

**Aguasaco, Carlos. *¡No contaban con mi astucia! México: Parodia y sujeto en la serie de El Chapulín Colorado*. México D.F.: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2014. Print. 257 pp.**

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*El Chapulín Colorado* (The Red Grasshopper) was a long-running and internationally popular television series from Mexico in the 1970s. The lead character was played by the late Roberto Gómez Bolaños, otherwise known as Chespirito, who also wrote and directed the series. With his world-weary face, home-made costume, and hopeless incompetence, performing on over lit, stagey sets (albeit with occasional special effects), the eponymous anti-hero El Chapulín Colorado (hereafter CH, the logo on the character's chest) was an extravagantly obvious parody of the superhero genre, played out in a "Third World" setting. Symptomatic is the catch phrase that gives this book its title, "No contaban con mi astucia" (They didn't count on my slyness) cried every time he avoids disaster or overcomes his enemies, which is only ever by bumbling luck rather than design.

All this would be familiar to the very many Latin Americans, U.S. Latinos, and even Spanish who have seen *El Chapulín Colorado* on television in their countries over the last few decades. For anyone else, the author provides all the necessary contextual background, and more, including an account of how Gómez Bolaños came to develop the character, though not before he has laid out an elaborate theoretical infrastructure for the subsequent analysis. In what he calls Latin America's "Jurassic Park of ideologies" (28), Aguasaco takes up an Althusserian approach, as inflected by writers such as Ernesto Laclau, but more markedly, by Juan Carlos Rodríguez, a sometime collaborator of Louis Althusser.

Althusser was a major influence in the development of media and cultural theory in the 1970s and 1980s because of the "epistemological break" he opened up between the reductionist view of culture in traditional Marxism, and a more complex theorization of the levels of the "social formation," which in turn provided a rationale for a more "cultural" Marxism. Thus, instead of dismissing cultural phenomena as merely the reflection of the economic base of capitalist society, Althusser's formulation was that the economic level was only determinant "in the last instance," and crucially, that this last instance never came: that is, economic factors never worked in isolation from other structural causes. This way of framing gave permission for the analysis of cultural phenomena to proceed on its own terms, while still remaining grounded in Marxism.

Aguasaco embraces not only this non-reductionist “structural causality” from Althusser, but also his concept of “interpellation.” This forms an integral part of Althusser’s theory of ideology, explaining how ideology works by “hailing” us as subjects, calling upon us to recognize ourselves as the inhabitants of ideology, “always already” living inside it. For Aguasaco, the mode in which *El Chapulín Colorado* addresses its audience, or positions them as subjects, calls them in such a way into occupying the ideologies it carries. Following Rodríguez’s focus on the contradictory discourses that circulate in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, particularly in the condition of “urban feudalism”, Aguasaco seeks to elucidate how the series reveals such a transition in latter twentieth-century Latin America.

For all this heavy theoretical framework, Aguasaco claims that his methodology “has sought to avoid imposing the analytic predisposition and to permit the object to reveal its contradictions, to show its functioning in an historical dynamic” (41). The methodology consists of a discursive analysis of episodes selected from the entire output of the series, no less than 256 episodes, their details all laboriously listed in an appendix. In the acknowledgements, Aguasaco thanks Televisa, the Mexican media conglomerate that produced and distributed the series, for giving him access to their archive, thus enabling him to view the episodes chronologically.

Although few readers would be unaware of Televisa’s immense influence, both past and present, in the television industry of not only Mexico, but elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking world, Aguasaco nevertheless provides a concise and handy account of how Televisa emerged within the longer history of Mexican broadcasting. This history is “marked by private initiative and a series of unsuccessful attempts on the part of the state to establish a national system” (57).

He then goes on to provide an historical background to the series *El Chapulín Colorado* itself, its eponymous character CH, and its writer, director and protagonist, Roberto Gómez Bolaños. Although Gómez Bolaños died in 2014, he left the very considerable resource of his autobiography of 2006, *Sin querer queriendo* (Accidentally on purpose). Aguasaco draws on this to outline the various stages in which the CH character was developed, as well as how Gómez Bolaños acquired the nickname of Chespirito: it was a corruption of “Shakespearito,” a sobriquet earned in his early days as a screenwriter.

Of the themes signaled in the book’s subtitle, the book’s longest chapter concerns parody. Aguasaco begins with a quote from Gómez Bolaños, in which he declares his intention was to create a character that parodied the “excess” of modern superheroes in media culture, just as Cervantes had created Don Quixote as a parody of the excess of chivalrous knights in the popular literature of

his time (65). Aguasaco follows closely the themes identified in this quote, notably how CH's weakness and stupidity invert the qualities of the U.S. models Superman and Batman, but nevertheless is able to face up to his fears. As an example of CH's subaltern and proletarian character, Aguasaco cites an episode in which CH confesses that he actually needs to wear spectacles, but that the "universal union of superheroes" forbids doing so when on active service, noting that Clark Kent always takes his off when he changes into Superman. The self-consciousness of satirical and parodic intent is seen in another episode in which a character declares: "What I like most about Chapulín Colorado is that he is a great hero in spite of being short, weak, skinny, ugly, pot-bellied, cowardly, pusillanimous, etc., etc." We should take this as a metaphor for Latin America, says Aguasaco, with its contradictory material conditions and incomplete modernity (77). On the other hand, CH is credited with a masculinity seen to be absent from his U.S. rivals.

Beyond the superheroes, there are further sources of parody the author finds in other episodes, notably classic U.S. and Mexican cinema, and also European literature and folklore, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Snow White*, along with *Don Juan Tenorio* and *El Conde Lucanor* from the Spanish canon. Some of these are sustained over several episodes, and Aguasaco's analysis is able to pursue the thematic unities accordingly. However, this is where we see the limits of his method of the "symptomatic reading" of these episodes as texts, in that the analyses are intrinsically textual and discursive, rather than indicative of how audiences might be interpellated or otherwise respond to them. In a rare reference to the putative audiences of the series, he acknowledges: "The spectators are divided between those who possess the cultural capital (audiovisual) that permits them to understand the parody and those that lack that repertoire of images" (97). Aguasaco's own cultural capital is impressive, in the erudite knowledge of both cinema and literature he displays in drawing out the parodic meanings and intertextual play in the episodes, but in doing so, lays himself open to the common criticism of such discursive analysis, that it ultimately tells more about the person making the analysis than the meanings taken by the text's intended audience.

Arriving at the issue of nation, Aguasaco sees the nation-state as "more a project than a material reality" (142), an ideological phenomenon in which a national bourgeoisie seek to maintain their hegemony over a given territory so as to create an integrated market. Many episodes of the series are set in the mythic Wild West, Aguasaco argues, so that CH can be seen to bring a civilizing influence, pitting the Mexican nation-state against that of the U.S. Following Althusser, the author asserts that a common national language provides a nation-binding ideological function, but goes further to argue that it is not just the linguistically diverse population of Mexico who are

interpellated by the “common code” of Mexican Spanish, but all of the Latin American nations that have become accustomed to that form of Spanish as a standard, not least because of Televisa’s longstanding domination of television programming in their national markets. Setting aside Lusophone Brazil, where the series has also been popular, Aguasaco argues that the fostering of a Latin American, rather than merely a national identity, gives rise to a contradiction. Notwithstanding the resistance to the U.S. which the series signifies by its parody of that nation’s superheroes, the interpellation of viewing subjects as sharing in a continental Hispanoamerican language and culture is forming them as citizen-consumers of a transnational market, not just a series of national markets.

Significantly, however, Aguasaco concedes that the functioning of television programs as “Ideological State Apparatuses,” the Althusserian term he uses, does not necessarily have a deterministic effect upon its audiences: “clearly it is impossible for hegemony to control every aspect of production and also it is impossible for it to shape reception. The result is a product with hegemonic intentions that once put to air becomes a space of ideological dispute” (157).

In his final chapter, on the subject, Aguasaco is less concerned with how subjects are interpellated or called into place by the series, than with selected themes and their contradictions as he sees them in the episodes. Here he applies the work of Juan Carlos Rodríguez, specifically the distinction “JCR” draws between the subject and the self, these terms referring to how individuals are inscribed in the class relations of capitalism and feudalism respectively. Asserting that the “ideological matrices” of both capitalism and feudalism are to be found in the internal logic of production of *El Chapulín Colorado*, Aguasaco proceeds to present analyses of episodes in which he finds treatment of the philosophical question of will; the institution of private property and its inheritance; and the representation of women. The last of these in turn identifies both recurrent types and particular characters in the series: the woman as victim; the criminal woman; the woman with trousers; and the nurse. He finds in these complex contradictions between feudal determinism and capitalist free will.

Looking back from the conclusion, this reviewer was left wondering about one exclusion and one inclusion. As most Latin Americans would know, *El Chapulín Colorado* had a related series shown alongside it, and even more popular: *El Chavo del Ocho*. This was also created by Gómez Bolaños, and included himself and the other actors from *Chapulín*, playing street children. Aguasaco gives this sister program only a scarce mention, but it would have been interesting for him to have explained why he chose to concentrate on *Chapulín* without regard to *El Chavo*. The puzzling inclusion is why Aguasaco makes a point of gratuitously repeating in his conclusion the fact that

Gómez Bolaños was the nephew of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz Bolaños, President of Mexico from 1964 to 1970, as if Gómez Bolaños were somehow implicated in the student massacre at Tlatelolco, which his uncle is infamous for having ordered.

A final note about *El Chapulín Colorado* as a “peripheral cultural production”: Aguasaco does not mention it, but the Bumblebee Man, an occasional character in the world-beating animated series *The Simpsons*, is evidently based on El Chapulín Colorado. The character is even referred to as Chespirito, and speaks Spanish (though badly). Thus, *El Chapulín Colorado* has itself become the object of parody, even if most of *The Simpsons*’ global audience would not be able to identify it as such. Surely Gómez Bolaños didn’t count on that.