

Oesterheld's Iconic and Ironic Eternautas

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The Eternauta as Icon in Argentina

When speaking of Héctor Germán Oesterheld and his *Eternautas* series of comics, we are speaking of multiple and interlocking levels of icons. Oesterheld first began the *historieta* [comic] about the time-traveling Juan Salvo, known as the “Eternauta,” in the late 1950s, later revisiting it in the 1960s and 1970s. In the three *Eternauta* narratives in question,¹ a group of intrepid technologically savvy individuals struggle against a deadly phosphorescent snowfall and a series of alien species only to have the news of their local victory obliterated by nuclear devastation and alien treachery. Attempts to avoid this near-future reality for Buenos Aires and/or the reconstruction of the city occupy the later installments of the series. This chapter will examine the evolution of Oesterheld’s use of science fiction (SF) icons within the *Eternauta* narratives over three decades in order to discuss the cultural assumptions underlying the sf genre, Argentine attitudes toward technology, sf and political strife, and national and global power dynamics.

Throughout the saga Oesterheld makes original use of classic SF icons, particularly those of the wasteland and the alien, with nods to the city and the robot. In Gary K. Wolfe’s landmark 1979 study, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*, he identifies and analyzes these icons, calling SF “a vast and complex body of fiction that nevertheless often rests upon the assumption of reader familiarity with the fundamental icons of the genre” (xiv). Latin Americanists and others who work

with science fiction written in the periphery have since demonstrated that when SF icons are deployed away from their Northern centers of origin, they have a tendency to change or mutate as they are adapted to their environment, adding depth and alternative viewpoints and thus, in the process, transform the science-fiction continuum.² To illustrate this, we will explore the iconic status of the character of the Eternauta himself, whose story constitutes such a powerful symbol that it still resonates in mainstream Argentine culture beyond the confines of the sf and adventure communities from which it originated. Further, we will consider both the SF icons within the *Eternautas* and the icon of the Eternauta in light of political struggles and what can be described as the posthumous iconization of Oesterheld himself.

Héctor Germán Oesterheld (1919-1978), originally trained as a geologist, became a pivotal figure in both Argentine SF and Argentine comics at the dawn of the “Golden Age” of each in the late 1950s. He formed an integral part of the seminal SF magazine *Más Allá* [*Beyond*] (1953-1957), and his founding of the magazines *Hora Cero* [*Zero Hour*] and *Frontera* [*Frontier*], for which he was also the principal *guionista* [writer for comic books], is largely credited with bringing Argentine comics into their own (Trillo and Saccomanno 96). The first *Eternauta* (*Et-57*), drawn by Francisco Solano López (1928-2011), was an immediate popular and subsequent critical success. I have written about *Et-57* and the era out of which it emerged at greater length in the article “*Más Allá, El Eternauta, and the Dawn of the Golden Age of Latin American Science Fiction* (1953-1959).” For our present purposes, suffice it to say that, though Oesterheld was not blind to the potential negative consequences of nuclear power (see Nicholls 891), the *Eternauta* of the 1950s was largely the product of the optimism of the early days of the space age

when the universe was the limit and appeared to be open to all. With *Et-57*, Oesterheld and Solano López produced a homegrown group of heroes and made Argentina into an “adventurable” setting (Sasturain, “Oesterheld” 122-23). At the same time, the first *Eternauta* has universal as well as local appeal with its battle of good versus evil, the memorable resourcefulness of its characters, the multifaceted horrors of its alien creatures, and, most particularly, for its debunking of stereotypes—both actual and science fictional—in its staunch refusal to settle for simplistic conceptions of our world or what lies beyond. *Et-57* had an estimated distribution of 180,000 issues a week during its two-year run in *Hora Cero*, and the bibliographies in both this essay and my *Más Allá* article are indicative of the extensive commentary (primarily in Spanish) generated by the *Eternautas*.

To illustrate iconicity of the *Et-57* series, we note that we have group heroes who are Argentines, but, more importantly, they are members of the human race. They try to unite with other groups in the fight of humanity versus the aliens invading the Earth. When they are recruited by surviving members of a military battalion, Juan Salvo and his friends join willingly, viewing the army as the only hope for an organized resistance. They battle a series of alien races: the insectlike *cascarudos*, giant *gurbos*, and the “manos” [“hands”] who give orders to the other two species as well as to humans who have been captured and turned into “hombres-robot” [robot-men]. When the SF icon of the monster is incarnated in beings such as these aliens, Wolfe tells us, “the unknown becomes an iconic ‘Thou’ rather than an abstract formulation” (*Known* 186). Oesterheld plays with reader assumptions about the icon of the alien. He first allows the reader to prejudge the series of monstrous aliens as other, as enemy, as unknown, by using them to

threaten his characters with physical and mental domination. Then, almost halfway through *Et-57*, we find out that the *cascarudos*, *gurbos*, and *manos* are not so much enemies as fellow victims, forced to fight for a never-seen race called *los Ellos* [Them]. Los Ellos are famously described by a dying *mano*: “Ellos son el odio... el odio cósmico” [They are hatred . . . cosmic hatred] (*Et-57* 164; this phrase is repeated in *Et-69*, though it is spoken by Juan Salvo [127]). Oesterheld does not allow us the comfort of a tangible “Thou”/defeatable enemy. As represented by Oesterheld in the 1950s, then, true evil is quite abstract. Although it is not difficult to make associations between los Ellos and real-world oppressors, still, in *Et-57*, Oesterheld leaves such identifications to the reader, at the same time envisioning many shades of gray amid the white-black of the Us-Them dichotomy more typical, perhaps, of the Cold War.

By the time Oesterheld returned to the *Eternauta* comic ten years later the Juan Salvo character was an established cultural icon. The *Et-69* was published in the mainstream, nongenre magazine *Gente*, and it contained changes that reflected the radicalization of Oesterheld’s political views and his dissatisfaction with the military government as well as with Argentina’s international relations. In the end Oesterheld’s own biography became inextricably linked with the icon of the *Eternauta*. “The medium of comics has had its geniuses and its mountebanks, its noblemen and its toadies, occasionally its heroes,” writes Maurice Horn in *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*, “but very rarely has it had its martyrs, which makes Hector Oesterheld perhaps unique in the field” (579). In what were to be the final months of his life, Oesterheld wrote the sequel to *Et-57*, *El Eternauta segunda parte* [*The Eternaut, Second Part*, (here *Et-76*)], while in hiding from the military police. In 1977, during the publication run of *Et-76*,

Oesterheld was detained by government forces. He died at some point in 1978 while in custody, one of the thousands “disappeared” by the military dictatorship during the Dirty War (1976-1983) waged on the Argentine people.

The Eternauta has outlived Oesterheld. The adventures of Juan Salvo continue in *historietas* written and/or drawn by others, as well as in other media. Various versions of the comic have been published in Europe from Italy and Spain to France, Croatia, and Greece (Chinelli). In the mid-1990s Solano López reclaimed graphic control of the Eternauta, producing further tales with other guionistas.³ The Eternauta has also been the subject of museum exhibits, theatrical works, a potential film, and at least one public service announcement. His image and words can be seen in more formally sanctioned venues such as subway station murals in Buenos Aires and in more spontaneous graffitied calls for solidarity and resistance to oppression.⁴

From the Iconic to the Ironic Eternauta

Et-57 remains the most iconic of the *Eternauta* narratives. The image most commonly associated with the Eternauta is Solano López’s 1957 Juan Salvo clad in the isolation suit protecting him from the deadly “snowfall” sent by the alien invaders (see figures 9.1a and 9.1b). The script of the Eternauta that is most often quoted and analyzed is also that of *Et-57*. The decision to make *Et-76* a continuation of the *Et-57* rather than that of *Et-69* is further confirmation of the lasting impact of the original narrative on the Argentine imagination. Yet as we shall see, the Eternauta moves beyond the first *historieta* from the 1950s to incorporate all of the other Eternauta versions as well as the real and fictionalized figures of Oesterheld himself.

A useful tool for thinking about the icon of the Eternauta is the concept of irony as discussed by Linda Hutcheon in *Irony's Edge* (1994), in particular her examination of how circumstantial, textual, and intertextual contexts (functioning as the unsaid) can affect our understanding of the work we are reading/hearing/viewing (the said) (143-159). According to Hutcheon, irony emerges from the “the superimposition or rubbing together of these meanings (the said and plural unsaid) with a critical edge created by a difference of context,” resulting in a triple-voiced, simultaneity of meanings (19, 58-63).⁵ In the case of the Eternauta series, the “ironic” meaning reflects the “iconic” meaning. While the functioning of irony is most directly applicable to the *Et-57* and *Et-69* texts because the latter is a rewriting of the earlier story, the ultimate or iconic significance of the *Eternauta* includes a constant oscillation among a larger group of “unsaid” contexts.

Circumstantial contexts from 1957 to 1977 include an Argentine government increasingly oppressive in nature, changing circumstances surrounding an increasingly politicized Oesterheld, shifts in global power dynamics, scientific and technological developments, and the growing popularity and recognition of the *Eternauta* series itself. Among the textual contexts present in the *Eternautas* are the frequent incorporation of music lyrics, references to classic adventure tales such as *Robinson Crusoe*, and the presence of objects in the foregrounds and backdrops of Juan Salvo’s Buenos Aires. The intertextual context for the Eternauta today includes each installment of the series, the SF continuity with its familiar icons, the adventure comic (Northern and Argentine) with its textual and graphic conventions and finally, documents detailing the disappeared such as *Nunca más*.⁶ The icon of the Eternauta that emerges from such polysemia encompasses many apparent contradictions, such as the wonder of the dawn of the space age and the

tensions of the Cold War, the initial optimism of the early years of industrialization under civilian president Frondizi (1958-1962) (Wynia 86-90), and the subsequent disillusionment with politics and power relations at home and abroad. Other tensions emerge in the struggles between globalism and localism, the group hero and an individual (super)hero, and finally, within the multifaceted Oesterheld himself as author, militant and martyr.

Hutcheon indicates that irony can exist exclusively in the eye of the beholder or in the eye of the creator, or, as in the case of the *Eternautas*, in both. Whether and where a reader perceives irony will be affected by the discursive communities to which s/he belongs. My interpretation of irony among the *Eternautas* may well differ from that of another reader, but it will almost certainly vary to some extent from the intentions of Oesterheld. Because Oesterheld deliberately chose the unusual course of rewriting himself, we can assume a fair degree of intentional ironic reverberation among his texts. Due to the circumstances and timing of his death, however, Oesterheld could not have apprehended the full range of irony or the scope of the iconicity his *Eternautas* would attain, especially in light of the aftermath of the Dirty War and the disappearance of thousands.

The First Eternauta(s): Initial Ironies

In 1969, in a very different Argentina, in a very different world, a very different Oesterheld began to rewrite the *Et-57*, publishing it with very different artwork by Alberto Breccia (1919-93). Yet the opening episodes of both *Et-57* and *Et-69* follow an almost identical course (see figures 9.2a and 9.2b). A guionista is working alone at night

when the chair across from his worktable creaks and a man appears in it. Juan Salvo, the Eternauta, has arrived in the comic writer's studio, one of many stops on his journey through time and space. Eternauta appears, writer is shocked and questions his senses, the visitor looks around and says his same famous first line: "Estoy en la tierra, supongo" [I'm on Earth, I assume].

Despite marked similarities, differences in style and tone between the two versions are immediately apparent. The *Et-69* is darker, more condensed, and more personalized than *Et-57*, and from the beginning the later text reveals itself to be constantly and ironically aware of its iconic predecessor. The later work is literally darker, as Breccia makes far greater use of shadow than does Solano López in *Et-57*. Although in both versions of the comic the episode is three pages long, in the 1957 edition each page contains an average of 7-9 frames, while in the 1969 version, 3-5 frames are more typical. From the first creak of the chair to the Eternauta's first line occupies 13 frames in the earlier version and only 6 in the later, as if using a shorthand referencing the earlier work. Varying publication venues and formats aside, there is also significantly more text in *Et-57*, though there is also more silence. When the Eternauta appears in *Et-57*, all four frames that trace his materialization in the chair offer a world-weary Juan Salvo with his distinctive light-colored hair dressed in vaguely futuristic garb. In 1969, it only takes the Eternauta two frames to materialize, and despite the changes in his features wrought by Breccia's pen, Juan Salvo looks much as he did ten years before. In the first of the two frames, however, the semi-materialized Eternauta is wearing his isolation suit, a clear evocation of the best-known image of the Eternauta figure and a tacit acknowledgment—or claim—of its iconicity. Yet where in 1957 Juan Salvo uses a

diving mask in the construction of his isolation suit, in 1969, in ironic differentiation, he wears the more sinister WWI gas mask, and when the suit disappears somewhere in the gutter between the two frames, the reader is left with the idea that there is something amiss or slightly off center.

In this first episode, the reader can already sense that *Et-69* will be darker than *Et-57* in worldview as well as in palette. Oesterheld explicitly identifies this darker worldview as his own in *Et-69*, as the tale becomes increasingly autobiographical. In *Et-57* the narratee significantly but simply shares the same profession as Oesterheld, but in the novelized episodes from 1962 to 1963 (*Et-62*), the guionista mentions “hijitas” [little daughters] sleeping in the next room, a likely allusion to Oesterheld’s own four small daughters (8). In 1969 the guionista is drawn in the likeness of Oesterheld himself, though he is never named.⁷ Breccia also draws the guionista in a distinctly Oesterheldian textual context, since a signed drawing of Mort Cinder, an Oesterheld-Breccia character (1962-1964), is hanging on the wall of his studio (figure 9.2b). In the same frame, Oesterheld’s text also supports this closer identification of writer and character, as the text box contains a summary of Oesterheld’s own oeuvre: “I’m writing the same thing as always, a comics script. An adventure in the South Pacific, treasures found and lost among algae and coral and tough guys, and a friendship to the end, and a girl with eyes the color of forever” (83). By the end of this first episode the reader is clearly meant to understand that this story is not “the same thing as always,” but rather a different one from the adventure tales of the guionista’s past—it is told to him by an eyewitness, and it is real, urgent and serious.

Hutcheon's reflections on the triple-voiced simultaneity of meanings come into play here as the autobiography, political context and intertextuality work together throughout the text. As the frame story of the two versions of the *Eternauta* make their transition to the main story, it becomes apparent that Oesterheld was writing *Et-69* with a copy of *Et-57* in front of him. At the transitional moment depicted in figures 9.3a and 9.3b, the Eternauta tries to convince the guionista to allow him to stay and rest for a while from his journeying by promising to tell him his story. Oesterheld revisits the same exchange, but he keeps so much of the wording that the changes that he makes come across as all the more deliberate, setting up ironic resonances for the reader familiar with *Et-57*. In contrast to the text of *Et-57*, not only is the text in *Et-69* somewhat abbreviated, it is more telegraphic in style, a pattern that continues throughout the work. The *Et-69* gives the impression of containing gaps through which *Et-57* echoes. Because of his spare rhetoric, the Juan Salvo of *Et-69* comes across as a more abrupt, even aggressive character than in *Et-57*. He is a somewhat less sympathetic hero overall, foreshadowing the metamorphosis of the character in *Et-76*. The switch from using the "tú" form to the more distinctly Argentine "vos" form likely reflects changing linguistic customs in Argentina, though it may also represent a desire on the part of Oesterheld for a greater degree of connection with people, especially young people (Chinelli). Finally, perhaps the most notable change from 1957 to 1969 in this transitional passage is the extension of the guionista's pity from the Eternauta ("pity for him") to himself and to us ("for him, for me, for you, reader"). This short addition hints at the ultimately darker message of the *Et-69*, as if to foreshadow the deteriorating political situation, or at least a sense of foreboding about Argentina's political future.

The majority of *Et-57* and *Et-69* consist of Juan Salvo's story of the alien invasion that he has lived through. In the final episode of both versions we return to the frame story of the Eternauta and guionista and discover that this invasion will take place in the near future. The *historieta* readers hold in their hands is the guionista's recounting of the Eternauta's tale in an attempt to prevent or at least mitigate the apocalyptic future described by him. By including himself and the reader as objects worthy of pity at the outset, the guionista furthers his efforts to impress the importance and immediacy of his tale upon readers. But at the same time, with the extended pity expressed at the moment of transition into the Eternauta's account, he also holds out less hope that his warning can make a difference, change fate and help avoid catastrophe.

The First Eternauta(s) in City and Wasteland: The Group Hero and Technology

Both *Et-57* and *Et-69* share the same general definition of hero and the same setting for heroism. With *El Eternauta* Oesterheld famously brought to fruition his concept of the group hero, as opposed to the individual superhero of Northern comic book renown. Although the Eternauta is the only member to survive to tell the tale, Juan Salvo had survived as part of a group during the invasion of Buenos Aires. The group consisted of everyday people: some friends and neighbors and the few other survivors of the initial deadly snowfall. The one defining characteristic of the members of Salvo's group is the tendency to be tech savvy. Juan Salvo is the owner of a small transformer factory (*Et-57*) or of a television factory (*Et-69*). His friends Favalli and Lucas are a physics professor and a banker, respectively, and both have electronics as a hobby. Polsky, the fourth friend, is retired, and uses Salvo's home workshop to make violins.

With a high value placed on technical knowledge, Polsky, not surprisingly, does not last past the fourth and third episodes (*Et-57*, *Et-69*). The surviving members are later joined by Franco, a factory worker, and avid reader of SF, the preferred genre of the techie. It should be noted that Salvo himself only occasionally plays a leadership role within the group and that Favalli, the scientist, is most often the voice of authority. There is also a significant political shift in *Et-69*, when Franco, as a representative of the working class, is increasingly the one to initiate action.⁸ Thus, when it comes to constructing an isolation suit to venture out into the wasteland that Buenos Aires has become in order to acquire provisions and arms, those with knowledge of technology prove most able to build reliable suits and use the weapons effectively, and only they possess the initiative and imagination to understand events and act accordingly.

It could be said that *Et-57* and *Et-69* maintain a positive view of technology, since those familiar with it are best able to resist the alien invasion and the ensuing disaster. In this sense, technology is not blamed for converting the city into a nuclear wasteland, rather, it offers the characters power and a sense of self-determination. For Wolfe, the city icon often represents a center of political oppression and social conformity, and disaster narratives transform it into “an environment as unremittingly hostile as the environments our ancestors faced, an environment that is in most ways the polar opposite of the city” (Wolfe, *Known* 147). Thus, the *Eternauta* series is not about technology gone wrong but rather consists of tales in which Argentines use technology in order to try to save their own city. The Argentine characters’ familiarity with modern technologies helps them to preserve themselves and to understand the principles of the more advanced nuclear technologies of the North, allowing them to figure out what is happening to them

and, in *Et-57* and *Et-62*, to attempt to work with the Northerners. Significantly, the city, as exemplified by Buenos Aires—almost a protagonist in and of itself—is represented neither as a technological den of iniquity nor as a politically repressive technological society. The destruction of the city is mourned, and its rebuilding eventually becomes a priority in *Et-76*.⁹ The respect for technology and the city is present even in the more pessimistic *Et-69*. The guionista displays a model of the Saturn 5 rocket prominently in his studio, and the group heroes profit from their updated scientific and technical professions and hobbies. The overall enthusiasm for technology does become somewhat muted in *Et-69*, with slightly less elaboration on the technical backgrounds of the characters and the knowledge gleaned from SF. For example, Franco no longer attributes his technical bent and know-how to sf; his job as a worker appears to have provided the needed skills.

Although the group hero and the city of Buenos Aires as a wasteland are common to both *Et-57* and *Et-69*, the later text makes significant moves toward greater isolation of the Argentine capital. Oesterheld adapts the parameters of hero and villain, “us” and “them,” in accordance with his own changing sociopolitical landscape.¹⁰ In *Et-57*, Salvo’s small group feels connected to and representative of the larger group of humanity, acting on a world stage. In *Et-69*, our heroes are no longer portrayed as a planetary species but are now members of the larger national group of Argentines and of the geographical bloc of Latin America. *Et-69* also marks the beginning of a trajectory that will culminate in *Et-76* of increasing specificity with regard to the enemy.

In the original *Et-57*, when military forces ultimately prove ineffectual against the alien and robot minions of los Ellos,¹¹ the remaining members of our group hero go on

alone to gain intelligence on the enemy and eventually destroy the local command post of los Ellos by using “reason and scientific ingenuity” (Wolfe, *Known* 200).¹² An unfortunate side effect of this victory is that, now that the alien defenses for the region have been eliminated, nuclear warheads launched against the invaders by the Northern superpowers are able to reach the ground, and Buenos Aires becomes a nuclear wasteland (see figures 9.4a and 9.4b for cause and effect images from *Et-57* and *Et-76*). Salvo, Favalli, Franco, and Salvo’s family escape with a few others, and they attempt to get their information on enemy weaknesses and their own successful tactics—an Argentine contribution to the global effort of humanity versus los Ellos—to the technologically superior North (*Et-57*). The group fails to get far from Buenos Aires, falls into an alien trap, and all become robot-men except for the Salvo family, who attempt to escape in an alien vehicle. Yet because he is unable to operate the alien technology properly, Salvo presses a button that sends him to another space-time continuum, separating him from his wife and daughter. In this new place, called “Continuum [*sic*] 4,” he learns from an old mano of the higher solidarity of all “good” species such as their own who must continue to resist the evil that is los Ellos. Salvo becomes the Eternauta, a man condemned to search throughout space and time for his lost family.

The First Eternauta(s) and the Eternauta Novel: Local and Global Politics

Comparisons of *Et-69* and *Et-57* invariably characterize the later text somewhere between the poles of “more politically engaged” and “propagandistic.” International politics play as overt a role as galactic power dynamics in *Et-69*, making this version of the first *Eternauta* text less universal in both senses of the word. Although the alien

invaders remain the principal “Them” to the protagonists’ “Us,” the role of the Northern nations changes drastically from that of Latin American ally (“Us”) in *Et-57* and also *Et-62* to that of betrayer of Latin America (“Them”) in *Et-69*. This change reflects Oesterheld’s political radicalization and his increasing perception of the relative isolation of Latin America, that is, of the inability of nations of the periphery to have an impact on global policies being set by the nations of the center.¹³ Oesterheld establishes Argentina’s relationship(s) with the North early on in *Et-57* and *Et-69* in a set of parallel radio broadcasts.

In episode five of *Et-57*, Salvo and company manage to tune in to a radio broadcast from the BBC (figure 9.5a), and they hear that the United States has been trying to establish contact with South America since the start of the deadly snowfall to no avail, and that French scientists have affirmed that the snowfall is not related to nuclear testing. This broadcast serves to establish a sense of a global community, of a planet-wide disaster, and of Northern efforts to come to the aid of an apparently harder-hit Southern hemisphere. Later, once the group discovers that the snowfall was the opening salvo of an alien invasion, Northern intercontinental nuclear weapons are seen as a great hope. The complete absence of even a hint of blame at the nuclear bombing of Buenos Aires is perhaps the most telling evidence of the representation of a cooperative North-South relationship in *Et-57*.

A few years later in *Et-62*, Oesterheld expands upon this spirit of international cooperation and also on Argentina’s ties with the North. While he largely posits a continuation of the good relations of *Et-57*, he significantly chooses to emphasize both the value of Argentina’s contributions to the war effort and the ultimate superiority of the

Argentine over the Northern characters. On a trip back to Earth from the alternate “Continuum 4,” Juan Salvo is able to save Favalli from slavery as a robot-man, and they travel to New York with a group of US military scouts to provide valuable intelligence on resisting the invaders. When the North is hit by advanced alien weaponry, it is the two Argentines who prove themselves to be the most able. As US soldiers collapse under the pressures of their new wasteland environment, Salvo and Favalli fight successfully until they are captured by the forces of los Ellos. Even then, they do not suffer the fate of most who fall to this enemy; as a mano explains to their select group of prisoners:

No los hemos convertido en meros hombres robots porque ustedes han demostrado iniciativa, capacidad de resistencia, un fabuloso deseo de vivir [...] porque demostraron ser los mejores entre los terrestres. (*Et-62* 117)
 [We have not turned you into mere robot-men because you have shown initiative, capacity for resistance, a fabulous desire to live [...] because you showed yourselves to be the best of the Earthlings.]

He explains further: “Quienes nos interesan son los que lucharon, los que se salvaron por algo, no sólo por cuidar el pellejo” [Those who interest us are those who fought, those who saved themselves for something, not just to save their own skins] (121). Nowhere in the *Eternauta* saga are the iconic characteristics of the Eternauta described better than in this mano’s speech: it is not physical power, superior weaponry, or even victory that determines human worthiness, but rather the will to resist and to fight for beliefs. In *Et-62*, then, we have plot developments largely in line with the *Et-57* worldview, including Oesterheld’s further development of the qualities of the Argentine group hero. Here we

should also note the absence of any US soldiers among “the best of the Earthlings,” another cultural transformation of typical sf paradigms.

By 1969, however, there is no longer even a semblance of international solidarity in *El Eternauta*. In Oesterheld’s rewrite of the initial radio broadcast, the transmission comes not from the BBC but from somewhere in South America. This broadcast is best viewed in Breccia’s original rendering (see figure 9.5b); in my translation I add ellipses where radio static and interference by alien technologies are written or implied by Breccia’s textual graphics:

[commander will be provisional leader . . . lethal snowfall . . . vast zone
Latin America ruthless extraterrestrial attack . . . inconceivable betrayal
superpowers . . . South America handed over to the invader to save
themselves . . . we will fight all the same. However alone we may be and
as terrible as the initial blow may have been we will fight all the same . . .
in the emergency survivors should . . . sacrifice.] (*Et-69* 91)

Once again *Et-57* functions as a palimpsest for *Et-69*, with Oesterheld setting up deliberate as well as less conscious ironies for the reader of the later work. The size of the group of “Us” has shrunk from global to regional in size in *Et-69*, “humanity” has become “Latin Americans.” The opposing forces of “Them” have also increased proportionally and are no longer quite so nebulous. The alien slave races are still on the front lines and los Ellos remain just offstage, like the central nations of the North that must now be counted among their ranks.

Postcolonial undertones are also present to a lesser degree in *Et-57*. For example, Favalli compares their fighting the alien invaders with the struggle of American Indians

fighting against the Spanish conquistadors (*Et-57* 109). In *Et-69*, however, his more specific affirmation that in Latin America, “Somos como los incas o los aztecas peleando contra los europeos” [We are like the Incas or the Aztecs fighting against the Europeans] now resonates more hollowly as the alien-Northern enemy repeat errors of the past in a second conquest—or a third (105). For, as Favalli points out in 1969, the Northern powers had really always been “Them”:

Si en verdad los grandes países nos tuvieron siempre atados de pies y manos . . . El invasor eran antes los países explotadores, los grandes consorcios . . . Sus nevadas mortales eran la miseria, el atraso, nuestros propios pequeños egoísmos manejados desde afuera... Por nuestra propia culpa sufrimos la invasión, Juan. Nuestra culpa es ser débiles, flojos, por eso nos eligió el invasor. [...] Teníamos que habernos defendido antes, Juan, cuando todavía era tiempo. Antes debimos odiar lo que nos debilitaba, lo que nos entregaba al enemigo.” (*Et-69* 106, 110; all ellipses in the original except for those in brackets)

[In truth the big countries have always kept us tied hand and foot . . . In the past the invaders were the countries that exploited us, the great consortiums . . . Their lethal snowfalls were misery, backwardness, our own small egotisms manipulated from the outside . . . It is our own fault that we are being invaded, Juan. It’s our fault that we are weak, lazy, that is why the invaders chose us. [...] We should have defended ourselves before, Juan, when there was still time. We should have hated what weakened us, what delivered us to the enemy.]

Favalli's affirmations that some of the blame for Argentina's situation lies at her own doorstep in these passages are tellingly interwoven with indications that there may also be more specific enemies within: the military. This conversation between Favalli and Juan Salvo is intercalated with the description of the arrival of the military at Juan's doorstep. In 1969 the group members are not volunteers but join the army under threat of their opening fire on Salvo's home (109). Salvo is then promoted from corporal to lieutenant, as he is in *Et-57*. However in *Et-69*, written during the de facto presidency of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970), Salvo is not promoted for his skills but after the captain in command kills his own lieutenant for daring to suggest an alternate battle plan (112-113), in an act of senseless violence reminiscent of that used by the Argentine military government against students and other groups at the time.¹⁴

We do not know a great deal more about what else Oesterheld may or may not have intended the Argentine military or the Northern nations to do in *Et-69* because *Gente* magazine forced him to abbreviate the *historieta* drastically after 14 episodes due to reader reception of Oesterheld's political content and Breccia's experimental artwork. Oesterheld was allowed three episodes to summarize over two-thirds of the content of the tale (based on the amount of material covered from *Et-57*). The trajectory remains roughly similar to *Et-57*, with divergences continuing to produce ironic meanings. Rather than taking their information to the North once they defeat los Ellos, the group plans to seek out centers of resistance in Latin America. Once Salvo arrives in Continuum [*sic*] 4 there is no inspirational speech on the need for expanding his ideas on the solidarity of humanity to include other species in the universe (*Et-57* 348-349), but only a brief

hope/condemnation that he will have eternity to search for his family/have to search for his family for eternity.

Oesterheld uses one of the final three episodes of *Et-69* to reproduce as much as possible of the classic closing frame of *Et-57*. As in 1959, when *Et-57* came to an end, Salvo realizes that the invasion has not yet happened in the guionista's world—in *Et-57* there are four years until the invasion; in the less certain times of *Et-69* those four years have shrunk to two. In both versions Salvo returns home to his family, forgetting everything that has happened/will happen/might happen to him. The *historietas* end with the guionista expressing his hope to avert tragedy by publishing the Eternauta's story as a cautionary tale for humanity (*Et-57*) or for Latin Americans (*Et-69*)—though, as we have seen in the opening frame, there is less hope that this will be possible in the darker narrative of 1969.

The Second Eternauta

In 1975, when Ediciones Record republished *Et-57*, such was its popularity that the publisher launched the continuation of the adventures of the *Eternauta II* (here *Et-76*) the following year in *Skorpio*, one of Record's comic magazines. With Solano López once again doing the artwork, the *historieta* regained its visually iconic look. The script also took up where *Et-57* left off, ignoring the changes in storyline brought up in *Et-69*, though continuing and amplifying the changes in textual tone. Where in *Et-69* Oesterheld wrote of the need for taking action against the oppressor/invader before it was too late, *Et-76* is the tale of taking that action. The ironic echoes of *Et-57* for readers of *Et-69* become jarring ironic reverberations for those now reading *Et-76*. By this time

Oesterheld was so active in the *Montonero* guerilla group in the struggle against the repressive regime of the military junta (1976-1983), that he wrote the majority of *Et-76* while in hiding from government forces. The second half of *Et-76* was published using the backlog of Oesterheld's scripts after he had been captured by the military. In this *historieta* Oesterheld focused on transmitting a more specific, localized message, putting his iconic character's status to political use.

Characterizations of *Et-76* tend toward the "propagandistic" end of the spectrum. While Oesterheld used the iconic status of his character and his narrative for what he clearly perceived to be a higher purpose, this came at both a high personal and artistic cost. In the case of the latter, the critic and guionista Juan Sasturain has written that "El crecimiento de la conciencia del instrumento que manejaba y la necesidad de formular explícitamente una PROPUESTA debilitaron a *El Eternauta II*, en el cual ya es imposible ese fenómeno de identificación con los protagonistas que suscitaba la primera parte" [[Oesterheld's] growing consciousness of the instrument that he wielded and his necessity to explicitly formulate a PROPOSAL weakened *El Eternauta II* [here *Et-76*], in which the phenomenon of identification with the protagonists of the first part is no longer possible] ("El Eternauta no tiene" 192). The icon of the Eternauta manages to survive the narrative narrowing and lack of identification that take place in *Et-76*. In retrospect, once the life of Oesterheld himself becomes incorporated into the icon, the *Et-76* regains something of the nuance and humanity of the earlier Eternautas.

When a character or story becomes iconic, it is larger than its original self and its creator(s) and attains a life of its own, since, in the words of Gary K. Wolfe, "An icon often retains its power even when isolated from the context of conventional narrative

structures” (*Known* 16). With *Et-76* Oesterheld seeks to harness the power of the icon that exists independently from him. He first does this by choosing to continue the well-received *Et-57* rather than the more problematic *Et-69*, including direct verbal and visual quotations from the *historieta* of the 1950s, and by inserting himself more deeply into the story itself. While the guionista narrator of *Et-57* shares a profession with Oesterheld, in *Et-62*, the guionista shares a biographical feature or two with his creator, and by *Et-69* the guionista looks exactly like Oesterheld. Because of the return to the narrative timeline of 1957, the guionista in *Et-76* no longer resembles Oesterheld physically, but, when he introduces himself here for the first time in the comic series, he informs Juan Salvo, his family, Favalli, Lucas, and Polsky, that his name is Oesterheld, though they should call him by his middle name, Germán, which was Oesterheld’s *nome de guerre* in the resistance. No longer content with the passive role of narrator in the outer frame of the story, Oesterheld/Germán becomes a main character in the central narrative itself, fighting alongside Juan Salvo as his right-hand man. Oesterheld uses these narrative strategies to assert his right to write the Eternauta. Yet his attempts to “wield” or adapt the icon meet with only partial narrative success.

There is a high price to pay for pressing the Eternauta into the service of a political cause. In addition to a widely acknowledged decline in the quality of the writing itself, this price can be seen most in the changes in the characterization of heroes and villains, good and evil, and in the more obvious delineation between them. Among the most oft-cited contributions of the *Eternauta* series to Argentine SF are the creation of an Argentine collective or group hero, with its attendant value of solidarity, characters who

are Argentine yet universal, and situations representing the complexities of the shades of gray between “Us” and “Them,” that question the very dichotomy itself.

In *Et-76*, there are no shades of gray. This Eternauta’s exposure to radiation and the time-altering technology called the chronomaster make him into a mutant with superhuman powers. This changes the entire tone of the work, even though familiar elements remain. Once Germán has sat down with Juan Salvo and friends to play a hand of the card game *truco* in 1959, the same game played at the beginning of *Et-57*, the Salvo house is mysteriously transported several hundred years into the future to the nuclear wasteland that is Buenos Aires. It is later revealed that an “Ello amigo” [friendly Ello] has brought them here with time-travel technology to help defeat an evil Ello trapped on Earth after the invaders had left. Favalli, Lucas, and Polsky do not exist in this time, so it is only Juan Salvo, his family, and Germán who meet the surviving inhabitants of Buenos Aires, now living in nearby caves and ruled by the remaining evil Ello from a fortress. Salvo, with his superpowers, becomes an individual hero who supplants the group hero. Although Salvo fights the Ello in a group with the cave people, he is clearly their leader and their superior; Germán is not his equal but a secondary character. Once an ordinary small business owner, Salvo now becomes one of the typical North American superheroes Oesterheld had worked so hard to move beyond in his *historietas*. He possesses inhuman strength (figure 9.6a), telepathic powers, and the ability to immediately understand the workings of any technology. Scientific ingenuity is no longer needed to defeat the superior alien technology of los Ellos as in *Et-57* and *Et-69*, rather the Eternauta’s mutant abilities win the day. He is totally in control, decisive, with the self-doubt and humanity of the Juan Salvo of yesteryear gone.

Since this Juan Salvo immediately knows what to do at every turn, he is frequently described as “inhuman.” The human race, Latin Americans or even his own group of friends lose primary importance for him, and this Juan Salvo sacrifices the lives of others—including those of his own wife and child—for the cause with apparent ease, saying “Su sacrificio no será vano. [...] ¿Qué importan unas cuantas vidas? ¡Lo que importa es salvar al Pueblo de las Cuevas!” [Their sacrifice will not be in vain. [...] What do a few lives matter? What matters is saving the People of the Caves!] (169-170). However, these lines become more poignant rather than callous when viewed in light of Oesterheld’s own situation at the time he wrote them.¹⁵ Still, according to Solano López, in *Et-76* “el personaje se desvirtuó. Yo ya no sentía al personaje [...] hacía y decía cosas que no encajaban” [the character was adulterated. I didn’t feel the character anymore [...] he did and said things that did not fit] (qtd. in Accorsi 69). In Oesterheld’s need for certainty, to express the rightness of his cause, he used all means at his disposal, including the icon of the Eternauta. But by gaining super powers, ironically, the Eternauta loses his iconic power.

Even the enemy, once universal, abstract, mythic in dimension and unknown in proportion, becomes specific, local, and concrete in *Et-76*. Los Ellos become one Ello, since the good Ello is killed early on. It can incorporate, taking the shape of a mano at one point (figure 9.6b), and it is itself corporeal, albeit somewhat nebulously so, appearing in its space/environmental suit in the final confrontation of good-and-evil (figure 9.6c). No Wellsian microbes can do away with this Ello; the Eternauta must use his mutant-gained understanding of the Ello’s own atomic technology to kill it. Once the evil Ello and its minions are defeated, the Eternauta helps the People of the Caves

redevelop steam technology to rebuild Buenos Aires, completing the cycle of the icon of the wasteland from total devastation to renewal.¹⁶ Just as Germán had begun to settle into an idyllic existence in this future, the chronomaster mysteriously starts up and transports him in time and space. Germán finds himself sitting on a city park bench in December 1976 surrounded by children playing and others going about their business. As Juan Salvo walks by, he calls, “¡Eh, Juan! ¡Voy contigo!” [Hey, Juan! I’ll go with you!]. “Sabía que vendrías, Germán” [I knew you would come, Germán], the Eternauta tells him in the final lines, “Te necesito” [I need you] (208), and they set off down the road together.

Oesterheld paid the ultimate personal price for his political militancy, not the least part of which was writing *guiones* such as *Et-69*, the *Vida del Ché* [*Life of Ché Guevara*] (1968), and *Et-76*. On April 27, 1977, Oesterheld disappeared, and he died in a clandestine military detention center some months later. Specific details regarding his death and the whereabouts of his body remain unknown. Since his disappearance and death, Oesterheld has become something of an icon in his own right. Certainly his own life narrative has become inextricably intertwined with the *Eternauta* as *historieta* and the Eternauta as icon. When Solano López wrote me that the next project under discussion with Oesterheld’s widow, Elsa Oesterheld, was an *historieta* about “el emblemático caso de HGO [Héctor Germán Oesterheld] y sus hijas” [the emblematic case of HGO (Héctor Germán Oesterheld) and his daughters], who were also involved in the resistance movement, it seemed a natural progression, the missing piece of the Eternauta saga (Solano López, “Re: Artículo” and “Re: Una pregunta”).

When the *Eternauta* series is discussed, *Et-57* is virtually always accorded primacy of place in the pantheon. Today the Eternauta icon retains the more universal flavor established in 1957, but the later *Eternautas* have been integrated into the icon in several ways. The *Et-69* of Oesterheld-Breccia occupies an important place in the Eternauta saga. The genius of Breccia's artwork is now recognized, and the work as a whole provides a transition in the trajectory of the narrative and of the icon from its more "universal" precepts to the local or political incarnations.¹⁷ Clearly *Et-62*, *Et-69* and *Et-76* add more of a Latin American, national and political content to the icon. The *Et-62* novelization also elucidates that it is the Argentines' ability and willingness to fight for a cause that places them among "the best of the Earthlings." The darker worldview expressed in *Et-69* and *Et-76* is in line with the Argentine reality of those years, when citizens were confronted by actual oppressors in the national sphere who were no longer so faceless.¹⁸ The personal tragedy of the Eternauta, a resistance fighter and eternal seeker, mirrors that of Oesterheld, of his family, becoming an icon for all of the families of the "desaparecidos," and of the Argentine nation that lived through the tragedy of the Dirty War and other oppressive governments. As a group Oesterheld's ironic *Eternautas* have given us an iconic Eternauta that has reflected the times, changed with the times, and endured for over 50 years. It promises to endure for many more. The Eternauta is both old school SF hero and incarnation of new possibilities for the genre; he is master and victim of technology; casualty of a political regime while enduring as a potent force against it; powerful and powerless; Argentine yet universal. As Oesterheld wrote in one of the many true versions of this tale, "Cada uno a su modo todos somos Eternautas" [Each in his own way, we are all Eternautas] (*Et-69* 131).

Captions List for images 9.1a – 9.6c

[pls see original publication for images mentioned in text]

Fig. 9.1a

Iconic image of the Eternauta, *Et-57* (32)

Fig. 9.1b

Iconic image of the Eternauta, *Et-57* (35)

Fig. 9.2a

Opening scene, *Et-57* (3-4)

Fig. 9.2b

Opening scene, *Et-69* (83-84)

Fig. 9.3a

Transition to the tale of the Eternauta, *Et-57* (5)

THE ETERNAUT: I know what you are thinking. Before refusing me, before telling me no, let me tell you my story. When I tell it to you, you will understand everything, including my strange way of appearing. And I am sure you will want to help me... Listen...

WRITER: I listened; all the rest of that night I did nothing but listen. Just as he said, when he finished everything was clear. So clear as to fill me with terror. So clear as to make me feel great pity for him. But I will not get ahead of myself: I want to tell the story of the Eternauta just as he told it to me!

Fig. 9.3b

Transition to the tale of the Eternauta, *Et-69* (85)

THE ETERNAUT: I know what you are thinking. But let me tell you my story. You will understand everything, even my way of appearing. And surely you will want to help me. Listen...

WRITER: I listened. All the rest of that night I did nothing but listen. And yes, when the Eternauta finished everything was clear. So clear as to fill me with terror. And with great pity for him, for me, for you, reader. But I will not get ahead of myself... The story of the Eternauta must be told just as he told it to me!

Fig. 9.4a

Buenos Aires is hit by a nuclear bomb from the North, *Et-57* (287)...

Fig. 9.4b

...the resulting nuclear wasteland in *Et-76* (36)

Fig. 9.5a

Initial radio broadcast about the deadly snowfall, *Et-57* (17)

Fig. 9.5b

Initial radio broadcast about the deadly snowfall and alien invasion, *Et-69* (91)

Fig. 9.6a

“Super” Eternauta, *Et-76* (186)

Fig. 9.6b

The *Ello* abandons his “skin-suit” *mano* disguise when captured by Juan Salvo, *Et-76* (102)

Fig. 9.6c

The *Ello*, *Et-76* (180)

Endnotes

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1. Oesterheld’s principal three *Eternautas* are:

- 1) *El Eternauta* (Oesterheld-Solano López; published 4 Sept. 1957-9 Sept. 1959 in *Hora Cero Semanal*), hereafter *Et-57*;
- 2) *El Eternauta* (Oesterheld-Breccia; published 29 May 1969-18 Sept. 1969 in *Gente*), hereafter *Et-69*;

- 3) *El Eternauta II* (Oesterheld-Solano López; published Dec. 1976-Apr. 1978 in *Skorpio*), hereafter *Et-76*.

A novelized *Eternauta* (hereafter *Et-62*) was published from 1962-63 in a science-fiction magazine called *El Eternauta* founded by Oesterheld in 1961. *Et-62* recounts further adventures of Juan Salvo after *Et-57*. In its original form, *Et-62* had some illustration. It contains episodes near Buenos Aires, in New York, and in outer space, but it was left unfinished when the magazine folded. The *Eternauta III* (1983) is widely considered apocryphal by readers and critics.

2. Ginway's examination of Brazilian science fiction in *Brazilian Science Fiction* is the critical work that most directly explores the use of Wolfe's icons in a non-Northern context (see especially Ginway 14, 39). Her monograph is a new landmark in the study of science fiction written in the periphery.

3. Today the Eternauta is registered as a brand, with half of the rights to it owned by the family of Oesterheld, and half by the family of Solano López (Solano López qtd. in Accorsi 70). Shortly before his death Solano López completed artwork for the approximately one thousand pages of the *Eternauta* saga drawn by him; he was also to direct a collection titled "Universo Eternauta" [Eternauta Universe] (Solano López, "Re: Una pregunta").

4. See Haywood Ferreira, "Más Allá," n19 for specific references. Mariano Chinelli states that the image of the Eternauta has frequently appeared in Argentine graffiti, including in stencil, a medium Chinelli describes as a true "street art" form (Skype interview).

5. Hutcheon's discussion of the ironic "rubbing together" of the Olivier and Branagh productions of *Henry V* reveals some of the key choices in play when re-making a work: the cuts (or additions) that will be made; the tone, emphasis, and focus to employ; the manner of juxtaposition of image and dialogue / text; and the use or absence of narrative framing... "For me," Hutcheon concludes, "irony happened when Branagh's said echoed in some way Olivier's different unsaid (in my memory), and the resulting edgy oscillation between the two created a new meaning—the one I think is the real 'ironic' meaning" (88).

6. The document *Nunca más* includes references to Oesterheld's disappearance and final days among the information of thousands of other *desaparecidos* [disappeared persons] (See 339, 374).

7. To my knowledge it is not known whether the decision to draw the guionista as Oesterheld was made by Oesterheld himself or by Breccia. Chinelli points out that the connection of the narratee to Oesterheld in *Et-57* was unlikely to have extended into the artwork given that in the same year in the same magazine another of Oesterheld's characters, the eponymous narrator of the comic *Ernie Pike*, was drawn in Oesterheld's likeness (first by Hugo Pratt, and later by other artists, including both Breccia and Solano López). The extent of the "Oesterheldization" of the *Eternautas* becomes fully apparent only when the texts are considered as a group.

8. Franco plays a slightly more prominent role in *Et-69* than in *Et-57*. He, rather than Favalli, is now the one to figure out how to fire the *cascarudo*'s weapons (i.e. alien technology). Further, in a 1975 interview Oesterheld does not respond to the interviewers' probing comments about his group hero but rather states: "el héroe

principal es Franco, un obrero” [the main hero is Franco, a worker] (qtd. in *Oesterheld en primera persona* 23). The worker is an important character in both the *Eternautas*, but with small changes in storyline such as this one and with the more obvious rhetoric from Oesterheld himself; the rise in importance of Franco seems a further indication of Oesterheld’s own political radicalization.

9. The positive representation of the city in the *Eternautas* is in keeping with the historical Latin American identification of the city with “civilizing” influences. This association also frequently applies to futuristic Latin American cities; Ginway has characterized the icon of the city in Brazilian science fiction as “an oasis of civilization which nurtures order and cultural identity” (77).

10. See Sasturain, “El Eternauta no tiene” 188.

11. The initial positive, unifying role of the military in *Et-57* reflects the ending of the rule of president *de facto* General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu (1955-58) and the democratic election of President Arturo Frondizi (1958-62). The military began to exert an ever-greater influence in Frondizi’s government, however, and he was eventually deposed by a military coup. The increasingly negative representation of the military in the narrative reflects Oesterheld’s view of the changes in the role of the military in Argentine national life. For further discussion of the representation of the military in *Et-57* see Haywood Ferreira, “*Más Allá*” n14 and n16.

12. Wolfe notes that “It is almost a rule of thumb in science-fiction films that the monster cannot be subdued by the conventional weapons of the hero; even the atomic bomb fails to stop the Martians in George Pal’s film of Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1953).” I judge it highly likely that Wells’s novel and/or this film were inspirations for

the method of the local defeat of los Ellos in *Et-57*. Los Ellos can put up a barrier over the city of Buenos Aires that nuclear warheads from the North are unable to penetrate. They also have a smaller protective sphere, likely containing the atmosphere they need to breathe. This sphere is pierced by the toppling the Monument to the Two Congresses, which is felled by a relatively low-tech bazooka shot by Franco. Much like Wells's Martians' death by microbe, los Ellos are killed by something in our atmosphere (*Et-57* 276).

13. As Ginway has discussed with regard to Brazil, when Northern-dominated phenomena such as the Cold War and the arms race are represented from the periphery, the predominant reaction is often a feeling of powerlessness, that one is “a witness with no real voice” (Ginway 85).

14. One such act was the Noche de los Bastones Largos [Night of the Long Batons / Sticks / Truncheons] on July 29, 1966. At the University of Buenos Aires, a protest of students and faculty against Onganía's elimination of university autonomy was repressed by Federal Police, who wielded their police batons with great brutality.

15. Two of his four daughters had been “disappeared” and killed by the military in June and July of 1976 along with a son-in-law and an unborn grandchild. María, one of the sacrificed young fighters from the Pueblo de las Cuevas, was the *nome de guerre* of Beatriz, the first of Oesterheld's daughters to disappear (García, “De frente” 4). His remaining two daughters were disappeared soon after Oesterheld himself, in late 1977.

16. For further details on the cycle of the city, see Wolfe, “The Remaking of Zero.”

17. Many other artists have since drawn their own interpretations of the characters of the *Eternautas*. A number of them can be found in places such as in the front matter of the Record edition of *Et-57 (El Eternauta (edición integra de lujo))*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Record, 1998) or the “Imágenes” link of the website www.eternauta.com.

18. A list of the status of the 12 Argentine heads of state from 1966 to 1983 (from the term of General Onganía to the election of Raúl Alfonsín) provides a brief but telling explanation for a negative Argentine outlook, since the vast majority were nonelected de facto military presidents.

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