

Book Review

Cosse, Isabella. 2019. *Mafalda: A Social and Political History of Latin America's Global Comic* (translated by L. Pérez Carrara). Durham: Duke University Press, 288 pp. ISBN: 9781478006381. USD 27.95.

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In her history of *Mafalda*, an iconic Argentine cartoon strip from the 60s, Isabella Cosse suggests that myths contain the “significant meanings of a social group’s existence” (p. 170). Myths explain but also model, move and inspire people across the ages, surviving beyond the human constraints of time and space. Cosse’s detailed historical reconstruction of *Mafalda* maps a trajectory of enduring vitality of a cultural product that came to function as just such a myth. *Mafalda* was created in Argentina in 1964 by Joaquín Lavado, Quino, an award-winning Argentine cartoonist of international renown. The strip shows the title character, Mafalda, a smart, idealistic and direct young girl, in her everyday interactions with her family and small group of friends. Set in a traditional Argentine middle-class family of the early 60s, *Mafalda* makes use of prototypes, polysemy and conceptual humor, and combines the familiarity of daily life situations with “atemporal reflections on injustice, inequality and human relations” (p. 212).

Cosse’s book details the dynamics of different socio-historical moments and contexts to explore how and why *Mafalda* transcended the page and came to life as the mythical incarnation of a ‘progressive sensitivity’ with resonance around the world. Drawing on multiple resources – including copious public as well as private archives, careful analysis of the comic strips and films, and numerous interviews with Quino himself, agents, publishers, editors, journalists, readers and fans – Cosse maps the emergence, promotion and consolidation of *Mafalda* as a cultural phenomenon that successfully transcended the borders of its culture of origin. The book chronologically follows the threads as they were being tied among those who were committed to placing Latin America more visibly on the cultural map and thereby challenging traditional notions of cultural validity and impact of the South.

Each chapter of this history is explicitly organized around a theme that illustrates the resonance and reach of *Mafalda* in different contexts. Chapter 1 deals with the question of how to conceptualize the Argentine middle class in the 60s. It traces the birth of *Mafalda* as a commissioned comic strip for an ad campaign and its subsequent rapid dissemination on newspapers and collection books in the Argentina of the mid-60s. At the same time, the chapter follows the consolidation of the middle class as

a complex and contradictory but nonetheless central socio-historical force in the social modernization processes in Latin America. Cosse's argument conceptualizes *Mafalda* as a cultural product which contributed to the creation of a middle-class identity with its use of self-reflective humor, effectively representing as well as creating reality. According to Cosse, the character of Mafalda was particularly effective as spokesperson of tensions and contradictions because she revealed these with the wit of a young articulate adult in the body of a cute smart girl. A section in this chapter on Quino's use of irony and social prototypes is particularly interesting, because it is here where Cosse signals the basis for her conception of *Mafalda* as an international myth symbolizing progressive ideals and attitudes.

Chapter 2 focuses on political polarization and radicalization, specifically in the context of Argentina, and Latin America more generally, between 1967 and 1976. Cosse explores how this different context changed the social significance of *Mafalda*, as the cartoon moved publishers and began to appear weekly in a new extended format. Quino, explains the author, played with popular slogans and symbols, adding new meanings and leaving them open for readers to interpret. Cosse sees *Mafalda* as opening a space for irony and satire in a context where a growing push to binary positions imposed moral rigidity and strict demands. At a time when discussions around political engagement dominated public conversations, Quino incorporated references to strikes, repression and social struggles while still dealing with the daily life of Mafalda's family and friends. Against a backdrop of political radicalization and increasing violence, *Mafalda* was read and re-appropriated as both a dangerous representation of youth rebellion and an example of timid petite bourgeoisie, depending on positions in the political spectrum. After narrating the events that led Quino to seek exile in Spain, Cosse closes the chapter explaining that "there was no longer a room for a *we* founded on caustic ironies offset by tenderness" (p. 101).

Mafalda's global scale is the focus of Chapter 3, where Cosse details its arrival and success in Italy, Spain and Mexico. The chapter develops the issue of international circulation of Latin American cultural products and the values these contribute to create and promote. Cosse tracks the expansion of "Latin America's best-selling and most internationally celebrated comic strip" (p. 102) by refraining from theoretical discussions to, instead, focus more specifically on the interaction of specific actors, processes and scales and how they influenced each other. She ascribes *Mafalda's* international success to both the growth of global exchange and to the utopian imagination of the 60s and 70s which viewed Latin America and its political movements as particularly appealing. *Mafalda* proved highly adaptable and engaging because readers could laugh at its conceptual humor about several common phenomena: sociocultural modernization, political and cultural radicalization of young people, gender issues, global inequalities and visibility of the Third World.

In Chapter 4 the book returns to Argentina to focus on the role of cultural productions in the context of the country's last military dictatorship and later transition towards democratic government, from 1976 to 1989. Cosse explores specific instances in which *Mafalda*, which Quino had stopped producing in 1973, was assigned different meanings as it was coopted for conflicting agendas. She explains that the comic's polysemy and open meanings allowed it to be read in different, even paradoxical ways. Relating in detail some of the examples of censorship and repression during the last military junta government in Argentina, the author then attempts to answer the question of why *Mafalda* was not censored by the regime. Cosse admits the reasons remain obscure but concludes that it could have been due to its immense popularity and the scarce media attention the strip and its author received during that period. With the return to democracy in 1983, *Mafalda* strengthened its status as a symbol of anti-authoritarianism and Quino took an explicit pro-democracy stance, even publicly affirming that, had she been a live person, Mafalda herself would have been among the disappeared.

Chapter 5 delves into the complex dynamics that have allowed *Mafalda* to attain mythical status around a world under the global advent of neoliberalism. Cosse explains the popularity of commemorations of Mafalda's "birthdays" as motivated, among other reasons, by the nostalgic return of readers to the radical political ideals of the 60s. The chapter devotes a section to the analysis of the relationship of Quino with Cuba and its revolutionary ideals. Cosse sees this trajectory as a "full circle" (p. 180), culminating in the productive creative association of Quino with the Cuban cartoonist Juan Padrón and the film projects they developed and executed together. The chapter ends with Cosse's reflection on the mythical status of the strip,

In sum, Mafalda has become a global myth that can be appropriated by different groups around the world who draw on her symbolic power to highlight their demands and to make sense of the dilemmas faced in the twenty-first century. (p. 206)

In the Conclusion, Cosse reiterates her initial aim to offer a "purely historical reconstruction" (p. 207) of *Mafalda*, which, in my view, the book rigorously accomplishes. The type of conceptual analysis Cosse offers in this chapter, of *Mafalda* as a powerful cultural product which has attained mythical status in diverse social and cultural contexts, can be of special interest to those of us who approach humor from a philosophical perspective. The author's final insights characterize Quino's humor in *Mafalda* as demanding reflective self-perception and, at the same time, prompting a social experience that transcends the mere reading to create community and belonging.

The focus of Cosse's book is on the various socio historical contexts where *Mafalda* came to life in different and sometimes conflicting ways. Although there are

reflections throughout the book on the richness and complexity of the cartoon strip itself as an example of sophisticated humor, the analysis is not centered around its careful and intuitive artistic architecture and expression but rather its role in a broader social context. The book's objective was to offer a social and political history of *Mafalda* and it does so with academic rigor and engaging prose. Cosse's book brings to the field of humor studies a clear example of illuminating historical analysis of popular culture and its power to exert globalized impact. The book is exemplary in its scrupulous and comprehensive detail on the multiple (geographical and cultural) trajectories which took *Mafalda* from a local example of contextual humor to becoming an international symbol of freedom, critical thinking and rebellious agency. Worthy of final mention is the excellent work by the book's translator to English, Laura Pérez Carrara.