

Graphic and political humour in Argentina: from Quino to *Página 12*

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Abstract

*The article analyses the tradition of critical cartoons in Argentina using the lens of Freud's conception of humour. After the end of the military dictatorship in Argentina in 1983 Rudy and Daniel Paz created a new style that came to be known as "ethical humour". In their daily cartoon on the first page of the newspaper *Página 12* they commented on the worst news of the day employing what Freud referred to as the humorous distance. The article proposes a historicised appraisal of humour through an elaboration of the connection between the beginnings of the comic genre and psychoanalysis. I argue that the tiny images in the daily newspapers served as chronicles, in the Benjaminian sense, of those dimensions of social life that tend to go unnoticed by historians; they offered a microscopic, childlike humour as a means of grasping social realities. Graphic humour in these political cartoons and comics in Argentina performs multiple functions: criticizing, conferring voices, generating distance, and helping to live, whilst preserving a profoundly humane dimension.*

Keywords: comics, psychoanalysis, memory, limits of humour.

Argentinean society is characterized by numerous conflicts and contradictions that generate an unusual dynamism. On the one hand, it has a history of dictatorships with only a few intermittent periods of democratically elected governments, combined with a tradition of conservative politics and profound Catholicism. The military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983) was one of the bloodiest periods in its history, with thousands killed and disappeared, the traumatic effects of which are still being processed. On the other hand, the country is greatly influenced by immigrants with different political positions, such as Italian and Spanish anarchists and socialists, as well as by a great legacy of cultural transfers. Curiously, psychoanalysis is part of this distinct legacy, as Buenos Aires is one of the cities with the highest number of psychoanalysts per head worldwide (see Plotnik 2003).

During the last decades, comics and cartoons, another Argentinian passion, have served as vehicles of social criticism with a high resonance in both political as well as in everyday life. Through a wide newspaper-based circulation, the tiny format of what sometimes amounts to a single image has repeatedly succeeded in disrupting discourses and structures of power in recent Argentinian history. Since the end of military dictatorship, cartoons and comic strips have regularly contributed to the discussions about the memory of crimes against humanity. With this in mind, their function was never only a political one. They also form part of the currency of what Freud termed a psychic economy, which allows people to relativize their situations, break down their seriousness, and help them gain the required distance to painful events in order to carry on with their lives. At the same time, comics and cartoons clearly demonstrate the limits of humour on certain extreme occasions, by appealing accurately to remain silent out of pain (as in the slogan “No jokes today”, see Figure 13).

The brief genealogy sketched in this article touches on the works of Landrú (*Tía Vicenta*) and Quino (*Mafalda*) during the 1960s and early 1970s, and then focuses on the contributions of Rudy and Daniel Paz in the newspaper *Página 12* from the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s. Undoubtedly, these examples are only one part of the enormous production of graphic humour in Argentina.

In the following I will propose a reading that establishes a connection between the beginnings of the comic genre and psychoanalysis (*Little Nemo*, *Yellow Kid*). I will further refer to and reclaim Walter Benjamin’s figure of the *chronicler*, which values the strength of the miniscule and microscopic, and suggests that a childlike humour might help to foreground those dimensions of social reality that tend to go unnoticed by official historians. The political humour of Argentinian comics thus performs multiple functions, ranging from criticism, or conferring voices, to generating an inner distance and preserving a humane dimension, whilst serving as a survival strategy.

1. “I laugh, therefore I am”: Psychoanalysis and political humour



Figure 1: Argentinian postage stamp (1998), designed by Rudy and Paz.

“*Río, luego existo*” (“I laugh, therefore I am”) – the deconstruction of the Cartesian maxim in this Argentinian postage stamp, designed by the illustrators Marcelo Rudaeff (Rudy) and Daniel Paz (Figure 1) implies a truth invoked by the work of Henri Bergson (1900) and, more specifically, by Sigmund Freud (2000a): to laugh and to cry are qualities that make us human and mark our difference to other animals. In Freudian terms “I laugh, therefore I am” also articulates a certain psychic economy, maintained and balanced with the help of laughter. Like an air escape valve, it restores not only the individual’s mental health but also that of the collective.

In a society repeatedly marked by military dictatorships, to say “I laugh, therefore I am” is a way to express both mental well-being as well as a resistance to authoritarianism, which is epitomised by the absence of any sense of humour. A postage stamp costing a humble 75 cents thus conveys this quotidian truth about the spirit of collective survival in Argentina.

In his work *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud (2000a) reveals that every *Witz* [joke] works as a kind of internal translation: it produces a double meaning, a different and a deferred meaning, i.e. *différance*, to borrow from Derrida. A joke causes laughter and therefore a disruption of language, of solemnity and finally of power, for without its double meaning a joke would not be funny. The Dictionary of the brothers Grimm derives the etymology of the word *Witz* from the Old High German word *wizzi*, which means ‘knowledge and sharp observation’, just as the English word *wit* also derives from the words ‘witness’ and ‘to witness something’. These genealogies seem to still be alive in the mode of performance of the *Witz* in the genre of political comics.

‘In der Kürze liegt die Würze’ [Brevity is the soul of wit] is one of Freud’s definitions of the joke, rich with an intertextual reference to *Hamlet*, which despite, or precisely because of it being a rather unhappy play, does not renounce humour. The same could be said of the comic strip: a reduced synthesis, which allows for diverse meanings to be generated by the reader’s interpretation of the interplay of text and illustration. Freud amplifies his definition describing humour as “spielendes Urteil, Verblüffung und Erleuchtung” [a playful judgement, a perplexity and an epiphany] (2000b). These too are appropriate words to describe graphic humour and the comic strip. In fact, the subconscious seems to be deeply connected with the genre of the comic strip. Conversely, might we advance the possibly daring hypothesis that the comic strip invokes the subconscious? Daniel Paz would answer the question with “Yes, we Lacan!” (Figure 2).

Psychoanalytic theory assumes that our subconscious uses different means to express itself: both dreaming and joking are closely connected to the world of comics and microhistories. It is therefore no coincidence that the early history of the comic genre is inhabited by dreams, and by mini-heroes dressed in pyjamas. Two examples of this are: the famous comic *Yellow Kid*, whose protagonist always appears in nightclothes, the surfaces of which are simultaneously used as text fields; and second, the complete works of Windsor McCay, often referred to as the father of comic strips (Figures 3 and 4).

2. Windsor McCay and the comic strip as a dream

The adventures of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* were first published in 1905, the same year as *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* and only five years after the first edition of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a text that can be said to have symbolically inaugurated the 20th century. The protagonist’s name *Nemo* (Latin for “nobody”) invites the reader to identify with the character, a boy who lives through frightening adventures in his nightmares. The grown-up “nobodies”, i.e. the adults in McCay’s comics, also dream of episodes relating to shame and fear. For example, the



Figure 2: Paz 23.6.2009.

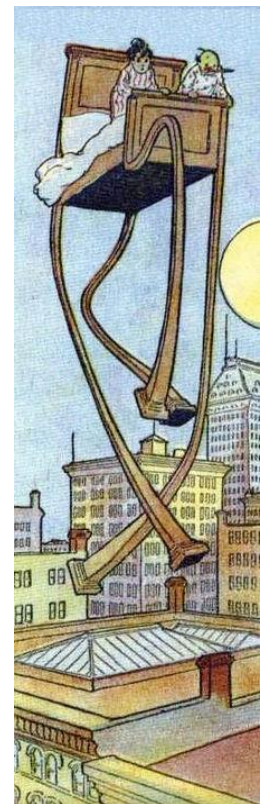
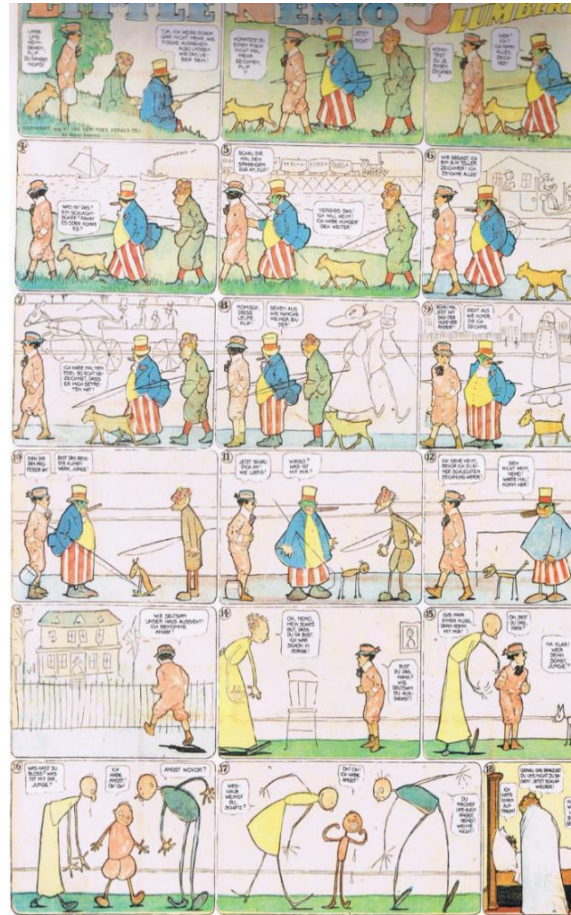


Figure 3: *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.

nightmares the characters have in the comic *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904), can be literally interpreted as *mares*: they sweep away the dreamers at night, like a wild horse, taking them through the lands of their subconscious.

McCay's graphic representations combine fantastic elements with adventures, desires, and above all a huge dose of humour. The writer has not only been experimenting from the very beginning with the limitations and possibilities of illustration, text, and the combination of both, for he deconstructs them as quickly as he invents them, but he also plays with the meta-analysis of the comic strip genre itself. In line with Freud's definition borrowed from Shakespeare's aphorism, "brevity is the soul of wit", McCay ridicules the concept of synthesis and the common "infantilisation" of the comic genre. As can be seen in Figure 4, one of the *Nemo* characters claims to be a better illustrator than the author himself and henceforth all the characters start to be minimised and further infantilised, eventually turning into simple stick figures – a nightmare *Nemo* awakes from. By this means McCay offers witty criticism on those who perceive comics as a simple, infantile, and minor art: an art for minors.



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Figure 4: Humorous self-critique about the comics' tendency towards simplification and infantilisation, as depicted in Nemo.

3. An underestimated political art

Since the very beginning of the comic strip genre there have been attempts to shake off its negative reputation, which is apparent in the Spanish word for the comic strip: "*historieta*", a diminutive, pejorative form of the Spanish word for (hi)story, "*historia*". Also the expression for character "*personaje*" (derived from *persona*) is laced with the same kind of depreciation. It is a small person who makes out of history a *historieta*, a tiny story. The genre's significance was first recognised in Argentina in Judith Gociol and Diego Rosenberg's (2003) landmark text *La historieta argentina. Una Historia* ("*The Argentinean comic strip: A history*"), a title that carries the comic strip's history in capital letters. The English expression *comic* already falls back on the genre's comical quality. It is not necessarily a characteristic of every comic strip in general, yet humour and marginalisation seem to be permanently present in the history of the genre.

In the case of Argentinean history it is good to remember that there is a difference between humour in general and political humour, and that the latter, especially in authoritarian societies, assumes the supportive function of survival and ethical conciliation. Juan Sasturain argues in the newspaper *Página 12* (12.1.2009) that political irony was introduced to patriarchal dictatorial Argentina, strikingly with the help of two "60's women": *Tía Vicenta* and *Mafalda*, both comic figures created in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Speaking of the journal *Tía Vicenta* and its author Landrú Sasturain reminds us that:

[...] Landrú's most important characteristic was that he employed the craziest talents of the new generation as illustrators, that he permitted them everything [...] He designed at some point a comic strip called "*Fron diza man*" in which the president (Fron diza) was depicted as an obedient superhero who worked for men wearing Uncle Sam's hat; the front cover of *Tía Vicenta* showed generals cueing up and asking "Is this the line for the coup?"¹

(Sasturain 2009.)

4. Quino: Reality and subliminal message

Argentinean comics reflect in a very condensed form the underlying conflicts and topics of the reality of the society, which might be seen as difficult to express in other ways. Some of them, like the well-known *Mafalda*, offer a symbolic microcosm of society. Famous illustrator Quino (Joaquin Lavado), the father of *Mafalda*, states in an interview that he derived his inspiration not only from Jorge Timossi, a former journalist, but also from many other people that helped him piece together the characters of his *historieta*. That the figures were based on real persons known to Quino did not of course imply that they were not also social prototypes:

I got to know Timossi [...] and he inspired me to create Felipe because they are similar, because he [...] is the type that flies around a lot in his mind but not really with his legs [...] The character of Guille is inspired by my nephew, who is a flautist in the symphony orchestra of Santiago de Chile. Don Manolo is taken from the father of a friend of mine, a journalist with the name Julián Delgado, one of the *desaparecidos* from the last dictatorship. And about Libertad, don't know, the truth is that I had created the character of Libertad long before for a satirical newspaper, and back then I said that she lives in a country where liberty is so small that the coin had a baby on the back side. Later on, I redesigned Libertad to create the character I used in *Mafalda*.

(Quino 2005.)

In his work, a daily cartoon strip, which appeared in a newspaper with a wide circulation and which occasionally turned into a parallel editorial by itself, Quino takes up the differences between reality and fiction, between people and characters, between comic and cartoon as a central theme, disregarding each and everyone's limitations. In the edition of Quino's *Mafalda*, depicted in Figure 5, Mafalda is shown as unable to stop laughing the whole day after finding the definition of "democracy", reading it out to herself: "Democracy (from the Greek *demos*), a form of government in which the people acts as sovereign".

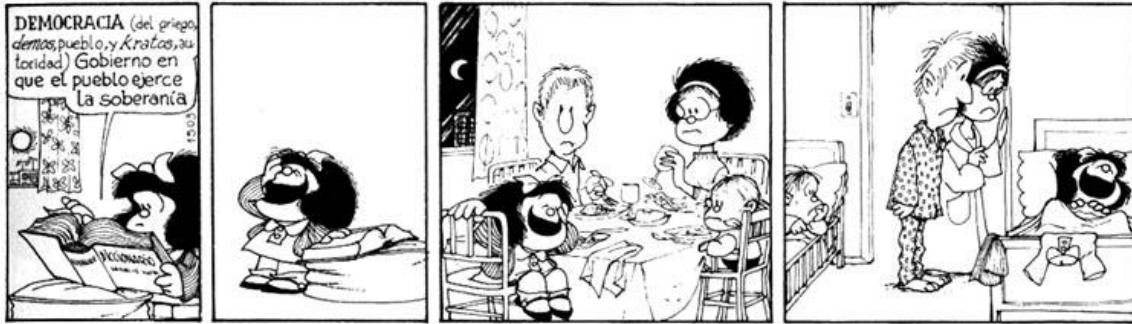


Figure 5: Mafalda in splits after reading the dictionary definition of democracy.

Applying the same tone, but referring to international politics, Mafalda asks the globe: “What have some poor Souths done to deserve certain Norths?” (Figure 6).

The implacable and sharp political criticism of Mafalda and her friends is well known. They are characterised by a wit that denounces injustice and simultaneously offers a gesture of social compassion, a tone that Quino also preserved in his later works. It is worth mentioning that he did not himself perceive his work as having a deliberate political intention:

My drama is that I don't have political ideas. I would be really happy if I could believe in something [...] I don't believe in anything. The ferocity is directed against the human condition. The exploitation of mankind by mankind itself is inherent to the human being and has been cultivated for the last five thousand years. I don't think it's going to change.

(Quino quoted in Gociol & Rosemberg [in print], 176).²



Figure 6: Mafalda dwelling on relations between the Global South and the Global North.

On the other hand, Quino transforms the common archetypes of conventional comic figures into characters with a certain psychological profoundness, through different personalities such as the intellectual Mafalda, the materialist Manolito, the “philosophical” Miguelito, the conservative Susanita, the dreamy Felipe, and Libertad’s adamant ideology. The truths that originate from Quino’s conceptual humour, thanks to both their acidity and sensitivity, manage to reveal unpronounceable aspects of the political reality. Interestingly, political and social problems never seem “to be out of fashion” and eventually *Mafalda* turned into a bestseller – with millions of copies being sold worldwide and translations into more than 12 languages – bringing long-lasting smiles across generations and borders. Quino also maintained this kind of humour in his later works (see Figures 7 and 8).

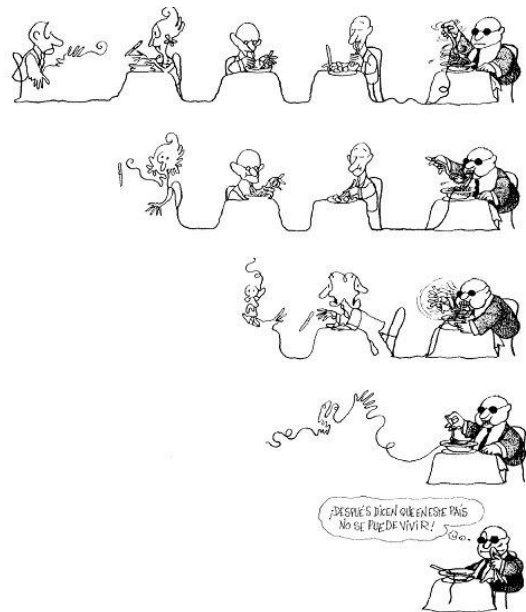


Figure 7: “Who says that you cannot live well in this country?”



Figure 8: Batman's complaint.

This sort of humour frequently combines social criticism with a certain tenderness, something that seems to affirm Freud's definition of a humourist: "through laughter he causes a conversion or inversion". Freud argues that "the humorist puts himself in the place of an adult, to some extent identifying with the father and reducing all others to children [...]. As if he is saying: Look here, now this is the world that seems to be so dangerous. It is only a child's play, just enough to make jokes about it" (2000b: 218). Further, Freud defines humour as part of

the super ego, the ethical dimension of the self. A similar psychological function can be ascribed to superheroes, representations of the super ego, which reached their peak as comic figures in the United States during the Second World War.³

5. Rudy and Daniel Paz: Tickling democracy

After the end of the military dictatorships and the establishment of democratic rule in Argentina in 1984, the daily newspaper *Página 12* came to life with an innovative idea, both on graphic as well as on journalistic terms. Its omnipresent use of humour is one of its distinctive traits, especially humorous headlines, and graphic humour in the form of a daily comic on the cover page. Beyond unquestionable differences between the comic strip, the cartoon and its authors, writer and psychoanalyst Rudy together with illustrator Daniel Paz, seemed to be the great successors of Quino and Landrú, the relentless critics of everyday politics.



Figure 9: Workers are threatening to reveal information which could seriously damage Kraft" "Cookies make you fat!"



Figure 10: "The workers want a bigger share of the company." – "Woah... we shared already our losses with them. What else can they ask for? They are insatiable!"

In their comic strips, they reflected upon the daily news inventing a dialogue between two characters (occasionally featuring a third character, an objective old man who gets to have the "last word"). They used a funny and often psychoanalytic register that enabled the reader to laugh about complex realities and to question political and economic injustices, forging exactly the crucial distance Freud mentioned of the humorist, making it into "just child's play" (2000b: 218). These daily strips were widely perceived as enriching everyday life, simultaneously providing elements with which to question its conditions, as well as to carry on, despite all obstacles. In order to do so, they used characters and situations from the past, or made caricatures of deepening social anxieties, such as the fear of the pandemic of swine flu (Figure 15). Worker's rights are generally a popular topic in Paz' and Rudy's strips (Figure 9, commenting on the takeover of the Kraft factory in 2009; or Figure 10, remarking on the management's attitude towards striking workers).

There is also open criticism towards the economic policies of the International Monetary Fund in Argentina, comparing their effects to the dimensions of catastrophes such as that of Fukushima (Figure 11).

And last but not least the two authors also criticize Argentinean conservatism and the role of the church. One key event was the legislation on gay marriage in Argentina in 2010 (Figure 12).

6. “No jokes today”

In the small space comic strips occupy every day in the newspaper, often underestimated as simple entertainment, they nevertheless often achieve a profound and long-lasting effect, rich with intertextual references, allowing them to deal with difficult and painful issues.

But there are limits: not everything can be “lightened up” with a joke, especially not incomprehensible deaths. With a gesture that recognizes the limits of humour, by simply stating “no jokes today” (Figure 13), Paz and Rudy sometimes refused exactly the expectation of the comic to soften the harshness of reality. Such a statement appeared for example on the following occasions: when the commanders of the last military dictatorship were granted amnesty in 1990, after the bomb attack on the headquarters of the AMIA (Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires) that caused 85 deaths in 1994, and after the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in New York in 2001.

Daniel Paz used a similar tone as well in this original comic (Figure 14) published the day after Roberto Fontanarrosa died (20 July 2007). His homage to the famous Argentinean illustrator travelled around the country as a perfect synthesis of the collective grief: “Thank you, master!” [Gracias maestro!]. The dog crying for his deceased author in the comic on the left side is the beloved Mendieta, one of the best known characters created by Fontanarrosa.



Figure 13: No jokes today.

In addition to the everyday comic strips on the cover of *Página 12*, a joint accomplishment of Paz and Rudy, the works of the illustrator and writer Daniel Paz are spread out across other sections of the newspaper. They approach the relationship between humour and political reality mocking history and as well as classical works in the form of *efemérides truchas* [fake anniversaries], comics with intertextual references and changing characters that remember absurd historical facts with irony. One of Paz’ most celebrated characters is León, “the troublemaker activist”: a bearded senior wearing a beret similar to Che Guevara’s, a long-time



Figure 11: “Is it possible to measure the disaster’s extent in Japan?” – “Three or four plans of the IMF together on the same day.”



Figure 12: “Many gays come to Argentina because they are legally allowed to get married.” – “Truth is... I liked the Nazis better.”

student and protester against absolutely everything that does not fit in his world view, prone to exaggerations that are funny precisely because of the similarity to everyday life in Argentinean universities.⁴

Rudy and Daniel Paz shared a tradition of political and graphic humour that rediscovered the psychoanalytic reading of tender, poignant laughter as a weapon to face political and social problems.

7. Chroniclers of history: The microscopic view

Der Chronist, welcher die Ereignisse hererzählt, ohne große und kleine zu unterscheiden, trägt damit der Wahrheit Rechnung, daß nichts was sich jemals ereignet hat, für die Geschichte verloren zu geben ist. [The chronicler, who tells the events without making a difference between the large and the small ones, hence contributes to the truth that nothing that has ever happened should be lost to history.]



Figure 14: The dog Mendieta mourning the death of its creator Fontanarrosa.

(Benjamin 1974: 694.)

Walter Benjamin reminds us that a microscopic view, on the border of the childlike or the infantile, might help us gain a deeper, subtler understanding of history. The tiny images and the few words of a comic strip offer another dimension of reality – a critical and at the same time an ethical one. This same microscopic perspective can be found in a different constellation: postage stamps.

Briefmarken starren von Zifferchen, winzigen Buchstaben, Blättchen und Äuglein. Sie sind graphische Zellgewebe [...]. Als Gulliver bereist das Kind, Land, und Volk seiner Briefmarken. Erdkunde und Geschichte der Liliputaner, die ganze Wissenschaft des kleinen Volks mit allen ihren Zahlen und Namen wird ihm im Schläfe eingegeben. [Postage stamps showing small figures, tiny letters, tiny leaflets and little eyes. They are graphic cell tissue [...]. Like Gulliver visits the child, the land, and the people inside his stamps. The geography and history of the Lilliputians, the complete science of this tiny people with all its numbers and names will be given to him in his sleep.]

(Benjamin 1991: 137.)



Figure 15: “Have you heard about swine flu? If it infects you it makes you transform into a bourgeois pig”. “Nooooo!!”

León the Trotskyist activist suspends his visit to Leon Trotsky's house in Mexico.

Graphic representations in Argentina thus belong to a certain tradition of political humour that gently proffer a different point of view of the world. Postage stamps, like comic strips, are like Pierre Nora's “lieux de memoire” (1984), points of crystallization of a collective memory and identity, directed at both the knowledge and the emotions of a society. The tiny comics of Quino, Rudy and Paz, and others in Argentinean history reveal what “we Lacan”: micro(hi)stories of sadness and resistance that help the reader to deal with everyday deceptions.

Rather than chronicling major events, they resort to the scale of the miniscule, foregrounding the tiny bodily traces, the minute gestures and changes in everyday life, the escape valves that can only indicatively point to far greater wounds and collectively accumulated grievances. Comic strips embrace humour as part of our human condition, and in the Argentinean *historietas*, a term that aptly refers to both comic strip as well as to a little history, a microscopic, childlike humour becomes the means of chronicling history.

Notes

¹ All quotations are translated by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

² Originally from an article written by Osvaldo Soriano in *La Opinión*, Buenos Aires, December 1972 (quoted in Gociol & Rosemberg [in print], 176).

³ Totalitarian systems also infantilized citizens of the society to a certain extent, for instance through exercising censorship. The tensions and connections between the two phenomena are worth further elaboration. I thank Veronika Zangl for this comment.

⁴ See also Daniel Paz' blog: www.danielpaz.com.ar.

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