

Más Allá, El Eternauta, and the Dawn of the Golden Age of Latin American Science Fiction (1953-59)

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Abstract: The comic *El Eternauta* is widely acclaimed as Argentina's most important work of science fiction, and Héctor Germán Oesterheld has been called "the most important comics writer in Argentine comics history, if not in the world" (Pilcher and Brooks). This essay discusses the confluence of events that led to the work's appearance at the dawn of the golden age of Latin American science fiction [sf]. It surveys the groundwork for *El Eternauta* laid by the genre magazine *Más Allá*; it then examines the initial function of *El Eternauta* in establishing a firmer footing for genre sf in Argentina and the work's continuing role as a reference point for a science fiction that reflects a Latin American worldview.

On a winter's night in 1957 (or 1959)¹ a *guionista*, or writer of comics, is working late in the atelier of his Buenos Aires home when a man dressed in futuristic clothing materializes in the chair across from him [Fig. 1]. The man tells the writer that he travels through time, searching the centuries for those he has lost. He has been called by hundreds of names, the most apt of which is *el Eternauta* [the Eternaut] because of his "triste y desolada condición de peregrino de los siglos" [sad and desolate condition as a time pilgrim] (Etl_O-SL 5). He eventually reveals that his original name was Juan Salvo, but the identity of this ordinary man has been altered by extraordinary events. The account of these events that we are now reading, the *guionista* declares, is the tale of the Eternauta just as the time traveler told it to him that night.

Thus ends the first installment of *El Eternauta*, which was to become one of Latin America's landmark works in the area of adventure comics and in the genre of sf.² The first and most iconic version of *El Eternauta* was written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld (1919-78), drawn by Francisco Solano López (b. 1928), and serialized in the weekly comics magazine, *Hora Cero Semanal* [*Zero Hour Weekly*], from 4 September 1957 to 9 September 1959. *The Essential Guide to World Comics* calls Oesterheld "the most important comics writer in Argentine comics

history, if not in the world” (Pilcher and Brooks 210).³ Most people in the Argentine sf community, including the nation’s foremost critic of the genre, Pablo Capanna, cite *El Eternauta* as one of the greatest works, if not the greatest work, of sf produced in that country (Capanna). My present interest in this *historieta* [comic] centers on the confluence of events that led to the appearance of the work at the dawn of what Andrea L. Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán have termed the “first golden age” of Latin American sf (7), the initial function of the work in establishing a firmer footing for genre sf in Argentina, and its continuing role as a reference point for sf that reflects a Latin American worldview.

The golden age of Latin American sf began in the late 1950s, lasting through the mid-1970s.⁴ Prior to this time models for science fictional writing in Latin America were largely global rather than local. Since the nineteenth century Latin American sf texts had been in dialogue with the genre on an international—principally Northern (American and European)—level, but there were few connections at the national or regional level.⁵ The readership of earlier Latin American sf generally was restricted to a socioeconomic elite due to issues of literacy, education, and access to literary and scientific publications. The golden age saw the formation of a more coherent local tradition(s)⁶ of Latin American sf. While the epicenter of the genre remained in the North, Latin American writers were now writing both from and for a wider local community. This period saw increasing interest in characterizing Latin American contributions to the genre, a hotly debated topic in Latin America even today.⁷ Critics seeking to define what is truly Latin American about Latin American sf have consistently emphasized that a work must go beyond the superficial levels of character, setting, and language and reveal a Latin American perspective. The Latin American reader must, as Capanna has said, “sentirse interpretado” [feel him/herself to be represented] by these writers and this writing (qtd. in “Coloquio a Distancia”

18). With *El Eternauta*, Oesterheld and Solano López set the bar quite high, providing one of the more deft representations of the Latin American/Argentine reader on all levels.

El Eternauta appeared at a pivotal moment in the history of Latin American sf, but other key interrelated transitions were occurring simultaneously in comics, politics, and science. Circa 1957 the Argentine comics scene underwent a transformation, due in no small part to Oesterheld's work as founder of the magazines *Hora Cero* and *Frontera* [*Frontier*] and as a writer. As Carlos Trillo and Guillermo Saccomanno describe in their *Historia de la historieta argentina* [*History of the Argentine Comic*], works were now being written for more mature audiences, with higher quality texts and artwork (96-97). At this time comics had not yet ceded pride of place to television in the entertainment sphere and circulation numbers were quite high.⁸ On the volatile Argentine political scene, candidate and then president Arturo Frondizi (1958-62) was promoting *desarrollismo* [Developmentalism] in a campaign to raise the national standard of living through modernization and technological progress. In science, the atomic era was just meeting the space race era, fostering both technophobia concerning humanity's capabilities for destruction and technophilia inspired by the tremendous possibilities waiting beyond the new frontier. While only Northern nations possessed nuclear capabilities and space programs, the nuclear threat was global and this was an era in which unconquered space belonged more equally to everyone, occupying a vivid place in the Argentine national imagination. What Oesterheld and Solano López do in *El Eternauta* is to combine Northern-driven advances in science (in atomics and rocketry), sf (a genre whose origins and distribution power were based in the North), and the adventure comic (where Northern superheroes held sway over the international imagination), and they look at them with Southern eyes.

Foundations: Más Allá, the rise of the techie, and the birth of Argentine fandom

The groundwork for both the audience and the characters of *El Eternauta* was laid by the magazine *Más Allá* [*Beyond*], published from 1953 to 1957. Capanna has called this period the “implantation” stage of Argentine science fiction and cites *Más Allá* as the primary impetus behind this phenomenon (*El mundo* 178-79). *Más Allá* was one of the earliest, most successful, and most influential sf magazines in Argentine and Latin American history. The complete title of the magazine was *Más Allá de la ciencia y de la fantasía: Revista mensual de aventuras apasionantes en el mundo de la magia científica* [*Beyond Science and Fantasy: A Monthly Magazine of Thrilling Adventures in the World of Scientific Magic*]. While the first issue also carried the slogan “cuentos y novelas de la era atómica” [stories and novels of the atomic era] on the front cover and the magazine frequently included content on nuclear physics and its products, this descriptive phrase does not appear on subsequent issues. The tone of the magazine is perhaps better summarized by the editors of the Spanish science fiction magazine *Nueva Dimensión* [*New Dimension*] in a 1973 *Más Allá* tribute issue, where they described the era of *Más Allá* as “los tiempos románticos y dorados de los viajes espaciales” [the romantic and golden times of space travel] (“Lo mejor de... *Más Allá*” 7). If the atomic-age arms race and Cold War somewhat tempered optimism about the race for space, the magazine’s readers nonetheless remained firm inhabitants of the World of Scientific Magic.

Although *Más Allá* was part of the U.S. sf magazine *Galaxy*’s international family of subsidiaries and its fictional material consisted largely of Northern sf in translation, it was very much an Argentine magazine. It led to the formation of a national sf readership and served as a point of contact for the nascent Argentine sf fan movement. *Más Allá* was known for the challenging scientific questions in its “Espaciotest” [SpaceTest], for its section of

correspondence from readers called “Proyectiles dirigidos” [Guided Missiles], and for its scientific articles. Following are a few representative examples of the latter. The February 1957 issue (vol. 4, no. 44) contained an article titled “The Next Artificial Satellites” with pertinent technical diagrams and photos. The March issue (vol. 4, no. 45) had articles on the H Bomb, the effects of radiation poisoning, and the functions of Geiger counters. In the words of *Más Allá* reader and later poet, mathematics instructor, and sometime sf writer Guillermo Boido, the particular merit of the magazine was “presenting an integrated version of scientific and humanistic feats” (qtd. in Pessina and Sánchez 36). *Más Allá* was the first major vehicle via which contemporary Argentine sf writers were published, including Oesterheld himself.⁹

In the *Más Allá* years, Argentine sf readership broadened significantly beyond the socioeconomic elite circles of yesteryear. As the editors of *Más Allá* made clear in their final editorial,¹⁰ however, they still saw their technologically literate readers as “una élite relativamente restringida” [a relatively restricted elite] (vol. 4, no. 48 3). Their magazine, they say, “no se dirige al gran público sino a un sector intelectual y espiritualmente privilegiado” [is not aimed at the wider public but at an intellectually and spiritually privileged sector] (vol. 4, no. 48 3). This self-selecting “new elite” was less exclusive than the “old elite” sf readership of days gone by. They formed a cohesive science-fiction fan base. *Más Allá* was even printed on rather pulpy paper. Even at the height of the golden age of Latin American sf, however, the genre could not be described as attaining quite the same level of association with mass culture as it did in the U.S.

To understand exactly who these readers of *Más Allá* and later *El Eternauta* were and also some of the impetus behind the transformation taking place in Argentine sf, it is useful to refer to Beatriz Sarlo’s schema for the changing roles of science and technology in the Argentine

imagination. In *The Technical Imagination*, Sarlo describes the transition of Argentine culture from one dominated by respect for the generally elite “knowledge” of science to one in which the “know-how” of technology and engineering was more accessible to all (8). This is not to say that science was displaced by technology; as Sarlo states: “Science is remote; technology, proximate. For this very reason, science has an authority to which technology must finally defer” (28). Rather, science and technology could now be thought of as occupying communicating spheres.

Sarlo locates the beginning of this shift in the national imagination in the writing of Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937) during the first decades of the twentieth century and traces the continuation of the process in the work of Roberto Arlt (1900-42) and subsequent writers (4).¹¹ These are the first generations of writers—and readers—for whom technology was an integral part of daily life. This new understanding of technology first emerged with advances in transportation and communication, and, in particular, with the advent of radio. The early days of radio were marked by an explosion of aficionados, self-taught hobbyists who could build, fix, and manipulate radios and who saw their practical knowledge of technology as a route for moving up in the traditional social structure and modernizing the nation (Sarlo 6-9).¹² It is no coincidence that Capanna describes *Más Allá* readers as “a stable conglomerate of students, ham radio operators, technicians, and engineers” (*El mundo* 179).¹³ In the Argentine futuristic fiction of the first half of the twentieth century, particularly that published in the periodical press, Sarlo points out, the technophobia lingering from the memory of World War I weaponry was overshadowed by “the optimism of a narrative in which science was rational and technology was working for positive changes in everyday life [...] unimpeded by Argentina’s position of marginality and its comparatively slower pace of technological development” (71) The “new elite” readership of both *Más Allá* and *El Eternauta*—and the characters of *El Eternauta*

themselves, whom Capanna has described as “masallistas” [Más Allá-ists]—all exemplify this changing dynamic of science and technology in Argentine culture (*El mundo* 181).

Let us close this brief overview of *Más Allá* and the implantation stage of Argentine sf and segue into *El Eternauta* and the golden age proper by quoting from one reader’s letter in the “Guided Missiles” section of the magazine. “Mister Director,” writes Julio Castellvi, “we have formed the ‘Center of Friends of *Más Allá*,’ an association dedicated to studying and experimenting in astro-modeling with the objective of building and studying miniature models of rockets and guided missiles.” The reader proceeds to put out a call to *Más Allá* readers to join the organization and provides a long list of “practical or theoretical” knowledge and skills that would be particularly valuable to the group, including

general aeronautics, aerodynamics, carpentry, lathe operation, metallurgy,
chemistry, physics, electricity, radio, aviation instrumentation, communications,
photography, mechanics (internal combustion and diesel engines), ham radio
operators, model airplanes, meteorology, ballistics, mathematics, astronomy,
draftsmen, general medicine, office work, and law.

Castellvi’s letter resulted in the founding of a successful club that contributed to developing Argentine fandom (Pessina and Sánchez 277), but beyond this, his laundry list of skills provides a more detailed idea of the readership of *Más Allá* and a virtual casting call for *El Eternauta*.

El Eternauta: Cast and catastrophe

In the second installment of the comic, we enter the Eternauta’s framed tale. Juan Salvo is in the attic workshop of his home playing the card game *truco* [literally, “trick”] with three close friends [Figs. 2-3]. Salvo himself is a small industrialist, owner of a transformer factory.

He uses the workshop to pursue his hobby of making model airplanes. Favalli is a physics professor who dabbles in electronics in the workshop. Lucas works in a bank; his hobby is also electronics and he has built his own Geiger counter [Fig. 3]. The retired Polsky uses his allotted space to make violins. This is a group of *masallistas*, a group overflowing with the technical know-how described by Sarlo and exemplifying the new importance of technology to the Argentine imagination. At the same time, as per Sarlo's caveat, Favalli, the university professor, clearly represents the continued authority of science. Although others will defer to his ideas throughout the narrative, Favalli does not occupy an ivory tower but plays cards and socializes with his more technology-oriented neighbors. The dual benefits of technology for self and for nation as described by Sarlo find their perfect complement in the tenets of Frondizi's Developmentalism. Sasturain describes the *Eternauta*'s/Developmentalists' ideal society as including: "class alliance, the recognition of the fundamental role of the worker, the necessary presence of the military, and the incorporation of the intellectuals" as well as the small industrialist ("El Eternauta no tiene" 188). The friends are already representative of the type of alliance supported by the administration, and the group will later become even more so as it changes somewhat in composition.

The friends' weekly *truco* game, a mundane scene from average Argentine life, is interrupted by a fantastic and catastrophic event: it begins to snow in Buenos Aires. Beyond the fact that it only snows in Buenos Aires once or twice a century, this is no ordinary snowfall; the friends soon realize that any contact with the phosphorescent flakes means almost instantaneous death. Luckily they are playing cards in a house that is hermetically sealed and they do not open a window or step outside before apprehending that this is a "nevada mortal" [lethal snowfall] (repeated mention). Unlike the superheroes that dominated the U.S. comics scene at the time,

these protagonists remain human and fallible. Their subsequent survival has much to do with the fact that they are *masallistas*. They have the practical, technical knowledge to jury-rig a radio battery, allowing them to confirm via a BBC broadcast that the snowfall is a worldwide phenomenon and is not, as they had suspected, the result of a nuclear testing accident in a Northern nation (of course, Lucas has already ascertained the latter with his homemade Geiger counter) [Fig. 4]. Their knowledge of English passes without comment; the only impediments to communication with the outside are technological in nature—a strange interference stops all radio transmissions.¹⁴ The friends do not discover the source of the snowfall for some time; they concentrate on constructing their own isolation suits in the workshop, now occasionally referred to with the science-plus-technology term “laboratorio-taller” [laboratory-workshop] (EtI_O-SL 26).

In many ways the tale is a fairly typical variation on the five stages of the end-of-the-world narrative outlined by Gary Wolfe in “The Remaking of Zero” (stages are numbered in brackets below; see Wolfe 8). Once they [1] “experience [...] the cataclysm,” the group members take stock of their new reality with a series of [2] “journey[s] through the wasteland.” A roll of the dice makes Juan Salvo the first to sally out of the airtight house and through the ghost town that Buenos Aires has become. Everywhere, in scenes that represent some of Solano López’s greatest work [Figs. 5-6], Salvo passes his fellow citizens whom death has surprised at the wheel of a car, in a shop, or stepping out to get the milk from the front stoop. A Frondizi political slogan painted on a wall is blurred by the defamiliarizing snowflakes.¹⁵ Salvo’s first priority is to obtain weapons from the hardware store for defense against marauders, now that “la ley de la jungla” [the law of the jungle] will soon reign supreme (anticipating Wolfe’s stage [4], “the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist” complete with “the challenges brought on by

unorganized bands of fellow survivors, who commonly revert to savagery”) (EtI_O-SL 31; Wolfe 8, 13). In the process, Salvo rescues Pablo, an abused orphan who had been locked in the cellar for punishment by the store’s now deceased owner. Pablo is experienced at repairing and using firearms, making him an ideal addition to the *masallistas*.

Initially it seems the small group will build new lives for themselves in the Salvo home, thereby initiating [3], the “settlement and establishment of a new community.” In the early episodes, then, *El Eternauta* is also a Robinsonade. Indeed, Salvo himself makes the comparison, saying “Éramos Robinsones en nuestra propia casa. Sólo que el mar que nos rodeaba era un mar de muerte” [We were Robinsons in our own home, but the sea that surrounded us was a sea of death] (EtI_O-SL 14). On a later sally Juan and Lucas come across Friday-like footprints in the phosphorescent snow (EtI_O-SL 46), but these footprints belong to a marauder who kills Lucas for his superior isolation suit (the first evidence of stage [4]). Judging Buenos Aires too dangerous, the group plans to take refuge in the mountains and establish a new community [3], but these plans never come to fruition. Once the protagonists discover that the deadly snowfall is the first salvo in the attack of an alien invader that is striking the entire Earth, it becomes clear that this is no longer completely a tale of “remaking zero,” a narrative of “the evolution toward a new culture” that follows a disaster (Wolfe 4, 16). *El Eternauta* instead turns out to be an account of the efforts to survive what will prove to be an ongoing catastrophe. There is no time for evolution in the tale; time virtually stands still, resulting in what Canaparo has described as a prolonged or “constant present” (880). Rather than “remaking zero” in *El Eternauta*, Oesterheld constructs a reality in which a more static “zero atmosphere” becomes the new norm (Canaparo 878, emphasis mine).¹⁶ In the end there will be no [5] “decisive battle” between good and evil (Wolfe 8, 14), because the battle is ongoing and never ending.

Argentine hero(es): “Solidarity” over “super-”

Historically aliens had not targeted Argentina for invasion nor had they had an Argentine in mind when saying “Take me to your leader” or even “Resistance is futile.” Oesterheld-Solano López’s use of Argentine characters and an Argentine setting was highly unusual for sf, for comics, and for adventure narratives at that time. “Possibly it all comes down to the fact that we do not consider ourselves capable of being protagonists,” Oesterheld said in an interview in 1971 (qtd. in *Oesterheld en primera persona* 41). According to Juan Sasturain, perhaps the most eloquent and knowledgeable writer on *El Eternauta* and the Argentine *historieta*, adventure had a “domicilio natural” [natural domicile] where “flying heroes, private detectives, [and] fast-drawing, sure-shooting gunslingers” belonged, and this domicile was Northern (“Oesterheld” 121). Sasturain specifies:

It is usually a place where English is spoken, and it is far away from here or—at least—it is not here, the place or the circumstance where the reading and consumption of the message are taking place. [...] Adventure does not live in the U.S.A. but rather in that rhetorical and arbitrary place that makes of the U.S. and its *world*—transcribed onto the entire universe as a setting—the comfortable and *adventurable* environment par excellence. (“Oesterheld” 121)

Sasturain recognizes Oesterheld as a pioneer who “changed the address” of Adventure, making Argentines and Argentine reality “*adventurable*”; Oesterheld accomplished this both on the surface levels of his narrative and at the deeper levels of the national imaginary, representing an Argentine or “third world” perspective [“planteo tercerista”] in his story (“Oesterheld” 122-24).

Oesterheld's "third world perspective" is particularly apparent in his exploration of issues of power dynamics (Sasturain, "Oesterheld" 124), both among members of Argentine society and among nations of the world. At the local level of the characters, Oesterheld created both heroes and villains who did not follow the Northern norm. Superman and Batman had extraordinary powers and/or ultra high-tech gizmos. They were loners, operating in a system characterized by "the verticalism imposed by the paternalistic and independent hero" (García v). Their archenemies were generally photonegatives of these Northern comic book stars, the other side of the same coin. Over the years Oesterheld developed his own concept of a group or collective hero, whose members come from and belong to everyday life. Oesterheld himself was the first to apply the term to his own work:

El héroe verdadero de *El Eternauta* es un héroe colectivo, un grupo humano.

Refleja así, aunque sin intención previa, mi sentir íntimo: el único héroe válido es el héroe "en grupo", nunca el héroe individual, el héroe solo. (qtd. in Oesterheld and Solano López 2)

[The true hero of *El Eternauta* is a collective hero, a human group. It thus reflects, although without prior design, my deep feeling: the only valid hero is the "group" hero, never the individual hero, the hero alone.]

With his collective hero Oesterheld "prioritizes the value of horizontal and complementary relations," of solidarity (García v). In *El Eternauta* this solidarity is ever-expanding, widening to include family, friends, nation, humanity, and beyond.

This *historieta* is not a tale of superpowers nor yet of Superpowers. Global power dynamics are not represented as a bi-polar clash of the titans. Interstellar relations are not the displaced tensions between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. common to Northern narratives of the era.

El Eternauta contains characters and situations universal in scope and appeal, but here invasion/battles royal/oppression and also resistance/action/protagonism are portrayed from the periphery and in the periphery. Still, as is common in Latin American sf, the periphery is not represented in isolation from the center. In *El Eternauta* Argentine heroes, events taking place in Argentina, and Argentine identity itself are frequently conceived and constructed in dialog with the political, scientific, and cultural influences of the North's central nations.

The composition of the group hero changes several times in *El Eternauta*. Polsky and Lucas are lost early on, victims of the deadly snowfall and marauders. When the Robinsonade/end-of-world narrative morphs into an alien invasion story, the remaining male members of the group leave Juan Salvo's wife and daughter with provisions in the relative safety of their home and join with the few remaining members of the military, the last possibility for an organized resistance.¹⁷ Favalli is immediately made an advisor to the ranking officer, and, due to his marksmanship and training in the reserves, Juan Salvo is made commander of the civilian volunteers. One of the volunteers, Franco, is wearing a particularly well-crafted isolation suit. Seeking a *scientific* explanation, Juan Salvo asks him if he is a student, but no, Franco is a worker (first described as a foundry worker and later as a lathe operator [see the Castellvi letter above]). Salvo then questions him: “¿Cómo hiciste para salvarte? ¿Estabas con alguien que conocía de física?” [How did you save yourself? Were you with someone who knew something of physics?] (EtI_O-SL 77). Franco, explains his *technical* savvy—thus identifying himself as belonging to that “intellectually and spiritually privileged sector” of the *masallistas*—saying: “No... Estaba yo solo... Y yo solo me hice el traje. Usted sabe, yo leo mucho... novelas, historietas del futuro, de ficción científica...” [No... I was alone... And I made the suit by myself.

You know, sir, I read a lot... novels, comics about the future, about science fiction...] (EtI_O-SL 77, ellipses in the original). The worker soon takes a leadership role in this new environment.

Battles ensue at well known but now estranged streets and landmarks of Buenos Aires. The group fights insectlike aliens called *cascarudos*, giant creatures called *gurbos*, other human survivors converted into robot-men, and the immediate superiors or handlers of all three, the *manos* [hands] [Fig. 7]. The human resistance is terribly outnumbered, and the technological disparity is so great Favalli compares their situation to that of the American Indians against the Spanish conquistadors (EtI_O-SL 109). Each time they think they have found the true enemy, it turns out to be another race of victims enslaved by unseen rulers known only as “Los Ellos” [Them]. *Los Ellos* are not a displaced version of the Red Menace or of a regional enemy of Argentina. Neither are *They* Northern-style supervillains. *They* are Evil itself—in the words of a dying *mano*, “Ellos son el odio... el odio cósmico” [They are hatred... cosmic hatred] (EtI_O-SL 164). The numbers of the Argentine (or local Terran) resistance are gradually decimated by attacks by the other *Ellos*-controlled groups.

Eventually our collective hero is reduced to only three members. It is no accident the final Argentine resistance is made up of the narrative’s three leading *masallistas*: Favalli, who speaks with the authority of scientific knowledge but also possesses technical know-how; Juan Salvo, who had contributed to national modernization with his transformer factory and whose attic workshop and technical savvy have been instrumental in the post-catastrophe survival of himself and others; and Franco, who is a worker with less formal education but whose practical technical abilities and reading of sf enabled him first to rise in status in the former Argentine class structure and then to become a leader in a society leveled by the invasion. Despite the long odds against them, the three move in the direction of what they suspect to be the alien

headquarters in search of information on any potential vulnerability in their enemy. They see guided missiles in the sky, coming from the North. Favalli identifies them as atomic, but superior alien technology prevents the bombs from detonating. The group's mission becomes ever more urgent; as Juan Salvo says, "Nuestros datos podían decidir la suerte del planeta todo" [Our data could determine the fate of the entire planet] (EtI_O-SL 251). These words occupy the only frame in *El Eternauta* in which the Earth is depicted from space; the viewing angle features a prominent South American continent. Northern technological superiority is recognized throughout *El Eternauta*, but Argentines, from our group of friends to the military, demonstrate that they are quite conversant with modern technology. Argentina is represented not only as "adventurable" but also as potentially playing a major role in the global resistance to the invasion.

The trio arrives at the alien headquarters in the Plaza del Congreso [Congressional Plaza] [Fig. 8]. They suspect that the pulsating sphere in the center of the encampment may contain members of *los Ellos* themselves. Franco fires a well-placed bazooka shot at the point at which the sphere touches the Monument to the Two Congresses, which is topped by a figure symbolizing the Argentine republic. The protective sphere is pierced, killing this outpost of Them (death by foreign microbes, along the lines of Wells's Martians, is posited). The monument remains unscathed. But unknowing Northerners continue their bombing raids on the now unshielded Southern city. The trio is rejoined by two members of the civilian volunteers, and together they flee toward the suburbs.

Though the seeds of the message are in this text, the North is not yet portrayed by Oosterheld as being in league with the forces of evil.¹⁸ The Northern bombs soon find their mark, giving us stark images of an "atomized Buenos Aires" [Fig. 9]. Even now Oosterheld, an

inveterate *masallista* himself, cannot bring himself to use a technophobic tone. He portrays this nuclear holocaust as a horrible accident caused by disrupted communications capabilities, and his fellow *masallistas* continue to seek to get their firsthand information on the enemy to Northern powers/allies. Skipping ahead a few installments, we find that the rest of the group sacrifice themselves so that Juan Salvo, now reunited with his wife and daughter, can escape the pursuing armies of robot-men. The Salvo family takes refuge in an alien aircraft. Salvo madly presses buttons on a control panel in an attempt to fly it to safety, but he is transported away from Elena and Martita to another continuum. There he meets an old *mano*, who explains that Salvo has escaped *los Ellos* but has become separated in time from his family. Juan Salvo is forced into the role of the eternal seeker, *El Eternauta*.

The *historieta* now seems to emerge as the story of a single individual, of a solitary hero and a fallen one at that. The subsequent words of the *mano* and the lessons taken from the Eternauta's story by the *guionista* in the frame negate this, however, and continue the central message of solidarity Oesterheld has been crafting since the first lethal snowflakes fell. As the old *mano* explains to Salvo-Eternauta:

Así como hay entre los hombres, por sobre los sentimientos de familia o de patria, un sentimiento de solidaridad hacia todos los demás seres humanos, descubrirás que también existe entre todos los seres inteligentes del universo, por más diferentes que sean, sentimientos de solidaridad, un apego a todo lo que sea espíritu. (EtI_O-SL 349)

[Just as among men there is, above the feelings of family or country, a feeling of solidarity toward other human beings, you will discover that there is also a feeling

of solidarity, an attachment to all that is spirit, among all of the intelligent beings of the universe, however different they may be.]

Only such solidarity can form an *Us* strong enough to preserve this “spirit” and to combat the “cosmic hatred” that is *Them*. Though the Earth is destroyed, the old *mano* continues, the *masallistas* have not fought in vain: their resistance has served to inspire all who still stand against *los Ellos*.

In the final episode we return to the frame story. The Eternauta realizes the year is 1959, and the events he has described had happened/will happen in 1963. He runs out of the writer’s house to find his family. The writer runs after him, only to find him—futuristic clothing mysteriously changed into a v-neck sweater and slacks—with his wife and daughter. He has forgotten his story. The writer begins to think he himself has dreamt or hallucinated the whole thing, but then who arrive to play *truco* but Favalli, Polsky, and Lucas [Fig. 10]. “¿Qué hacer?” [What to do?], the writer asks himself in the final frames as the four friends discuss whose turn it is to deal, “¿Qué hacer para evitar tanto horror? ¿Será posible evitarlo publicando todo lo que el Eternauta me contó? ¿Será posible?” [What to do to avoid so much horror? Can it be possible to avoid it by publishing all that the Eternauta told me? Can it be possible?] (EtI_O-SL 352).

The legacy of El Eternauta

Oesterheld would revisit *El Eternauta* at length twice more at decade intervals, rewriting *El Eternauta I* in 1969 (with artwork by Breccia) and writing *El Eternauta II*, a continuation of the 1957-59 *Eternauta*, in 1976-77 (with artwork by Solano López). With each version Oesterheld “se fue identificando cada vez más con su propia historia” [identified more and more with his own tale] (Solano López); both narrative and writer grew more politically radical. In the

Oesterheld-Breccia *Eternauta*, the *guionista* is drawn in Oesterheld's likeness. By the Oesterheld-Solano López *Eternauta II*, published during the military dictatorship that waged what came to be known as the *Guerra Sucia* [Dirty War] (1976-83) against the Argentine people, Juan Salvo has become a militant against oppressive rulers, and the *guionista* character is now openly called Oesterheld and accompanies him on his adventures.

Oesterheld became active in the *Montonero* guerilla group that supported popular revolution against the increasingly repressive regimes in the 1970s. For this and for writing scripts such as the later *Eternautas* and the *Vida del Ché* [*Life of Ché Guevara*] (1968), Oesterheld was "disappeared" by the military in 1977, even as the magazine *Skorpio* continued to publish their backlog of *El Eternauta II* installments.¹⁹ *El Eternauta*, particularly the less overtly ideological *Eternauta* of 1957-59, was a cultural icon long before Oesterheld's death and in the intervening years it has achieved mythic status. It is a symbol of solidarity and of resistance to oppression, whether that of a dictator at home or of imperialism in all its manifestations. Images of Juan Salvo in his isolation suit can be found on Argentine walls in solidarity with the missing *desaparecidos* [disappeared] of the Dirty War, next to a protester against the visit of President George W. Bush in 2005, next to passages from *El Eternauta*, or with the simple message "Resiste" [Resist].²⁰

According to Capanna, while the economic and political instability that has plagued Argentina since the 1930s has prevented the flowering of "a solid local school of science fiction" (*El mundo* 177), Argentines have made frequent and consistent contributions to the genre, one of the principal among them being *El Eternauta*. Written at the dawn of the golden age of Latin American science fiction, this *historieta* was a product of the times and circumstances, but it was also a unique result of the collaborative efforts of extraordinary individuals. *El Eternauta*

changed the landscape of the national imaginary for Argentine science fiction and adventure comics, in the process revealing much about this genre and this medium in the North. Even today when the debates on originality versus imitation in Latin American science fiction and comics continue to rage, *El Eternauta* remains a reference point, a model for what can be possible.

Endnotes

1. The date indicating the present day in the frame story of *El Eternauta* is given as 1957 in the opening frame and 1959 in the closing frame. These years reflect the dates of publication of the episodes in question.

2. There have been a confusing number of editions, rewritings, continuations, and even rewritten continuations of *El Eternauta* by a variety of *guionistas* [writers] and *dibujantes* [artists] in formats that include serialized comics published in magazines, collections of various parts of the *Eternauta* saga in book form, and one novel. Some versions are widely considered apocryphal. Litigation is ongoing. Here I am principally concerned with the first *Eternauta* by Oesterheld-Solano López; I am working with the *El Eternauta: 1957-2007, 50 años* edition, cited as EtI_O-SL. Oesterheld rewrote the first *Eternauta* in 1969 with artwork by the great Alberto Breccia; references here are to the Colihue edition, cited as EtI_O-AB. *El Eternauta II*, by Oesterheld and Solano López, was published in the magazine *Skorpio* from 1976-78. Loathe as I am to cite Wikipedia, the entry on *El Eternauta* in the Spanish edition is a useful starting point for those interested in further information on versions and editions. *El Eternauta* has never been translated into English (though the EtI_O-SL was, with some alterations, published in Italian in *Lanciostory* [1977-78]). All translations in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated. The original Spanish is provided for primary texts, select passages from secondary sources, and for certain key terms.

3. In many places in this article the author-artist team responsible for *El Eternauta* will be referred to as Oesterheld-Solano López, though often one or the other will be singled out for his contributions. Oesterheld consistently affirmed that he sent artists complete scripts to work from, that the ideas were his and there was very little to no collaboration on content (for Oesterheld on

the relationship between *guionista* and *dibujante*, see *Oesterheld en primera persona* 16, 21, 24-25, 31 and qtd. in Trillo and Saccomanno 97). By all accounts the working relationship between Oesterheld and Solano López was a good one. It did not resemble Eisner's "perfect (or pure) configuration" in which "the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person" (132), rather, as Solano López describes it, "Every week I received a handwritten script from Oesterheld (his secretary typed it later); we didn't speak any more about it. [...] We saw each other very little because we were so busy [with this and multiple other concurrent projects]" (Solano López).

4. Useful discussions of this time period in Latin American sf can be found in Bell and Molina-Gavilán 6-10, Capanna (*El mundo*) 178-89, Gandolfo 36-50, and Ginway 38-39.

5. For more on early Latin American science fiction see my "Back to the Future" and *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*.

6. Since the golden age there has been a fair amount of pan-Latin American activity in sf, including the production of multicountry anthologies and magazines and fanzines with multinational contributors and readers. The internet has fostered such region-wide efforts. However, the continued vitality of national sf communities, as well as the diversity of Latin American countries, means that generalizations about Latin American sf are subject to local variation: hence, "tradition(s)."

7. For more on this debate see the conclusion of my book, *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*.

8. Between legal and pirated copies, estimates put the circulation of *Hora Cero* at 180,000 issues per week (Solano López and Antonio Presas in *H.G.O.*). Televisions were uncommon in Argentine homes in the 1950s, *guionista* Carlos Trillo recalls, so comics were the

“refuge of adventure” (in *El Eternauta* [documentary film]). Once television ownership was widespread, the number of comics magazines published in Argentina diminished rapidly and drastically (Jorge Claudio Morhain in *H.G.O.*).

9. The degree to which Oesterheld was involved in *Más Allá* remains unclear. No names are given for editors or editorial staff. Some believe Oesterheld was in charge of the whole operation (see, for example, Jorge Claudio Morhain’s comments in *H.G.O.*); Capanna says he was “among those who edited [the magazine]” (*El mundo* 178). Pessina and Sánchez list Horacio de Angelis as editor and Oscar Días as graphic designer (276), though they cite no sources; in his essay in the same volume Gandolfo says such information is unknown (36). When asked about his participation in the magazine, Oesterheld himself mentioned only that he had written the short snippets on science scattered throughout each issue—he was a trained geologist—and contributed short stories both under his own name and under the pseudonym Héctor Sánchez Puyol (*Oesterheld en primera persona* 14).

10. Let it be clear that *Más Allá* was not forced to cease publication because of elitist content or editorial policies. In 1957 it had a circulation of around 20,000 issues per month, a total never equaled by another print sf magazine in Latin America. Its commercially oriented publishing company, Editorial Abril, shut it down because its sales were below those of its lines of children’s books and its Donald Duck stories (“Lo mejor de... *Más Allá*” 7). The last issue of *Más Allá* came out in September 1957, a scant month short of the launching of the “artificial satellites” described in its sections devoted to science and dreamt about in its sections devoted to sf.

11. I discuss Sarlo’s framework further in chapter four of *The Emergence of Science Fiction*.

12. For more on the role of radio in the Argentine imagination, see chapter five (“Radio, Cinema, and Television: Long-Distance Communication”) of Sarlo’s *The Technical Imagination*.

13. This characterization is based on a survey of its readers carried out by *Más Allá* in December of 1953 (reproduced in *El mundo* 176) and on Capanna’s own experience as a reader of and contributor to the magazine.

14. Canaparo identifies the time when communication technologies cease to function—particularly the radio in the case of *El Eternauta I* (Oesterheld-Solano López)—as the time when a sense of society is lost (882, 882n31). He then goes on to argue that much of the innovation of *El Eternauta* lies in its early reflection of a world become “irreversibly technological,” as a depiction of the twenty-first-century condition (884). Significantly, Canaparo makes a number of references to the Oesterheld-Solano López comic of 1957-59 but works principally with the Oesterheld-Breccia version of 1969.

15. This slogan is one of several in favor of Frondizi’s election campaign to appear in the earlier episodes of *El Eternauta*, before disillusionment with his presidency and his ability to deliver on the promises of Developmentalism set in. Aside from Perón—whose government “defied conventional labels” (Wynia 43)—Frondizi was one of only a scant handful of presidents constitutionally elected in Argentina between 1943-1983, none of whom served full terms. Frondizi’s presidency was marked by such constant and overt military interference in the workings of government that, as Wynia puts it, “In a very special sense, it was the military that became Frondizi’s coalition partner after 1959” (93). When the Peronist party—unpopular with the military—made important gains in the 1962 elections, Frondizi was deposed by a military coup.

16. See Canaparo also on the “obsolescence of time itself” in *El Eternauta* (883); see also García (iv).

17. The military is originally a source of order, eliminating the “law of the jungle” and restoring a common purpose among the survivors of the snowfall. As weeks and installments go by, the military in *El Eternauta* will lose prestige, reflecting Oesterheld’s views on the increasing role of the military in Frondizi’s government (García vii; see also n14 above). In the end, in *El Eternauta*, as Sprecher states, “All significant successes have been the result of lateralizing strategies resulting from civilian initiatives and not of the military’s strategy of frontal attack” (60). In the Oesterheld-Breccia rewrite of *El Eternauta*, published in 1969 during the authoritarian military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-70), the military receives an even less sympathetic portrayal, as befitted the times and also Oesterheld’s own political radicalization.

18. Despite the relatively sympathetic representation of the North here, still, as Solano López has stated regarding the first *Eternauta*: “In an almost unconscious way we were depicting a metaphor for the Argentine situation, a marginal country besieged by foreign interests. It was a metaphor for imperialist intervention” (Solano López). In the 1969 Oesterheld-Breccia rewrite, the metaphor comes to life: the Superpowers allow *los Ellos* to invade South America in return for their own safety (EtI_O-AB 91).

19. For more on Oesterheld’s political activities and those of his four daughters, also disappeared by the military government, see the documentary *H.G.O.* Oesterheld died in captivity in early 1978; see pages 339 and 374 of the report *Nunca más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* [*Never Again: Report of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons*] for entries on Oesterheld.

20. All of these images are reproduced in *El Eternauta: 1957-2007, 50 años*, and most are easily located online. On a lighter note, the same iconic image of the Eternauta was used for a government campaign to educate citizens on Y2K issues (image reproduced in *Solano López en primera persona* n.p.; originally published in a special supplement of the newspaper *Clarín* on 5 December 1999). The group *Carne de Cañón* adapted *El Eternauta* for the theater in their 2007 play *Zona Liberada* [*Liberated Zone*]. A film version of *El Eternauta* has long been promised, but the latest film project, in progress for much of 2009, has recently lost its director (Lucrecia Martel) due to differences of opinion between the director, producers, and Oesterheld family. A fan blog chronicles the progress of the project at <http://eleternauta-lapelicula.blogspot.com/>. In Buenos Aires a plaza carries Oesterheld's name, and the downtown subway station Uruguay (B line) contains a mural in ceramic tile of images from the *Eternautas* drawn by Solano López and Breccia.

There is ample additional evidence of ongoing interest in *El Eternauta*. The level of detail in the Wikipedia entries alone is impressive, from plot summaries to a list of explanations of Argentine cultural references. More formal recognition of the impact of this *historieta* is the *Eternauta*-based exhibit on Oesterheld organized in 2007: “Muestra 50/30: 50 años con el Eternauta... 30 años sin Oesterheld” [Exhibit 50/30: 50 Years with the Eternauta... 30 Years without Oesterheld] (see <http://muestra50-30.blogspot.com/>). The webzine “Continum 4” is devoted to all things *Eternauta* (see http://www.portalcomic.com/columnas/continum4/continum4_menu.html), as is the site <http://www.eternauta.com/>. There are frequent articles on *El Eternauta* and its creators in comics publications such as *Comiqueando* (see www.comiqueando.com.ar). Solano López continues to draw further adventures of the Eternauta.

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