Science Fiction in Argentina

Page, Joanna

Published by University of Michigan Press

Page, Joanna.
Science Fiction in Argentina: Technologies of the Text in a Material Multiverse.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52102

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1997818
With the world’s population decimated by nuclear war and all but extinguished by a mutated AIDS virus, the survivors have taken refuge in a colossal skyscraper built in the remote Tierra del Fuego. Inside, they are so rigidly segregated that they have no opportunity to discover the terrifying truth: that the lower classes of society are being recycled as food for the higher ones. After being drained of their life forces, they are mashed to a pulp in a huge machine before emerging on a conveyor belt, reformed into neat cubes and ready for packaging. The machine’s quite unnecessary number of ducts and grinders, together with the sound effects of gory squelches (fig. 4), point with a self-parodying humor to the common use of visual hyperbole in comics. Excess and exaggeration are often evident in Ministerio (Ricardo Barreiro and Francisco Solano López, 1986), contrasting powerfully with the comic’s more somber exploration of state repression and memory within postdictatorship Argentina.¹

Such self-parody has been typical of graphic fiction since the emergence of underground comix in the 1960s, such as Wimmen’s Comix and Robert Crumb’s Zap (1968), and has taken on a particular force in Argentine comics since the 1980s.² Indeed, the comics medium is often strongly characterized by reflexivity and a ludic interrogation of its own conventions. As Hans-Christian Christiansen suggests, “Comics have inherently unique features which would tend to promote formal play of a potentially disruptive kind: for instance the anti-naturalistic iconography and the deconstructive or conflictual play between word and picture and picture-sequence.”³ While
an important number of comics, especially in Argentina, have dedicated themselves to the task of adapting literary or cinematic texts, or to the recreation of classic comics for another market or generation, intertextual and intermedial play are by no means limited to such enterprises. The recurrent citations, resignifications, and remediations of graphic fiction become even more prevalent in science fiction and fantasy genres, given their frequent use of common narrative topoi and “shared universes,” in which more than one writer contributes to the construction of a fictional world.

Many would agree with Manfred Pfister that intertextuality is the “central constructional principle” of postmodernism. Deployed as an antimimetic device, it works to blur the boundary between text and world, suggesting that reality is simply a linguistic construction and that texts refer...
only to other texts in a giddy *mise en abyme* of self-reference. In this chapter I will test out the hypothesis that comic-book reflexivity does not primarily engage in intertextual and reflexive play in order to point to the illusory nature of what we take for reality, but instead to draw attention to the material qualities of its medium. In other words, the kind of reflexivity we encounter in graphic fiction ultimately reveals not the immateriality of the world so much as the materiality of the text, and of drawing, writing, and reading as embodied practices that situate us within the material world. This reflexivity does not necessarily, therefore, lead to a postmodern crisis in representation of the kind Hans Bertens describes as “a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real.” Instead, as I will argue, it acts to recuperate mediation and translation as defining features of graphic fiction and crucial to its self-positioning as a map, manual, compendium, or digest to aid its readers in their negotiation of the material world beyond the text.

My discussion will focus on the use of reflexivity in a selection of science fiction comics by the scriptwriter Ricardo Barreiro (1949–1999), serialized in magazines between the late 1970s and the late 1980s and later collated in book form. Barreiro was one of Argentina’s premier scriptwriters, eclipsed only by Oesterheld, and he worked in partnership with many of the country’s most talented illustrators, including Francisco Solano López, Juan Zanotto, Eduardo Risso, and Juan Giménez. The first part of this chapter will investigate how the comic medium is exploited in Barreiro’s work to give form to the experience of time and space within the modern city, and to evoke the comic’s particular capacity to blend myth and materiality. Here I will draw on recent work by Jens Balzer and André Suhr, among others, who take inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s urban writings to ask whether the comic medium has “special competences for capturing urban space and city life,” extending this question to consider some of the particularities of the Latin American city.

The second part of the chapter will engage in a more critical fashion with the Benjaminian orientation of recent comics theory and criticism, and specifically with a line of enquiry I find very suggestive, at least in part because it highlights the materialist impetus of comic-book reflexivity. I refer to Jared Gardner’s work on comics as a form of (Benjaminian) archive. His insights have been extended by Jörn Enns, again with recourse to Benjamin, who argues that if graphic fiction takes on the form of the archive, it is “also because it reflects the experience of the modern city, which is itself also an archive.” With reference to Barreiro’s texts, I will explore what the metaphor of the archive might reveal or conceal about the construction of
knowledge in graphic fiction. I will propose some alternative figures that—taken together—might account more fully for the reflexive practices of these comics, as well as the strategies employed more generally by graphic fiction to define and differentiate itself in relation to other forms of literary and visual media.

My analysis throughout will draw attention to the tension between mythology and materialism in these comics’ representation of the city. Although they appear in some ways to inscribe themselves within the literary tradition of fantasy, self-reflexivity, and philosophical idealism epitomized by Borges’s fiction, their commitment to the material dimensions of both urban experience and the text itself points to an alternative way in which we might read their metafictionality: not as evidence of a postmodern flight into textuality but primarily as an exploration of the materiality of graphic fiction as a medium, and its particular capacity to reflect the city’s own fusion of the mythical and the material.

Myth and Materiality in the Neoliberal City: Ricardo Barreiro’s Science Fiction Comics

In their introduction to an excellent compilation of essays, *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture, and Sequence*, Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling describe the “fundamental connection” between the rise of comics and the emergence of mass societies and mass cultures at the turn of the twentieth century, as comics flourished in tandem with modern newspapers. This relationship is not merely historical or commercial, but also aesthetic, they argue: comics have a particular facility for capturing urban space and city life, producing similar modes of perception and promoting “the loose and moving gaze of the urban flâneur.” The structural similarities between comics and the city have inspired a recent wave of scholarship on comic form that has succeeded in uniting formalist and semiotic approaches (such as those developed in foundational works by Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen in the 1990s) with the social and economic critique of modernity.

Although there is emphatic agreement among scholars that the spatial and narrative fragmentation of comics powerfully conjures up the experience of urban life, contradictions begin to emerge in the detail. André Suhr directs his attention to how comic form may mimic the fragmentary, fleeting, and finite nature of our perception as we walk through the streets of a city, proposing that the frames of comics mimic those frames that feature
prominently along our way through the city: “Windows, openings, doorways, street entrances—they all frame our view, putting things into the picture and others out of it, just as comics’ frames do.” Similarly, Jens Balzer suggests that “comics are part of an aesthetics that can consume the image of the ‘whole’ only in its disharmony.” Ahrens and Meteling, on the other hand, ask: “Does the spatial inertia of the sequences in contrast to film, video, or television result in retardation in order to ease the saturation that has been attributed to the big city since 1900?” In other words, do the static images of comics actually provide relief from the speed and tumultuous disorder with which texts and images bombard us in the city, allowing the reader to absorb them at their own pace?

This contradiction is, of course, at the root of art’s defamiliarization of perception, through which it simultaneously registers experience and encourages us to reflect critically upon it. It is a contradiction Graeme Gilloch finds to be particularly marked in Benjamin’s texts on the city, which are “symptomatic of, yet resistant to, modernity. The Passagenarbeit incorporates the experiences of modern life in order to negate them. Writing the city breaks its spell.” Benjamin—like many others of his time, including Laszló Moholy-Nagy and Jean Epstein—grasped the vast potential in film to defamiliarize temporal and spatial experience, drawing on the camera’s resources “for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object.” The use of slow-motion sequences and close-up shots brings to light “entirely new structures of matter,” thereby altering our perception of the city. For Benjamin, however, the revolutionary potential of photography would not be fully realized until the writer took it up to recast conventional literary form, breaking down “the barrier between writing and image.” This new medium would tap into the energy with which advertising had begun to flood the streets of the modern city with new constellations of texts and images, in its own recastings of the relationship between art and technology. “Without ever knowing its name,” Gardner suggests, “the writing Benjamin is calling for in the 1930s is clearly the comic.” It is with this conviction that scholars working on comics have recently returned to Benjamin’s writings on the city. The sketches, aphorisms, and brief commentaries that comprise his Arcades Project (1927–40) evince the ceaseless flux, the assault on the senses, and the dissolution of fixed perspectives that characterize urban experience, and that may also be powerfully expressed in the temporal and spatial discontinuities of graphic fiction.

In the discussion that follows of two science fiction comics scripted by
Barreiro, I will supplement Benjamin’s observations with those of the urban theorist Néstor García Canclini to consider how graphic fiction may capture the specific characteristics of the modern Latin American city. Both theorists share an understanding of the tensions between the mythological and the material in the city, which is composed of images, dreams, and memories as much as of bricks and concrete. This vision permeates the representation of the city in *Ciudad* (Barreiro and Juan Giménez, 1982), in which characters are trapped within an infinite labyrinth that is implacably solid in its physical dimensions but also subject to the constant metamorphoses proper to myth. In *Ciudad* and a later comic, *Cain* (with Eduardo Risso, 1988), Barreiro also brings into focus other tensions that have come to define urban experience in Latin America: the conflict between rationalist planning and unplanned growth on a vast scale, the coexistence of multiple temporalities, and the extremes of totalitarianism and a decentered, weakened power of the state under neoliberalism. Barreiro and his illustrators consistently exploit the material and formal resources of graphic fiction to construct the comic as an exemplary medium through which to explore late twentieth-century urban experience in Latin America.

In *Ciudad*, the protagonists have slipped into another universe from which they cannot escape: a perilous, precarious place that, although presented in a fantastical key, bears many of the hallmarks of the modern (Latin American) city. The comic’s unforgiving perpendiculars and outsized facades portray a city that has not been built on a human scale. It is “una metrópolis monstruosa, infinita y sin nombre” (a monstrous metropolis, infinite and nameless) and “un laberinto infernal” (an infernal labyrinth). Alternating long shots and close-ups, bird’s-eye and worm’s-eye perspectives emphasize the vulnerability of its inhabitants, lost in the monumental architecture of its streets. This effect is heightened at times by the use of three-point perspective (see fig. 5), coupled here with a curved horizontal line mimicking the distortion of a fish-eye lens to lend a delirious tilt and reel to the towers stretching upward above. Both *Ciudad* and *Ministerio* give voice, at least in part, to modern anxieties about the development of the ultrarational, bureaucratic city, often figured as a prison or a labyrinth. *Ministerio* in particular echoes the fears expressed by Georg Simmel in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), in which he laments the risk to the individual of “being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.” Quite literally, here, citizens are sucked into Solano López’s infernal machine and spewed out as anonymized cubes of biological material that provide the nutrition necessary to maintain society’s strict hierarchies (see fig. 4 above).
While *Ciudad* bears witness in a similar manner to the danger that the rational city represents to individual safety and liberty, it also immerses us in a city that continually transgresses its bounds and threatens to dissolve order and form into anarchy and excess. It highlights the tension between the rigid, prison-like grid of the planned metropolis and our much more subjective experience of time and space in the city. Through repeated transgressions of the comic’s own conventional grid format (its separation into panels and gutters), Barreiro and Giménez evoke an experience of moving through the city that confounds any strict topography. Figure 6 illustrates Jean’s long walk home, which stretches out impossibly until he finds himself in the parallel universe of the infinite city. The page encourages a reading that is both simultaneous and linear, which grasps the whole theme (walking), represented by the dominating central figure of Jean, as well as following the narratives of the individual frames. It therefore pulls us out of time, mimicking Jean’s own separation from objective time. This is reinforced by the repeated superimposition of his figure in different sizes on some of the panels, suggesting a splitting of consciousness as he begins to enter a different dimension.

The spatial coordinates of the city itself are never defined in *Ciudad:* it
Fig. 6. Ciudad (Ricardo Barreiro and Juan Giménez, 1982), 5
appears to represent a conglomerate of different cities from Europe and the Americas. Without warning, street signs change language from Spanish to French or English, and we slip imperceptibly between Paris and Buenos Aires with the same ease as Cortázar’s protagonist in “El otro cielo” (Todos los fuegos el fuego, 1966). The city cannot be located in any specific time: some architectural designs seem to place us in the past and others in the future, while the people condemned to wander its streets also belong to different moments in history, stretching back to the eighteenth century. We are told that

la ciudad es un lugar fantástico. Quizá la intersección en un punto infinito de todos los continums [sic] espacio temporales de la tierra. . . . Aquí no existe lo imposible. No hay ni lógica ni reglas; estamos en el infierno y el paraíso, al mismo tiempo en el Aleph de Borges o la infundiblula [sic] cronosínclástica de Voneguth [sic].

the city is a fantastical place. Perhaps the point of intersection in one infinite point of every space-time continuum on earth. . . . The impossible doesn’t exist here. There is no logic and no rules; we’re in heaven and hell, simultaneously in Borges’s Aleph and Vonnegut’s chrono-synclastic infundibulum.

The eponymous Aleph of Borges’s short story (1945; also cited in fig. 6) is a point in space that contains all other points. In Kurt Vonnegut’s novel The Sirens of Titan (1959), by entering a kind of wormhole, matter becomes scattered across time and space, existing simultaneously in different worlds and time zones. The “chrono-synclastic infundibulum” is a place where multiple truths coexist, fitting together although they would be logically incompatible in any single world.

From the 1970s onward, literary quotation of this kind is extremely common in Argentine comics, which frequently cite Borges, Cortázar, or other writers of the fantastic tradition; a (more politically committed) version of Borges even becomes a character in Perramus (Juan Sasturain and Alberto Breccia, 1985–). Intertextual citation plays a key role in Ciudad’s exploration of alternative temporal and spatial regimes, as the comic series establishes portals of its own between texts from different times and places. This technique is reinforced by the introduction into the story, toward the end of the first series, of Juan Salvo, the famed protagonist of El Eternauta, whose visage would be instantly recognizable to Argentine readers. As he recaps his story for them and describes his experiences traveling through parallel uni-
verses, the panels and gutters that usually divide up time give way to three interior splash pages, presenting a collage of events from *El Eternauta*. While conveying the sense that all times are simultaneous to the time-traveling hero, these pages also demonstrate the effortlessness with which fictions may transgress the bounds of a book or comic panel to intermingle with other stories, creating a sense of a shared literary universe that both subtends and transcends the material one.

*Ciudad*’s intertextual references thus do more than simply establish literary predecessors for its particular exploration of distortions in time and space: they also present the city as overlaid and underpinned by myths and legends, which have a determining force. The tales of Noah’s Ark and the Pied Piper of Hamelin hijack an episode each, playing themselves out within the story-world of the comic. Vampires and sea monsters lend a historical density to the more modern threat of an automated hypermarket defended by punitive robots. The portrayal of the material city shot through with mythologies old and new echoes the vision of the city that emerges in Benjamin’s writing, which aimed, as Gilloch suggests, to “unmask the modern metropolis as the site of the phantasmagoric and the mythic.”24 The material architecture of the city is interwoven with “the residues of a dream world,” such as the arcades, exhibition halls, and panoramas of Benjamin’s Paris,25 and becomes a space in which “the past constantly collides with the present and the real constantly merges with the mythological.”26 This is a view of the city that is shared by García Canclini, for whom

Las ciudades se construyen con casas y parques, calles, autopistas y señales de tránsito. Pero las ciudades se configuran también con imágenes. Pueden ser las de los planos que las inventan y las ordenan. Pero también imaginan el sentido de la vida urbana las novelas, canciones y películas, los relatos de la prensa, la radio y televisión. La ciudad se vuelve densa al cargarse con fantasías heterogéneas. La urbe programada para funcionar, diseñada en cuadrícula, se desborda y se multiplica en ficciones individuales y colectivas.27

Cities are built with houses and parks, streets, motorways, and traffic lights. But cities are also shaped by images. These may be those of the plans that invent and order them. But the meaning of urban life is also imagined by novels, songs, and films, stories in the press, on radio and television. The city becomes dense under the weight of heterogeneous fantasies. The metropolis programmed to function,
designed as a grid, bursts through and multiplies itself in individual and collective fictions.

The imaginary and the fantastic very much shape the fabric of the city in *Ciudad*: the buildings and parks the protagonists come across are often illusions or projections of some kind, and they soon learn that nothing in the city is what it seems: as we are told, “La ciudad es siempre la trampa, la apariencia engañosa, el doble juego” (the city is always the snare, the deceptive appearance, the double bluff).28

 Might we then be tempted to situate *Ciudad* within the fantastic tradition in Argentine literature, given its emphasis on the city as constructed by texts and illusions? This reading would be complicated by the comic’s commitment to bringing embodied practices to the fore and to pursuing a mimetic relationship with the irreducibly material dimensions of the city. The materiality of the city is continually emphasized in the characters’ long journeys through an inhospitable environment, wearied by the discomfort of trudging along streets with the unbearable heat of the sun bouncing off the concrete. If the comic medium—with its temporal and spatial disjunctions and its frequent recourse to intertextual citation—may evoke the imaginary dimensions of the city with particular clarity, it may also accentuate its materiality. *Ciudad*’s artwork repeatedly takes on the architectural forms of the city as the characters move through it. Narrow gauge, page-width horizontal panels mimic the shape of the metro tunnel as the train races between stations, and at one point the sketch of a train stands in for one strip, with its open doors imitating the shape of a panel (fig. 7). The steep-angled verticals of the cathedral are echoed in other panels on the same page, which trace lines of similar weight and slant, integrating the cathedral’s lineaments into the broader visual design of the comic itself.29

In other ways, too, *Ciudad* points to the physical fabric and the material conditions of the Latin American city, which continually seep through the comic’s fantastical images and tales. The comic’s depiction of the city faithfully reflects the changes experienced in Latin American cities in the latter half of the twentieth century, which became increasingly polycentric as new urbanizations sprang up around huge out-of-town shopping malls and the middle classes moved out in search of safer, greener suburbs. As García Canclini explains, we now find ourselves in “una ciudad diseminada, una ciudad de la que cada vez tenemos menos idea dónde termina, dónde empieza, en qué lugar estamos” (a dispersed city, a city about which we have less and less idea where it ends, where it begins, and where we are within it).30 *Ciudad* is
remarkably prescient of these changes, which would gather pace in the years following its first publication. One of the most remarkable features of the city it depicts is the utter lack of integration of its different spaces. Any civic center or seat of government is noticeably absent, and the city is carved up instead into segregated barrios differentiated by their relative state of social and economic development.

Other features of the city in Ciudad also map out the particular configurations of urban space in late twentieth-century Latin America. The vast and futuristic “Auto Supermarket” that provides the setting for the third episode calls to mind the Americanized shopping malls that would multiply in and around large Latin American cities during the late 1980s and 1990s, following the first North American–style commercial centers that appeared in Brazil and Mexico toward the end of the 1970s. The self-defended neighborhood of the “Barrio Castillo” episode strongly evokes the privatization of urban space and security in the barrios privados (gated communities) that were to become extremely popular among the middle classes in Buenos Aires and other capitals from the 1990s onward.

If it is the disciplinary function of the city-state in Ministerio that endangers the lives of its characters, it is the absence of governance that is often the greatest threat to the protagonists of Ciudad. The city becomes both the site of terrifying power, exercised through technologies of surveillance and con-
control, and a lawless jungle of uncontrolled violence and barbarism. Drawing on Lewis Mumford and Theodore Rozniak, Gary K. Wolfe finds that the modern city, especially as represented in science fiction, is

an unmanageable, cacophonous, barely conceivable environment that has long since shifted from the communal imperative to the survival imperative: cities that were once social organizations to promote the protection of the individual from a hostile and chaotic environment must now devote more and more of their resources to the protection of the individual from the hostile and chaotic environment that the city itself has become.31

This observation is particularly apt with respect to the Latin American city, in which the original rationalist plan, marked out on a grid, has overflowed into informal, unregulated, unpredictable spaces, which often exist in a state of lawlessness or are effectively governed by forces beyond state control. Against this backdrop, however, plays the phantasm of large-scale state repression of the kind experienced in the Southern Cone dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s. In a similar manner, the city in Barreiro’s comics is a space that is always characterized by too much or too little centralized power and order.

The notion of the city as the intersection of space-time continuums is of course one drawn from science fiction, but it is perhaps not so far removed from the disorienting jumble of conflicting temporalities that make up the Latin American cityscape, and that often provoke what García Canclini describes as “esta sensación de vivir a la vez en varios siglos” (the sensation of living in different centuries at the same time).32 In a way that is particularly marked in the Latin American megalopolis, the archaic remains visible within the cracks of an uneven modernization. Traditional forms of social organization and cultural practices are juxtaposed with high-tech communications that connect elite sectors of the city to a high-speed, globalized, postmodern world. As García Canclini suggests,

Vivimos la tensión entre tradiciones que todavía no se van (tradiciones barriales, de formas de organización y estilos de comunicación urbana) y una modernidad que no acaba de llegar a los países latinoamericanos, cuya precariedad no impide, sin embargo, que también lo posmoderno ya esté entre nosotros.33
We live at a point of tension between traditions that have not yet disappeared (local customs and forms of organization and urban communication) and a modernity that has not fully arrived in Latin American countries, the frailty of which does not, however, impede the postmodern from taking its place among us.

In this context, *Ciudad’s* fantastical conjunction of ultramodern edifices with decaying neighborhoods trapped in the past effectively recalls the inequalities that were to shape the use of urban space in Latin American cities during the latter decades of the twentieth century. This is one of many ways in which the comic’s apparently fantastical treatment of time and space may be understood to be firmly rooted within the specific and material realities of urban experience in Latin America.

Social inequality and the weakness of the state also become central themes in a later series, *Caín*. Barreiro constructs a vision of a deeply divided Buenos Aires in which the rich neighborhoods “vampirize” the poverty-ridden periphery, while the state, big business, and the media are caught up in webs of corruption and crime. Like *Ciudad*, *Caín* showed uncanny clairvoyance in respect of the profound impact of neoliberal policies that would transform the cityscape of Buenos Aires during the 1990s, as multinational companies charged into the capital.

In his essay “One-Way Street,” written in 1928, Benjamin describes a significant change in the place of writing in the modern city. Having previously enjoyed an independent existence in the printed book, writing has become an integral part of the cityscape, “ruthlessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos.” From the stillness of reading a book, we are now exposed to different kinds of reading, “a flurry of changeable, brightly coloured, clashing characters” and “locust swarms of lettering” that rise vertically, drawing our eyes upward to the neon signs and advertising billboards of the city. It has been pointed out, by Balzer among others, that the comic evokes this modern use of writing in the city with admirable precision, with its insertion of texts within images and its exploitation of vertical as well as horizontal planes of reading.

*Caín* illustrates with great clarity this penetration of writing into the cityscape in the form of advertising and the “locust swarms” of neon lights. However, the texts woven into this city’s fabric tell a specific story, of the power of multinational business and the weakness of the state: the “brutal heteronomies of economic chaos” of Benjamin’s phrase, perhaps, which ges-
tures toward the state’s subjection to external forces. The oversized, neon-lit words in *Caín* (fig. 8) are rendered in stark black and white, plastered across tower blocks whose tiny illuminated windows, forming horizontal rectangles of differing length against a black background, also take on the appearance of block type seen from afar. We are urged to *read* the cityscape, both literally and metaphorically: the signs all refer to well-known global brands rather than Argentine ones, brands that flooded the market in Argentina under the neoliberal regime of the 1990s and often drove local companies out of business. In *Caín*, multinationals are also suspiciously involved in

Fig. 8. *Caín* (Ricardo Barreiro and Eduardo Risso, 1988), 9 (detail)
the state’s discipline of its citizens. A sign forbidding entry to a juvenile reform institution carries the surprising strap line: “Auspicia esta norma legal Siemens” (This regulation is sponsored by Siemens).\(^{38}\) Cán, the hero of the comic, is left for dead after the brutal police repression of a riot at the reformatory, and sold in a vegetative state to a medical company experimenting with prosthetic brains. We are told that the Ronald Reagan Medical Foundation is just one of many multinational corporations that, because of the lack of control exercised by the Argentine state, is able to carry out experiments on human guinea pigs that would be banned anywhere else in the world.

One of the comic’s grandest signs (fig. 9) encodes a biting critique of the relationship between the state and big business in Argentina. Cán’s evil stepbrother has robbed him of his inheritance, ownership of his father’s huge company. Its headquarters fill the panel here, with the company’s imposing status and influence clearly magnified by the use of a low-angle perspective. Throughout Cán, hard angles and geometric shapes are associated with city-center spaces and sites of power, while more softly traced, sinuous, and untidy lines are, by contrast, reserved for the impoverished ruins of the city’s periphery, Cán’s home. The company’s name emblazoned on the tower, “Bunge De Hoz,” is a combination of two names with a particular resonance for Argentine readers. “Bunge” refers to Bunge and Born, a giant agricultural conglomerate started by European immigrants to Argentina in the late nineteenth century, while “De Hoz” represents José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz, who was minister of the economy during the 1976–83 dictatorship. He was responsible for setting in train a dramatic reshaping of the nation’s economy through his pursuit of neoliberal policies. While these brought some initial success in fighting inflation, they ultimately benefited the four or five largest and most powerful companies in Argentina, including Bunge and Born, at the expense of smaller, local businesses. These companies were given special access to the government and enjoyed a series of privileges, including the ability to fix prices, while smaller companies were given little or no protection, and many went bankrupt.\(^{39}\)

Unlike Ciudad, Cán does not often indulge in overt intertextual play;\(^{40}\) however, it does introduce a form of reflexivity in its adoption of the modes of perception of a range of different visual technologies and its experimentation with unusual “camera” angles. Cinematographic zooms take us closer to the action, while at other points our vision is directed through binocular lenses or Cán’s infra-red, target-seeking prosthetic eye. Unexpected “shots” from behind a televsional image or beneath a parrilla (a metal-wired bed used in electric shock torture) insistently draw our attention to the unusual use of
Fig. 9. Cain (Ricardo Barreiro and Eduardo Risso, 1988), 57
perspective in panel composition. The comic’s square, grid-like arrangement of panels receives repeated visual echoes within the frames, in the tiled backgrounds of a great number of scenes, in a checked blazer, brick walls, the square geometry of fitted kitchen cupboards, the glass panels of an atrium roof, and the multiple screens of a television studio. Often set at a violent angle, the checked patterns and grids within the panels immerse us in austere and alarming cage-like structures. This is a city made in the image of a comic, an effect heightened by Risso’s use of stark solid blacks and an unflinching, cutout style to emphasize two-dimensionality.

If Ciudad’s panels were molded to take on the forms of the city’s architecture, then, Caín reverses the relationship, actively constructing the city with the forms and dimensions of a comic. Both series, however, play on formal analogies between the comic medium and the city, and position themselves in a clear mimetic relationship with a broader materiality that embraces a world beyond the comic’s pages. Risso’s nonnaturalistic, hard angles and flat surfaces in Caín enhance the brutality of the cityscape and throw into relief the softer curves of human features. Illustrated in a contrasting style, Giménez’s Ciudad also evokes a sense of materiality through highly textured facades and shadows filled with dense and irregular crosshatching. This draws particular attention to the material tools of the comic’s production and the physical activity of drawing. This emphasis is entirely consonant with the rise of the auteur comic during the 1980s. It also suggests ways in which graphic fiction does not simply establish a mimetic relationship with the material world but may even be understood, as a product crafted from ink and paper, to participate in that materiality. The unique combination of text and image in graphic fiction allows for a complex form of mediation that does not translate the city’s physical dimensions into a dematerialized form of discourse. Instead, it closely reproduces the forms and textures of urban space and insists on its own reliance on textual practices that are embodied and material in nature.

Comics, the Archive, and Cognitive Practices

Gardner notes an “archival turn” in contemporary graphic fiction, finding the superheroes of yore to have been replaced by “tales of collectors, the compulsive combers of archives, warehouses, and dumpsters.”41 The comic is “closer to the archive than to traditional narrative forms,” he claims: “Like the archive, the comics form retains that which cannot be reconciled to
linear narrative.” It is this excess of signs, texts, and images, continually threatening to dissolve the ordered frames of a neat, linear narrative, that often makes the comic form so suited to representing the complexity of urban experience. Both Gardner and Enns draw on the highly suggestive figure of the archive developed in Benjamin’s writing, as a conglomeration of texts and images in which the ruins of the past are interwoven with dreams of the yet-to-come. They propose that the comic medium is ideally suited to the task of “making the present aware of its own ‘archive,’ the past that it is always in the process of becoming,” particularly given its use of montage, the form preferred by Benjamin for its capacity to bring images of the past and present into a dialectical relationship.

This line of investigation opens up very fruitful ways of understanding the self-representation of comics as a space for collecting and reflecting on heterogeneous fragments of the everyday, altering our perception of the relationship between past and present very much in the way that Benjamin envisaged. While the figure of the comic-as-archive may illuminate a great deal about reflexivity in graphic fiction, however, it may also conceal the more active role of comics in transforming and translating its texts and images, and in giving material form to the invisible and the intangible. While the arrangement and classification of artifacts within an archive always suggest new constellations of meaning, the comic’s use of existing material involves a far more active reappropriation. This is particularly the case in science fiction comics, given the overlaying of additional meanings that results from the genre’s typically parodic mode, particularly in Argentina.

In the discussion that follows of an earlier comic series scripted by Barreiro, Slot-Barr (with Solano López, 1976), I will suggest that the “archival drive” that Gardner equates with comic form and production may be understood as part of a much larger toolbox of cognitive practices. Additional figures such as the map, the encyclopedia, and the compendium allow us to gain a fuller sense of graphic fiction’s reflexive self-positioning. These figures are placed under erasure within comic discourse and form, often subjected to parody but nevertheless revealing an underlying didactic aspiration to orientate readers within an ever more complex environment, as well as a desire to create a way for comics to take their place in the “archive,” that space of cultural legitimation, alongside other forms of literary and visual media. Again, this ambition may be read within the context of the nascent development of the auteur comic, both in Argentina and beyond.

Gardner and Enns produce cogent readings of the comics they present as examples of the comic-as-archive (the work of Ben Katchor and Kim Deitch
in the case of the former, and Jason Lutes’s Berlin in the latter), detailing ways in which they respond to a desire to capture “the forgotten traces of the past.” However, this kind of chronicling is rarely in evidence in science fiction comics. While these may, indeed, construct futuristic worlds in order to address historical themes or contemporary concerns, they do not respond in any straightforward manner to the kind of archival impulse that Pierre Nora brands the “imperative of our epoch,” nor do they usually participate in the rise of memory discourses and musealization that, for Andreas Huyssen, “together are called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space.” Science fiction comics more typically celebrate the universality and mutability of myth in a way that is deliberately dehistoricizing, and the frequent use of pseudoscience and imaginary science parodies the pursuit of knowledge and the preservation of the past.

Barreiro’s comics often pay ironic homage to the dual function of entertainment and education in the tradition of science fiction comics. These have often taken the opportunity to introduce readers to relevant scientific discoveries or facts—such as the principles of nuclear physics or the rudiments of space rocket design—or to frame social messages about the impact of scientific advance within their narratives, in the manner of the ecologically orientated stories of the 1970s U.S. magazine Slow Death. Closer to home, Raúl Roux’s Más allá (1938) peppered its narrative with explanations of planetary orbits and Newton’s law of gravity. In an ironic replay of this relationship between entertainment and knowledge, the action of Ministro is unsubtly interrupted by asides addressed to the reader, giving spurious information about the precise biological makeup of the particular (fictional) species currently attacking the protagonist. The example in figure 10 lays out classic longitudinal and cross-section presentations of a mutant spider, the giant polyphagous multipede. The use of labels and arrows mimics the meticulous diagrams of a zoology textbook, while the continuing narration—which, as it is confined to a box matching the other labels, appears to adopt the authoritative voice of science—hybridizes the language of scientific description with that of the horror genre in its reference to the “gigantesco” (gigantic) specimen of a species known to be “devoradores insaciables” (insatiable devourers). At another point, an editorial interjection cuts into the narrative at a moment of maximum suspense, leaving the protagonist literally dangling from an elevator cable, in order to appeal to us as readers to forgive a forthcoming digression in the name of the advancement
of knowledge. A page of background information ensues on the “Ese Ese,” the protagonist’s android pursuers, before we rejoin our hero, still clinging valiantly to the cable.

In other works by Barreiro, the archive becomes an object of critique, fully imbricated with acts of ideological manipulation and the abuse of power. The science fiction genre is characteristically suspicious of the relationship between colonial power and knowledge, a collusion that takes on a particular resonance in the Latin American context. This suspicion of the archive is a central theme in Barreiro’s 1970s series, *Slot-Barr*. Slot’s heroic, galaxy-tripping adventures are prefaced and punctuated by texts of an overtly didactic nature, including a chronology and a historical report, attributed to a historian who appears later as a character in the narrative. The report advances a dependency-theory explanation for the economic inequalities of the future (which, naturally, bear a marked resemblance to those of the present). Later, interspersed fragments from the fictional *Enciclopedia galáctica abreviada* give “scientific” accounts of the technical operations of different spacecraft and the anatomy of predatory space creatures (fig. 11).

Barreiro’s *Enciclopedia galáctica* is a reference to the fictional *Encyclopedia Galactica* of the future civilization created in Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* trilogy (1951–53). Written in the neutral tone proper to the genre, the oc-
casional excerpts Asimov places at the beginning of his chapters lend a sense of historical depth and verisimilitude to his invented universe. We later discover, however, the extent to which the Encyclopaedia's data-gathering and data-preserving project is fundamental to a bid for power on the part of its compilers. A similarly sinister intent governs the promotion of the Enciclopedia galáctica in Slot-Barr. At first sight, the insertion of encyclopedia entries adds gravity and scientific credibility to the comic's fantastical inventions. Building on Asimov's technique, Barreiro and Solano López exploit the comic's capacity for visual collage, composing mocked-up pages of short entries and explanatory diagrams, rendered in scholastic small type. The addition of spurious entry numbers and cross-references (see fig. 11) create the illusion of a totalizing work of monumental proportions, while the level of detail employed, completely unnecessary to the development of the plot, points to SF’s commitment to worldbuilding. However, it becomes clear in Slot-Barr that the encyclopedia is also a tool of mystification, used by the ruling Confederation to propagate a lie, to hide the true origins of humanity.
and position itself at the center of human history. The encyclopedia is “otra de sus tantas falsedades” (one of its many falsehoods)\(^50\) wielded in the name of power.

Indeed, the recourse to archives throughout *Slot-Barr* yields only deception and decayed remnants. In the sixth episode, Slot travels to Earth to search for a book that contains the secret prehistory of humanity and the origins of the Confederación Empire. It is this book, “el libro de los libros” (the book of books), that contains the key to liberating the citizens of the beleaguered planet Guewar 2 from the imperial forces of the Confederation.\(^51\) A knowledge of the origins of humanity and how the Confederation was able to establish its power is crucial to the success of the revolutionaries. Sadly, Slot discovers that time has taken its toll on the book, and only a fragment remains legible. It reads: “La historia del hombre no es sino la de la lucha entre el débil y el poderoso, entre el pobre y el rico” (The history of humankind is nothing but the battle between the weak and the powerful, between the poor and the rich).\(^52\) Although he and his fellow travelers are cast into gloom at the demise of the book, which cannot now ensure the salvation of the plucky rebels of Guewar 2, in *Slot-Barr’s* historical-materialist vision this scrap of text is of course the true key to liberation, bringing a proper understanding of the role of class war in the evolution of human history. Unlike the “book of books” in Borges’s fictions, which lies forever out of our grasp (“La biblioteca de Babel”) or leads us only into a textual labyrinth from which there is no escape (“El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”), Barreiro’s “book of books” bears clear witness to the material conditions of existence that shape life beyond the text.

Borges’s stories are canonical examples of the fantastic tradition in River Plate literature, in which texts invariably lead us only to other texts, and what we see around us is revealed to be a complex illusion created by and embedded in acts of language and of the imagination. Self-reference in Barreiro’s graphic fiction and the comic medium more generally, I suggest, is rarely of this kind: it does not destroy the mimetic relationship between text and world but often enhances it, countering the antimaterialist, narcissistic thrust of postmodern reflexivity. Ole Frahm reminds us of a common reflexive device in comics, in which a character is presented to us as reading the same pages of the comic in which he is depicted. For Frahm, this destroys the illusion that the comic refers to an external world and effectively parodies “the very notion of an original.” As a classic example, he cites Al Williamson’s “The Aliens” (1953), in which the aliens come across a copy of the same comic that we are reading ourselves. The story becomes so self-
referential that by the end, it refers only to itself, referring to itself, referring to itself ad infinitum (fig. 12). A similar panel is included toward the end of Ciudad, when Juan Salvo conjectures that they may all be characters in a novel, a film, or even a comic (fig. 13). However, both of these examples are arguably much less hermetic than Frahm would suggest. While “The Aliens” ends with a dizzying mise en abyme, it is one that insists on the material dimensions of the comic. The final caption returns us to the physical copy we are holding, reminding us that it will have a role to play in the future events narrated in the comic: “This may be the very magazine those creatures will find when they land on the exploded fragment of earth!” In a similar way, the mise en abyme panel in Ciudad, which duplicates our own hands holding the comic, leaves us acutely aware of reading, not just as a mental activity but also as one that involves the visual and tactile senses and the physical act of holding a magazine or book and turning its pages. Ciudad does not, moreover, end with this image, but with Juan Salvo’s decision to take the only possible route out of the city, even if it may be a trap. Indeed, reflexivity in Barreiro’s comics often leads outward rather than inward, directing the reader to the real world beyond the comic.

Ministerio also ends with a reflexive reframing of its own story, but one that points us beyond its pages to its political context. We discover that the comic we are reading has been written by the main character: as we turn the last page, we see him writing “THE END” on the panel we have just seen at the foot of the previous page (fig. 14). In that panel, his joy at the liberation from the evil regime is subdued as he recollects his two friends who lost their lives in the struggle. The comic continues for another page, relating his excitement at finishing the comic we have been reading. But this too is tempered by the sobering sight of police violence on the street outside. The final panel of the book we read, in which the protagonist repeats the names of the absent friends of the comic-book story as he witnesses civilians being thrown into the back of a van at gunpoint, establishes a clear link between the apocalyptic terrors of the fictional regime of Ministerio and the brutal abuses of state power in Argentina.

In contrast to the kind of self-reference Frahm theorizes, reflexivity here does not parody “the recurrent notion that, in some cases, a proximity between object and sign actually exists that can be called truth.” It does the opposite: it insists on its relevance to what is taking place beyond the comic and constructs the comic as a form of truth telling. It is not a textual labyrinth in which we are trapped, but a much broader and stickier web of violence and impunity. Barreiro and Solano López make use of the mate-
Fig. 12. “The Aliens” (Al Williamson), *Weird Fantasy* 1. no. 17 (January–February 1953)
rial form of the comic—the “mise en page”—to render the physical act of page-turning significant to the narrative and to highlight the insertion of the comic’s pages within the social and political realities of its context.

The montage form of the comic, together with its use of heterogeneous texts and images to capture the complex relationship between memory and reality, suggests an affinity with the archive as Benjamin both imagined it and created it: as a space in which new meanings may arise from shuffling or reordering of texts and visual documents. However, while the archive is
always in need of an archivist to create meanings by ordering and classifying the material gathered in it, science fiction comics often take a much more active role in providing an aid to exploration, styling themselves as a map or a manual to orientate readers in their created worlds. It is in the nature of science fiction, of course, that such maps relate as much to the present world as any future one. While Slot-Barr’s didactic impulse appears to be directed toward alien forms (here’s how to recognize a Zarkus if you are unlucky enough to come across one in outer space), it really aims to persuade its readers to adopt a historical-materialist view of economic inequality (here’s how to demystify imperial discourses of power and fight for liberation). It is here that a tension emerges between the parodic mode of many science fiction comics and the desire to retain an instructive role for the comic itself in training its readers to “read” political and social realities, in a manner more reminiscent of earlier revolutionary comics such as those scripted by Oesterheld.

Rather than the montage work associated with the archive, it may be more relevant to think of the comic’s operations in terms of the digest. The well-known Classics Illustrated, which began in 1941, was responsible for abridging and illustrating nearly 170 works of world literature in comic form.54 However, the technique of literary adaptation is to be found everywhere in comics, and particularly in science fiction. Barreiro’s Slot is a
composite figure, taking on the travels and the travails of his literary forebears. Barreiro dedicates an entire chapter to the retelling of a version of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), with Slot adopting the role of Ishmael; other characters whose stories overlap with Slot’s are Homer’s Ulysses and Hugo Pratt’s cult hero El Corto Maltés (Corto Maltese), created in 1967 and the protagonist of multiple comics series. What links *Slot-Barr’s* intertextual citations is the motif of a journey across the seas, and these three literary sailors—Ishmael, Ulysses, El Corto Maltés—are united and updated in Slot, who cruises in a similar way across the galaxies in his “nave-vela” (sail-ship), a spacecraft boasting a giant parabolic membrane that allows travel near the speed of light.

The comic becomes a site for the embedding, articulation, and revision of literary classics, both ancient and modern, and—crucially—a space in which high culture may meet popular culture on mutual ground. The figure of the archive takes insufficient account of the active transformations and transmediations to which comics subject their material. The acts of collecting and ordering, however meaningful the resulting constellations of texts and images may be, do not fully describe the work commonly undertaken by comics of translating or abridging texts, or restyling images for different markets. Direct citations are rare: everything is revoiced, retold, redrawn, rewritten. This is emphasized within the text of *Slot-Barr* itself, as the narrative is continually taken up by new voices or told from the perspective of different world histories. Unlike an archive, this is not a work of salvage but of plunder; not an exercise in preservation but one of conscious adaptation and transformation.

The comic becomes in this way a compendium of world literature in its historical and geographical sweep. An encyclopedic reach is common to much of Barreiro’s graphic fiction, in which writers and characters of the Western literary canon also appear alongside more contemporary, local, and popular figures. In the first series of *Parque Chas* (Barreiro and Risso, 1987),55 Melville, El Corto Maltés, and El Eternauta are joined by Giuseppe Bergman, a character created in 1978 by the Italian graphic novelist Milo Manara, and Alejandro Ricardo Dolina, an Argentine broadcaster and popular writer of the time, with other representatives of the nation including Diego Maradona and Borges. Barreiro consciously popularizes the canon and celebrates the comic’s versatility in assembling and transforming images and texts of all kinds. Such acts also point to graphic fiction’s uneasy relationship to that canon, particularly prior to the auteur movement in comics, which gathered force in the 1980s as the graphic novel found greater acceptance within elite
culture. If Slot-Barr and Ciudad present themselves more as paraliterature than literature, however, they do so in order to claim a particular role for the comic in incorporating, adapting, and popularizing a vast breadth of other texts and perspectives.

Conclusion: (Re)materialization in Graphic Fiction

The figure of the Benjaminian archive therefore illuminates but does not fully account for the work of comics, drawing useful attention to the particular ease with which the comic brings together the material and the mythological but understating the extent to which the comic—in science fiction, especially—styles itself as a didactic tool and a digest of world culture, while simultaneously subjecting such pedagogical pretensions to parody. Importantly, it does not encourage us to consider the materializing operations of graphic fiction, which does not simply gather together existing remnants but purposefully translates sounds into printed letters, and time and movement into spatial forms. As Lucas Berone suggests, “La historieta provoca así una cierta materialización de lo incorpóreo, la caída en la materia de lo que había permanecido ajeno a las cosas: el lenguaje” (In this way, the comic brings about a certain materialization of the intangible, the lapse into material substance of what had remained aloof from things: language). The comic stands apart from other literary texts in which the printed word and the compagination of the book are mere vehicles for sense and carry little or no significance in themselves. It does not only or primarily take the material world and translate it into the abstract realm of language; it also takes the invisible—speech, the sound of objects in movement or collision—and turns it into material, graphic form: ink on paper. Human speech, writing, and the onomatopoeic “language” of objects share the same frame, eroding differences between the animate and the inanimate.

Making the inanimate “speak” alongside human language in this way, and rendering visible the invisible energies that govern relationships between humans and objects, graphic fiction immerses us in a material world that is heterogeneous in nature and full of unexpected agentic forces. Its vision has therefore much in common with the new materialist perspectives explored in later chapters of this book, and particularly in chapter 5. The heavy use of onomatopoeia in comics (particularly heightened in Japanese manga) points to a specific kind of mimesis. Collapsing the distance between text and world crucial to the Aristotelian theory of mimesis, the comic mani-
festly participates in material processes as well as representing them. Instead of converting material experience into discourse (as a literary text would), the particular combination of text and image in graphic fiction allows for specific kinds of rematerialization.

Herein lies, perhaps, its power to evoke the experience of walking through a modern city. In Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, as Gilloch claims, “Not only does one encounter the city-as-text but, more important, the text-as-city.” The text becomes “the site of shock and ambiguity, of the heterogeneous and paradoxical,” a montage of “diverse, eccentric figures,” presenting the unknown at every turn of the page.57 Barreiro’s comics likewise confront us with the “shock” of modernity in their predilection for montage, excess, and the unexpected. They also, like Benjamin’s work, prepare us for that experience and help us to assimilate it. If postmodern reflexivity is “an un-tiring reminder to the reader that he or she is reading a text, a language, a fiction, and not viewing the world without mediation,”58 graphic fiction triumphantly recuperates the work of mediation as its defining feature and one that is crucial to its cognitive operations. As a self-appointed mediator between the reader and the world beyond the text, the comic maps out points of orientation in fields as diverse as ecology, space exploration, class war, dictatorship memory, popular culture, and the classic texts of world literature. Crucially, however, its acts of translation and transmediation are also ones of (re)materialization, returning language to its place in a world of things and inscribing reading, writing, and illustrating as embodied, senso-rimotor practices.