representation catch?

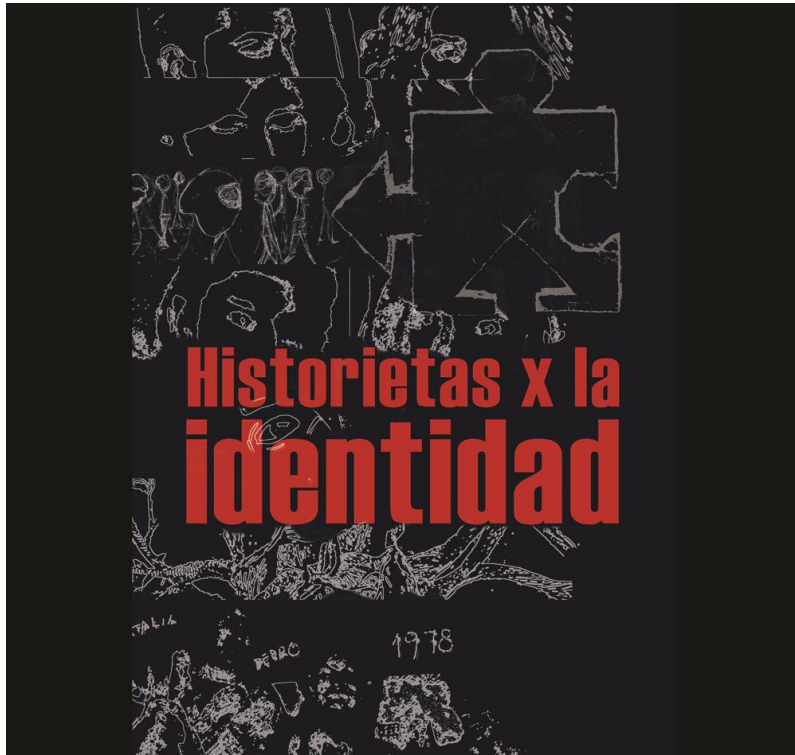


While this has been explored in different media such as films, dramaturgy and the visual arts, we have yet to explore how comics have dealt with this urgent and necessary issue. How can comics contribute to the sustenance of a collective memory regarding an extermination process? How can they become a new means to keep and reproduce those testimonies, those voices that inevitably tend to fade away in time, to fight and resist against recurring negationism? Furthermore, we can also consider the use of narrative fiction as a tool to achieve these objectives, something that poses a series of aesthetic and ethical questions.

Although this is something that has been present in comics from 1984 onwards, I'd like to focus on recent years, particularly the case of *Historietas por la Identidad: Comics for Identity*, part of an ongoing project launched and held by the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo as a way of reaching out to their lost grandchildren (Fig. 3).⁴ Back in 1997,

⁴ All of the comics are available online and can be downloaded for free in PDF format: <http://hisxi.blogspot.com.ar/>

this movement – which had been largely ignored and even despised by Carlos Menem’s government (1989-1999) and a progressively apathetic public opinion – launched *Theater for Identity*. Soon other projects in different media followed as part of the same effort: *Music for Identity*, *Rock for Identity*, *Graphics for the grandmothers*, etc. In 2012, comics started to integrate this collective meant to keep a social memory of tragic events, in a moment when political tides had changed and Human Rights demands had become a state policy.



Between 2003 and 2015 – during Néstor Kirchner’s and Cristina Fernández’s presidencies – amnesty laws were abolished, trials were started, testimonies gathered and recuperated, culprits were judged and prosecuted – many were sentenced, many others were acquitted – and comics became politically engaged in a way that questioned its limits as a medium and a narrative language. Comic and visual artists were asked to present different cases of families looking for their lost members who were still unborn when their parents were taken away by the regime’s task forces.

Creative liberty was total, they had only to respect a few formal requirements: 1) the comic was to be preferably two pages long, it had to include data on the parents – names, what they did and the dates of the time they were taken away -; 2) it had to include pictures of the relatives looking for the disappeared children and an

approximated date of birth – this varies depending on the case, some are more precise than others -. Among all of the works – over 30 – I’ve chosen three.

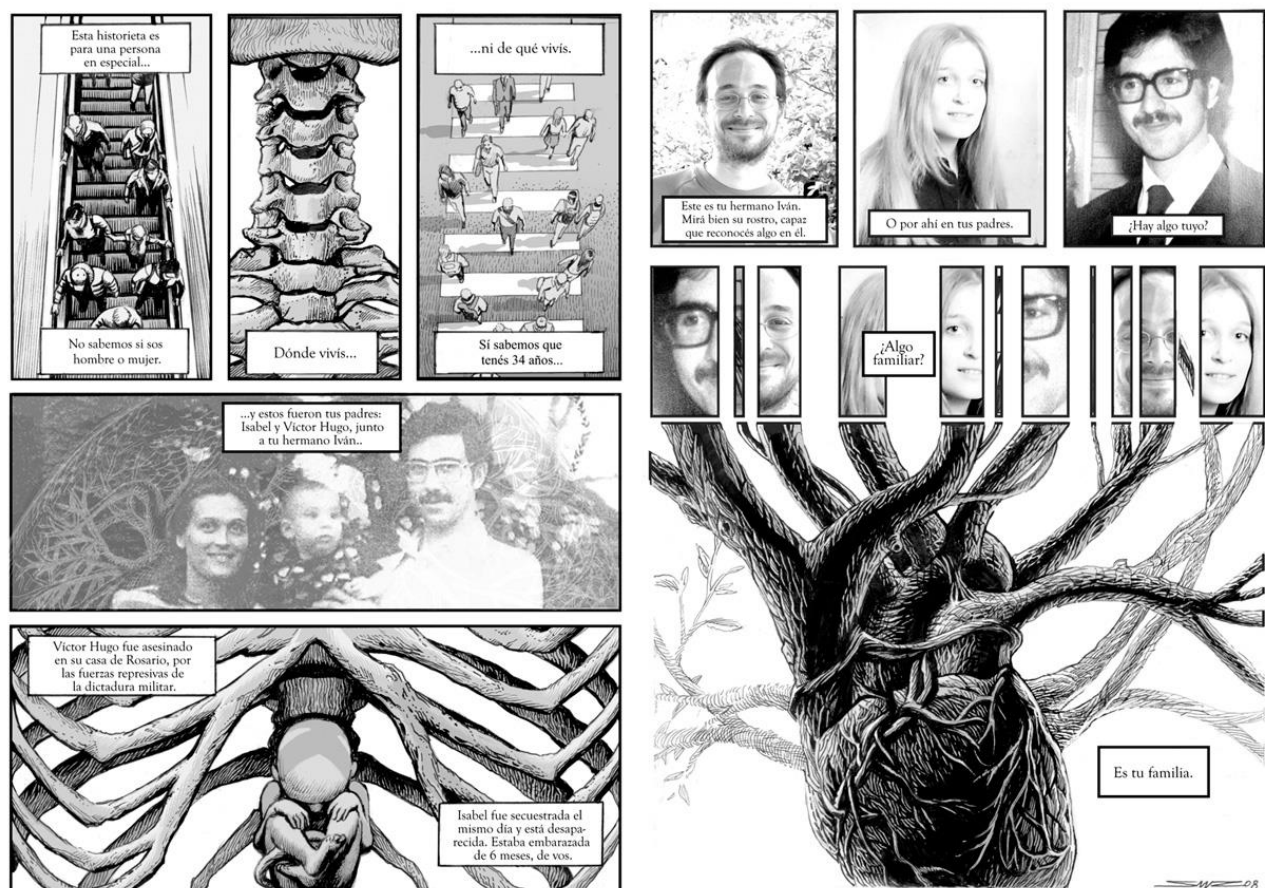
Figure 4 shows the work of Lucas Nine, regarding the Deria-Vaccaro family (Fig. 4). In the volume compiled by the National Library are included some excerpts from the authors explaining why they did what they did in terms of aesthetic choices. Nine’s starts by saying that he knew his work was supposed to serve a purpose, that is to say, narrative was meant to be functional. Second issue: his drawing style usually took the form of, as he put it, “an ironic detachment” which he found inappropriate when dealing with such an issue. And finally, he suggests some kind of institutionalized aestheticism he’d like to avoid, something we can interpret as imagination prioritizing functionality before experimentation, thus becoming conservative despite its good intentions.



So what Nine did was to “maximize the documentary material” he had been given, consisting of family pictures, by using the narrative logic provided by the comic grid panel. The result is intense and fascinating: based mostly on a single image – the disappeared couple sharing an intimate moment in their kitchen, doing the dishes together -, Nine resorts to the zoom in and the out-of-focus to try to compose some sense out of those “shreds of life” (Didi-Huberman, 2004), all that remains from violently interrupted lives. What could be considered as trivial suddenly becomes a proof that these people have existed, that they had a life like anybody else, a daily life that was not opposed to their political engagement.

The pictures of the faces (the parents and their daughter) form a triangle that becomes the pyramidal base of the page, that which sustains the narrative. Yet this triangular form is meant to be temporary, since the family picture is incomplete: the unborn child (the gender is unknown) is still missing. There should be four faces instead of three.

The second example is Salvador Sanz's approach to the case of the Fina-Carlucci family (Fig. 5). Once again, the author – known by his realistic, visceral, even gory graphic style, whose works usually fits into the fantasy/sic-fi genres – had to ask himself how to deal with such a difficult, thorny issue; something that made him rethink his own work. Unlike Nine, who decided to forgo the use of drawings, Sanz decided to blend two very different, even conflicting, graphic styles: photographs *and* drawings.

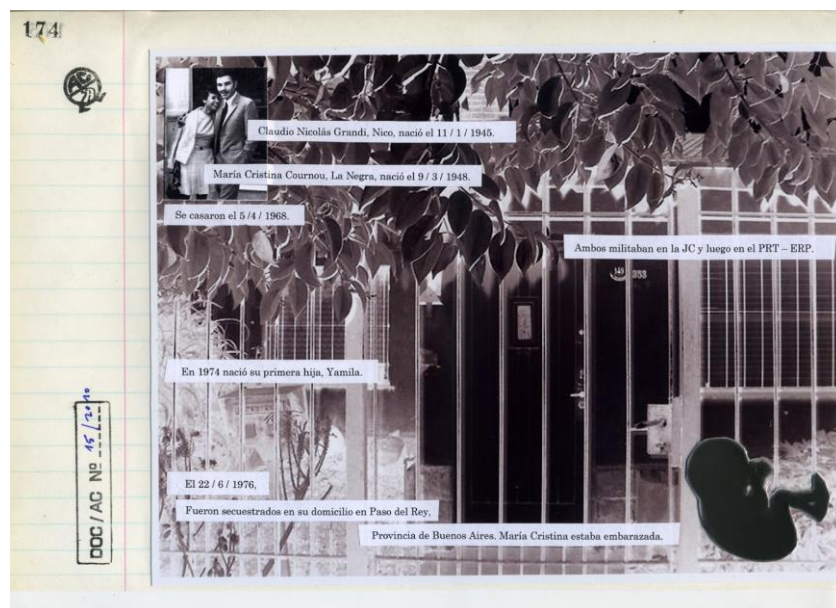


The text, assuming the family's voice, is directed to the missing brother/sister: "We don't know whether you are a man or a woman, where do you live or how do you make a living. We do know you're 34 years old and that these were your parents". After summing up the disappeared couple's fate – the father was murdered at his home by a task force, the mother was kidnapped that same day and remains a *disappeared* – the

text invites the missing child to pay attention to the photographs of his or her brother and parents: “Do you resemble any of them? Do you find something in you? Something familiar? This is your family”.

Sanz’s formal approach is impressive: “behind” the panel grid – yet at the same time being part of that grid – we get to see parts of a skeleton carrying an unborn child. The paradox between that which is dead but still carries a new life is heartrending, a metaphor of the very objective of *Comics for Identity*: to triumph over death by restoring a part of those tragically and violently interrupted lives through their heirs, the children that live under false identities forged by their appropriators. Thus the motto of the Human Rights movements in Argentina: “Memory, Truth and Justice”.

Finally, the third example is provided by Eduardo Molinari’s work regarding the Grandi-Cornou family (Fig. 6). From the start, the image poses a formal question: can this be considered a comic? Molinari is not a comic artist, and the use of the Archivo Caminante (the Walking Archive) seal means this is part of a bigger ongoing artistic work. Also, the use of collage marks Molinari’s style in his approach to Argentine and Latin American history that one can check through his body of work: the contraposition of speeches – the winners and losers of History -, a kind of dialectic aesthetic that means to reveal the hidden and forgotten experiences by digging through the different layers of time as an archeologist would do.



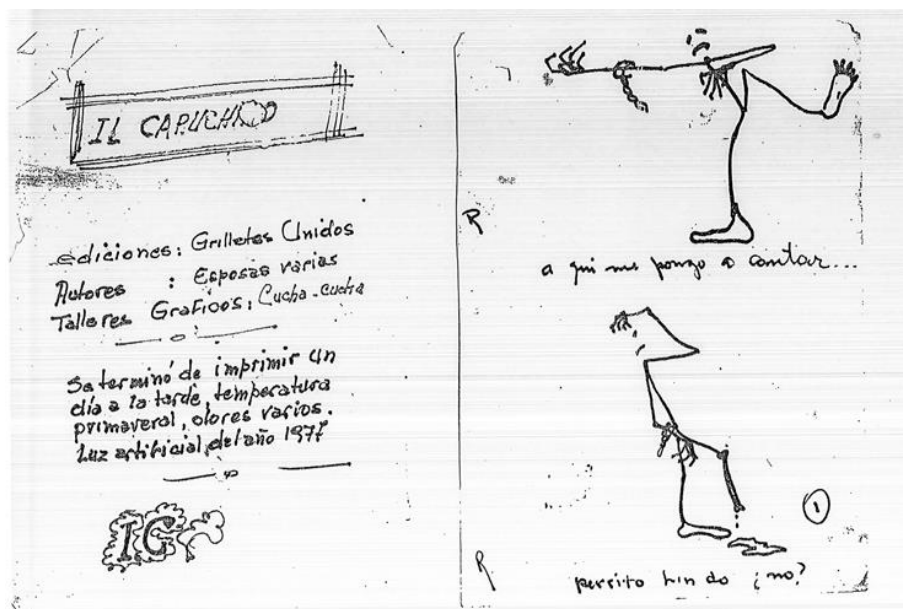


Molinari himself explains that his idea was to contrast the official information mass media in Argentina was reproducing at the time with the actual cost of those politics - people being taken from their home by the regime's task forces -. The chosen newspaper, *La Nación* (*The Nation*), is the oldest newspaper in Argentina, founded in 1870, and has traditionally been the representative of the interests of the Argentine oligarchy, deeply involved in the support of the military dictatorship.

These seemingly unrelated events – the kidnapping and the increase of Argentina's external debt - are now brought together by the *iconic solidarity* logic (Groensteen, 2007), that is to say: its coexistence within the page makes us, the readers, to look for *some* kind of meaning. In this case, that meaning being the violence applied as a disciplinary measure by the regime was not gratuitous, it served a specific purpose: to install a new economic model, neoliberalism, characterized by its inequality, which in return needed to neutralize any resistance that might compromise that objective. I believe we can understand this as a political use of McCloud's gap: within the spaces that lie between the fragments of different speeches we find the denunciation of a complicit silence, that which was being hidden by the media, the regime's *real* plan. A silence only multiplied by the silencing of thousands of opposing voices. By doing this, Molinari is trying – and even warning us – to avoid diluting these tragic episodes within the confines of individual crimes. These were manifestations of a more general,

systematized plan and we can't – and shouldn't - understand one factor without the other.

One final note: these are images from a recently recovered mini-comic, which had remained unknown until 2014 (Fig. 7). It was made by a disappeared woman, Lelia Bicocca (a catechist), while she was being held captive at the Navy School of Mechanics (ESMA in Spanish), the biggest and most cruel clandestine detention center in the country. *Il Capuchino*,⁵ as it was titled, is filled with bitter humor and reflections, literally produced in the worst of contexts, something that defies the established logic when approaching comic studies. When does something like this stop being a comic to start being a document? How can theoretical tools from our field of studies help us read and reflect on something like this? How can all these graphic records and experimentations converge as multiple manifestations of the same process while being separated by time and death and disappearance?



Once again, there's a gap in the middle where silence and absence will always be ineradicable. Still, that's no excuse to stop exploring it. On the contrary, we still have much to acknowledge and I believe this is one of the greatest challenges for our field of studies: how can comics help us to better face and understand that, which at some

⁵ The title refers to the Catholic order, the Capuchins, in a word game with *capucha* (hood), since prisoners spent most of the time hooded. It could also be a reference to the place within the ESMA where she was being held in captivity, known as *Capucha*. Along ten small pages, Bicocca made references to the extreme production context, mixed with quotations of classical literary works such as Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* and Jose Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, considered the founding work of Argentine literature.

point, will always be impossible to understand and to forgive? To “make silence speak” (Souto Carlevaro, 2010: 82) is, indeed, a collective effort to which comics are contributing. Acknowledging it should be the first step to understanding it and to contribute from a critical and historical perspective, one that doesn’t relinquishes engagement; moreover: one that turns it into an ethical compass for any research dealing with these difficult, painful issues.

Image references:

Fig. 1: *Siluetazo*, Buenos Aires, September 1983. Photograph by Guillermo Kexel.

Fig. 2: Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo demonstration (Buenos Aires, 1980). Author unknown.

Fig. 3: Flyer for the *Historietas por la Identidad* exhibition at the National Library, Buenos Aires, 2015.

Fig. 4: Lucas Nine, *Deria-Vaccaro Family* (*Historietas por la Identidad*, 2015)

Fig. 5: Salvador Sanz, *Fina-Carlucci Family* (*Historietas por la Identidad*, 2015)

Fig. 6: Eduardo Molinari, *Grandi-Cournou Family* (*Historietas por la Identidad*, 2015)

Fig. 7: Lelia Bicocca, *Il Capuchino* (1977?)

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