

Mafalda: a social and political history of Latin America's global comic

by Isabel Cosse, translated by Laura Pérez Carrada, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019, 288 pp., \$99.95 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 4780 0507 0, \$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 4780 0638 1.

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This monograph is a translation of a 2014 publication in Spanish by the Uruguayan Isabel Cosse. Unlike other contributions in this field, the reader will not, on this occasion, encounter a detailed semiotic analysis. Rather, Cosse's book contribution is framed in the exploration that Latin American Cultural Studies make in a variety of transnational social contexts: Argentina, Mexico, Europe, Latin America. As a result, the book will could be of great interest to those readers interested in the history of Latin American media, since it explores, insightfully, the Argentinian middle class of the 60–70s and, particularly, the representation of gender roles within the tradition of comic strips in Argentina.

Joaquín Salvador Lavado (1932–2020), also known as 'Quino', was born in the Guaymallén department, part of the Mendoza province in Argentina. In any discussion about Quino's work, *Mafalda* (1964–1973), his more international and award-winning creation, must necessarily become the centrepiece. *Mafalda* has been translated into 26 languages and is still very popular in both Western Europe (Spain and France) and Latin America. *Mafalda* shares the success of other great creations in the world of comics, such as the characters from *Peanuts* (1950–2000) or *The Adventures of Tintin* (1929–1976), in which the narrative and stylistic tradition they represent, while influential, are only secondary. For most of the audiences familiar with these comic books that consume her, *Mafalda* has transcended, above all, as a pop culture icon. Specifically, Cosse's book aims to investigate the reasons behind the success of this product as well as the different meanings that the character still holds, with a special focus on the Latin American market.

The first section of the book is an introduction to the social context of Quino's work through the depiction of the Argentinian middle classes and the consequences of recent modernization in this society. Cosse explains how this comic portrays elements of Argentinian society including citizens' relationships to gender and social class. *Mafalda* has its origins, like so many other characters, in a failed advertising campaign. It is only by chance that the archetypal couple of young boy and girl was eventually transformed into a single child (a girl, more specifically) with the voice and consciousness of a critical adult. However, while this gender transformation can in itself already be read as subversive of white-male narratives, it is in fact the richness of personality features of the network of characters around *Mafalda* (Manolito, the young capitalist; Felipe and Susana as well-to-do bourgeois characters; Libertad, the

smallest but also most determined of the bunch, and so on) that leads Quino's work to be read as a social and political allegory.

In the early chapters, the author covers the historical context of the publication of this work and its social uses. The comic strip is a genre with great social and political significance. Typically part of a newspaper, the comic strip format allows, therefore, to link the subtexts of this fiction to the ideological discourses of the host. It is, therefore, a genre of a persuasive nature, whose ideology is sometimes represented by the editorial line of the magazine and is rarely 'just' designed for escapism. Isabel Cosse explains that this political positioning of the comic strip is even clearer in the Argentinian media ecosystem in the late 60s. She also elaborates on the relationship between the magazines (*Primera Plana*, *El Mundo*, *Siete Dias*,) and the different challenges that the Latin American state faced. *Mafalda* was published for almost a decade, in magazines that differed in their political orientation. However, due to its use in other social or popular discourses, many times without the permission of the authors, the character will forever be associated with youthful opposition to the system. The fact that the character was criticized precisely for her 'inaction' probably provides the best example of the progressive radicalization of Argentinian Society (p.90).

From Chapter 3 onwards, Cosse uses the concept of 'cultural appropriation' to illustrate the transnational journey of *Mafalda*. Cosse's analysis includes three case studies, *Mafalda's* reception in Italy, Mexico, and Spain, justified, according to the author, in the popularity of the series in these markets. Here, *Mafalda's* success is explained by its status as a Latin American product, the framing of the character's narrative in political reflection, and its criticism of social inequality in postindustrial society. This was a narrative of great social relevance in the Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s and made also significant impact in European markets.

The last chapters offer a mosaic of historical and social data and commentaries. In the first, the voice of Quino's characters is analysed in relation to the March 1976 coup d'etat in Argentina. Of particular interest, however, is the chapter 'Mafalda, the myth' where Cosse presents the conclusive argument of her thesis, *Mafalda* as a kind of middle-class myth. Despite apparently being an oxymoron, since myths should be universal, the author appeals to its ongoing popularity and to the ideological and allegorical reading of the text to explain that the uses of this character remain valid in Latin America today. However, her arguments lose weight as they adopt the concrete form of historical episodes, so tied to a national historical context. The polemics surrounding the use of *Mafalda* characters in the V Centennial of the conquest of America in 1992, or the contradictions behind Quino's discourses on Cuban socialism may have transnational significance but they also contradict the claims for a universal consideration of *Mafalda*.

In conclusion, Cosse's book is successful in explaining the relationships between the characters and the reality of the middle classes in Argentina in the 1960s. The research includes a great variety of examples from Quino's work to explain how characters are used to represent allegories and prototypes of Argentinian society of his time. Of great relevance is also the study of *Mafalda* in terms of cultural appropriation and resignification. The fact that *Mafalda's* origin, as explained in the book, is associated with allegory only makes her an even more inspiring figure in the study of popular culture and the role of gender in the construction of transnational narratives.