Introduction

Experiences such as death, massacre or war can function as kernels where art can encounter its limit. This limit is simultaneously aesthetic and ethic: the different ways of narrating or showing the world are rendered problematic while the certainties about the right of showing or narrating are demolished. Beauty is frivolity. Representation is misrepresentation. These reflections about the limits of representation have become commonplace in relation to the experience of the Nazi genocide.

Art cannot elude the questions that stress its relation with history. If it is deemed legitimate to represent horror, all rhetoric somehow falls short. If, on the other hand, the task of representation is accepted, the resources of the different media would somehow attest to an experience alien to what is seen as humane. And finally, the question arises whether it is ethic to let those representations circulate in the market of cultural goods without even putting the matter under discussion. Going beyond these reflections, the answer has been given through production. Bringing about a living memory of the facts does not require silence but a discourse that speaks about its means and its inscription as product. On the other hand, as Andreas Huyssen (2002: 127) observes: “incommensurability has always been an engine, not an obstacle, for artistic representation.”

It is possible, at least partially, to extend these reflections to the years of state sponsored terror in Argentina, a period that has inscribed itself in the series of bureaucratic massacres of the 20th century and that constitutes a rupture in our history. This event not only reformulates the ways of understanding the past, but also inscribes itself in the future whenever social memory finds ways of reinterpreting this experience. It is against this backdrop that I situate my interest in examining how the Argentinean comic strip dealt with a subject that is in itself opaque and resistant to any conceptual or rhetorical tools from the field of literature or cinema, and it is even more so in relation to a language such as that of comics, which, from its inception and only with a few exceptions, has been generally hostile to modes of realism and political discussion. Nonetheless, it can be said that this restriction is the result of the institutional and publishing history and not due to any intrinsic capacity.

The aim of this text will be to examine the strategies to depict horror in different comics made and published during the years of democratic transition in Argentina. This is an era we rather arbitrarily delimit to the period between 1982 and 1985. A period that begins with the disintegration of the military regime after the Falkland’s War defeat of 1982, and more specifically with the start of the democratic government in December of 1983, ending with that “formative nucleus of social experience of that past” as given shape in the report entitled Informe ‘Nunca Más’ de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (Report ‘Never Again’ of the National Commission of Missing Persons) and the trial of the military junta of 1985 (Vezzeti 2003: 23). It is a period during which the mass media reported, to the point of exasperation, on the so-called “horror show” – those events that, until that moment, had been circulating secretly within society, and which, by virtue of their obscurity, enabled large portions of the population to shield themselves from any complicity with the terrorist state by claiming...
ignorance. Consequently, I am interested in analyzing those comics that provided full visibility without the restrictions imposed by censorship and personal risks taken by authors. Therefore, this analysis concerns the experience and representation of that hidden and horrifying reality, suddenly disclosed to full public view. However, in order to do so, it is essential to examine beforehand the publishing situation and the internal development of the comics’ field in Argentina. These constituted the necessary conditions for the production of works intending to depict the horror.

New Comics, New Modes of Expression

The bibliography of representations of state terror in comics is not as abundant as that of the so-called “literature of dictatorship” (Delgado et al. 2004) provided we define the latter as a literature produced during or around the time of the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional.¹ These discussions are very useful for the reading of the selected corpus of comics, not only for pointing to common problems, but also for analyzing the differences which are basically the result of two factors. First of all, one can point to the internal development of the field of comics (provided comics can be conceived as a partially autonomous field, which is in itself problematic), its publishing history and its means of production and institutional organization. These elements differ markedly from those in the literary field. Consequently, the tradition comics dialogue with in this period is outspokenly different. On the other hand, the inherent tension between narrating and showing within the language of comics adds another issue (which written language may elude or process in very different ways) to the aesthetic dilemma. It is of vital importance that research on comics take the latter into account so as to evade the risk of erasing the specificity of the form through a mere analysis of narrative content.

Having said this, it is interesting to address some questions related to literature. Of particular interest is the debate on the new application or reuse of certain formal resources. This can be interpreted as a way of resisting the supremacy of authoritarian speech which, as Beatriz Sarlo states, proposes a discursive regime “that presupposes an unavoidable and unquestionable foundation of truth set upon pre-discursive relations” and in which “ambiguous interpretations are also brought to a close by Meaning” based on values, assumptions and certainties that are held as indisputable (Sarlo 1987: 36 and 38). What needs to be defined is whether these devices, which also appear in the comics of the period – such as perspectivization, fragmentation, the framing of discourse, the blurring of ambiences (Delgado et al. 2004) – are requisite of censorship and characteristic of repression and the moral and political crisis during the Process, which would make them ungraspable for mechanisms of realistic representation during the years of the transition.

Another possible perspective is to place those developments of artistic language in the context of the internal development of literary production and their apparition and imposition as part of the change in the literary canon of the period. Thus, Andrés Avellaneda (1985) examines how realism was dominant in Argentinean literary production of the 1960s; a canon that would be repressed by the dictatorship for being contrary to the cultural system imposed by the military regime in which literature was subordinated to moralism. However, the realistic canon was beginning to wear out by the early 70s, though the struggle for the ownership of the “canonic field” took place once the dictatorship was over. The distrust on the mimetic capabilities of writing did therefore not depend on the barriers imposed by that atrocious stage of state terrorism, though it did find in these barriers an additional excuse to support the need to abandon realism.

Comics in the 1980s were in a similar situation due to the fact that the rhetorical strategies employed during the Process were part of a phase of renewal that had started prior to the Process and which would also exceed the strict framework of the Argentine comic strip. This parallel between the development of literature and comics in Argentina is paradoxical since realism had never been part of the canonical production of comics – earned by the use of genres inherent in mass productions – and partly constituted the contents for renewal. But it was precisely the renewal in the comic strip and the manifestation...
of new publishing frameworks that gave authors the necessary tools to depict the horrors of repression and it were these elements that even determined, as preconditions, the mere existence of those comic strips. Consequently, it is essential to consider these stylistic changes in order to explain the appearance of the comics we are discussing.

The aesthetic and formal renewal of the comic strip in the 1980s took place almost simultaneously in Europe, the US and Argentina. The most prominent influences on the Argentine comic production came from France, Spain and Italy. This mainly concerns the boom of the *author comic*: even the phrase “author comic” was for decades simply an antilogy. There was a slow production of self-referential comics stressing their own language – sometimes this stress was even greater than that on narration – by a shift of attention away from the hero as the axis of the story, by rupturing the linearity of page layout, and by appropriating relatively established graphic experimentations in the plastic arts of the historic avant-gardes, which had up till then only sporadically emerged in comics, and perhaps only in the solitary figure of Alberto Breccia. I am referring, first and foremost, to the legacy of the group involved that was formed in France in 1975 around the magazine *Métal Hurlant*, and a host of its publications in primarily the US and Spain, the latter publications being widely distributed in Argentina. But it was not just the legacy of authors such as Moebius or Phillipe Druillet. Almost contemporaneous were the experiments conducted in Italy by the “Gruppo Valvoline” in *Alter Linus* and magazines as such as *Frigidaire*, and in Spain by *El Vívora*, and a little later – concerning both the date of production and that of arrival in Argentina – the reinvention of the *superhero comic* and the development of the so-called “post-underground” alternative comic in the USA.

It is possible to treat each development separately and one could agree with Carlos Scolari that these movements were born out of developments not directly pertaining to comics as such – “May 1968 in France, the 1977 Movement in Bologna, the Democratic Parties in Spain and Argentina” (Scolari 1999: 297). Whatever the reason may be, it is clear that a change took place on a global scale consisting foremost in the acknowledgment that it is possible to make comics according to the logic of mass production and established genre traditions. It was precisely this opening that allowed Argentina to include other topics and techniques required to deal with those themes.

In Argentina, as in many other countries, the narrative comic strip had not taken up the topic of politics. In contrast to cartoons, comics do not tend to explicitly incorporate contemporaneous social turmoil in their stories. It is not a question, as Pablo de Santis (1992: 7) maintains, that “since literality leads to failure, reality demands from comics a zigzagging and sometimes secret path”. In fact, the explicit inclusion of contemporary politics as a vivid element partaking in fiction is an evident characteristic of modern literary realism, from Stendhal and Flaubert onwards, that has not made narratives fail to a greater extent than any other means. In reality, this depoliticization is not typical of stories in general but is a result of the mode of production of comics. On the one hand, graphic humor originated in 19th century Argentina with the appearance of polemic magazines explicitly devoted to political caricature. The legacy of these publications continued to be felt throughout the 20th century. On the other hand, the foundations of the “serious” comic derives from the reissuing of foreign publications, especially British and North American, and from the local exploration of certain genres – western, science fiction, adventure, even historical and gaucho-like narratives – that cannot, in general, explicitly refer to any contemporaneous events. During the seventies, it was customary to produce comics with a prospective or real European audience in mind, which unfortunately contributed to the strengthening of this depoliticization. As Juan Sasturain highlights when talking about what he calls the “domicile of adventure” (Sasturain 1999) in Oesterheld’s comics, it is not a coincidence that the work of Héctor German Oesterheld has allowed such a powerful posthumous politicizing.

Therefore, changes in views concerning the expressive possibilities and the acceptability of certain forms in comics, together with the publishing conditions welcoming these changes, resulted in an increasing incorporation of politics in comics. Without these preconditions, the mitigation of censorship and the end of the dictatorship would never have been sufficient for the depiction of the horrors of repression on the pages of magazines.
Before Fierro: Superhumor and Cuero

In 1980 the first issue of Superhumor was published. An offshoot of the overwhelming success of Humor registrado, Superhumor is presented as a comics magazine and, therefore, sets a genealogy that distinguishes it from its mother magazine – Superhumor will become the publisher’s comics magazine. The first issue has evident characteristics of the manifesto. While reviews or informative texts used to be scarce or even inexistent in classic comics periodicals, Superhumor featured an editorial and two articles signed by Juan Sasturain, Carlos Trillo and Guillermo Saccomanno respectively, contextualizing the magazine and the published comics while making explicit reference to the other specialized publishers of that moment, basically Ediciones Record and above all Editorial Columba. Moreover, this issue has an interview with Alberto Breccia, a widely admired author in a medium that had scarcely seen such models.

The editorial of Sasturain, which would be reprinted four years later in Fierro, begins by placing the magazine in the tradition of the “golden age,” ranging from 1940 to 1960, while more markedly singling out the differences: “There are no adventure stories, no pointed or round helmets, no thick bearded cowboys.” The intention, also formulated explicitly, is to foster a “national comic strip” related to comics’ geography and not bound by genre. This is shown in the paradoxical comic entitled Los héroes están cansados (The heroes are tired), created by Carlos Trillo and Domingo Mandrafina. In this comic, the prototypical detective resembling Bogart proposes to an editor to be the protagonist of his own death. Both this comic and Calle Corrientes (Corrientes street), written by Guillermo Saccomanno and Francisco Solano López, accompany the manifesto written by Trillo which identifies a fundamental difference by pointing out that both Mandrafina and Saccomanno publish their works in magazines owned by the publishers Columba and Record. What is stressed as divergent are the medium and the means of production. This difference between what these authors publish in other media is highly marked, though Superhumor’s inaugural claim – undoubtedly informed by a strategic view that will be shared by both Cuero and Fierro – is not entirely fair. It is essential to underline that the innovations of the 80s, referred to above, did not happen out of the blue. In fact, these innovations were propelled by a double movement.

On the one hand, throughout the 60s and 70s, an interest in the theory and the art of comics emerged and was reflected in Oscar Masotta’s semiotic analyses in publications such as LD or events like the Bienal de Historieta (Comics Biennial) held at the Di Tella institute, and instances of similar events in France and Italy. These phenomena that constituted the origin of the avant-garde experiments to come, would also have a less innocent influence on the more mainstream and classical magazines. The industrial production becomes more attentive to style changes and the history of these changes, while, ever since the appearance of scriptwriter Robin Wood, both Skorpio, Record Publishing and even Columba started showing what Oscar Steinberg (2000: 54) defines as a controversial comeback of adventure comics which, in each case, had already integrated a sensibility for the devices of the language of comics.

Nonetheless, it is beyond question that this “new comic” clashed with the idea of what used to be possible and conceivable in the medium. In its 21st issue, Superhumor published a letter by Gerardo Canelo in support of a “clear, pleasant and appealing comic strip.” Amongst other things, Canelo argues that “it is sad to see there are real fans of, for instance, Buscavidas [by Carlos Trillo and Alberto Breccia] because it contains the graphics typical of the schizophrenic.” Naturally, the publication of the letter – which is not addressed to the magazine but to a contributor – is a way to take sides and it is difficult to say whether it represents a general opinion, though it is certainly put forward as a credible point of view.
Superhumor was an anomaly in comics magazines, especially in 1980. First of all, it includes a large quantity of text, probably because it had to resemble Humor, a magazine that contained both graphic and written humour and that, little by little, turned into a news magazine. Owing to the fact that Humor was also a moderately critical voice against the dictatorship – a moderation imposed by censorship and repression – with political humour as its core, Superhumor inherited this sensibility through the publication of comics that were closer to the tradition of cartoons and graphic humour. The register of the political does not yet appear in the more narrative comics – to this rather vague category belongs a comic strip with humorous drawings such as Los enigmas del PAMI, written by Carlos Trillo and Enrique Breccia. More prevalent is the allegorical register. The clearest example of this is the 1981 comic Ulises Boedo (Trillo and Mandrafina). In this comic, two of the core themes of the Proceso years are interwoven: the impossibility or denial to see the truth and the idea of invasion, which would become a compelling metaphor for the dictatorship ever since the prophetic re-interpretation of El Eternauta (the new reading appeared initially in an article written by José Pablo Feinmann which was published in October 1982, in issue nr. 21 of Superhumor, in which he recollects the 1976 republication of El Eternauta: “The snow of death falls down on everyone”).

Figure 1. J.L. Gallego (script) and Sanyú (drawings). Recorridos. “La Ruta del oro II”, 1983: [page 3], plates 2 to 4. From Tiras de Cuero Nr. 3 (December 1983). (c) Sanyú and J.L. Gallego.
What can be observed in *Superhumor* is the subsistence of the division between graphic humour (cartoons) and comics concerning the treatment of political themes, which, in this case, is reproduced within one and the same magazine. During the Process of National Reorganization, references to political situations could not but be very superficial. By eluding the main issue of the bloody repression, there is a risk – evidently not desired – to normalize the political situation: talking about how difficult it is for pensioners to get their money might suggest that this is the worst social issue of a (any) country. This is the effect produced by Angel's comic *Cuando sea grande voy a ser como mi abuelo* (*When I grow up I am going to be like my grandfather*) that was published in the first issue of *Superhumor*. It is interesting to contrast the latter with the acerbated grotesque of the above-mentioned *Los enigmas del PAMI*, whose critic potential is situated in its absence of explicit references to the contemporary situation. This phenomenon will change as the dictatorship reaches its end.

*Superhumor* entered the era of the beginning of democracy with a content that increasingly tended to mimic that of *Humor* (to the extent of adopting the caption “Now with more Humor” on its cover and a predominance of news articles over comics). It is interesting to note how this development came about with regards to the content of the comic *Bosquivia*, written by Trillo and Saccomanno and illustrated by Tabaré and Fortín. *Bosquivia* shifted it focus from relatively timeless fables about power (if there is an explicit reference to be found, it is only to the generals that ruled Bolivia), to addressing mainly the socioeconomic issues plaguing Argentine reality while incorporating caricatures of real characters according to the cartoon tradition. The innovations of comics put forward in the first issue of *Superhumor* concerned forms of realism and the representation of local spaces with the intention of bringing a “global painting of the local village”. Contradictorily, the beginning of democracy, which potentially allowed the inclusion of politics in comics, led instead to an evacuation of comics from its pages. By the time politics could be depicted without restraint, *Superhumor* was no longer a comics magazine.
The first issue of *Tiras de Cuero* was published in November 1983, which was also the last month of the dictatorship. It was a short-lived project that only lasted for three issues, but it is important as it was a comics magazine in tune with the innovations of the eighties, without the intermingling with graphic humour and cartoons so characteristic of *Superhumor*. This publication is also important because, to a certain extent at least, it prefigures the course of the magazine *Fierro*. Both *Cuero* and *Fierro* share a marked interest in science fiction also evident in *Métal Hurlant* – *Cuero* published comics by Druillet, Gotlib and Giraud. The critical texts in *Cuero* were much more polemical than in *Fierro* which explains their motto, “the most powerful fantasy in the world and the most savage critic”. The magazine also crossed the borders of other media, paying attention to literature, film, the arts and rock music. It had a host of contributors: Carlos Albiac, Ricardo Barreiro, Angel Faretta, Juan Giménez, Félix Savorido, Dalmiro Sáenz, Sanyú, Carlos Trillo. The publication also contained sex: women flashing their tits were not uncommon images in Argentine comics of the time, on the contrary. Breasts dominated the covers of *Cuero*, *Fierro* and, some years later, *Coctel (Cocktail)* and *Puertitas (Tiny Doors)* and even the conservative *Skorpio*.  

Figure 3. Carlos Albiac (script) and Félix Saborido (drawings). *La Triple B*, 1984: [page 2]. From *Fierro* Nr. 1 (September 1984). (c) Carlos Albiac and Félix Saborido
The pertinence of the “new comic” is overtly addressed in Cuero and it even presents this concept as a genre as a caption of the cover of its first issue suggests: “Science fiction, the black novel, the new comic”. And that innovation is stressed by the interest in making contemporary topics – and essentially, by 1983, political issues – enter the world of the comic strip. The editorial of the first issue states: “Because there are magazines of comics with a moral where bad things are not allowed. And there are others that keep their distance, and which therefore disregard social issues” (emphasis in the original). The “social” element enters the magazine in basically two of its comics, namely Yo acuso, o no? (Do I accuse, or not?) (see figure 1), written by Dalmiro Sáenz and illustrated by Torre Repiso, which deals with the messy investigations of real crimes, and Recorrido (Paths) (see figure 2), a series written by J.L. Gallego and illustrated by Sanyú. The intention of the first comic is to link the story to reality by using investigative journalism as a model and by putting the situation of enunciation in scene, in which Steinberg, the editor, plays a role as a character, and where concern for the narrator grows until the latter becomes more important than the story itself. It seems that the inclusion of contemporary reality in comics can never be realized innocently, which, by the same token, discloses the crisis of realism in the arts. A great mistrust of direct narration and the ways in which custom and repetition have effaced the traces of production in the creation of new comics, thereby naturalizing the latter into straightforward and transparent stories, this mistrust would become the main perspective guiding the treatment of facts related to state terror.

“Recorridos” is formally more complex. Sanyú’s drawings have nothing in common with the conventions of “good drawing” of realistic illustration. On the contrary, these drawings are violent simplifications, ranging from the multiplication of voices to the use of songs that function as sound tracks to the comic and which receive ironic comments in footnotes. However, the inclusion of the real is posed as less problematic. The facts of the story are almost strictly contemporaneous with what was
going on at the time of publication. For instance, the chapter published in the first issue of December 1983 covers the celebrations held after Alfonsin’s victory in the general elections of October, the songs are the ones actually played on the radio, which function in a natural way, that is to say in the way a realist novel works, as background that informs and conditions the characters’ actions. It is not impossible to ascertain whether the magazine would have been able to incorporate stories about the repression. We may imagine this to be the case judging from the violence underlying these “realistic” comics (I am afraid quotation marks should be used every time this word pops up). But we would have to wait until the first issues of Fierro to read what comics would be able to depict about the years of state terrorism.

**Fierro: Comics and Nationalism during the Democratic Transition in Argentina**

*Fierro a Fierro* went on sale in newsstands in September 1984. Just by glancing at the first issue, the two perfectly round tits drawn by Chichioni and gracing the cover, signalled that, evidently, the Process of National Reorganization was over. *Fierro* would become the magazine of the transition. Like any other magazine or, at least, any other magazine with strong objectives such as Superhumor or Cuero, *Fierro* “spectacularizes” its entry by establishing differences with the past as a means of legitimating its existence. The first step, explicitly put forward not only in the editorials of the first issues but also in the selection of published material, consists in staging a hiatus in the panoramic overview of Argentine comics: in the nearby past, something was lacking. Consequently, *Fierro* has been called into being to fill this void and address this need.

A closer look at the editorial of the first issue allows us to synthesize the side taken by *Fierro* as regards the past and the role the magazine intends to play. Firstly, *Fierro* aims at filling the space of all artistic production that was either hidden or banned during the dictatorship; “In the end, we made a magazine the way we wanted,” remarks Juan Sasturain, the editor. And, it is in the opening paragraph where a space is pledged for that “entire generation that is asking for pages”. Secondly,
A reference is made to an interrupted tradition. *Fierro* will be like Oesterheld’s, Pratt’s, Solano Lopez’s and Del Castillo’s *Hora Cero* (*Zero Hour*) and like *Patoruzito*, proper names that all refer to a classic moment now known as the “golden age” (as we will see, this not only concerns comics but also Argentine history). Third, shared values are affirmed. The first point of belief, the crucial element for fostering of an identity in the years of transition, is democracy: “*Fierro* belongs to those who embrace it. And it is not easy to reach an agreement. (…) One piece of writing does not wipe out another, nor does one drawing wipe out another. When joined, they become better.” The preoccupations of the magazine, at least throughout its first year, would remain constant. The subsequent editorials will invariably refer to a preexistent audience that had never found the sort of comics they wanted to read, an audience that was looking forward to reading the magazine and that is taking publishers by surprise with their participation.

Therefore, *Fierro* endowed itself with the function to make whole what the military regime had broken. These discontinuances can not only be seen in the comics, but also in the cultural sphere at large: from its very inception, the magazine wishes to reach the entire community of readers, and not just readers of comics. The desire to reach a general public allows us to single out those characteristics ascribed to that national community, as well as the mechanisms by which *Fierro* legitimates that will. *Fierro* positions itself as “the national comic” through the creation of an audience that is constructed as a preexisting community of readers anticipating the arrival of the magazine. This readership is described in terms of a national community through the creation of and ensuing inscription in a tradition and the reference to shared values. These values are characteristic of the democratic transition in Argentina: democracy (a diversity of poetics, freedom of speech) and the repudiation of the Process of National Reorganization.
Comics, History, Horror and Democracy

The definition of this community of readers as a national community is fundamental to the magazine's project, and it is played out in two ways, namely by the constitution of shared values, which implies a reference to a specific common imaginary, and by the creation of a tradition, to which Fierro inscribes itself and that forms part of a collective memory shared by this community and which was interrupted by the Process. The issue of values – I repeat that this is fundamental in the forging of a national identity after a period of terror – is overcome when the two main problems in the cultural field following the democratic transition are addressed: democracy and the problem of representation of the horrors of the dictatorship.

The problems of representation are so important that in the editorial of Fierro's second issue there is specific reference to the risk of creating the “Falcon Fiction” genre, in reference to the Ford Falcons that were used to kidnap people and drive them off during the years of terror. A genre in which

Figure 7: Drawings by Ch. Medrano. “Bautismo de fuego”, [page 1], plates 1 to 4.
From Fierro Nr. 4 (December 1984). Ricardo Barreiro (script) and Alberto Macagno, Marcelo Pérez, Carlos Pedrazzini and Ch. Medrano (drawings). La Batalla de Malvinas. (c) Ricardo Barreiro, Alberto Macagno, Marcelo Pérez, Carlos Pedrazzini and Ch. Medrano.
the bad guys are not the Indians, Mexicans or the Japanese of the traditional comics but, rather, are always soldiers.

In its first issue, explicit references to the Process abound, and it is exactly this aspect that interests me in the present essay, particularly in comics such as La triple B (The Triple B), Sudor Sudaca (Sudaca’s Sweat), La Batalla de las Malvinas (The Battle of the Falklands) and Hermandad (Brotherhood) by Peiró. It is also remarkable how almost all comics in the first issues of the magazine propose a reading that links them to the years of state terror through allegorical interpretations of comics sometimes produced in other contexts, especially the sub genre of “anti-utopian” science fiction. Horacio Altuna’s comic Ficcionario is a main example in this sense, but the entire “oppressive” atmosphere that the editors ascribe to the first issues follows this tendency.

The use of history is also striking. In its first issue, Fierro would publish the series La Argentina en Pedazos (Argentina in Pieces) containing adaptations of Argentine literature texts and introduced by Ricardo Piglia. The first issue of Fierro published Enrique Breccia’s adaptation, on a script by Juan Sasturain, of Esteban Echeverría’s short story El matadero (The Slaughterhouse) (it is interesting to note that the first issue of Fierro proposes re-reading of the beginning of Argentine literature, which was characterized by exiles, murder and new or inexistent genres. As Tulio Halperín Donghi (1987) indicates, the use of stories about the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1835 – 1852) offered as a transparent metaphor for the repression during the Process, and it would even become a constant throughout the years of transition – as part of a new “official history” – going beyond the authors’ effective adherence to a liberal view of history. A clear example of this is Enrique Breccia, who, after having adapted a classic anti-Rosist story, will publish, in the pages of Fierro, the comic strip El Sueñero, suggesting that Rosas was the positive leader of a nationalist resistance. This became the topic of a polemic in the magazine.

The problem of democracy as a value is also constantly discussed in the magazine. The topic is thematized by an appeal to the reader, repeatedly formulated in the form of a plebiscite and with special emphasis placed on dissenting opinions and polemics. The theme is also addressed through the coexistence of opposing aesthetics, which is presented as a deliberate choice and a matter of discussion among publishers. Two phrases are always repeated in editorials, articles and responses to letters by readers: “Fierro belongs to its readers” and “Nobody likes the entire magazine,” phrases pointing to communication-participation and the coexistence of poetics. The coexistence of aesthetics is evident. From Juan Giménez or Horacio Altuna to José Muñoz and Max Cachimba, winner of the comics contest launched in the first issue, the distance is enormous. Once again, this is the effect of explicit decisions. In the twentieth issue (April, 1986) of the magazine, the prologue to the item “Piedra Libre” (“Peek-a-boo”), which had been specifically added as a forum of debate surrounding Enrique Breccia’s El Sueñero, Sasturain claims that

Fierro does not need to profess its trust in democracy, Argentina or the patriotic. It is plainly performed from the beginning, it is expressed naturally.

To the first mechanism of the constitution of a community of readers – the reference to shared values such as democracy and a rejection of the Process – a second is added, based on the imagining of a historic continuity interrupted by the Process. Fierro presents itself as essential to the process of recovery. As was the case with the initial issues of Superhumor, Fierro refers to the “golden age” of Argentine comics, namely those published between the forties to the mid sixties. Two main features are highlighted. First of all, a national style is posited for the comics of this period which were mainly produced for a local market, despite the fact that, every now and then, these comics made use of the genre conventions of the North American comic (thus not differentiating the production of comics from overall economic production, or rather, how the first Peronist administration had envisioned its economic production). Secondly, the massive scale of the magazines that published these
comics is emphasized. Reference is made to a national market of readers and not to a limited subgroup, and its resultant ability to produce social effects of recognition of characters and situations. The announcements and depictions in *Fierro*'s first four issues, either in the form of historical analyses or occasional allusions in the comics themselves, contains many references to classic magazines of the "golden era" such as *Patoruzito* or *Misterix* and to authors such as José Luis Salinas, Hugo Pratt, Alberto Breccia and Arturo del Castillo.

Both strategies involved in the constitution of a reading audience as a national community concentrated on the figure of Héctor Germán Oesterheld, who was a prominent scriptwriter throughout this “classic” period and who at the same time was a victim of repression as he had been ‘disappeared’. Oesterheld became a symbol, a constant presence in the first issues of *Fierro*, suggesting that Oesterheld’s magazines and his comic *El Eternauta* functioned as models for the a national comic. *Hora Cero* is mentioned in the first issue’s editorial, while Oesterheld is repeatedly characterized as "master" and "teacher". This issue also contains some previously unpublished texts and it also uses some of Oesterheld’s characters in the new comics. Ernie Pike for instance appears in *La batalla de Malvinas* and the *Manos* as the image for the comics contest for scriptwriters organized in the first issue. In addition, essays on his work appeared and a number of his comics were republished, such as "Joe Zonda" in the seventh issue, and a special selection from his oeuvre to celebrate the magazine’s first anniversary. Oesterheld is thus simultaneously seen as tradition, democracy and testimony to horror. In short, he symbolizes the motherland.

**Modern Tensions**

Apart from the reorganization of the past, *Fierro* places itself within the context of the renewal of the comic strip of the 1980s. One of the magazine’s explicit aims throughout its entire existence, but especially during its initial stages, is to regain the connection with what is “new”, as one of the most visible consequences of the cultural policies of the Process has been the disruption of that connection. The magazine holds the dictatorship responsible for having caused a double fracture: not
only between the national and the popular, but also between cultural modernization and a contemporary production free of censorship. The magazine's title already sums up its objectives. *Fierro a Fierro* refers to the tradition of the Argentinian comic (it is the title of Raúl Roux’s gaucho-like comic that appeared in the 1940s in the magazine *Patoruzito*), to one of the canonical texts of Argentine literature (its evident connection with *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* written by José Hernández) and to the mainstream of foreign comics of the 1970s, represented by *Métal Hurlant* in France and its North American counterpart *Heavy Metal*. The slogan “comics for survivors” was, according to Juan Sasturain, stolen unintentionally from the Spanish magazine *El Vivora*.

*Fierro* is an answer to the need for modernization in chiefly three fields, namely the publication of foreign comics, the publication of material written by those who were exiled or unable to publish any recent work, and the publication of a collective qualified as “the young generation,” the representatives of an “underground” movement active since the beginning of democracy. The desire to be “up-to-date” with the new trends basically implies the publication of European material (particularly all the material made by Moebius in the 1970s, considered a “new classic” and one of the main selling points for the magazine) and of as yet unpublished Argentine comics (such as Altuna’s *Ficcionario* and *Sudor Sudaca* by Muñoz and Sampayo, as emblematic presences of the magazine’s first issues), as well as the organization of a contest and the creation of “Oxido,” a space reserved for young comics authors and also the most experimental section of the magazine.

It is precisely here, with the intention of producing a “national comic” and the will of becoming up-to-date with recent developments in the language of comics, that the magazine will encounter tensions. The moment that *Fierro* makes an appeal to a general reader, the kind of reader that *Patoruzito* and Oesterheld’s magazines used to have, is also the moment when a field of comics production and consumption is constituted, but a field markedly different from that of other cultural products. The imposition of a comic *fan* market and the increasing “juvenilization” of the audience will reach its apex in issue 48 of the magazine, the first issue without Juan Sasturain as editor in chief. In this issue, *Fierro* merges with *Cain (Chain)*, a news magazine for youngsters by the same publisher. As such, it will prove increasingly difficult for *Fierro* to keep a coherent pub-
lishing policy, as certain concerns that once endowed it with a certain consistence during its initial course – I am referring to the general cultural discussions during the first years of democracy – will start losing force, while the consumer patterns of comics increasingly differs from the general crises in aesthetics and politics produced within that society.

Distance, Allegory and Fragmentation

The characteristics of state terrorism in Argentina seem to simultaneously demand and preclude representation. The notion of disappeared, and the intention of dictators to keep everything hidden, as well as the entirely clandestine character of repression, necessitate the disclosure of facts shaped by their denial, and at the same time it is mandatory to find suitable means to elucidate an experience that questions the very notion of representation itself. As Hugo Vezzeti (2000: 14) recounts:

On the one hand, the will to remembrance faces obstacles inherent in testimonial material itself: an order of events destined to oblivion, to incredulity and to rejection since they project a disruptive effect on the certainties of everyday life. On the other hand, however, the imperative to narrate immediately entails the awareness of these obstacles: the translation and the communication of that extreme and anomalous experience require special attention to the form and voices.

Comics face an additional problem, because of the lack of records and the necessity to create images for the disappeared: to show what has been erased. Consequently, it is of vital importance to address the issue of point of view, to de-naturalize drawing styles and narrative methods, and to distrust transparency of discourse.

How to Draw: La Triple B and La Batalla de Malvinas

The first issue of Fierro contained two comics dealing explicitly with the political facts of the recent past. I am thinking of La Triple B, written by Carlos Albiac and illustrated by Felix Savorido, and La Batalla de Malvinas, written by Ricardo Barreiro and illustrated by Alberto Macagno, Marcelo Pérez and Carlos Pedrazzini. I will point to the effects of their respective graphic strategies.

La Triple B shocks from its very beginning because of its evident and deliberate contradiction. On the one hand, it opens with an extremely violent scene in which the methods are disclosed of a military task force trying to obtain information after breaking into a house. Rape and murder ensue. One of the boys of the couple is rescued by Bolita who happened to be in the house and witnessed what went on. A horrific scene that had already become part of the imaginary of all Argentines is made entirely alien through a parody on Chester Gould's drawing style in Dick Tracy (see figure 3).

The drawing style is strongly marked. Firstly, it is a style rooted in the humoristic cartoons of the beginning of the 20th century rather than the illustrative styles of the thirties 1930s. This choice clashes with a strong presupposition in comics that a drawing should correspond to the narrative theme or genre. Secondly, the style is distinctive in its interpretive clarity: it does not leave room for ambiguity, subtleties or vagueness. The horrific scene, narrated in a linear fashion, seems to offer some resistance to such clarity, thereby turning into a new kind of violence. In this sense, it is interesting to point out how, to some extent, the drawings function in a similar way as in the original Dick Tracy (it can be said that the style had already partly diverged from its origins). Dick Tracy is also a comic of death and violence, and openly displays this violence through such an excessive pedagogy that it was deemed impossible to be a truthful depiction of society (Masotta 1992). However, I must stress the phrase “to some extent”. Because the narrated violence displayed in La Triple B is reality: the reality of recent history and the reality of the different modes of disclosure of those facts as produced in testimonies, journalism and the legal discourse of the period.
In fact, in contrast to Chester Gould’s *Dick Tracy*, the whole story of *La Triple B* is informed by the characters’ struggle against the structures and authority of the state. Thus, Bolita, who witnessed the crimes and who rescues the son of those murdered, has begun to rob the house. He takes the boy to a priest who has organized a charity event for the poor people of the neighborhood and who clashes with church leadership. The boy will be handed to one of his uncles, who is about to commit suicide because economic policies have ruined him (the infamous “law 1050” indexing credits), on the day of 1978 World Cup finals. Justice – the comic was published before the trial of the junta – is only possible outside of the nation state: the murderers, whom Bolita accidentally bumps into in a bar, will be quite literally drowned in shit (the characters cover them with the entire contents of a sewage truck) in a highly unusual vindictive closing act for stories based on the Process, but which, on the other hand, shows a striking resemblance to the way villains ended up when chased by *Dick Tracy*.

The question of style is clearly a matter of enunciation. At the same time of the transition, Art Spiegelman was producing *Maus*. I would like to point out how *Maus* is a complex reflection on enunciation: not only does it narrate the factual aspect of the Holocaust, but it also highlights the position from which those facts are told, the difficult decisions to take regarding style, the inevitable, multiple, and necessary mediations between what is real and its representation. Faced with a reality that makes bodies disappear, comics – whose relation with the representation of the body is essential – have to create an “impossible visual text” (Rothberg 1994), and cannot – the imperative is at the same time aesthetic and ethic – create this text without making explicit the conditions of that creation. When *La Triple B* chooses its style, what it actually chooses is to put enunciation in crisis or, in this case, what we could call “graphiation”.

The term “graphiation” proposed by Philippe Marion (Baetens 2002) allows us to make an internal distinction in the opposition between the “narrated” and what is “shown”. In what is shown, it is necessary to distinguish the iconic content of the graphic marks that point to the position of enunciation facing that content. It is interesting to point out that *La Triple B* can work as an example of the objections that Jan Baetens makes to Marion’s term, basically to the idea of a unique enunciation and the consequent risk of “biographism”. In *La Triple B*, the drawings underline that *La Triple B* is a comic, and highlight its character as sign instead of trying to erase its traces in order to effect a transparent means of narration. Instead of effacing the producer and an implied point of view, the deliberate unsuitability of the drawing style stresses these aspects. But this unsuitability also undermines the possible suggestion that style is a means of expressing the author’s subjectivity or a single point of view. Enunciation is an impersonal moment that is necessarily polyphonic. This impersonal enunciation seems necessary for facing the horror.

*La Batalla de Malvinas* was an important project for *Fierro*, although it was never completed. The Falklands’ war took place in two areas: the public zone of mass media and the dictatorship’s propaganda, and another sphere of silence and oblivion, covering up not only the corruption and ineptitude of the military leadership, but also the fate of the fighters, even in the democratic period. The narrative is structured along these two poles and mixes the historic register – by its use of the documentation genre through references to specific battles and the political background – with the testimonial register of a witness narrator, in this case the figure of the reporter Ernie Pike, originally created by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and who appears as a homage. Unlike *La Triple B*, the “graphiator” or rather, the “graphiators” of *La Batalla de Malvinas* do not stress the fictionality of all narrative but tend to erase this aspect by means of respecting the most classic conventions concerning “good drawing” in realist comics. In fact, the two spaces of narration alternate between the two schools that lay the foundations for the serious Argentine comic. Macagno’s drawings (figure 4) and later Pedrazzini’s (figure 5) are legacies of Caniff’s impressionism, a line ranging from Alberto Breccia and Hugo Pratt to Mandrafina. Pérez’s (figure 6) and later Medrano’s drawings (figure 7) make use of lines and accurate representation, going back to the work of Harold Foster and Alex Raymond.
As in La Triple B, recourse is made to a tradition of comics. However, unlike La Triple B, La Batalla de Malvinas does not explicitly mark this tradition as a citation but as an adequate means (it is a serious comic, so a realistic style is called for). The use of dominant styles thereby ignores the problematic aspects constantly stressed by La Triple B. It is likely that the use of these tools in La Batalla de Malvinas is informed by a traditional subject matter that is rarely called into question in adventure comics. Indeed, we are not dealing with the repressive actions of a dictatorship, but with the rather traditional given of an open war.

Allegory and Oblivion: Perramus

The first thematic core of Perramus (Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain) concerns the story of a man who betrays his fellow activists and who opts for oblivion because he cannot bear his feelings of guilt and who has the chance to vindicate himself by an act of courage by taking up the fight as his destiny (destino) which, as the imaginary Borges of the comic observes, is the anagram of sense (sentido). The deliberate allegorical stance – both affirmed and denied, as will become clear – of the series allows us to interpret the destiny of the main character Perramus as a possible history, or a desire towards what history was during the dictatorship: a model.

The rhetorical strategy of Perramus to create a distance between its object is the use of an extended allegory, a continuous metaphor that allows for evident correspondences between narrative items and actual referents: allegory posits a second referent that can be accurately decoded. The references to figures in Perramus are not arbitrary; there is an exact function of the sister figure, there is personification, a key moment of the story presents “Mary [as] pleasure; Rose, luck; Margaret, oblivion” (I, 1, 4). It is clearly the model that surfaced in the second part of El Eternauta (Héctor Germán Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López), published in 1976 (quoted in book II, chapter 1, page 4) and the political readings of the first part published in 1957: the possibility of using the matrix of adventure comics, fundamental to the system of citations of Perramus, to refer to the political present.

However, allegories are constantly sought for and eluded, as if fearing the risks of a rhetorical artifice of little renown (the real Borges enumerated these problems). Yet, at the same time, their possibilities and necessity for the story and the conditions of publication are obvious. This hesitation regarding allegory or, more precisely, this tension involving the clear definition of a referent, is mentioned explicitly in the prologue to issue 12 of Fierro, signed by both authors (though the stylistic traits are characteristic of Sasturain):

*It is not too hard to transpose the setting of Perramus to a contemporary Latin America, distorted by a lens of controlled delirium. Santa María is Onetti’s – Santa María del Buen Ayre, obviously – the Vanguardia Voluntarista para la Victoria are the extremist chimaeras with their variations, the marshals are the colonels or generals with their classic methods. Somebody who wants to see in Whitesnow and his seven little helpers the puppets of ubiquitous Yankee power and its persuasive methods would not be wrong at all. If you want to see transparent symbols, you impoverish the text and the story (emphasis mine).*

In the Spanish edition of the third episode, Sasturain asserts in a similar vein:

*That outer trip, the story itself, was highly marked by the historical, political and perhaps personal context of those who came up with the story. Nonetheless, those contexts, despite their strength, do not exhaust meaning but open it up, something that would be shown in the subsequent adventures (emphasis mine).*
It is clear that the authors suggest keys for interpretation – Sasturain himself has written at least one article on Perramus (Sasturain 1999: 219) – but, at the same time, they evade them or whisk them away. This tension between a precise referent and the ambition for universality, which refrains from limiting the story to a representation of facts, is not limited to the prologues but is part of the construction of the comic itself.

On the one hand, one can clearly establish a reference to the Buenos Aires under the dictatorship in the first two chapters and the whole of the second cycle. The first chapter shows an operation – although carried out by caricatures of military officers with skulls on their caps – with an unmarked car without sirens, and from a distance and in grey, we can suppose the arrival of one of the infamous “green Falcons” used by these task forces. The ship where Perramus and Canelones are recruited to throw corpses into the sea – a method effectively used by dictatorship to make corpses disappear, which would be confirmed years later by the confession of a participant of the “death flights” – are all given the unmistakable name “N.N.”, a label referring to unidentified corpses and graves. Santa María is obviously Buenos Aires, with which it shares certain suburbs, streets, newspapers, a historical past – including, in the final chapter of the second episode, the English invasions of 1806, Juan Manuel de Rosas and the battle of the Vuelta de Obligado – and even a political present, with an image of Alfonsín, who was president in 1984, and a graffiti featuring Perón, in the epilogue of the second part (figure 8).

On the other hand, the story quickly relinquishes such explicit references. The adventures on Mr. Whitesnow’s island of the third episode are explicitly farcical in tone, a tone that will run through the remainder of the comic. Farce runs parallel with the characterization of the Vanguardia Voluntarista para la Victoria (Volunteer Vanguard for Victory), which refers to a rural guerrilla evidently inspired by the Cuban revolution, more so than by any urban guerrilla like the one that operated in Buenos Aires. The referent is in any case a certain image of Latin America.

This tension can be explained by the publishing situation. The European publication of the work demanded a universalizing treatment, which retains from the historical framework a certain atmosphere and an interpretation evading specific details or distinctive particulars that would be potentially unintelligible for a prospective audience. Obviously, the story has a double interlocutor who constantly shifts between exact references to Argentine history and more general considerations about dictatorship and oppression. The real Borges, who moved from creolism to become the most canonical and universal of all Argentinean writers, is, to a certain extent, an embodiment of that tension.

However, I would like to ascertain the value of employing a continuous metaphor as a chosen strategy to incorporate the factual layer of the Process. Allegory functions as a model offering an interpretation of the real. And this interpretation of the years of the Process suggested by the story’s narrative and graphic choices dialogues with the construction of a history by collective memory during the years of transition.

In principle, there is one remarkable and accentuated component: the representation of the military (referred to as the “Mariscales,” or marshals, in the comic) and all other members of the regime. Breccia’s drawings offer a wide variety in the representation of faces and bodies of the different characters, ranging from realism to female stereotypes and the grotesque. In all these cases, there is a search for the particularization of each character, as is clear after a closer look at the panels featuring crowds: the military figures do not vary, and they are all treated in the same way, resembling expressionless skulls (figure 9). Even in the opening chapters, where two soldiers have proper names, their images are almost exactly the same. This uniformity is even the theme of a chapter on an election farce (II,3). The military officers are radically different from the society they rule; they are just an occupation army. The result is characteristic of many representations of dictatorship: the horrors are suggested as distant to a basically innocent society that was nonetheless guilty of denial, cowardice and oblivion.

However, next to the radical innovation of the methods of extermination used by the dictatorship, the complicity or at least the tolerance of huge numbers of the population, together with the historical and ideological background, cannot be ignored. As Hugo Vezzetti (2003: 39) states:
The representation, already firmly in place after the democratic renaissance, of a society victimized by a despotic government, is only part of the picture and does not take into account that dictatorship is entirely different from foreign occupation.

This representation dominates *Perramus*: Santa María is a dark and empty city with scarce images of daily life. Empty streets abound. In the chapters where crowds appear, the figures are systematically positioned as spectators: spectators of street vending (II, 4), spectators, live or before TV, of the successive coituses of Falo Juárez (II, 5), spectators at the zoo (II, 6), spectators at a football match (II, 7). Spectators that neither seem to perceive their radical differences with military officers nor take part in their activities.

In *Perramus*, social responsibility in the face of terror is basically cowardice and because of this, it is essential to combat oblivion in the process of reconstruction. In fact, *Perramus* is a story of guilt and redemption, and refers to the Borgesian dialectic of the traitor and the hero as a matrix of Argentine history. This can be seen in the final chapter of the second book, where an Englishman with the name Sunday decides to die for Argentina. In that sense, if the character Perramus is presented as allegorical, as a model of Argentine's attitude towards horror, it is possible to ascertain what sort of relation between the present and that horror is put forward by the story and how this reconstruction tells us about Argentina. Eduardo Rinesi has stressed the possible “uses of oblivion” in the construction of national identities. The problem facing Argentina by the end of dictatorship was “the recreation of a nation after a hideous past that had disassembled the social networks of solidarity and the awareness of a shared belonging to a collective unity” (Rinesi 1992:77). Argentina in its post-Process phase, just as Germany after its Nazi period, was faced with the task of reconstructing historic
The dominant mode of reconstruction of the 1980s was founded, according to Rinesi, on “the double basis of law and its necessary reverse (…) guilt”. (Ibidem: 67). Perramus forgets and tries to build a false personal identity based on the amnesia of the episodes on the island of the imperialist Mr. Whitesnow. He can only reconstruct his identity by recollection and the fight against all the “Mariscales”.

*Perramus* creates an allegory based on two main concerns of remembrance as they were being discussed in the early eighties with regard to the years of the Process, the years of the transition, and the future. As to the past, allegory allows for the erasure of details characteristic of realist representation that might call into question the view on dictatorship as an ominous reality detached from a society that could only be either a spectator or at most a victim. Regarding the future, allegory, in this case the personification in the character of Perramus, brings together the need for truth to ward off oblivion, and the call for justice that would be heeded by the report *Nunca Más* and the trials of the military junta.

**Fragments: Sudor Sudaca**

The experience of dictatorship damaged the possibility of constructing a national identity since the past was no longer that glorious past Argentines were taught at school, but a past marked by atrocities. The community had to accept, if not its own complicity, at least the coexistence on the national plane of a massacre planned by the bureaucracy of a fundamental institution in the militarized construction of Argentinean history. If, as was the case in *Perramus*, allegory was offered as a model for interpretation of the past and the future, such an interpretation was only possible owing to a belief in a certain intelligibility of reality, permitting the creation of stories and continuities.

The series *Sudor Sudaca* (Carlos Sampayo and José Muñoz) was published between 1982 and 1984 and focuses directly on this rupture, thematizing unintelligibility and making fragmentation as its topic and constructive principle, namely the fragmentation between past and present, Europe and Latin America, the dead and living. *Sudor Sudaca* deals exclusively with the experience of exile. At the moment of its conception, the series could not be published in Argentina although it was con-
temporaneous with the waning of the postwar dictatorship after the Falklands debacle. It was first published for a European audience and seemed therefore condemned to incomprehension. In a 1984 interview with the authors in Fierro, José Muñoz indicates:

I sometimes feel envious of Fontanarrosa here, of Tardi in France, of Andrea Patienza [sic] in Italy, of the El Vívora guys in Spain who are all committed to their environs and where they belong. They say “A” and everybody understands them. Whereas when I say “A,” I have no clue whether they understand B or C.

However, this short-circuiting between authorial intention and reader competence was not new to Argentine authors in the early 1980s. As mentioned before, Argentine comics artists had for decades been working for foreign publishers while living in either Europe or Argentina, or for Argentine publishers functioning as agencies distributing material in Europe. Even having clear aesthetic differences, Alack Sinner, Muñoz and Sampayo’s masterpiece, fits within this mode of production, as it is a comic set in New York made in Italy by Argentines. In Sudor Sudaca, this discrepancy between the context of production and that of distribution is part of the organization of the stories. It is a comic deliberately constructed on the possibility of not being understood, about the paranoid inconsistencies and fragmentation of reality conducive to incomprehensibility. The comic is an effective description of the processes Argentine society went through after the dictatorship.

The untitled story initiating the series is a summary of what the rest of the episodes would be like. Whereas the other stories alternate between the exiled in Europe and a past Argentina, the opening chapter of Sudor Sudaca mixes both spatial and temporal elements through the figure of Cortázar and his typical trope of passage. The first four pages show a boy in an Argentinean town in 1953 on his way from school, crossing paths with a youthful Cortázar about to leave for Paris (figure 10). The last three pages show the same character, now an adult exiled in Italy and about to return to Argentina, while listening...
to an old radio and receiving the news of Cortázar’s death. Cortázar’s theme of passage between two worlds (between reality and fiction in stories such as “Continuidad de los parques”, between the observer and its object in “Axolotl” and, obviously, between Europe and Argentina in “El otro cielo”, or even in Rayuela) organizes the first episode centred on symmetries and correspondences. The intersection of the main character and Cortázar – a young version on page 3, and a mythical image on page 7 – structures the story, and this connection is underlined by the old radio the boy uses in 1953 to listen to soap operas, the same radio broadcasting the news of Cortázar’s death when he is an adult. The same organization of sequences reinforces this symmetry. The first four pages begin with the child character coming out of school, looking at the observer, while the
last three chapters show the adult character, seen from his back entering a bar. Both sequences go from expositional clarity to major abstraction: the child's narrative very clearly relates the ambush by his schoolmates and the ensuing fight; afterwards it focuses on details, shows close-ups, and attention to text and the sound of the radio. The adult's sequence similarly ends with a mute and gloomy scene of the encounter with Cortázar. Both sequences contain similar frames (panel 2, page 2 (figure 11) and panel 4, page 6 (figure 12)), showing, a silent character surrounded by haphazard characters at the centre of the image with a bar in the background.

This first episode summarizes both worlds, the alternating worlds of *Sudor Sudaca* that are both presented as unintelligible. The story not only treats the impossibility of understanding exile banishment but also the impossibility of grasping Argentina's past, depicted as torn into pieces, unrelated to its present, and full of inaccessible references for both a European readership and *Fierro*’s younger readers. The language of the comic can be interpreted similarly. If the dialogues of sequence in Italy remain untranslated even in the Argentine version, Argentine language itself is equally presented as a foreign language that can only be partially understood. The Argentine characters accumulate phrases of child and domestic abuse, all cut, syncopated, odd words: “chupate 'sta manadarina”, “te via matar”, “joeputachoemierda”, “con mi vieja no te metás”, “yo te via
Even the radio announcer’s voice is transcribed into an oral register making the words look odd: “El alimento completo y rico para los ninnios”. In Sudor Sudaca “everybody talks, everybody talks at the same time, everybody speaks different languages, nobody understands anything” (Carut 1999).

Pablo de Santis observed that “The stories of Sudor Sudaca are very good, but, all in all, they are not their best. Their best are the ones taking place in another country, even though they are undoubtedly Argentinean. Freed from the burden of remembering a language, freed from the need of rebuilding a world which they had left aside, they create their own system, their own world. When they try to represent the “Argentine language”, colloquialism, it sometimes turns into an unfamiliar nonexistent slang, full of exacerbated tics” (De Santis 1992: 91). I believe, however, that the effect is quite the opposite. Far from
striving to oral mimesis effecting recognition, the dialogues tend to do the reverse. The observation “an unfamiliar inexistent slang” is correct but, in the context of the whole series, it is difficult to maintain that the strangeness of this Argentine language is a failure. Instead, I believe it is fundamental to the meaning of the narrative. If, as popular belief tells us, language is motherland, then Sudor Sudaca seems to say that there is no more motherland.

The remaining episodes are set in the Europe of the exiled (“Solos para siempre” (“Forever Alone”) and “Dos o tres mil cosas que los otros saben de mí” (“Two or Three Thousand Things the Others Don’t Know About Me”), an Argentina of the past (“Viril convocatoria” (“Virile Summons”) or a present-day Argentina imbued by the past (“Otoño y primavera” (“Fall and Spring”). Characteristic of these episodes from Sudor Sudaca, leaving aside the in many senses exceptional “Otoño y primavera,” is the impossibility of every possible reconstruction of national identity. If the two constituent elements of that identity are the continuity with the past and the idea of an imagined community of the present, both relations seem hopelessly fractured. The episodes of the exile deal, through different registers, with the impossibility to reconstruct histories and with the distrust and ignorance amongst the exiled. “Solos para siempre” tells the story of Roby, an Argentine pretending he had been kidnapped during the dictatorship in order to seduce Juana, who, after increasing rumors in the Argentine community that she is a military infiltrator, is expelled from the group. An impersonal voice off narrates all events in the present tense, and his task is limited to presenting what happens. The past cannot be reconstructed because the characters just assume, speculate or invent everything related to Argentina. The climax of this impossibility of representing Argentina during dictatorship is reached on pages 6 and 7 of the comic. Until this moment, the image had been going along with the rumors, showing each of the exiled when new additions were made to the story. On page 6 (figure 13), the narrator continues to unfold the speculations of the group of exiled, claiming Roby to be an agent of repression having participated in torture and kidnapping, and who is reportedly planning actions against the exiled. The image, unable to show the present, does not show anything: in the frames the script is depicted, with the description of scenes of repression and death that should be seen in the drawings. The descriptive texts themselves are fragmented and then destroyed: the words of the text reappear and form new sentences; they break the linear sequencing of the verbal and are put randomly inside the panels. Language also seems powerless to represent horror.

In the same way the Argentine exiled are incapable of reconstituting the past, a past framed by the episodes of exile, the relationship among the compatriots is equally tainted by radical miscommunication. Distrust and fear organize their relationships. On the other hand, the choice of the beaches of Sitges as the setting of the story is not accidental. It is an international place, devoid of local color and crossed by languages (English, Italian, different varieties of Spanish). This mixture of languages – systematically interrupted by the frame’s borders in sequences – is superposed by the narrator’s voice that resists all kinds of regional marks in his speech, with the exception of the word “coger” (“to fuck”) accompanying the beautiful image of Juana’s naked body. This can be seen as the only moment of truth the story contains.

The same topic structures the second episode of the stories of exile, “Dos o tres mil cosas que los otros saben de mí,” in which the main character is unexpectedly visited by two foreigners he does not recognize, but who seem to know every detail of his life. The paranoid pattern of the story is similar to that of “Solos para siempre” in which the exiled are unable to reconnect with the past and memory. The comic itself shows its readers nothing more than this mere impossibility. “Dos o tres mil cosas…” is an empty dialogue plagued by allusions while the images depict intimate gestures not found in the text: the “invaders” make their way to the flat they “invaded,” they occupy the place and make themselves at home (they serve drinks, open the fridge, search the library and look at the portraits), while the owner is stupefied and is unable to react. The sequence is frequently interrupted by images depicting foreign places (while the dialogues continues) in which the tower of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona and the Eiffel Tower in Paris are pure signs that refer to particular cities. In the one image that does not show vistas of the kind, a travel agency is depicted suggesting that, if the ties with the past are broken and one is unable or unwilling to remember, the present is reduced to the utter superficiality of tourism.
This rupture with every national bond is not only related to immigrants, but also to the representation of the past. “Viril convocatoria” is set at the same period as is that of the opening pages of the comic, sometime during the 1950s. The narration of a character facing military draft, a real nightmare for any Argentine male until the nineties, can be read as the recovery of the past that the stories of the exiled were canceling out. However, the accumulation of references, brands, proper names and places is subjected to an ironic distancing. There are comments full of “Argentinisms” (“tacho” is Argentine for “culo” (ass)) and statements that on the contrary “Argentinize” certain others, like when a tango singer says “What do the pitucos/lambidos y sushetas know? (Qué shaben los pitucos/lambidos y sushetas?),” with the text clearly indicating the singer’s pronunciation (“shaben”).

It can be noted that the most remote past, the golden fifties, becomes even stranger when making use of a language that is almost foreign to memory. And this Argentina, far from being presented as an idyllic place, as a golden age destroyed by dictatorship, is an accumulation of different forms of violence, class and gender differences. To the violence of the dictators – all coming together in the ironic final speech – is added the disdain towards and mockery of a suspected gay, functioning as an answer to the racial slurs against the “cabecita negra”. The repetition of the word “negros” corresponds to the repetition of the black of the drawings.

This leaves us with the final episode, “Otoño y Primavera”. This moving story focuses on the parents of two exiled who meet when their respective children, Héctor and Alicia, announce that they are going to get married in Europe. Made in December 1984, almost a year after the end of the dictatorship and after the authors’ visit to Argentina, with as setting the day of the general election, the comic reworks the themes of the previous chapters, endowing them with a new meaning attesting to the hopeful climate of those days. All ingredients are present: exile, the emergence of the past, interrupted dialogues, the moving back and forth of time. However, what is out of place in the other chapters, gains meaning here. To begin with, the setting of the comic is far less strained than in the other episodes. The plot is clearer (there is less “sweat”), the framing is less artificial and more revealing – small details, a sprained ankle, and an unsheathed knife – add information to the plot without diverting its course. The secondary characters, one of Muñoz’s and Sampayo’s trademarks, are almost always laughing (page 3, plate 1; page 6, plate 5; page 8, plate 3; page 8, plate 3; page 10, plate 1; page 14, plate 2; page 17, plate 4). And there is reference to linguistic difference, now revaluated as beautiful and not as mere misunderstanding on page 6, plate 5. There are two random characters talking: “Do you know what the Catalanian word for pigeon is? Colometa”, “Oh, how nice!”

The whole comic aspires to synthesis. The subtle indication of the protagonists’ social class suggests a reading that visualizes, in the parents of the exiled, a synthesis between members of the middle class and the suburban poor and a synthesis between radicals and peronists embracing the whole transition. It is hardly a coincidence that the elderly are the ones organizing their lives – their children will separate – as reflected in the remark of an old man stating that “I am peronist, but I vote Alfonsin,” while a youngster accuses him of being a traitor. The comic shows the renewal of the bonds between the past and the present, the rebuilding of a nation after horror and the hopes for transition.

Hence, the past explains the characters’ present, especially in the case of Héctor’s mother, who is intimately marked by the past, especially by being abandoned by her son’s father. And next to providing an explanation, it ties them together: when Héctor was much younger, his mother used to listen to the soap operas transmitted by a radio that had been tuned by Alicia’s father. Local color, which previously functioned as a device for estrangement and violence, now provides union and it may suffice to compare in this respect the milonga in the Japanese Park in “Viril convocatoria”, the dance evening full of racial tension and anger, with the tango danced by the main characters in “Otoño y Primavera”. The comic ends with a stroll in a park where old comics magazines of the “golden age” are sold, such as Misterix, Rayo Rojo (Red Lightning) and Frontera (Frontier) (figure 14). The only moment of violence comes literally from the past through the return of Ireneo, Héctor’s father. This interruption alters the setting of the comic and the lives of the characters. Once more, the frames take a detour and play with the notion of unintelligibility (figure 15). It is the interruption of an irrational, archaic knowledge as Ireneo is intent on using his rights over his wife and son – whom he has not contacted in twenty years – on the sole and simple argument of being “the
father”. He attacks Alicia’s father with a “cuchillo,” a typical Argentine knife, in a sort of creole duel that does not end in death but in synthesis: “Your Héctor and my daughter got married, that is all”.

In this comic, as well as in the mindset during which it was drawn, the past and the present could work together in the reconnection of broken links. Argentina’s democratic era has yet to accomplish this dream, and the policeman in the final image, resembling Dick Tracy, can be seen as a dark omen referring to our present (figure 14). However, in 1984, “Otoño y Primavera” offers a beautiful closure for the horror and its representation. If, as the current analysis has illustrated, representation of state terror demands distance, as in La Triple B, explication, as in Perramus, or simply resists representation, as in Sudor Sudaca, narrative and memory can only be recovered after regaining the possibility of talking about and hoping for a future.

Notes

1 Trans. note: The Process of National Reorganization is the name the junta employed for its so-called counterterrorist operation, which in reality constituted a system of unrestrained and arbitrary repression. Henceforth, the Process of National Reorganization will be simply referred to as the Process.

2 Trans. note: Iron, Superhumor and Leather (or Skin).


4 Trans. note: PAMI’s enigmas. PAMI is the system of social assistance granted by the Argentine state to the elderly.

5 Tiras de Cuero: el artepoder de la historieta. (Leather Strips: The Art-power of Comics). (In the following issues, the subtitle was changed into “Comic strip, etc. for adults”). Year 1, issue 4, November, 1983. The magazine was edited by Oscar Steinberg, with art director Roberto Rollie, special contributor Oscar Traversa and contributors Carlos Albiac, Arístegui, Ricardo Barreiro, Gabriela Borgna, Emilio Corbiere, Alberto C. Dose, Angel Faretta, J. L. Gallego, Gottleib, Ángelica Gorodischer, Eduardo Gruner, Juan Jiménez (sic), Ernesto Melo, Oswal, Pané, Felix Savorido, Dalmoiro Sáenz, Guillermo Saccomanno, Sanyú, Oscar Steinberg, Mabel Tassara, Torre Repiso, Oscar Traversa, Carlos Trillo and Gil Wolf.

6 Previous versions of this section were published in El Picaseos, issue 2, Autumn, 1999 (La Plata, Argentina: La Máquina Infernal) and in Tram(p)as de la comunicación y la cultura 2:11, March 2003 (La Plata: School of Journalism of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata).

8 Perramus consists of four episodes that were first published in 1984 in Italy. The first instalment, conceived by its scriptwriter in 1982, and made during that and the following year, was published in Argentina in the eleventh issue of Fierro (July, 1985) and, together with the second episode, it was published in book form in 1990 by Lumen, Ediciones de la Flor and Ediciones Culturales Argentinas. The third episode, “La isla del guano”, was published in Spanish in 1993 by Ediciones B (Libros de CO & CO). The fourth episode, “Diente por diente”, was only published in France in 1991 as Perramus, Dent pour dent by Glénat. Because of the multiple publications, I will use Roman numerals to indicate the episode and Arabian numerals to indicate chapters and pages according to the internal sequence of plates. For instance, I, 1, 4 means Perramus I, chapter 1 (“Saber y no saber”), page 4.

The comics of the series Sudor Sudaca were published between 1982 and 1984, in Italy, Spain and Argentina, namely in Fierro’s first issue. The series has been collected in book form in Spain (Barcelona: La Cúpula,1990).

10 Trans. note: These are all slang. Approximations are: “suck this tangerine,” “gonna kill you,” “sonofabithpieceofshit,” “don’t mess with my old woman,” “gonna kill you”.

11 Trans. note: “pituco,” “lambido,” and "susheta" could be translated as “posh”.

12 Trans. note: “cabecita negra” and “negros” can be translated as “niggers,” but refers more specifically to immigrants from the North of Argentina and from Bolivia and Paraguay.
References


