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International Journal of Cultural Studies published online 3 March 2014
DOI: 10.1177/1367877914520894

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What is This?
Political humor in comic strips: A comparative analysis between Oriental and Occidental approaches

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Abstract
The humor utilized by Quino and Lat, cartoonists who belong to cultures that are far apart, is the starting point of this work. This investigation analyzes the topic of politics viewed from these two different cultural backgrounds and therefore from two different perspectives. The researchers seek to go more deeply into the topic of politics, and aim to uncover the differences and similarities in the way these two artists approach this subject through the use of humor, specifically in four of their cartoons. The main findings are that Quino’s approach can be considered universal, while Lat’s approach tends to be more localized. It is found that cultural predispositions make humor social by nature. Neither of the artists seeks social change through their work, but rather social awareness.

Keywords
comic strip, incongruity, political humor, release, socio-critic, superiority

Humor is an element commonly present in human artistic creations. Throughout history, it has been present in the different genres of art; from the classic Greek comedies to roguish Baroque novels and more contemporary humorous representations such as comic strips. Even though the definition of humor can be quite complex in nature, it can be
stated in a simplistic way as ‘something that makes a person laugh or smile’ (Ross, 1998: 1). However, humor may serve different purposes when it is found in literature; it can contain empty comic values which aim to simply entertain the reader, or be ‘just for laughs’, but it may also contain much deeper connotations that can be used as subtle or direct criticism of certain segments of society: ‘There may be a target for the humor – a person, an institution or a set of beliefs – where the underlying purpose is deadly serious’ (Ross, 1998: 2).

Although the data used in the production of this article can be analyzed from different angles, the researchers will remain focused on its political aspects, as political humor is an element that the two cartoonists studied in this research have in common.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this article is to analyze how humor is utilized in comic strips by the cartoonists Quino from Argentina and Lat from Malaysia by addressing political issues from different approaches: one universal and the other localized.

The expectation of the researchers is that humor not only serves the purpose of entertaining the reader, but also serves as a literary tool intended to expose national and global issues to be assessed and addressed by the reader. Since this study specifically looks at comic strips, the language and the drawings themselves should reflect socio-cultural and political elements through which humor is conveyed to the readers.

**Biographical outlines of Quino and Lat**

Quino (Joaquin Salvador Lavado) is an Argentinean artist, who was born in 1932. Although known for his comic strip Mafalda, he has also worked extensively on family issues, the global economy, the Amazon deforestation and politics (Peru21.pe, 2009). He claims neither to be a political activist nor to draw on the reality of Argentina; his work transcends the space and time in which it has been created, as it reflects issues that are more universal in nature. Neither Quino nor his work were censored during the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Ongania (1966–70) because comic strips were considered a minor artistic genre, created only to entertain the readers by using the innocence of children. His work was not considered to be intellectual and, furthermore, the fact that it was in strip form made possible its publication in different magazines such as El Mundo of leftist political tendencies, and later in Siete Dias, a magazine that dealt with superficial topics (Sández, 2009). Quino states that what concerns him most is to rescue the human values that are gradually being lost in society. He is currently still drawing, but the strip that made him famous, Mafalda, ended in 1973 (Peru21.pe, 2009).

Lat (Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid) is a Malaysian cartoonist, who was born in 1951. His work is also very broad in content and has focused on showing Malaysian reality from a humorous perspective. He is known for his stories of Kampung Boy ‘Countryside boy’, where he narrates facts of rural life and sometimes compares them to the life in the cities. His work has contributed to peace and harmony in this nation where more than three races coexist, each with its own culture. Like Quino, he continues to produce cartoons on various topics (Boxes with Lat cartoons as gifts, 2012).
Theoretical framework

What is comical and what is humorous are not the same, and in the same dynamic, irony, satire, jokes and laughter carry specific realities that are part of a socio-cultural reality. The comical, as part of comedy, is a nuanced representation of life. For Baudelaire, the comic arose when the human spirit lost its state of absolute tranquility and became part of men as earthly creatures, with all their faults and miseries (Baudelaire, 1988). The comic in this case, present in the cartoons, creates an environment that has helped ease the pain of a social condition, as it expresses and recreates a series of anomalous situations for the individual and for society.

Irony uses everyday expressions that can purvey different meanings, as it has the power to suggest realities based on two possible interpretations. However, ‘Understanding the force of irony involves awareness of the language used and knowledge about the world’ (Ross, 1998: 50–1). Otherwise, irony can be easily misunderstood.

Satire constitutes the act of mocking the flaws of a person or institution. Political satire is present when, either through written and/or graphic media, the political system of a nation is criticized by the use of humorous resources. This criticism can encompass other factors as well, such as the social, religious and economic areas, which are necessarily related to political affairs.

For Edward Lordan, in his book Politics Ink, political satire in the United States has its origin in England, with the concept of the ‘Infallible King’, referring to George III. He assumed the throne of England in 1760, an era when the colonies started to protest against the English regime. It was during this era that a series of satirical illustrations portrayed, among other things, a king with mental problems and poor skills for governing the nation. These types of illustrations are known as sequential art, which indicates a series of situations in the course of a timeframe. In the United States, comics go through a transformation process, from colonial times to the arrival of the internet. The social and political changes definitely influenced the thematic and technical development of the comics.

The increased production of artwork in the United States occurs basically for three reasons: the increase of the colonial population, the use of printing in the colony and political developments in Europe. One important figure is Benjamin Franklin, who, with his deep thinking, succeeded in showing the colonial situation in the 18th century in a critical and humorous way. Along with this illustrator, there were others such as Thomas Nast, Tom Toles and Ted Ran, who became a counter-force against one of the strongest colonial regimes in the world during different periods of U.S. history.

Edward Lordan (2006) presents the history of political humor through the comic strips produced in the U.S. from the 18th century until current times, in which the internet has become another tool to continue showing the scope of political illustrations, nowadays a common artistic expression worldwide.

Likewise, Gary Huck is a contemporary illustrator who creates political satire in the U.S. and whose work is characterized by topics such as tax cuts and free trade. His humor appeals more to members of unions and social activists (Huck and Kanopacki, 2013). Tom Tomorrow, the pseudonym of Dan Perkins, and Ted Rall, are two other caricaturists who focus on political humor within the U.S. context. Their work is similar to
that of Quino in the sense that they all deal with political satire. However, Quino does not portray specific political characters in his comic strips, because he maintains that the humor that utilizes the faces of actual politicians does not transcend the particular, as these characters come and go with ease. He also comments that, for this reason, he prefers to use timeless and faceless concepts such as ‘democracy’ and ‘government’ (Entrevista a Quino, n.d.). This is one of the reasons why the political satire used by Quino is deeper and longer-lasting than the work of Lat, who uses actual politicians in his comic strips, as is evident in the analysis of the comic strip shown in Figure 1 (see Appendix).

Jokes are the development of a short story with funny connotations. Citing Freud, Yupanqui states that jokes avoid aggression and direct criticism against entities that represent authority. To that extent, it functions as an elaborate revenge – a peaceful one, but no less expressive than a more aggressive form of revenge. The joke may function as an element of opposition towards a political system or it can support an ideology that seeks to maintain the values that sustain certain form of power (Yupanqui, 2008: 251).

Laughter is the result of the previous elements and part of a socio-cultural frame. Baudelaire considers the laughter arising from what is comical; that is, who laughs and not the object of laughter. For both Freud and Baudelaire, laughter fulfills a release function that eases emotional tensions. For Bakhtin (Bajtin) (1989), who considers it the product of the population itself, laughter is sarcastic; it amuses but it also criticizes and unveils the problems of society (Yupanqui, 2008: 254). In these situations, events of various kinds are dealt with, which affect the individual, the society and humanity as a whole.

The authors cited previously agree that laughter fulfills the function of providing a sense of wellness that goes from the psychic to the physical and it does not pertain only to adults. Children also use laughter and they express it more freely through games, but also in individual behaviors, often in solitude, where they manifest an egocentric language that includes laughter. Children during this stage develop a sense of awareness of the problems in their surroundings and attempt to solve them by expressing themselves both through language and laughter, even without the need for a real audience. Once children express themselves through this egocentric conduct, their actions become manifestation of knowledge (Kozulin, 2006).

Scholars define humor differently depending on their approach, and some of them go so far as to provide deeper philosophical connotations: ‘Humor, furthermore, has the potential to reveal fissures within the notions through which we understand the world, and therefore even in reality itself as we comprehend it’ (Farber, 2007: 84).

Humor, and the elements that make it possible, do not only respond to mental, physical or biological processes. It is explained through the use of complex social machinery, which includes variables related to the political humor generated by the cartoon (Yupanqui, 2008).

Humor, as seen from a sociological aspect of culture, is part of an interdisciplinary study that engages the social sciences. Humor, which is present in cartoons among other artistic manifestations, must be analyzed taking in consideration the approaches of areas such as anthropology, sociology and literature, as its study is as broad as the realities it suggests. Likewise, it must be pointed out that ‘The context for humor is crucial for determining whether an individual finds something amusing or not’ (Ross, 1998: 7).
The literature found on the study of humor tends to agree that some of the most important theories that attempt to explain this somewhat elusive subject are: superiority, release, incongruity, and the sociological approach to literature presented by Bajtin (Bakhtin).

One of the theories that deal with humor is the *superiority* theory, which has been described as one that ‘emerged in classical times and more or less held the stage through the seventeenth century’ (Farber, 2007: 67). However, this author points out that this theory is regarded as too narrow in scope to be utilized for the analysis of humor. This theory, amply studied by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, is based on the principle of considering that ‘much humor being a form of mockery – a way of attacking others, so maintaining power and status by gaining support from others who join in the laughter’ (Ross, 1998: 53).

The second approach to humor is the Freudian *release* or psychic theory. Even though it has been very influential, this theory also falls short in scope when analyzing humor. According to Ross: ‘The psychic release theory of humor explains the triggering of laughter by the sense of release from a threat being overcome – such as a reduction of fears about death and sex’ (Ross, 1998: 63).

Freud, in arguing that the joke transcends a psychic act and becomes a communicative act, necessarily provides a social element. Freud speaks of a predisposition to get the joke; this predisposition is simply the knowledge of socio-cultural elements shared among those predisposed to understand humor (Yupanqui, 2008). Laughter does not end with the humorous process; it has a liberating effect, as it washes away the pains of humanity (Baudelaire, 1988).

A third theory considered by the philosophers involved in this field is the *incongruity* theory, which was conceptualized in the 18th century and, according to Farber, ‘dominates contemporary humor theory but is still widely regarded as not quite there yet’ (2007: 67). It is on this theory that Farber elaborates in his study of humor, by integrating the analysis of the humorous situation with the corresponding perception of the reader or audience. According to Ross (1998), incongruity theory is the conflict created between the audience’s expectations and what actually happens in the joke.

This extension of incongruity theory aims to fill some of the gaps that the theory fails to explain, such as the affective dimension of humor and the way perceivers respond to humorous stimuli. These gaps have required some theoretical patchwork in the past, as exclusionary clauses must be added to justify all the exceptions encountered during the application of this theory. For this reason, Farber proposes a more universal framework from which these exceptions can follow logically, as opposed to being added on to it. This theoretical framework suits the objective of this study, as it allows the researchers to analyze beyond the humorous material found in the comics selected, by taking into consideration the sociological and psychological variables brought by the beholder. Since this study aims at comparing the humor used in two similar comic strips published in two different countries, Farber’s approach to incongruity theory permitted a more complete analysis of the corpus, as well as means for multicultural comparative analysis. Moreover, this research will also analyze the data taking into consideration a socio-cultural approach which is taken from the studies of humor presented by Bajtin (Bakhtin).
According to Yupanqui, Bajtin (Bakhtin) considers that what is comical and with it, humor, appeared when the serious and the comic could not coexist in a system of social classes and the presence of a political system. At that time it was impossible to give equal rights to both the serious and the humorous, and the latter began to be part of unofficial events, becoming a threat to this political system (Yupanqui, 2008).

One way of producing humor in comic strips is by using children as the characters portrayed in them. Taking into consideration that in the comic strips drawn by Quino children are presented as persuasive agents who transmit a message, and therefore potentially powerful characters, we feel the need to briefly introduce theoretical aspects of the cognitive processes that explain how children can possess an adult-like reasoning that they can express through their dialogues or their laughter. These behaviors are explained mainly by the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky.

For Piaget, a child’s thinking possesses an ‘operational structure’ that depends on the experiences and interactions a child has with the world. This contact with reality is internalized, transformed and later it becomes a cognitive act. Piaget affirms that being in contact with the world is conducive to thought. Although Vygotsky agreed with Piaget regarding the reality–thought formula, he added the contact a child has with the world as part of a more ample socio-cultural context, rather than a spontaneous and individual act. This contact with the environment is mediated by external elements such as family, society, culture and media (Kozulin, 2006: 92). The reality–thought relation should consider socio-cultural aspects that allow the internalization of experiences so they can later become cognitive acts.

Related studies

The literature shows a study conducted by Dr. Kynes somewhat similar to this one, in which he describes and contrasts the comic strips of Mafalda and Charlie Brown, from the American series Peanuts. However, this study is more descriptive than analytical, and does not focus on a specific topic, as the present study does. Among his findings, Kynes states that Mafalda has a more social and political tone, and therefore carries a desire for change and vindication. On the other hand, Charlie Brown is more psychological and philosophical, and therefore intellectual. Even though both comic strips possess an evident humanistic charge, Kynes affirms that Charlie Brown goes more deeply into humanistic topics than Mafalda (Kynes, 2011). This is a conclusion with which the authors of this article do not agree completely, as the work of Quino attempts to rescue human values before addressing the problems of society. As part of the similarities between these two comic strips, it is important to note that both use children who utilize adult language in their interactions. According to Kynes, Mafalda usually ponders adult matters such as pollution, bureaucracy or politics, but always from a global perspective, as she talks about the Cold War, the distribution of wealth in the world, the ineffectiveness of bureaucracy in general and other controversial topics current during the period when Mafalda was published. Mafalda, therefore, contains a form of humor that is more direct and acts as a social critic tool. Mafalda also disapproves of the adult world, and even refuses to take part of it by ridiculing it and rejecting it. Instead, she opts to remain a little girl who wishes not to incorporate herself in the adult world of her parents. Kynes
points out that, among the differences between these two comic strips is that *Mafalda* has a richer array of characters and scenarios than Charlie Brown. Furthermore, Charlie Brown does not include any adult characters, while in *Mafalda* adults play an important role. Mafalda is the focus of this comic strip, while Charlie Brown has a more choral stance. Kynes cites the work of Eco on this topic, stating that Charlie Brown was much more widely diffused because of its Anglo-Saxon origin, while *Mafalda* was read mostly in Latin American countries and some European countries where Romance languages are spoken. Eco, in his unsigned prologue to *Mafalda, la Contestataria*, published in 1968, affirms that Charlie Brown belongs to a prosperous society, which he seeks to be part of, while Mafalda belongs to a country full of contrasts that seeks to integrate her against her will. Finally, Kynes finds that the type of humor found in *Mafalda* uses direct humor, in the sense that it uses irony, satire and sarcasm, while Charlie Brown uses instead nonsense or absurd humor (Kynes, 2011).

Another analysis found in the related literature presents *Mafalda* as a means to reveal a society based on consumerism, with all the vices that it can possess, but without going into specifics (Valero, 2010).

Finally, the article written by Sández (2009) focuses on politics during the 1960s and 1970s in Argentina, based on the aesthetic and social avant-garde movements of that era. The author states that Quino was never considered part of the artistic avant-garde because he did not possess a degree in fine arts, and he was never identified as an individual who opposed the established political systems. In *Mafalda*, Quino does not represent a member of society, but it is the comic strip itself that resembles the social classes and ideologies of humanity as a whole (Sández, 2009). This article makes a political analysis of Quino as an individual who belongs to a forward-thinking era and as an artist, however the article does not compare his work with that of any other illustrator, which is the essence of the present study.

In the case of the Malaysian illustrator Lat, no comparative analysis was found in the literature. There have been studies that describe the illustrations of his comic strips, hence highly descriptive; nevertheless they do not analyze its historical, psychological or artistic connotations (*Lots of Lat*, n.d). Another source found regarding Lat was a thesis that explores the formation of Malaysian identity after the colonial period through the illustrations of the books *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy*, both from Lat (Blackburn, 2009).

There are no previous studies that relate in any way these two important cartoonists from two distant cultures such as Latin America and South-East Asia. For this reason, we aim at establishing ties between these artistic expressions that may seem different on the surface, but which have in common many elements at the artistic, social and philosophical levels.

**Methodology**

This study analyses four comic strips, two from the Argentinean cartoonist Quino and two from the Malaysian cartoonist Lat. The comic strips from Lat were chosen from printed publications of this artist. The comic strips from Quino were chosen from online sources. Due to the nature of our work, all items in the corpus belong to the political genre.
Analysis

Initially, we analyze the data by applying the theory of incongruity, then continue with the Freudian perspectives of release theory and finally the superiority and cultural approach. In the first section, the study analyzes the structure of the comic strips selected by using a schematic format, by which the theory of incongruity is validated. Then it presents these structured examples, with the focus of the analysis being the actual content, based on the theories of superiority, release and the socio-cultural approach.

Structure of comic strips in light of the theory of incongruity

Given the humorous nature of the illustrations of Lat and Quino, it is possible to make the following analysis by applying the theory of incongruity, founded in the 17th century and later studied and extended by Farber (2007). This analysis will take into account that the theory of incongruity: ‘focuses on the element of surprise’ (Ross, 1998: 7). The comic strips will be run through a four-stage process in order to expose and explain the element of incongruity: the initial situation that is presented, the initial expectation of the reader, the bewilderment of the reader after the incongruent element is introduced, and the decoding stage. Through these processes, it is possible to identify the fissures present between human thought, by which we understand the world, and reality itself, as proposed by Farber (2007) in the theoretical framework. The comic strips studied here are Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the Appendix.

Lat: strips 1 and 2. Initial situation. Initially, the two illustrations portray everyday situations. In Figure 1, the character Rahim, who was the Chief Minister of the state at that time (Lim, 1991), asks his secretary for tea. The shield of Malacca, a state located on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia can be seen on the right side of the illustration, confirming that he is a public official. In Figure 2, a man who waters his plants is happy because his relatives from Malacca have come home, and they also smile, happy to see a relative.

Expectation. In Figure 1, the reader would expect the secretary to bring the tea, as requested. In Figure 2, it would be normal for relatives to visit family members.

Bewilderment. In Figure 1, the official requests some tea, and his secretary brings him coconut water instead. In Figure 2, the relatives do not come to visit, but instead bring their laundry.

Decoding. This is the moment when the viewer understands the message. In Figure 1, the office of a public official does not have water for tea and in return he is offered coconut water. Irony, expressed here by the replacement of one drink for the other, is what allows the understanding of this double meaning and criticism of the artist to a particular water shortage situation, which occurred in a place called Malacca. In Figure 2, the relatives come to wash clothes while the home-owner is watering his plants, by which the reader infers the water shortages in certain sectors.

Mafalda: strips 3 and 4. Initial situation. In Figure 3, a mother asks the children what they are playing. They respond that they are playing a game called ‘government’. The mother tells them to not make trouble. It is a normal scene of a mother who wants to know what
their children are doing and like any mother, does not want them to create problems. In Figure 4, it is normal that a girl is looking up the meaning of a word in the dictionary, in this case the word ‘democracy’.

Expectation. In Figure 3, children would be expected to assume the roles of certain government officials as part of their game, engaging in the role of governing. In Figure 4, the reader would expect the child to learn the meaning of the word democracy.

Bewilderment. In Figure 3, it is a surprise that children would say that they will not do anything at all as part of this game named government. In Figure 4, it is baffling that a girl would produce endless laughter on learning the etymology of the word ‘democracy’.

Decoding. In Figure 3, the decoding occurs when the reader captures the ironic element introduced by the protagonists of the game and warns about the ineffectiveness of those who have the government in their hands. In Figure 4, the prolonged laughter of the girl in response to the etymology of the word democracy surprises and makes the viewer reflect on the antagonistic meaning of that term. In real life, the meaning of that term comes nothing close to ‘government in which the people exercise sovereignty’, as indicated in the dictionary displayed in this comic strip.

Theoretical analysis

The humor depicted in comic strips, is part of a socio-cultural evolution; in some cases it is local, but at the same time can have universal connotations. Some events typical of a defined nation transcend space and time to become universal, as is the case of the comic strip of Lat referring to the water problem in Malacca. This is a highly localized event, but is present in the politics of several nations, both currently as well as throughout history. Regarding Mafalda, the concepts of government and democracy are universal, like all the events and issues considered by its author, Quino.

Lat: the political analysis of a specific issue. What is comic came to be when man lost his state of absolute perfection and became part of earthly events (Baudelaire, 1988). Nothing is as earthy as the socio-economic problems caused by the lack of proper planning, or by the presence of incompetent officials. The two comic strips of Lat refer to the lack of water in the state of Malacca. These situations are humorous because they are contextual, as scarcity of water is a common problem in Malaysia. This contextual element, for Ross (1998), plays a vital role in the understanding of humor. In Figure 1, in the absence of water, coconut water is offered as a substitute to the character Rahim. The Durian Tunggul reservoir, located in Malacca, dried out on 3 January 1991, affecting a population of 600,000 (Khor and Lee, 1993).

Continuing with Baudelaire, the comic aspect in this case, present in the illustrations studied, is a means of relieving the pain of a social context, as it heals while it disputes and puts into question not so much a natural phenomenon, but the mismanagement of existing resources (Baudelaire, 1988). The reservoir dried out creating problems at all levels: social, economic and political. The confidence of the public and investors was badly affected. Lat, using humor in his two comic strips, does not only focus on what happened but also points to a character named Rahim. Returning to Ross (1998), it is the
humor that emerges from the above figures that is perpetuated among all beholders and becomes a subtle mockery; and it gains power as it gets stronger with laughter by exposing a vital problem for any social conglomerate, that is, the scarcity of water. Laughter provokes the support of all who join in, and becomes a direct but subtle attack regarding a problematic matter. It is the laughter that arose at the time the problem occurred in Malacca, but it is also how it holds up with the new audience that reads this strip. It is the laughter that prolongs itself and becomes an assessment of the world, an assessment of ethical values that initially affected a specific place, but that can be extended to any place and at any time (Ross, 1998). When the water crisis is presented, the washing of the world’s grief, as spoken of by Baudelaire, results in the subtle accusation of a politician who, to the bewilderment of the population and foreign investors, blamed various spheres of society but never took personal responsibility. In interviews at the time, Rahim said it was a sabotage that affected the filter, leaving the reservoir dry. He also blamed the water authorities. Furthermore, he said that the story was being exaggerated by the media, referring specifically to the National Union of Journalists. Finally he also appealed to religious beliefs saying it was a test from God (Lim, 1991).

Lat undoubtedly portrays with this joke in the comic strip of Malacca, the revenge of 600,000 people left without this precious resource through the unclear management of a character named Rahim (Lim, 1991). This comic strip allows the people affected by the water shortage to mock the government and the mismanagement of this resource and it acts as a counter-power agent.

According to the theory of superiority, humans laugh because they feel superior to an event (Baudelaire, 1988). The laughter, as the result of the two comic strips, works not only as the sense of superiority of the collective I, which suspects or knows the source of that socio-political issue. Laughter, in this case, can also be viewed as a power source that has the property of attacking an established rule (Ross, 1998). It is the counter-weight to the lies of a political class that has become unreliable and that is now named and portrayed in the comic strip. At this point, humor turned away from the alleged seriousness represented by a political figure and became part of popular culture that uses mockery to extend a counter-power force (Ross, 1998). Moreover, what is comic became a threat to the political system (Youpanqui, 2008). The two comic strips of Lat seek the spontaneous laughter that denies and affirms: it denies a series of values that have lost credibility, such as the integrity of politicians, and affirms a truth being discovered, as it is not a matter of coincidence that a reservoir with a capacity of 20.4 billion liters has dried out (Lim, 1991). This fact implies the possible presence of government corruption.

In Figure 1, showing the replacement of drinking water with coconut water, and in Figure 2, illustrating relatives arriving not for a social visit but to wash clothes, a hidden problem is brought into the open. Once it is present in a comic strip that is available to everyone, the strip becomes a counter-power tool that defies politics by exposing the water problem in Malacca. This is a local phenomenon, but it is part of a global problem, as the scarcity of water is a common issue worldwide. Here we confirm that the joke is social in nature because there is an omniscient narrator who narrates, in this case the cartoonist Lat, then there is the person about whom the joke is being told, in this case Rahim, and finally there are the viewers, all of us.
Quino: the political analysis of a universal issue. In Mafalda, the terms ‘government’ and, more specifically, ‘democracy’, have lost that sense of perfection present in the etymologies and become concepts closer in nature to reality, thus becoming part of earthly life, with all the faults and imperfections that that represents, as stated by Baudelaire. In Figure 3, kids play at being the government and the mother ensures that they will not cause trouble. They say that they will not do anything at all. There could not be anything closer to the work of governments worldwide, doing very little for the nations they represent. Moreover, Mafalda, in Figure 4, laughs at the definition of democracy, which according to Greek etymology means: government in which the people exercise sovereignty. This concept, by being dealt by children, empowers them, and they become the vehicle used by the cartoonists in order to criticize the entities in charge. This also relieves the pains of a social environment while the joke expresses a reality. By doing so, it has a therapeutic function, because there is the sense of release that Ross (1998) talks about. Although for Quino, the author of Mafalda, his drawings are political, they reflect on the human condition (Entrevista a Quino, 1972). In this regard, Quino and Baudelaire would agree: for Baudelaire, in a perfect world, everything is so well done that there is no need to create the means to recreate or criticize it (Baudelaire, 1988). Meanwhile, Quino presents in his work a critique of the political system with an emphasis on the importance of human values. To Quino, government and politics, among other topics, are problems that have existed since the origins of mankind (Entrevista a Quino, 1972).

Following the statement of Ross (1998) regarding mockery and the maintenance of power, in Mafalda the concepts of government and democracy also work as a form of vengeance, which is manifested in the humor and the mockery that act as a form of attack against the established political system. However, this vengeance is neither direct nor aggressive. This is in part because it is being presented by children, and also because of its sarcastic and ironic nature, as remarked by Bakhtin (Bajtin). For Kynes (2011), both Quino and Shultz portray children as innocent protagonists of their comic strips. However their thoughts and reflections are adult in nature.

In the comic strips of Quino, children play as being the government in Figure 3, and then in Figure 4 a girl looks up a definition in a dictionary. In both cases, the social environment has provided them with the concepts of ‘government’ and ‘democracy’. In the first, government is recreated through a game, a cognitive activity by nature, and in the second the definition of democracy is obtained from an academic source, and is presented as containing a playful element. Both of these activities performed by the children occur before the surprised look of the parents, who, in turn, perform their authoritarian role. In Figure 4, concerning the definition of democracy, the parents do not speak, but their attitude judges the behavior of the girl. In Figure 3, the mother asks the children not to make a mess during their game, hence exercising her authority.

In both illustrations, the socio-political elements that make part of a culturally universal context are present with a clear sense of irony, as it is the children who bring into question concepts of such a broad span like ‘government’ and ‘democracy’. They do so before the silent gaze and absence of criticism from the adults. Children have their own opinions and perspectives on reality because their mind is not the mind of an adult on a smaller minor scale (Kozulin, 2006: 97). The mental structures of children are the same
as those of adults, although the cognitive level of adults is more complex due to their higher degree of experience.

As an example of these mental structures and the perspective they create in children, the laughter of Mafalda becomes more significant in relation to the etymology of ‘democracy’ because it is the reasoning of a child that challenges a definition provided by an official source. Mafalda’s laughter will continue to echo in those who come in contact with this cartoon, and its mockery will increasingly find a wider audience and challenge the established systems (Ross, 1998).

Although the purpose of Quino was at no time political but rather humanist (Entrevista a Quino, 1972), Mafalda is the voice of a counter-power that is present in the world, not only in the years in which it was written, from 1964 to 1973, but also currently, because the reflections of Mafalda remain pertinent (Entrevista a Quino, n.d.). Furthermore, as stated previously, Quino does not use specific political characters, and therefore his humor remains timeless and transcendental.

In contrast with the works of Lat, the humor in Mafalda is a social fact that has gone beyond Argentina due to the global predisposition to the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘government’. They have moved away from their original purpose to create not only a socio-political crisis but also a human one. Mafalda is a humanistic search for what is human, and it is neither political nor an expression of nationalism.

According to Quino, other Argentinean cartoonists such as Calé have asked him why his strips always deal with issues outside the country, while the other artists deal with national topics (Pérez, 2012). This is another element that supports the depth of the political satire present in Quino. Mafalda is the reflection of humanity that has lost its essence and is mistreating others of the same species (Entrevista a Quino, 1972). In contrast to the declarations of Quino, Eco affirms in his prologue of Mafalda la Contestataria, that Mafalda is a character of the 1970s in Argentina. Although he does not situate her as a protester with regard to Argentina specifically, he does situate her as the product of Latin America and its more advanced cities. Even though Mafalda is born in an era of dictatorships and deep changes, her messages have universal connotations, and therefore philosophical ones, just like Charlie Brown in Peanuts (Eco, n.d.). Nevertheless, Charlie Brown deals with more existential issues and does not focus on specific political or historical problems (Kynes, 2011).

On his own account, Eco affirmed during the celebration of the 30 years of Mafalda that the children in this comic strip are at the same height as adults: they try to imitate them and they hold political discussions. Eco’s affirmation coincides with the statements of Piaget and Vygotsky, explained previously. On the other hand, in Charlie Brown, children are more withdrawn and psychoanalytical, without committing to any ideology (Marin, 1994). Mafalda, and in general the work of Quino, because of its universal and timeless contents, cannot be located in any country. Mafalda arises in a specific environment, just like any artistic creation, but because of its philosophical tone, it can be applied to any time and space.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the comic strips studied here has yielded results that coincide with the expectations set out at the beginning of the article. With regard to the incongruity theory
in relation to the study of humor, the four illustrations chosen adhere to the processes required by this theory: from an initial situation to the deciphering of the joke, passing through the expectation and the bewilderment stages. However, it has been established that other fundamental theories of humor cannot be discarded. Therefore, the illustrations studied here have allowed us to see clearly how the theories of superiority and release can be applied in the same way, and even simultaneously. All the theories applied have yielded a socio-political background and patch up the theoretical gaps found in the incongruity theory, as suggested by Farber (2007).

The humorous illustrations of Lat and Quino are similar in appearance, as they use the same format of brief drawings known as sequential art, in black and white. Although Lat’s artwork is characterized by the concern about the socio-cultural and political problems of Malaysia, and the illustrations of Quino maintain in contrast a sense of universality with a much larger scope, humor is the vital element by which they transmit their disagreements, critics and nonconformities.

The humor present in the illustrations of Lat and Quino is social in nature, as there is a cultural predisposition that goes beyond the illustration. For Lat, who is more specific, it is the majority of Malaysians who, by judging the water issue, find additional ammunition for criticizing the government. However, as water shortage is a world problem nowadays, it has the potential to reach a universal dimension. In Quino, the social and cultural concepts are much more broad, as they are the reflection of political issues that have a global reach. Humor works for the two artists as a means of liberation and power: liberation by exposing publicly issues affecting humanity, and power as it shows another reality that is a counterweight to the official regime established by the highest levels in Malaysia and, in the case of Quino, in the world.

For both Quino and for Lat, simple humor transcends and becomes an evaluation of the world, as it not only shows certain problems, but also suggests that these problems need to change or become the instruments that will provide a better existence for mankind.

Humor in these two artists does not act as a direct mean for social change but serves as an educational tool because it illustrates a number of facts. By educating, it can ignite a social consciousness that can potentially bring changes for future generations. The humor used by Lat and Quino educates, entertains and transforms, creating a critical consciousness that sees the need to rescue the human and natural values that have been lost.

However, one can find substantial differences in the approach utilized to address the issues portrayed. As for the contrasts between these comic strips, specificity is more evident in the case of Lat. The opposite occurs with Quino, as his comic strips are reflections on politics and democracy applicable at any time, anywhere in the world.

While Lat mainly uses adults in these illustrations, keeping children out of the spotlight, Quino uses them as the main protagonists for dealing with political issues on a very wide scale. The use of children in the illustrations gives the reader a different set of expectations. These are complex issues that, when seen through the reasoning of children, create irony: a child’s perspective may be deeper and more real than the work of politicians who bear the destiny of nations. This is another element to capture the attention of the viewers and awaken their social consciousness, criticism and ethical values.
Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Author biographies

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Figure 1. Source: By permission, Lat (1992).

Gloss:
Frame 1: One tea ...
Frame 2: Sorry boss. There is only coconut water ...
Sign: Save water
Figure 2. Source: By permission, Lat (1992).

Figure 3. Source: © Joaquin Salvador Lavado (QUINO) Toda Mafalda (Ediciones de La Flor, 1993).
Gloss:
Frame 1: What are you children playing at?
   At the government.
Frame 2: Well, don’t make a mess, ok?
Frame 3: Don’t worry, we won’t do anything at all.
Figure 4. © Joaquín Salvador Lavado (QUINO) Toda Mafalda (Ediciones de La Flor, 1993)
Gloss: Democracy (from the Greek demos, people, and kratos, authority) Government in which the people exercise its sovereignty.