



COMICS BEYOND THE PAGE IN LATIN AMERICA

edited by James Scorer

UCLPRESS

'The Nesternaut', or how a president becomes a comic superhero

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Written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and drawn by Francisco Solano López and first published in 1957, *El Eternauta* (*The Eternaut*) was an unprecedented success in the history of Argentine comic strips (Oesterheld and Solano López 2008).¹ The local comics industry was in the final stages of what would later become known as a veritable Golden Age, which largely coincided with the heyday of cultural industries as well as with a period of general expansion in the national industry (Vazquez 2010, 25–43; see also [Vazquez's](#) chapter in this volume). This success, which would continue to grow until it gained a prestige reserved only for great works of literature, could be explained by its exceptional quality, the use of intrigue as the main driver of the plot, the representation of the protagonist's stream of consciousness (who keeps repeating that it is 'best not to think', even as we readers witness the uninterrupted flow of his thoughts), but also, and above all, by the fact that the main events are set in some of the most iconic locations of the city of Buenos Aires (Avenida General Paz, the River Plate football stadium, Plaza de los dos Congresos). Until then, the 'home of the adventure story', as Juan Sasturain would rightly define it, had been European or US cities. It was the first time that Argentine readers witnessed a full alien invasion in the streets they walked through every day (Sasturain 1995). As in the *Zé Ninguém* street comics analysed in [Ivan Lima Gomes's](#) chapter in this volume, the city had itself become a character.

Many years later, that invasion would be reinterpreted allegorically as a representation of the numerous coups that would throw the

country's precarious social balance into turmoil, between President Juan Domingo Perón's overthrow on 16 September 1955 (two years before the publication of the first *El Eternauta*) up until the definitive return to democracy on 10 December 1983. It is important to remember that, more broadly, the metaphor of invasion had been used in literature to represent the opposing forces (in Julio Cortázar's 'Casa tomada' ('House Taken Over'), for example).² But Peronist political allegory was a far cry from that first version of *El Eternauta* in which the army appear as allies and the petit bourgeois Juan Salvo manages to survive, first and foremost, thanks to the advantages afforded to him by his class. These advantages, he insists, are attributable to luck and not for one minute to the injustices of an unequal class system. In that sense, insufficient attention has been paid to the clue that Oesterheld himself offered in the prologue to the first reissue of the strip: 'El Eternauta was my version of Robinson Crusoe, alone, surrounded, a prisoner, not of the sea but of death'. In the same way as Robinson, Juan Salvo was preparing to survive on his particular desert island, stripped of time and space. The deadly snow that falls at the start of the story and which kills anyone who touches it was the perfect symbol for the solitude surrounding his family and his friends in the middle-class suburb of Vicente López. Isolation – turning the house into a fortress – was the solution. But also, much like Robinson, his later aim would be to return to civilisation, to the comfort of his home and attic. The circular ending of *El Eternauta* closes the Robinsonian loop because ultimately it is about regaining lost class privileges.

Juan Salvo, middle-class man, does not have a social conscience. He does not have a conscience of change and restructuring of the world. Like his friends, he seeks a return to a status quo: Elena wishes to return to her home, Juan wishes to be back in his wife's arms, in his property in Vicente López, his job in the business. And he does so. He actually does it. And on that return to the past, he not only builds his future tragedy, but also that of the whole of humanity.

(Vazquez 2005)

One year before this first release of *El Eternauta*, the 'use of symbols, signs, meaningful expressions, doctrines, articles and artwork for Peronist ideological affirmation or for Peronist propaganda which may claim such nature or might be taken as such, belonging to or used by

individuals representing Peronism or organisations thereof' had been banned under penalty of imprisonment by presidential decree on 9 March 1956 (Executive Decree number 4161 9/03/1956). This law inaugurated an extended period of proscription of the main national political force. This crucial interdiction would feed a Peronist imagery that would later acquire almost legendary status. Certainly the deliberate use of 'symbols, signs, meaningful expressions' that the decree refers to had been a trademark of early Peronism. And the visual imaginary of Perón and of Evita had been used for propaganda to a degree that surpassed all previous Argentine political movements (see, for example, Plotkin 1994). But it is also true that the ban imbued these symbols with a mystique beyond the realm of mere propaganda.

It was not until the new millennium, however, that Peronism became the political and ideological framework for an Argentine president turned superhero. In late August 2010 a meeting took place between the then former president Néstor Kirchner and the militant youth wing of the Kirchnerist movement under the slogan 'bancando a Cristina' ('standing by Cristina'). This rally was promoted by the group known as La Cámpora,³ whose manifest aim was to show the widespread support of the militant youth for the president: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Néstor's wife and presidential successor, Cristina was embattled at the time as a result of a conflict with the country's major media conglomerates. In fact, Néstor Kirchner's election in 2003 had entailed a surprising shift to the centre-left of a Peronism whose recent presidents (Carlos Menem 1989–95, 1995–9; Eduardo Duhalde 2001–3) had positioned themselves clearly on the most neoliberal extreme of Argentine politics. Following the institutional crisis that included the resignation of several presidents during the final weeks of December 2001, Néstor Kirchner would be remembered as the political figure who took the country out of crisis, lowered poverty and unemployment rates, cancelled foreign debt, and reopened the Trials for Crimes Against Humanity, as well as a host of other policies that were diametrically opposed to the previous administrations.

The poster advertising the rally (Figure 9.1) revealed the former president wearing the Eternaut's characteristic diving suit in the midst of the deadly snowfall, walking with his archetypal smile. This poster was the birth of the 'Nestornaut'. Conceived as an advertising joke, the image would acquire huge popularity a few months later following the sudden demise of the former head of state. The Nestornaut would subsequently become a veritable emblem of the Kirchnerist movement, not only as one of the most representative images used by the vast crowds that attended

the leader's funeral, but also as an icon of the political struggles that were to follow. The Nestornaut appeared on T-shirts, stencils, placards and banners as the symbol of resistance to powers which did not see eye to eye with the State, a power which the then head of state, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, widow of the Nestornaut, was having to confront.



Figure 9.1 Political poster that first showed the Nestornaut, an image of former Argentine president Néstor Kirchner wearing the costume of Héctor G. Oesterheld's character the Eternaut.

There have been other studies – see Scolari (2014), Gago (2015), Francescutti (2015), Vacchieri and Castagnino (2015), as well as my own (Palacios 2012) – which either analyse the figure of the Nestornaut (Francescutti), read it as part of a global history of the character of the Eternaut (Scolari, Gago, Palacios), or see it as an example of transmediation within contemporary Argentine fiction (Vacchieri and Castagnino). Though I draw on these studies here, I focus more on determining what the necessary conditions for the emergence and success of an image like the Nestornaut were. As well as the political history of the Peronist movement and the social and political history of *El Eternauta* itself and its writer, Héctor Germán Oesterheld, I will argue that the role played by the national comic-strip industry as a catalyst for the political events of the 1960s and 1970s and during the return to democracy is also crucial. In the remainder of this chapter, I will unpack these various aspects,

focusing in particular on the controversy that arose after the creation of the Nesternaut.

***El Eternauta*: A social and political history of a misunderstanding**

The social and political history that would end up presenting *El Eternauta* as a symbol of successive acts of resistance against the invader embodied by multiple military regimes originates in Oesterheld's biography: he became a member of the Montoneros, a militant left-wing Peronist group, becoming its Press Secretary and writing the comic strip '450 Years of War Against Imperialism', which was published in the magazine *El Descamisado* (the group's official publication) from its tenth issue on 10 July 1973. Together with his four daughters (two of them pregnant at the time), Oesterheld was also one of the many 'disappeared' during the last military dictatorship (1976–83). In '450 Years . . .', analysed in Silvia Sigal and Eliseo Verón's now classic study of Peronist discourse (2003), a certain view of history was brought into play, by which the past as a symbol of the present was made up of a long succession of 17 Octobers (the date in 1945 when crowds demanded the release of the then imprisoned Perón) and Septembers 1955 (when he was deposed by a military coup) (Sigal and Verón 2003, 196). That is to say, this was an immobile history, anchored in a dialectic which entailed the legitimization of the movement itself, given that it had always been there, letting itself be killed and resisting. The Peronist Youth was just a new incarnation of those who had always, ever since the Conquest, defended the People-Homeland from an invading enemy identified with Imperialism.⁴

Surprisingly, a similar view of history had been forestalled in the second version of *El Eternauta*, which was published in *Gente* magazine in 1969 (Oesterheld and Breccia 1982). This second version takes up the storyline of the first and rewrites it but also adds some strange elements, even to the plot, in what might be interpreted as a blunder on Oesterheld's part, an attempt to insert a political reading that did not fit with the narrative. To begin with, the alien invaders in the new version have created a pact with the great global powers, the latter handing Latin America over to them. The intrigue that the 1957 version handled so well is replaced by a more naïve view of history that sets out a meaning which, as I have shown, the first *Eternauta* lacked: 'The invader used to be the exploitative countries, the large corporations. . . . Its deadly snowfalls were . . . poverty, backwardness, our own selfishness,' as the character

Favalli explains. Here, the interplanetary and impersonal horror of the first *Eternauta* has been disrupted by the presence of alien invaders who have been negotiating with the Pentagon and the Kremlin.

I would argue, then, that the allegorical reading of *El Eternauta*, particularly the way that it is subsequently connected to the figure of Néstor Kirchner, is based on a misunderstanding because the image itself alludes to the first version, which was devoid of the political slant that would be introduced by the second version. The latter, moreover, was drawn by Alberto Breccia in a style which contrasted not only with the earlier realism of Francisco Solano López but also with the propagandist tone that Oesterheld would come to acquire. That this second politicised version was published in *Gente* was an oddity, since the magazine was known as much for its frivolity as for its profoundly reactionary spirit. In fact, publication would later be suspended as readers started expressing their irritation not with the script but with Breccia's dark, avant-garde style.

Later studies would see this episode as the expression of a certain political unease on the part of a magazine whose views were diametrically opposed to the reading of history that the strip proposed: the deadly snowfalls and alien invaders, once the conquistadors, are now the great neocolonial superpowers. Such a reading was entirely in tune with that taken by the young editors of *El Descamisado*. *Gente* magazine presented an alternative view of history: that history moves forward in spite of those who should not, in any case, be classified as 'people' (since they are responsible for 'violence'). Progress is the inherent condition of history: 'I look at my country from a distance and it infuriates me that we are wasting so much time', wrote the editor Carlos Fontanarrosa from New York, later apologising to readers not for stopping the publication of *El Eternauta* but for having published it in the first place. In that issue, dated 18 September 1969, he writes:

See you soon and let it be clear that my 'moment of truth' is near, that truth which cannot be replaced with strangers, buildings, different shows, the chance to get to know and experience a world like this one, nothing, nothing can replace the need to return to your own, to what belongs to you, to what you're about.

(*Gente* 216, 18 September 1969)

For the editor, the enemies are those responsible for a violence that does not allow history to follow its inexorable course; for Oesterheld,

on the other hand, the enemies are those who prevent change, allowing history to repeat itself. That these are diametrically opposed points of view passes unnoticed by both the editor and the readers in their letters to the editor. Instead, the complaints are directed at the 'graphic message' of Breccia's artwork: 'I will not deny the artistic quality of Breccia's drawings, but his value as comic strip illustrator is, however, debatable,' says a reader in issue number 209. Carlos Fontanarro for his part adds:

[W]e had a great opportunity with 'El Eternauta' here in the magazine, a strip, as you all remember, which 'we could see' and that is why we published it. I hope Breccia will forgive me, he is a great illustrator, even, I would say, an artist, but in our mission to achieve communication we should have not surrendered to the aesthetic form of his drawing which at times became unintelligible.

(*Gente* 216, 18 September 1969)

Trillo and Saccomano subsequently wrote a prologue for the comic edition in which they claimed that 'focusing on Breccia's formal ruptures allows [the editor] to avoid analysing the discourse of the story that Oesterheld tells, which would evidently force him to show himself as unfriendly to his readers. 'Form and content are always inextricably linked,' they argued:

The drama of the story, that group fighting for their integrity, for a piece of life, betrayed by the great powers who have negotiated the invasion; that group, we mean, who in one of the thought bubbles remembers Tupac Amaru, needed to be drawn as Breccia drew them, with heartrending, sombre, harrowing expressionism.

(Trillo and Saccomanno 1982, 11)

However, nowhere else in Oesterheld's work is there such a harsh contrast between what is being said and what can be seen. Not because what is said might be different from what is seen, but because the strategy the text uses to tell the story is radically different from the one used by the drawing. Trillo and Saccomanno, as well as Fontanarro, confuse the pairing of 'form/content' with the pairing of 'drawing/verbal text'. But if we recognise such a separation, then 'form' is also the way in which we choose to speak. That form, in this case, is at the service of 'communication', a 'literary message'. This idea, that the violence of

the invasion does not differ in essence from the violence that the world's superpowers exercise on Latin America, does not appear, at least not in such explicit terms, in the first *Eternauta*.

This conception of the language of comics is similar to that put forward by Oscar Masotta in *La historieta en el mundo moderno* (Masotta 1970), one of the first theoretical studies of comics published in Argentina. Defining comics as 'drawn literature', Masotta was trying to legitimate an object of study which until then had never been addressed in theoretical terms. But in so doing he positioned drawing as being subordinate to other art forms, not least at a time when Argentine artists were producing the greatest innovations in terms of form. Breccia himself, not only in his *Eternauta* but also and perhaps even more so in his later adaptations of classics of world literature, distances himself from the illusion of transparency which the epigones of the language had so far demanded. In fact, this 1969 *Eternauta* marks Breccia's definitive leap into a type of illustration which does not subordinate itself at all to the word, which does not try to communicate anything so much as bring out the conventional nature of all representation. In that sense, this *Eternauta* marks the end of the adventure story in contemporary Argentine comics.

Robinsonian or not, the notion of adventure was subsequently replaced by Oesterheld's political experiment. But it was also part of a more general trend in Argentine and Latin American comics of the early 1970s, which believed that sacrificing adventure was the price to pay for admission into the world of art. Authors had begun to feel increasingly unhappy with the role of mass media art that had been ascribed to comics and they simultaneously felt compelled to address the violent events that were plaguing Argentine society at the time. Oesterheld's was just one strategy of many approaches to this problem.

There is, moreover, a substantial difference between the 1969 *Eternauta* and the final one, published in *Skorpio* magazine between 1976 and 1978 (Oesterheld was captured in 1977 and killed at some point later that year or in early 1978). This third version takes up the end of the first, continuing the plot and breaking the circularity of the original story. That is significant when considering the view of history that underpins Oesterheld's later work, which is very different to that found in *El Descamisado* and even more so to that in his famous publications of *Mort Cinder* (originally published between 1962 and 1964 in the magazine *Misterix*), *Ticonderoga* (originally published between 1957 and 1962 in the magazines *Hora Cero Extra* and *Hora Cero Semanal*), or *Sherlock Time* (originally published between 1958 and 1959 in *Hora Cero*

Extra and *Hora Cero Semanal*). Whereas the version published in *Gente* justified violence through the need for struggle, in this later case only completely unjustifiable violence remained. Turned superhero, Juan Salvo (and with him Oesterheld) espouses the pessimism of an unredeemable history. Many studies have claimed that the third version is the most political of the three. I would argue that this version, written clandestinely and after the abduction of two of his daughters, is only highly political insofar as it does not convey exasperation with politics but its total and utter negation.

Secret origins: From the *Eternaut* to the *Nestornaut*, and back again

The Nestornaut was just one of the three or four images used to advertise the rally of the Peronist Youth at Luna Park stadium on 14 August 2010 to celebrate 1,000 days of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in office, a moment of crisis for the movement. Kirchnerism generally, and Néstor Kirchner in particular, had lost the 2009 legislative elections. The 2008 crisis in the agricultural sector (known as the ‘crisis del campo’ (crisis of the countryside)) had put the government in opposition to the more traditionally conservative sectors, fuelling its conflict with the mass media, particularly the monopoly represented by the newspaper *Clarín*, the TV channel *Canal 13*, and their subsidiaries. That conflict played out against the backdrop of the passing of the Ley de Medios (Media Bill), whose approval in 2009 would never be accepted by the mega corporations (and which would later be wiped out at a single stroke by Mauricio Macri, whose presidential campaign had been supported by that media monopoly, just a few days after coming to power).⁵

Unlike the fictional character, which was promoted by subaltern intellectuals from the bottom up until it obtained the recognition of academics and political institutions, the trajectory of the Nestornaut goes in the opposite direction, as it is invented by a splinter group of the governing party, radiating out from there first to its followers and then to the wider public sphere.

(Francescutti 2015, 34)

Nevertheless, the massive bicentenary celebrations, which those hostile to the government had tried to prevent, had proved effective. The festive

climate of the day had brought back a historical memory, one that had been a political banner of Kirchnerism and which was in stark contrast to the non-existent politics of memory of Néstor's main opponent, Mauricio Macri, the then mayor of the City of Buenos Aires.⁶

As I have demonstrated, that first poster, whose central image would go viral after the death of the former president,⁷ incorporated a misguided metaphor in which the deadly snowfall and the alien invasion could be read as a figure, almost an allegory, of the political violence of the 1960s and 1970s. The main intention was to reactivate historical memory by associating Kirchnerism with the movements of that earlier period, presenting the enemies of the movement (particularly the president's enemies) as the 'aliens': the other, the threat, the 'Them' against whom the former president advanced, 'supporting Cristina', as the poster read.

However, when it comes to a deep understanding of the image, another detail is important: the erasure of the rifle that Favalli gave Juan Salvo to protect himself from potential threats during his first expedition outside the house. That detail gave new meaning to the story as, though the enemies are the same, the weapons are different. Once again, that view of history in which past and present merge into a single circular account whose episodes are mere repetitions of one same event, seemed to be re-updated, as both presidents were associated with the Peronist Youth which had at the time exploited the possibilities of a similar view as a way of legitimising the movement to which they belonged.

There was, however, a subtle difference, as Peronism had also changed. In fact, the way the poster with the image of the Nestonaut is framed is quite different from the solemnity typical of the strips of *El Descamisado* and from the usual way in which the archetypical figures of Perón and Eva had always been depicted. Instead, the background drawing, the choice of colours, the stereotypical, playful font of superhero comics, the rhetorical device of articulating the phrase as a palindrome – 'Néstor le habla a la Juventud le habla a Néstor [Néstor speaks to the Youth speak to Néstor]', with the frame of reference 'LA JUVENTUD' at the centre – the use of the imperative ('vienen todos, convocá [everyone's coming, invite]'), all speak of a cynical distancing which had not existed in the traditional imagery associated with the movement. The gesture which led the militant youth to liken the president to a comic-strip hero might seem similar to the glorification of the images of Perón and Eva in early Peronism. But it was substantially different because the use of a comic-strip character fell outside the conditions of possibility of first- and

second-wave Peronism. Historically, either as cartoons or as more serious, educational tools, comic strips had incorporated political figures only in terms of satire and mockery, or by way of canonising historical figures from the past. They were never used to nod playfully to their followers.

The retrieval of the more mystical imagery of the Peronist movement was carried out, then, by means of a suggestive disbelief in the images it revered. Associated with the more popular sectors of Argentine society, traditionally hostile to the spheres of high culture whose most prominent members (writer Jorge Luis Borges, for instance) used to be decidedly anti-Peronist, new Peronism rescued from oblivion some of its most iconic symbols, which were now resignified as pop-art objects, as the use of the abbreviation 'Nac & Pop' (National and Popular) to refer to the cultural movement most clearly linked to Kirchnerism bears out. This cynical distancing enabled not only the emergence of figures like the Nesternaut, but also the success of TV character Bombita Rodríguez, referred to as 'el Palito Ortega montonero', by Argentine comedian Diego Capusotto.⁸ Only through a similar strategy could Peronism reinstall an aesthetic that had been lost following the disastrous neoliberal policies of the Menem era.

Such cynical distancing entailed a double effect, characteristic of any humorous discourse. The comical draws on a common ideological field shared with its audience, 'a basic ideological pact' (Steimberg 1977). A 'recognition effect' occurs, which establishes complicity between author and reader. This recognition effect, which constitutes one of the essential aspects of any ideological effect (Verón 2004, 106), achieves a double result: the inclusion of the reader, who is now part of the producer's cultural universe and thus becomes 'complicit'; and the exclusion of those who do not have the necessary prior knowledge. That is to say, to those who knew and shared the doctrinal universe of Peronism, the joke underlying the image of the Nesternaut was clear. The superimposition of Néstor's smile and the archetypal smile of Perón is one such example of these gestures (another of the lines utilised by Diego Capusotto in Bombita Rodríguez's song is 'Mummy's smile is like Perón's').

Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, for any reader unfamiliar with the code, the recognition effect remains. The reader or viewer of a joke can reconstruct an ideological assumption unknown to him or her from the joke itself. Or, in the words of Umberto Eco: if the comical violates an implicit rule, even the spectator or reader who is unfamiliar with that rule can reassemble it based on the joke (Eco 1998). This means that the comical not only creates the object which it mocks,

but also, by contrast, shows us what is serious, what is normal, what the rule is that we are escaping from. In this particular case, it involves the rediscovery of an unknown aesthetic based on the parody and transformation of that aesthetic. Such is the case, for example, of young people who had never read *El Eternauta*, who knew nothing about Oesterheld and, most importantly, who did not share in the repertoire of images typical of historical Peronism nor in the doctrine of heroism and the epic which it had traditionally supported.

This second effect, however, reached its limits in those who saw the image as incongruent or simply believed that *El Eternauta* (or even Peronism) meant something different. For instance, one of the main drivers behind the canonisation of the strip, Guillermo Saccomano, stated in an article published in the newspaper *Página/12* that 'if there was something that *El Eternauta* as a series embodied it was precisely the destruction of the individual and romantic view of the hero. Those of us who are in our sixties today, almost the age of Juan Salvo, know the risks of an elitist construction of the hero as a political adventurer' (2011). Another of the opposing voices was that of Alejandro Scutti, director of the publishing house *Récord*:

They are misrepresenting the character, they are politicising him somehow, it is plagiarism [. . .]. They want to present Kirchner as a hero and to preserve him in time. As Perón was at the time [. . .]. We are the sole owners of the rights to *El Eternauta*; it is annoying that nobody looks for the relevant owner of the rights to do what they do.

(*La Nación*, 10 October 2011)

The anger of sociologist Marcos Novaro, author of *Historia de la Argentina 1955–2010*, is perhaps more surprising, as he denies all similarities between the fictional character and the political leader, a gesture that entails taking the fictional character seriously, believing in him as a real person. He described Kirchner as 'A bloke who never ran any risks [. . .] who never distinguished himself for his fearlessness. And who therefore never paid personal costs [. . .] he was the prototype of the politician who takes no risks; he has nothing of the Eternaut about him' (cited in Francescutti 2015, 38).

José Pablo Feinmann published an article in *Página/12* in which he defended the figure of the Nesternaut against the onslaught of Mauricio Macri who, as a reaction to the debates around the Nesternaut, decided

to ban the distribution of the comic strip *El Eternauta* in the schools of the City of Buenos Aires:

El Eternauta was a symbol of my generation, of that 'decimated generation' which Kirchner mentioned in his inaugural speech, and the youth of today know it and they have decided that it should also be theirs; their symbol, no? The symbol of the struggle for a fairer, freer, more democratic country, one which respects, once and for all, all Indians, those with darker skin and all the good people. That is the message. That is what the much-feared (by you and by your advisers, because without your advisers, forgive me, you're nothing) Nestornaut symbolises. Nothing better than that message of life and respect for others. And of respect for politics as a means of transforming an evidently unjust world, the world that you represent.

(Página/12, 27 August 2012)

Lautaro Ortiz, then editor-in-chief of *Fierro* magazine, also defended the use of the figure of the Nestornaut: 'Taking *El Eternauta*, Kirchnerism put forward a reading that, actually, is not far at all from the one Oesterheld himself had posed, and from that of scholars who studied that work: friendship, group struggle, the collective mission, the fate of societies, one's own strength when faced with the enemy' (cited in Francescutti 2015, 38).

Despite their differences, however, all these views amounted to taking the Nestornaut seriously. But such an attitude, I would suggest, was not congruent with the moment of its original creation. To the militant youths who came to Luna Park on 14 September 2010, the joke was clear. A few months later, however, Néstor Kirchner died suddenly at his home in El Calafate. The president's death provided the Nestornaut with a seriousness originally exempted from the character. Now a symbol of much more, it also implied the end of the cynical distancing which had characterised the retrieval of the Peronist imaginary for the new generations. That is why the controversies that followed were not able to recover for themselves the comical gesture that had been a feature of the image when it first appeared. The seriousness of the invectives was responding both positively and negatively to the way the figure of the president was being canonised. The sudden clash with the reality of death dissipated the risible effect and gave new life to the images of the movement. For many young university students like myself, it meant

having to position ourselves in relation to the government at the time. Now it was acceptable to be a Kirchnerist. We could say it out loud. For better or for worse, the Nesternaut had become immortal.

Conclusion

The appropriation of the figure of the Eternaut by the Kirchnerist movement did not occur without certain resistance from those sectors which felt that a national symbol was being taken away from them and put at the service of a cause that they did not support. That was despite the fact that the legitimate heirs of its creators had previously agreed to such use.⁹ If there were any objections to the political use of *El Eternauta* it was only from those who considered that it was a sacred object of Argentine culture which they were not prepared to give up. But the question remained over which Oesterheld and which *Eternauta* they had in mind. The enthroning of Oesterheld as the great Argentine comics writer had occurred prior to his abduction and murder and prior to his more distinctly propagandist work. Those who criticised the Nesternaut referred to the early Oesterheld, prior to his political conversion. Returning to the controversy surrounding the 1969 version, it is surprising how the complaints of the readers are all directed against Breccia's graphic work, with nothing being said about the ideological turn that the story takes or Oesterheld being left unscathed. By then the strip and its writer had already been canonised to the point that the declarations of the author himself were falling on deaf ears. On the other hand, those who defended its political use focused their gaze on the late Oesterheld, choosing to ignore his earlier work.

People entered a dispute over the figure of Juan Salvo similar in fashion to the controversies surrounding the deaths of Sherlock Holmes or Superman, a point that opens up questions about the status of characters in contemporary culture. Character theories present in narratology and in contemporary literary criticism focus on the classic Aristotelian discussion over whether the character precedes the plot or vice versa, taking for granted the reciprocal relationship between them. Writers such as William H. Gass maintain that both the stories and the characters that inhabit them are fundamentally made up of words (cited in Leitch 1986, 154). Algirdas Julien Greimas's (1990) actantial model, for example, deliberately omits any reference to psychological aspects or to identification with any human type. But, as the case of the Eternaut demonstrates, a character is much more than the agent of a certain

succession of events. A character's life in society far exceeds the limits of a storyline in which they are born and develop. Superman, Sherlock Holmes, Ulysses, Dracula, Snoopy, Mafalda, Clemente or the Eternaut all have a life beyond the page, which cannot be explained by psychological identification or with reference to a scheme of events whose stability they would guarantee. The idea of narrative transmediatisation, which has garnered interest in recent years (Scolari 2014), is in fact implicit in the very concept of character itself.

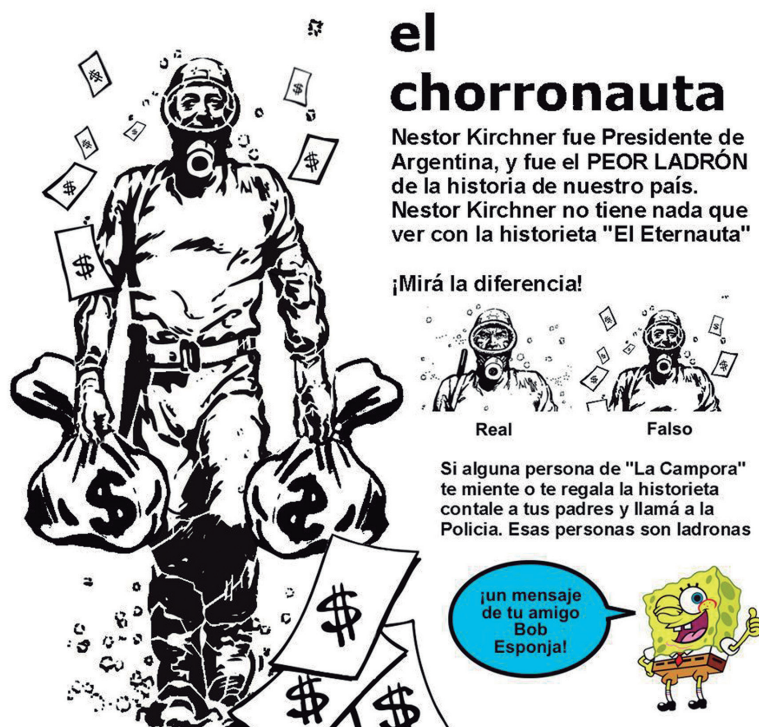


Figure 9.2 Internet meme refashioning the Nestornaut but on this occasion with two money bags. The meme is entitled ‘El Chorronauta’, or ‘The Robbernavt’.

To end I will mention one final example. In [Figure 9.2](#) the Nestornaut has been transformed into ‘El Chorronauta’ (The Robbernavt), a clearly negative depiction of the figure of the former president consistent with the frequent accusations of illicit gain made by the opposition with the complaisance of the mass media, which was unsympathetic to him during his final years. In it, Kirchner can be seen surrounded by a shower

of banknotes as he walks carrying bags of money. Next to him, the captions explain that ‘Nestor Kirchner was president of Argentina, and he was the worst thief in the history of the country’, before continuing ‘Nestor Kirchner bears no relation to the strip “*El Eternauta*” [. . .] if anyone from *La Cámpora* lies to you or gives you the comic strip, tell your parents and call the police. These people are thieves’. There is also a visual comparison between the Eternaut and the Nestornaut (in fact, it is the ‘Chorronauta’ since he is surrounded by banknotes), respectively labelled as ‘Real’ and ‘False’.

However, the virulence with which he is attacked, the insistence that you call the police, and the mention of a comic strip (*The Nestornaut*) that never existed, are all perhaps less interesting than the presence of Sponge Bob in the lower right-hand corner, who explains: ‘a message from your friend Sponge Bob!’. Here the opposing political movement uses a well-known children’s character in a denunciation that underpins the appropriation of Oesterheld’s character. Characters have a social impact which goes far beyond the medium in which they are originally shaped. What is lacking even today is a discursive theory of the fictional character, a theory which accounts for the incorporation of characters into reality, their life in society, their ability to narrate us, and also to narrate themselves through us.

Notes

- 1 T.N.: Even though an English translation of *El Eternauta* exists (*The Eternaut*, tr. Erica Mena, Fantagraphics Books, 2012), the original Spanish title is preserved here due to its iconic status and to reflect the general trend in English-language scholarship. The English version of the character’s proper name, ‘the Eternaut’, has been used to differentiate it from the strip.
- 2 In this short story an unknown something or someone gradually takes over the protagonists’ house until they end up being expelled from their home. The story has traditionally been read as a metaphor for the irruption of the first wave of Peronism (1946–55) in the social life of the upper classes and their intellectual exponents.
- 3 The aforementioned group takes its name from José Cámpora, the first Peronist president elected following the end of the proscription law. He resigned from post after 49 days to allow Perón to return to power. His campaign slogan had been ‘Cámpora to government, Perón to power’.
- 4 The political youth group known as Juventud Peronista, or ‘JP’, was a resistance movement of the most left-wing section of the party. From its ranks would emerge some of the clandestine armed organisations that would confront the successive military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s. It was historically refounded by Gustavo Rearte in 1957 after the dissolution of the original Movimiento de la Juventud Peronista following the overthrow of Perón in 1955. The youth movement was reactivated during Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s presidencies, taking shape as various different groups, including La Cámpora, JP Evita, JP Peronismo Militante or JP Descamisados. Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández had themselves been militant members of the Federación Universitaria de la Revolución Nacional in their youth.

- 5 After Néstor Kirchner's death, one of the many offshoots of the Nesternaut – in this instance taking up Breccia's image – shows the leader removing his hood and exclaiming 'We can breathe now, kid!', an allusion to the declaration of constitutionality of the Ley de Medios by the Supreme Court of Justice on 29 October 2013.
- 6 In contrast with Kirchnerist memory politics, the politics of denial of historical memory has been characteristic of Macri's presidency. One of the first things his government did, for example, was to replace the images of the various historical figures who appeared on banknotes (the Kirchners had added Eva Perón to the 100-peso bill, for example) with animals. See, for example, <https://www.politicargentina.com/notas/201612/18377-el-gobierno-reemplazara-a-los-proceres-de-los-billetes-por-animales.html>
- 7 The image of the Nesternaut can be seen in many murals which adorn the city of Buenos Aires and its surroundings. Adorning school walls, soup kitchens, Justicialista Party grassroots centres, and often accompanied by allusive inscriptions ('love defeats hate', 'a thousand flowers will blossom', 'they can cut all the flowers but they cannot stop Spring'), the stencil can be found throughout the city of Buenos Aires and many other Argentine cities. Flags, banners, T-shirts, mugs, even shoes have been made with it. The image was used on the web throughout Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's second term, both as praise and criticism. On 19 February 2011, the website of the Argentine national press agency TELAM displayed the image of the Nesternaut on its homepage for a few hours, though it was later removed following a brief outcry.
- 8 The figure of Bombita Rodríguez combines the irreconcilable images of the Montoneros and Palito Ortega, a conservative and reactionary popular singer who would later become Governor of the Province of Tucumán during Carlos Menem's presidency. The contradictory combination of a type of 'cheap, popular, catchy song and lyrics which instigated revolution in Argentina' is comic because it not only contrasts two traditionally opposing worlds but also links the values, concepts, notions and names of a proverbially solemn Left. In this way, Bombita Rodríguez stars in soaps such as one which tells the story of a cab driver in Havana – 'Rolando Rivas Marxista', a pun on the title of the Argentine soap 'Rolando Rivas Taxista' – or takes part in hidden camera pranks on members of the bourgeoisie such as 'VideoMarx' (a pun on *VideoMatch*, a TV programme famous for its candid camera sketches).
- 9 'Marina López, daughter of Solano López, the work's illustrator who died in 2011, said that her father agreed with the use of "the Nesternaut". Martín Mórtola Oesterheld, the writer's grandson, points out that "El Eternauta had already been used by other political groups" – the Dario Santillán Popular Front being one of them – and that its use by Kirchnerism had been authorised by Elsa Sánchez, the writer's widow' ('El héroe será llamado a la lucha', *Clarín*, 14 October 2014).

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