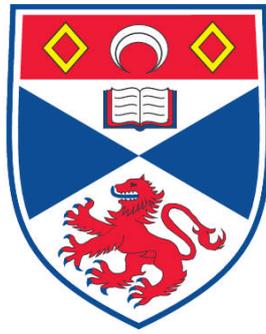


**HUMOUR AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL  
CRITICISM: MEXICAN COMICS AND CINEMA**

**Leticia Neria**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St. Andrews**



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**Humour as Political Resistance and  
Social Criticism. Mexican Comics and  
Cinema, 1969-1976.**

Leticia Neria

Advisor: Professor Will Fowler

Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD.

University of St Andrews

January, 2012



## **Abstract**

This research focuses on the study of Mexican comics and films from 1969 to 1976. It uses the language of humour to understand how these media expressed contemporary social and political concerns. After reviewing theories of humour and proposing an eclectic theory to analyse visual sources, three different comic books and four films were examined in order to gain an understanding of the issues that troubled the society at the time. This eclectic theory considered academic approaches from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, linguistics, psychology, and others. The theory of humour proposed in this thesis can be used to study humorous visual expressions from other cultures and historical times.

Thus, one of the novelties of this research is the proposal of an eclectic theory of humour to study visual culture. A second original contribution of this thesis is that it proposes an approach to social history through the analysis of two relevant cultural manifestations: humour and visual culture.

This work also invites us to reflect on Mexican society during the presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez, as well as the circumstances of the mass media and the arts, both of which enjoyed some freedom in what was called the *apertura democrática*. Nevertheless, since some topics were still prickly and difficult, humour helped society discuss them, kept them on the social agenda, and acted as a safety valve to express the discomfort of the members of society.

Finally, this thesis considers social manifestations, such as humour, as sources through which to study culture and history; it highlights the relevance of the cultural legacy of comics which have been considered as a sub-cultural product; and it shows how we can use films to discover something new about a specific time and social group.

Word count: 81,615 words

Para mis abuelas:

Esperanza, porque te lo prometí.

Martha, porque te lo debo.

Felicia, por tu energía.

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México, creo en ti,  
como en el vértice de un juramento.  
Tú hueles a tragedia, tierra mía,  
y sin embargo, ríes demasiado,  
acaso porque sabes que la risa  
es la envoltura de un dolor callado.

Ricardo López Méndez

## Introduction

*Dime de qué te ríes,  
y te diré quién eres.*

What do the theory of humour, Mexico in the 1970s, and visual culture have in common? All are part of this thesis. Nevertheless, the twist in this research is that it is not simply about humour, or history, or comics and cinema. Instead, it draws them together to show how humour is used as a language to portray a certain reality, and to express criticism and discontent. We will see how scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied humour in order to understand what it expresses and how it might help a society – or a member of it –to portray the faults that exist there: that which causes discomfort, which they are aware of, and which should be corrected. For this research, humour is observed in two media, comics and cinema. These media belong to a specific time and place, Mexico from 1969 to 1976, the most intense period of the *Guerra Sucia*. Scholars have studied the arts and culture during this period because although the Mexican government was waging a secret campaign against its detractors, in public the president, Luis Echeverría, spoke of the tolerance of the authorities, and their ability to cope with criticism. This was part of what he called the *apertura democrática*. Since the democratic opening directly influenced the arts, culture, and means of communication, scholars have shown an interest in observing how it impacted the production and contents of media such as comics and cinema.

The originality of this research lies in its analysis of theories and perspectives about humour which help us understand the mood of the population in relation to the political and social reality of Mexico at that time. What this work does is to point to **how** the analysed sources expressed political and social concerns through humour, and **what** those concerns were. It is also a reflection on the reasons for asserting these

thoughts through humorous means. These help us to understand society at the time as well as in historical context.

The reason for choosing comics and films might seem obvious: both are visual. However, they also share other important characteristics. Both are mass-media products. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is their use of images, the idea of movement, and the narration of stories. I also believe that both can be understood according to similar theoretical perspectives as I will explain.

According to Román Gubern, comics and films share so many characteristics it would be impossible to mention them all.<sup>1</sup> But we can start by pointing out that both cinema and comics share a principle of imitation, and indeed, this is something they have in common with humour. Although both narrate a story through images, cinema presents these images in actual movement, while comics do not. This does not mean that comics do not present movement, but rather the way they do it is different. They are still images which *suggest* movement.<sup>2</sup>

Cinema generates in viewers the idea that they are living a fragment of reality, although according to Christian Metz, what we are watching is a partial reality.<sup>3</sup> Cinema uses reality in order to create another *world* but based in the reality that the viewer is familiar with.<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Arnheim suggests that since films reflect a situation that happens in a specific time and place, what they construct is an imperfect illusion of reality. Cinema presents us its own reality and we, as an audience, understand it that way.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje de los comics*, 4th edn (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1981), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> Miguel Ángel Muro Munilla, *Análisis e interpretación del cómic* (Logroño: Universidad de la Rioja, 2004), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Metz, *Film Language. A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Casetti, Federico di Chio, *Cómo analizar un film* (Barcelona: Paidós Comunicación, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 33.

And what about comics? Comics take elements from reality and adapt and recreate them into a two-dimensional image; however, they do this without the details in the settings and the mise-en-scene so characteristic in cinema. Simplistically, it may seem as though comics are not related to reality. However, when we read a comic we recognise the characters and settings as fictional, and we interpret them and give them sense by connecting them to our reality, as with films. In comics, readers need to fill the gaps missing in the images and narrative themselves, and they do so using knowledge of similar situations from their own reality. Thus, in both media, we identify elements from real life - even if they are caricatured- such as objects, places, and feelings, and connect them with similar ones belonging to our reality.

Another reason for using cinema and comics as a cultural source is because both are human creations, they have been created by someone for some reason. There is no impartiality in cinema,<sup>6</sup> and the same is true of comics. In both media what we see has been selected by someone; they contain clues that guide us in the way in which this ‘someone’ wants us to see them, deciding what we should notice, and hiding or downplaying other aspects. These ‘clues’ help us to understand what the creator is trying to communicate to us.<sup>7</sup>

Viewers recognise the reality that is presented on screen, and recall events and images outside it. They do not limit their minds exclusively to the situations on the screen or in the frames.<sup>8</sup> They do more than simply make sense of the narration according to their own experience, and also enrich their own knowledge and experience. This helps them understand reality better, and re-interpret the world in a more complete

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<sup>6</sup> Alejandro Montiel, *Teorías del cine. Un balance histórico* ([n.p.]: Montesinos, 1992), p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, *Film Art. An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1990), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Andre Bazin, *Bazin at work. Major Essays & Reviews from the Forties & Fifties*, trans. by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 7.

way.<sup>9</sup> Cinema is not an accurate copy of reality, but a reconstruction of it. And although it is less obvious in comics, they are also a reconstruction of reality, but usually more caricatured. Both present a transformed reality, a partial reality, which Umberto Eco describes as a *possible world*.<sup>10</sup> This possible world invites the audience and the reader to recognise it as an allegory of their own world and their own reality. In a period in which the regime reacts with violence against its detractors, perhaps one of the few safety valves to express criticism is through euphemisms and non-explicit references which can be understood as coming from reality but without pointing directly to their target. And if these references were diluted with humour, they might be received more positively, not only by the audience but also by the authorities.

## **Structure**

This thesis is divided into four chapters and two appendices. It is important to alert the reader to the fact that the first two chapters are shorter than chapters three and four. This is because while chapters one and two respectively present the theories of humour considered for the research and the relevant historical topics that set the studied sources in context, the last two chapters form the analysis in which everything is assembled. The quantity of information which fits the parameters of an ‘act of humour portraying political and social criticism’ was vast, all of it relevant. This increased the size of the chapters despite the fact that many of the examples were left to one side. However, since the main purpose of this thesis is to present what was found in the analysis, I considered it important to give these chapters proper attention and space. And although chapters one and two are shorter they were necessary in order to show how humour

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Mitry, quoted by Montiel, *Teorías del cine...*, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula*, trans. by Ricardo Pochtar, 5th edn (Barcelona: Lumen, 2000). pp. 172-215.

helps us to understand a specific culture as well as why it was used in Mexico during the last year of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidential term and Luis Echeverría's *sexenio*. And, since the sources needed to be set in a specific time and place, it was necessary to dedicate a chapter to the historical facts of that period.

In chapter one I examine theories of humour from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and philosophy. This will help me analyse the sources as well as understand the nature of humour and the reason why authors use it to portray and criticise reality. This chapter is not a revision of the state of the art of humour. In chapter one the reader will find an eclectic choice of various ideas about humour and its relation to society. The choice was made carefully considering the questions that I was aiming to answer. Theoretical perspectives on humour were thus narrowed to those most useful to answer the specific questions in my research. The reader will find information on how we recognise something as 'humorous', and what might be our reaction once we are inside the language of humour. When we understand humour as language, we then see that it communicates something to us.

Thus, humour can tell us something important about the time and place in which it was expressed. In brief, the mechanism that develops humour is *incongruity*. Incongruity can be expressed in various ways, such as breaking a common narrative with an unexpected fact. I will give special attention to the idea of exaggeration since it is a common mechanism of incongruity, and it is constantly used in these sources, especially the comics. Afterwards, I consider the relationship between the act of humour and the person who witnesses it. I explain why humour helps us cope with situations, and why it is chosen as a means of expression. Humour makes us feel superior, brings comfort even in insufferable times, and helps us to find the light side of uncomfortable situations. Moreover, I discuss humour as a means of rebellion. These ideas help us to

understand the relevance of humour both as a cultural source and also as a historical one.

In chapter two I discuss events in Mexico at the end of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidential term (1964-1970), and during Luis Echeverría's term (1970-1976). This chapter does not aspire to be a complete history of the era. Echeverría's *sexenio* is well-studied because of the political change that occurred as a result of his so-called *apertura democrática*, as well as the repression of his government against opponents. Although a vast bibliography was consulted for this thesis, in this chapter I focus on those historical issues which are treated humorously in the comics and films studied here.

As we will see in chapter one, humour belongs to a specific time and place. It is local and contemporary. It is necessary to know the context in which it was created. Humorous sources such as jokes, comics and films are a means of studying history. However, the purpose of this research is not to research history through humorous sources, but to discover how humour was used to communicate a social and political reality. Understanding the history of the time helps me target those topics in films and comics which concerned the population.

Chapters three and four are where everything is put together – theory, context and sources. Chapter three is dedicated to the analysis of three comics –*La Familia Burrón* (1948-2009)<sup>11</sup> by Gabriel Vargas; *Hermelinda Linda* (1968-1988)<sup>12</sup> by Óscar González; and *Los Agachados* (1968-1977) by Eduardo del Río, 'Rius'. These comics were chosen for several reasons. First, all three are considered humorous, so that readers

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<sup>11</sup> In 1948 *La Familia Burrón* appeared under the name 'El Señor Burrón o vida de perro'. The name was changed to *La Familia Burrón* in 1953. Juan Manuel Aurrecochea Hernández, 'El Señor Burrón o vida de perro'

<[http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd\\_ver\\_serie&vl\\_id\\_registro=154&vl\\_orden=argum entista&vl\\_serie=&vl\\_salto=1](http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd_ver_serie&vl_id_registro=154&vl_orden=argum entista&vl_serie=&vl_salto=1)> [accessed 16 May 2011]

<sup>12</sup> The comic was launched in 1965 under the name *Brujerías*. Initially it was a serious publication about witchery. It became a humorous publication under the name of *Hermelinda Linda* in 1968. Personal communication with Óscar González, 15 July 2010.

were expecting a funny story. In addition, they were very popular at the time, issuing more than 100,000 copies per week each, and reaching more than 200,000 at their peaks. Thus, the number of readers that they reached was large. Those who bought and read them every week likely shared the worldview represented in the comics. Finally, while the stories of *Hermelinda Linda* are set in Mexico City, *Los Agachados* portrayed the countryside (although it also presented urban issues and points of view). The situations in *La Familia Burrón* took place in Mexico City's downtown, although some issues are set in the countryside or even overseas. Thus, the three of them offered different perspectives from different realities.

I begin with comics because it was easier to track recurrent topics in comics. The number of issues consulted was very large, and I was able to locate themes which were repeated frequently. In films, perhaps due to their length, treatment of topics was less iterated. In the comics, when a topic appeared consistently in numerous issues, such as *machismo* in *La Familia Burrón*, I considered it to be a social concern and looked for it not only in the other comics but also in the films. This helped me to create an 'index' of relevant topics and later to analyse how they were expressed, how the topics were related to Mexican reality, and why humour was used to discuss them. Only a selection of the large number of possible examples was included in this research. In appendix two the reader can find charts which detail which topics were discussed, what they were expressing and how they benefitted the reader.

In chapter four, the same techniques are applied to films. The films are *El Águila Descalza* by Alfonso Arau (1969), *Mecánica Nacional* by Luis Alcoriza (1971), *Calzonzin Inspector* by Alfonso Arau (1973), and *Tívoli* by Alberto Issac (1974). The choice of these films is not arbitrary either. All four were classified as comedies when they were released. *El Águila Descalza* was an independent film financed by the

government. The director was part of the contemporary countercultural movement, and he focused on the working class. *Mecánica Nacional* was advertised as a film that was critical of the status quo,<sup>13</sup> and it deals with the growing middle class. *Calzonzin Inspector* is a political comedy that discusses problems and abuses in the countryside (although much of the country suffered equally from such abuses). And *Tívoli* was also advertised as a political comedy, and portrayed various social and political classes, abuse of authority, and life in Mexico City. All four films were popular, with cinema runs longer than average. Of course, four films alone are not a sufficiently representative sample to state definitively that these were the issues of concern. However, once these topics are compared with the comics, we gain a broader idea about how relevant they were in the social psyche.

The similarities and differences in the topics, and the manner in which they were discussed, are evaluated in the conclusions. The conclusion reflects on why these topics emerged during Echeverría's *sexenio*, and why humour inserted in films and comics seemed an ideal language to express them. Moreover, although it is impossible to know how effective the impact of the messages was, or how they were received and understood, this research draws out the keys through which viewers recognise topics, and therefore sheds light on the *possible ways* to read the visual media.

As mentioned, this thesis contains two appendices. The first presents the methodology used to analyse comics and cinema. Rather than disrupt the flow of the thesis, it seemed more pertinent to present the theoretical model in appendix one, since the analysis of the images and the media was not empirical. Methodological approaches were chosen which could be used for both media. I included the methodology of Francesco Casetti and Federico di Chio in *Cómo analizar un film*, and combined it with

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<sup>13</sup> In an advertisement printed in *El Universal*, 26 April 1973, Section Cultural, p. 7

Román Gubern's ideas of visual and comic analysis put forward in *El lenguaje de los comics*. The description of methods is contained in appendix one.

The second appendix is a series of charts which clarify which topics were aired in the films and comics, and what mechanisms of humour were present. Since not all the examples could be presented in the analysis, it seemed important to indicate how often the various topics were discussed; this is a way to gauge their relative importance, to show that they were not isolated or rare concerns, but rather could be considered as part of the wider social imaginary.

What the reader will find in the following pages is an account of how during a period in which there was much talk of opening, tolerance and democracy, opponents of the regime were being tortured and murdered. Even as the authorities asserted their tolerance of criticism, the reality was very different. Hence, some cartoonists and filmmakers decided to express their dissent. But, humour was used to soften the criticism and helped them avoid censorship (or worse). In fact, not only did they criticise the authorities, but they also pointed out the tensions and problems faced by a society which was transforming, becoming both more modern and more cosmopolitan. Humour can show a distorted vision of reality, real but 'sugar-coated'. Society recognised itself, understood the reality being shown, but also was able to digest it more easily. Difficult topics remained on the social agenda, despite the fact that the government refused to admit them and did not permit an open discussion of them.

Thus, the relationship between the topics of this thesis makes sense: even as Luis Echeverría invited artists to be critical of the regime, and talked of a time of tolerance, the reality was very different. Visual artists expressed their dissent through their media and by using humour they were able to criticise the authorities in a safer and more enjoyable way. They used visual humour as a way to protest against repression, and

became the voice of others who shared their point of view. Humorous films and comics became a means of political resistance and social criticism against the Mexican regime and the faults of the society in the 1970s. They were both a form of social conscience and a public record.

## Chapter 1

### Laughing when it hurts: A theory of humour for visual culture

*Comedy is simply a funny way  
of being serious.*

Peter Ustinov

Humour is a topic that has interested scholars from diverse disciplines for centuries. From Aristotle and his legendary book on comedy (that apparently was destroyed centuries ago and inspired Umberto Eco's best seller *The Name of the Rose* (1980)), to classic and contemporary philosophers, psychologists, linguists and sociologists, the publications on humour are innumerable. To review every perspective and theory would be a book in itself, and it is not my intention to do so. Instead I will present those which are useful to an understanding of humorous films and comic books, because they can help us gain an insight into contemporary political and social concerns in a given society. Theories from a variety of disciplines are explored in this chapter, and from them, certain ideas have been selected which help achieve the aim of a better understanding of Mexico. In the following pages I discuss ideas which will help us understand the use of humour in selected comics and films in Mexico from 1969 to 1976, why and how humour was used as a means of expression, and what this tells us about the history of Mexico and the mood of society. In other words, what Mexicans laughed at helps us understand who they were.

There is no 'final word' on humour, nor any single scholar who has settled the argument on its meaning. Research tends to be located within a given discipline. Psychologists try to understand why we laugh and how this affects our psyche. For sociologists and anthropologists, humour explains who we are and the community we belong to. Linguists approach humour as a language, thus exploring what it communicates. Philosophers reflect on its transcendence as a condition of the human

spirit. Thus, their perspectives and ideas will help us construct an understanding of humour, its relevance to society, and why it represents non-conformity, a means of resistance against a political system.

First, it is important to recognise that, because there are many studies of humour, the terminology among them differ. Umberto Eco suggests that the idea of the comical is an ‘umbrella concept’<sup>1</sup> joining different phenomena, and it is impossible to give it a single, clear definition. What some scholars call comedy, others call humour; jokes and ‘true jokes’ (discussed later), are also part of this terminology as well as innocent and hostile jokes. While some refer to laughter as a physical act, others consider it a mental process. And we cannot deny the difference between parody, irony and sarcasm.<sup>2</sup> Victor Raskin noted this lack of terminological agreement among scholars, pointing out that there is a ‘terminological chaos created by an abundance and competition of such similar and adjacent terms’.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with these ideas, we group together insights which refer to humour, laughter, hilarity, jokes, comedy, wit, etc., when they can be understood as having the same aim: to introduce the audience into a ‘comedy environment’. However, I will also discuss ideas that help us understand how humour expresses thoughts that we would not dare express in a serious situation. In so doing, we will gain an insight into the concerns of the people. I will not discuss the difference

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Los marcos de la “libertad” cómica’, in Umberto Eco, V.V. Ivanov and Monica Rector, *¡Carnaval!*, trans. by Mónica Mansour (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984; repr. 1998), pp. 9-20 (p. 9).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle uses comedy and comical to refer to the same phenomenon: representing faults, ‘the ugly’ in someone/something. William Hazlitt differentiates between terms such as laughter, comedy, ludic, wit, irony, humour. Sigmund Freud differentiates between jokes and humour, and classifies jokes according to their content and who they are addressing. Henri Bergson uses the term ‘comic’ to correspond to Freud’s use of humour, and he also refers to laughter as humour in the same way as Mikhail Bakhtin. Luigi Pirandello and Umberto Eco consider comedy to be the perception of the opposite and humour as the ‘feeling’ of it, although both terms describe a broken frame. The philosophers Alenka Zupancic and Robert Pfaller use the term comedy for acts of humour with no social or political aim, and true comedy for those which create their own universality. Susan Purdie considers jokes as part of the comedy narrative. Simon Critchley discusses humour and sometimes uses the term comedy for the same concept. Paul McGhee also discusses humour, while Gregor Benton and George E.C. Paton view jokes and humour as similar terms. The relevant titles that inform this discussion can be found in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Raskin. *Semantic Mechanisms of humor* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company. 1985), p. 8.

between varieties of terminology in humour, such as jokes and parodies. Scholars differentiate between them, but it is not my intention to distract readers in a sea of different terminology. Thus, we will understand all these concepts as ‘acts of humour’ since they are actions expressed through the language of humour, which benefit from being within this language. The meaning of all these ideas will be drawn out in the following pages.

Not all acts of humour make us roar with laughter, but recognising when we are inside the language of humour helps us understand ‘facts’ in a certain way. The important point to note here is that the terms studied refer to acts or moments which turn the environment into a less solemn one, and one in which chaos does not worry us. In fact, it entertains us.

### **Things that make us laugh...**

*So I went to the psychiatrist yesterday, and he told me “You’re crazy”. I said I wanted a second opinion. He said, “OK, you’re ugly too!”*

When we read this joke, we recognise that we are witnessing an act of humour. Something intellectual has happened, which may bring at least a hint of a smile. This act is a comic one, and that is why we are allowed to laugh. Even when it is not proper to laugh, we recognise the humour in a statement. But, what are the indications in the text that help us understand that something belongs to the universe of humour? And afterwards, what do we laugh at?

Humour is directly related to social context. Different social groups laugh at different things. Humour is a universal human activity, and there is no society without humour, but each expresses it differently.<sup>4</sup> ‘Our laughter is always the laughter of a

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Critchley. *On Humour* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002; repr. 2010), pp. 18, 28.

group'.<sup>5</sup> It tells us who we are. There is nothing universal in relation to the laughable; 'it is the stimulus and the human participant(s) which bring humour about'.<sup>6</sup> Even the extent to which it is appropriate to laugh will depend on the specific context and social setting. We do not laugh at the same things or for the same reasons. Nonetheless, there is some agreement among scholars regarding the characteristics normally present when an act of humour occurs, the most common being *incongruity*. I return to this later in this chapter.

Laughing and humour are intellectual acts. The comic is strictly human, suggests Henri Bergson,<sup>7</sup> although laughing is not, according to recent research suggesting that monkeys and rats have this ability.<sup>8</sup> What is strictly human in laughter is the intellectual process that makes us laugh. When an event 'makes us think transgressively as well as marking our transgressive thought',<sup>9</sup> then we find it funny and recognise that it is part of the universe of humour. Without recognising that we are inside the language of humour, we would feel frightened or stressed every time the coyote falls from a cliff or is blown up with TNT in his attempts to capture the roadrunner, because we would not separate our rational thought from the 'transgressive' one in which the impossible is allowed. Freud points out that the only way to enjoy this frustrated expectation is when it does not bring us pain.<sup>10</sup> If we feel personally attached to the situations described through humour, if we feel personal sympathy for Borola Burrón and her crazy enterprises in the adventures of *La Familia Burrón*, then we would feel disappointed every time she fails in her tasks. Thus, humour is more complex than we might think, and involves more

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<sup>5</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (London: MacMillan, 1911), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> 'La risa es cosa seria para los científicos', *El Universal*, 31 March 2010, section Ciencia, <<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulos/58041.html>> [accessed 23 September 2011]

<sup>9</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *El chiste y su relación con lo inconsciente*, trans. by Luis López-Ballesteros y de Torres, Biblioteca Freud, BA 0638 (Spain: Libro de bolsillo, 1969; repr. Madrid: Alianza, 2008), p. 201.

than just disjunctions in the narrative. There are different characteristics and elements which must be recognised in order for an act to be considered ‘humour’, and which indicate to us that it is safe to laugh at what we are witnessing. We turn to this issue next.

### **Humour as a social construct**

*Don't steal. The government hates competition!*

The reason why one thing makes us laugh and another does not are diverse. Not everyone laughs at the same things. This is because humour is a social construct. ‘Humour tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in’.<sup>11</sup> According to our social background we read the world in different ways, and that changes the way in which we interpret it. We understand the world according to our own experience<sup>12</sup> and discriminate in terms of what we find funny according to the social groups we belong to. A sense of humour is shared by specific groups, it is something that we have in common with certain people: ‘laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary’<sup>13</sup> because we share the same code. In the joke about government corruption, if someone has suffered the corruption of the authorities, then they may find the comment amusing. Others may find it offensive (perhaps politicians themselves!). Humour depends on who we are.

Humour also changes. It belongs to a specific group at a specific time; we do not laugh at the things people laughed at one hundred years ago. Values, interests, and perceptions change with time, and various social factors will affect the way we

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<sup>11</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> On the way our background and environment influence how we understand the world, see Umberto Eco, *Limits of Interpretation Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 64-67.

<sup>13</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 6.

understand humour.<sup>14</sup> The rebelliousness of Borola Burrón seems less extreme sixty years after her creation, having lived through the sexual revolution. Thus, the humour emanating from this feature will be diminished. That is why the cartoonists of *La Familia Burrón* have had to change the sources of humour in the comic book through the years.

What makes us laugh depends on social context at a particular time and place. That is why context is so important to understanding humour, and it is also a reason for using humour to study a society. At the same time, according to Raskin there is something universal in humour, namely *humour* itself,<sup>15</sup> because although we may not share values and norms, that does not prevent us from understanding something as an act of humour when signs communicate a comic intention.<sup>16</sup> Yet those from a different social context, who witness an act of humour from outside their own social setting, may find the act of humour less effective or convincing. That begs another question: how do we recognise something as an act of humour?

## **Recognising an act of humour**

### **Incongruity theory**

*Why don't fish play tennis? –They might get caught in the net*

Those who study humour, starting with Kant and Bergson and followed by others, agree that *incongruity* is central to all kinds of humour, though it is not the only element which generates laughter. McGhee defines incongruity as ‘something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated, and so forth, [which] must

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<sup>14</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 121-122.

<sup>15</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...* p 13.

serve as the basic vehicle for the humour of an event'.<sup>17</sup> William Hazlitt points out that laughter 'consiste en aquello que es el grado supremo de lo contrario, no sólo a la costumbre, sino al sentido y a la razón'.<sup>18</sup> Critchley, following Kant, adds that incongruity is when we expect one thing and something different emerges.<sup>19</sup>

During a joke or a comic performance involving incongruity, we participate as spectators, contrasting the situation with our own experience, enabling us to perceive the incongruity of the scene, and recognise the comedy. 'Humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in a joke'.<sup>20</sup> A familiar image of incongruity is a clown. Clown's features do not match what we consider to be a normal person. Also, clown's movements and behaviour are out of proportion. Once we recognise that the character is illogical, then we perceive the comedy and are ready to laugh.

In the joke about the fish that opens this section there are different incongruities. We know that fish do not play tennis. But if we take the question seriously, our answers might be that fish do not have arms, there is no tennis underwater, and so forth. The 'obvious' answers – the real ones – are not the right ones for the purposes of the joke. Kant explains that 'laughter is the result of an expectation which ends in nothing',<sup>21</sup> that is, if the world as we know it is disrupted, we are witnessing humour. Eco calls this a broken frame. In either terminology, they refer to an incongruity as something which distorts our regular thought while bringing us pleasure. I explain this next.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul E. McGhee, *Humor, Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Sobre el ingenio y el humor (Conferencias sobre los escritores cómicos ingleses, 1818)', trans. by Javier Alcoriza y Antonio Lastra, *Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación*, 7 (2002), 69-94 (p. 74). <<http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/inf/11357991/articulos/CIYC0202110069A.PDF>> [accessed 18 December 2007]

<sup>19</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952; repr. 1980), p. 199.

We experience surprise when incongruity appears because what we expected to happen has been transgressed by an unusual circumstance. Something unexpected appears in the narrative, or a common or stereotypical situation is broken by something unusual. This implies that there must be situations which allow different kinds of interpretation at the same time,<sup>22</sup> and what is revealed is normally the less predictable. In a scene from the film *Time Bandits* (1981) directed by Terry Gilliam, we see Robin Hood giving valuable things to poor people who are queuing for a gift. The hero gives the gift to each person, shaking their hand and congratulating them, as if it was an award ceremony. However, after every gift is handed out, his assistant punches the recipient in the face.<sup>23</sup> This unexpected action generates the comedy; it does not correspond to expectations in such a situation (an award ceremony), nor to the stories commonly associated with Robin Hood. Once the scene has been understood as humorous and that we have discovered the surprise, the humour will diminish or disappear if the same act is repeated, because ‘it is the absence of surprise which kills the joke when one hears it for the second time’.<sup>24</sup> We find a joke funny the first time someone tells it, but if we hear the same joke a second time, the surprise is gone and we will not find it as funny. This may seem like a contrast with Bergson’s idea that repetition is a source of comedy, but it is not. When a scene or fact is repeated, it contrasts with the normal course of events. Thus, it is incongruent, because the world is *unrepeatable*. However, once we have understood the pattern, our enjoyment will diminish because the unforeseen has become predictable.

It is possible to find humour in situations which are not connected by a regular logic, that is, when there is no coherent relationship between characters, situations, speech, etc. The incongruous elements should be interwoven into the ‘normal’ narrative,

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<sup>22</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Gilliam, *Time Bandits* (HandMade Films, 1981) [on DVD]

<sup>24</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 33.

so that there are parts which are not incongruous, because ‘very few people really break up laughing at pure incongruities’,<sup>25</sup> in fact it could be confusing, because we are familiar with a regular narrative having a specific order and content. An example is a famous sketch from Monty Python, *the fish slapping dance*, in which two men dressed as British colonial military officers dance and slap each other with fish. It is hard to find a logic that links soldiers, dancing, slapping and fish, and this lack of coherence is what produces laughter.

Nevertheless, incongruity is not the only element producing laughter, although it is a very popular one. Freud points out how scholars have considered incongruity as an essential feature of jokes.<sup>26</sup> McGhee considers that incongruity is the core of any act of humour.<sup>27</sup> But Freud adds that incongruities are only a way to intensify the comic effect.<sup>28</sup> He considers that the most relevant characteristic of jokes is the pleasure that it produces.<sup>29</sup>

### **Too much is not enough. The mechanism of exaggeration**

*There once was a man who was so ugly that his wife had twenty children with him just so she could lose him in the crowd.*

Humour must be understood in order to succeed. Once the incongruity is understood, we are in the language of humour. We saw how the alteration of a frame or stereotypical situation causes laughter, but incongruity is not limited to actions or events; characters themselves may be incongruent, such as in our clown example. A clown not only acts illogically, but also looks illogical. The big hair and giant shoes, the red nose, the fancy

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<sup>25</sup> McGhee, *Humor, Its Origin...* p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 153-154.

<sup>27</sup> McGhee, *Humor, Its Origin...* p. 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Freud suggests a difference between jokes and humour. In jokes we obtain pleasure without expecting it, while in humour, we inhibit our distress and transform it into pleasure. *Ibid*, p. 180, 235.

colours, all those features make him look different – and laughable- because they are exaggerated features. Exaggeration is a common technique in humour. Comedy isolates gestures and takes them to the extreme. Freud showed that a comic effect results when a characteristic, which could pass unnoticed ordinarily, is isolated and amplified.<sup>30</sup> According to Bergson, once we have recognised the excess in the gesture, we are inside the language of comedy. In fact, exaggeration is such an important feature, that some scholars consider it to be the core of humour.<sup>31</sup> Bergson states that the main element for the comical is in the body, and that is why an exaggeration of this element will result in laughter. He talks specifically about caricatures, in which the characters always have a distorted gesture, even a very small one. In the case of real people portrayed as caricatures, the caricaturist will look for a feature and will magnify it to make it stand out. Thus, the work of the caricaturist ‘consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it’.<sup>32</sup> Other humourists do the same through other media. ‘A good imitator always imitates precisely our singularity’.<sup>33</sup> And these representations can be done with individual characters or a society or social group more widely, as we will see in the film *Mecánica Nacional*. If there is no obviously idiosyncratic characteristic or it is unnoticed as part of a totality, then the caricature will create one.<sup>34</sup> In caricatures, the characters are usually disproportionate, such as Regino Burrón, Borola’s husband, whose difference in height with Borola is striking. Also, his chin is bigger than the rest of his face, and his legs and feet do not match the rest of his body. Borola is another example: her head is too big for

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<sup>30</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In*, Short Circuit Series (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2008), p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* pp. 203-204.

her body, she has a large round red nose, long feet and big hands, and legs which are as thin as her arms. Both are a disaster. And both are laughable.

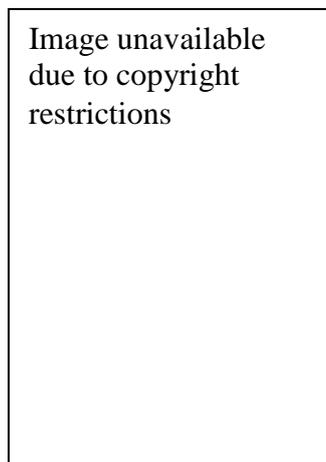


Image 1.1. 'Regino and Borola Burrón'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (n.d.) (in colour)

Bergson pays special attention to the body in relation to the comical, but he dismisses the excess in the actions. On the other hand, Freud and Alenka Zupancic see action as relevant. Freud suggests that we consider some movements and actions funny when they go beyond what we would consider to be normal. We also laugh at the exaggerated movements of comic characters because they use more energy than necessary to achieve their aims. 'Reímos, pues, de un gasto desproporcionado'.<sup>35</sup> The famous Mexican comedian Tin Tan is a good example - his performances usually included excessive movements in his face (like blinking too much, or making his lips protrude) and over-exerting himself while performing simple tasks. According to Zupancic, excesses are part of what constructs the funny character; their movements determine that comic characters are 'not only human', but humans who are different from 'normal' people. If comedy was simply a reminder that we are *just humans*, there would be no comedy. Thus, what comedy points out is that we are not superheroes or tragic heroes, but humans, and as humans, we have faults. 'The flaws, extravagances, excesses, and so-called human weaknesses of comics are precisely what account for their not being "only

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<sup>35</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 191.

human” ’.<sup>36</sup> People laugh ‘at what appears to them to be a slightly strange version of themselves: almost as if they were to see themselves in a distorting mirror at a fair ground’,<sup>37</sup> and a way to create this distortion is through exaggeration. In the comic character we recognise the body, the behaviour, but there is something in his actions that makes him different, suggesting that we are witnessing an act of humour.

Zupancic claims that what comedy does is to point to the *finitude* – or limits – of humanity. A man is never perfect, but rather full of faults and specific attitudes. Pointing to these weaknesses, these faults, *true comedy* tells us who we are. It shows us that a man is never *only* a man, but something else, with characteristics which can make him inhuman (related to Bergson’s idea that we recognise something as funny when a mechanical thing is encrusted onto a living thing).<sup>38</sup> This means, according to Zupancic, that we are all finite. And this is also why comedy can cause problems among some groups or societies. We find it difficult to manage our condition of finitude, of imperfection, because ‘finitude is something that human beings cannot really accept and be reconciled with; this is supposed to be the core and the source of most problems and misfortunes of humanity’.<sup>39</sup> It is uncomfortable if the faults described are those from the group that one belongs to, but it is even worse if they are pointing directly to us.

### **Jokes as Pleasure. Relief theory**

*Why doesn’t Mexico have an Olympic team? –Any Mexican that can run, jump or swim is in the US!*

When Freud studied humour, he examined some of the main perspectives of the time, incorporating them into his own ideas of how jokes work, their aim and relevance. He

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<sup>36</sup> Zupancic, *The Odd One In.*, p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and their Relation to Society* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 1998), p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> Alenka Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal”, and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It’, in *Lacan. The Silent Partners*, ed. by Slavoj Zizek (London, New York: Verso. 2006), p. 192.

classified jokes and humour and described the features that make us laugh, similar to some of those mentioned above. However, he also reflected on the relationship between humour and the unconscious.

For Freud the most relevant content in the joke is the pleasure it produces,<sup>40</sup> and although he was focusing on jokes, the same pleasure can be obtained in any act of humour under the right conditions. Jokes are a socially acceptable way to gain pleasure.<sup>41</sup> He compares dreams and jokes: ‘el sueño se encamina predominantemente al ahorro de displacer, y el chiste, a la consecución de placer’.<sup>42</sup> So, while dreaming helps us avoid distress, jokes give us comfort and relief. Freud suggests that three people might participate in a social comic act: one who, through the act of humour, ‘develops’ what was unseen or unmentioned (such as someone’s fault), the person that the joke is referring to, and the one who witnesses the act and gets pleasure from it. The second participant is not always necessary if the joke does not target the fault of someone or something.<sup>43</sup> However, we will examine all three Freudian participants since our case studies would be labelled under his terminology as hostile or tendentious.

Adults live with stressful demands in a world with a specific moral code; laughing is a release mechanism. Because society represses some of our impulses, laughing is a social and psychological relaxation. According to Purdie, in an act of humour we recognise the forbidden as permitted, a ‘marked Symbolic transgression, as well as permitted Imaginary play’.<sup>44</sup> Humour is a defence mechanism or safety valve for our own fears and repressions, because those situations, topics, or facts which we are not allowed to mention in our daily lives are aired through humour and are temporarily

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<sup>40</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

<sup>44</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: the Mastery...* p. 43.

permitted. Humour can set us in a kind of carnival mood, understanding carnival as ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’.<sup>45</sup>

According to Freud, jokes are an acceptable way to deal with taboo topics. Thanks to jokes, we can discuss even the most censored issues, because they are accepted by the conscious mind without causing rejection due to their content.<sup>46</sup> In a second study of humour, published twenty years later, Freud added that in humour we overcome suffering and that which causes displeasure, transforming it into pleasure, all without losing our mental health.<sup>47</sup> As an example, the joke that opens this section refers to the fact that for many years, the economic situation in Mexico has driven Mexicans to cross the border into the US illegally to look for work. Through the joke, we confront the fact of the economic crisis. But we also allow ourselves to be ‘politically incorrect’ and make a racist comment. Mexicans might be offended, but perhaps it helps them to overcome their tragedy as Freud suggests.

Though not everybody will appreciate some jokes, they are a way to express feelings of concern safely, giving us pleasure because we can give them expression. We laugh at a joke in which we ridicule or insult someone or something because through the insult we make the joke possible.<sup>48</sup> But more important than the joke itself is the assumption that ‘la tendencia antes reprimida ha conseguido imponerse y manifestarse por entero’.<sup>49</sup> In the 1970s, although the government said that any issue could be discussed openly, in reality we know that they did not tolerate open criticism, as the

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<sup>45</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* pp. 132-137.

<sup>47</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘El humor. 1927 [1928]’, in *Obras Completas de Sigmund Freud. Freud Total 2.0*, trans. by Luis López-Ballesteros y de Torres, 2nd edn (Argentina: Ediciones Nueva Hélide, 2002) [On CD-ROM] (para.7 of 14)

<sup>48</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.

case of *Excélsior* showed.<sup>50</sup> So, part of the humour of *Los Agachados*, the political comic book by Rius, is the fact that the author is pointing out the faults of the Mexican government, making fun of those in power, expressing the thoughts of Mexicans. In 1972, the front page of the comic questioned the *apertura democrática* of the president, Luis Echeverría Álvarez by asking ‘¿Apertura democrática... o demagógica?’ and portraying Echeverría as an angel and a devil.<sup>51</sup>

Image unavailable due to  
copyright restrictions

Image 1.2. ‘Luis Echeverría Álvarez’. Eduardo del Río ‘Rius’, *Los Agachados* (n.d.) (in colour)

We recognise the person he is portraying, with his exaggerated caricature; however, readers in the early 1970s would also notice that the cartoon dealt with a banned topic, and a figure who was meant to be beyond ridicule. In this case, laughter brings pleasure through the release of energy that had been used to contain that forbidden thought against the president; laughter arises because it has addressed a censored topic. As we can see, ‘humour has a therapeutic as well as a critical function with respect to society’,<sup>52</sup> because through it we find a way to express topics which we repress, in a socially acceptable manner.

The comedian or the person who tells the joke expresses those ideas which are stressful or forbidden. During this act of humour, the listener becomes distanced ‘from

<sup>50</sup> The *Excélsior* affair, in which this newspaper was targeted by the government and the private sector, is discussed in chapter two.

<sup>51</sup> Eduardo del Río ‘Rius’, *Los Agachados* 115.

<sup>52</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 10.

or temporarily suspends involvement in a real-life situation which clearly would be stressful, intolerable or insufferable for social actors themselves in reality'.<sup>53</sup> When we laugh, 'that laughter is involved in contesting dominant modes of power and expression, but in a slippery way'.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the job of the one who creates humour will become 'a central function of the tension-management of morally problematical interpersonal situations in a society',<sup>55</sup> and even more so in those societies in which the moral values are very strong, or the expression of opposition is repressed.

According to relief theory, there are characteristics in humour which benefit us, and bringing pleasure is the most important. Also, in a physical sense, during laughter we activate different muscles and it is this 'sequence of spasmodic muscle tensing followed by relaxation that produces the sense of relaxation or relief as a result of laughter'.<sup>56</sup> But there is one other benefit which comes as a result of this relief: once tension is relieved, we are in a better position to cope with troubles<sup>57</sup> and one reason is because after laughing, we are able to see the lighter side of situations. I will discuss this in more detail in the section on humour and politics.

### **Faster, Higher, Stronger. Superiority theory**

*Vicente Fox, president of Mexico from 2000 to 2006, had a reputation for being uncultured and uneducated. Alluding to this, there was an urban joke during his presidential term that, despite his reputation, he actually enjoyed books very much. In fact, he had finished three books in the past week, but could not finish the fourth because he had run out of crayons.*

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<sup>53</sup> George E. C. Paton, 'The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality', in *Humour in Society. Resistance and Control*, ed. by Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton (London: MacMillan Press. 1988), 206-233 (p. 207).

<sup>54</sup> William Arthur Callahan, 'Another book on laughter and misunderstandings. A field guide to chuckles, smiles and guffaws' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hawaii, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Paton, 'The Comedian as Portrayer...', p. 208.

<sup>56</sup> McGhee, *Humor, Its Origin...*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

We might find this joke funny because we see the exaggeration – we know that Fox knew how to read, and would not be colouring children’s books. Moreover, we also see the incongruity – a Head of State would not be colouring childrens’ books. But there is another factor contributing to its comic effect: we laugh because we have denigrated someone in power, and that brings a feeling of superiority.

Superiority theory is the perspective most closely related to political humour, and humour as a social function. According to the idea of superiority, laughing at someone being denigrated, brings a sense of victory, even if the person is in a position of power. We feel superior. ‘Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless’.<sup>58</sup> For a moment, the joke makes us powerful.

Thus, humour can tell us something about who we are or where we belong, because in what we find funny we discover what we consider to be inferior, ridiculous, different, stupid, or unlikable. We also ‘laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us’.<sup>59</sup> Humour can reveal our fears. Hence, we find something funnier when the butt of the joke refers to our antithesis, because in this case, we can use the joke as a means of aggression, to ridicule our enemy.<sup>60</sup> ‘Humour is a form of cultural insider-knowledge<sup>61</sup> and its acknowledgment and fragmentation can be very revealing for understanding a social group. Lawrence Mintz proposes that humorous expressions ‘are culture-bound-connected to realities of time and place’.<sup>62</sup> Humour might tell us who we are.<sup>63</sup> In other words, you are not only what you eat, you are also what you laugh at. When laughter ends, we might realise that we are sexist, racist, homophobic, cruel. And that is tough to swallow.

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Hobbes mentioned by Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Critchley *On Humour*, p. 56.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 67.

<sup>62</sup> Lawrence Mintz quoted by Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 75.

We respond to an act of humour because we consider ourselves superior to those who are the butt of the joke. When we laugh at someone who stumbles, it is not only because of the unexpected –the incongruity of the interruption of the regular action of walking- but also because we consider ourselves better than the person who just stumbled.<sup>64</sup> However, according to Freud, we make fun of something or someone because our super-ego has triumphed over our ego. Although we may laugh at things which scare us or facts we repress, it is because the super-ego reassures us that we are in a safe environment to do so.<sup>65</sup>

But let us clarify this. What Freud claims is that in humour, the super-ego takes the role of an adult, while the ego is a child. When the ego witnesses a situation which normally would frighten us, the super-ego appears as the paternal figure that protects the ego, pointing out that the situation is not harmful and it is right to laugh. It resembles a parent-child relationship: while the child is concerned about breaking his favourite toy, the adult recognises that this is a minor problem, which can be easily solved by getting a new toy. According to Freud, the super-ego also helps us cope with issues that worry or hurt us, because when we confront them, our super-ego understands the fears of the ego as trivial;<sup>66</sup> therefore, the super-ego controls the fear –or the displeasure- and converts it to laughter.<sup>67</sup> The same occurs when we laugh at ourselves: it is the triumph of our super-ego, pointing out that the situation of concern to our ego is minor, deserving nothing more than a laugh. We give comfort to ourselves.<sup>68</sup>

However, humour can also be a tough critic, and according to Bergson, we find in humour the expression of an imperfection that should be corrected. Laughter is a corrective, ‘a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of

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<sup>64</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 198, 229.

<sup>65</sup> Freud, ‘El humor...’ (para. 13 of 14)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 238.

<sup>68</sup> Freud, , ‘El humor...’ (para. 10 of 14)

absentmindedness in men and in events'.<sup>69</sup> Through laughter, we are pointing to a fault, and to the necessity of correcting it, which elevates us to a position of superiority. 'In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed'.<sup>70</sup> Besides, we laugh in order to show our disdain or to hide our jealousy.<sup>71</sup> We could not assume this position if we did not feel (or try to at least for a moment) better than the object that is causing us the hilarity.

As we saw with Vicente Fox, we do not laugh only at the unlucky. We like to degrade those in power, or in a better position than us. Each laugh is a victory for the powerless, which helps explain why humour emerges in repressive states or dictatorships. I will describe this in more detail when I discuss the relationship between humour, context and figures in power.

Zupancic considers that humour emerges when we recognise a person who *believes* to be superior, despite being no different from anyone else. Thus, the soul of the comic characters should be projected in their whole body: 'the soul itself is as *corporeal* as possible'.<sup>72</sup> What comedy does is to point to the *finitude* of humanity because it 'emphasizes our essential humanity, its joys and limitation'.<sup>73</sup> A man is never perfect, but rather full of faults and specific attitudes and 'these weaknesses are precisely something on account of which a man is never only a man'.<sup>74</sup> There is at least one characteristic which makes him/her different, and consequently serves as a source of humour. And to point out to these finitudes make us feel superior.

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<sup>69</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...*, p. 87-88.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>71</sup> Hazlitt, 'Sobre el ingenio y el humor...', p. 75.

<sup>72</sup> Zupancic, 'The "Concrete Universal", and...', p. 183.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

### **Rules were made to be broken. Society, social norm and the breaking of the rule**

*What's the difference between the Mexican government and the Titanic? The Titanic sank faster but at least some people survived.*

All humour occurs in a social situation. Society has rules and codes, and the interaction of these rules and codes with the act of humour was partly what interested Umberto Eco when he claimed that the comic effect appears when there is a violation of a rule. Moreover, when this violation is made by someone we do not feel sympathy for, because they are inferior, repulsive, or animalistic (*animalesco*),<sup>75</sup> we have the feeling of superiority.<sup>76</sup> However, Eco's approach can be criticised; for example, Bergson argued that we treat the comic character as a 'playmate', even putting ourselves in their place.<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, the audience may not feel any relationship at all. Nevertheless, what we will take now from Eco's approach is the idea of the *broken rule*.

The broken rule refers to the relationship between a social norm and the breaking of it. A rule has been violated; at the same time, we are not worried about this violation, but rather we actually feel avenged by the person who confronted it. We have a sensation of pleasure and relief –a Freudian idea of comedy- because we enjoy the violation of the rule and the misfortune of those who violate it.<sup>78</sup> For example, in the comic book *Los Agachados*, one of the main characters, Nopalzín, is arrested by the police when he is mistaken for a hippie from the United States. When the Mayor tries to speak with him in English, Nopalzín starts making word games with popular words in English from products and advertisements. In this case, we laugh because Nopalzín has

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<sup>75</sup> Eco understands 'animalesco' as someone ignoble, inferior and repulsive. 'Los marcos de...', p. 10. If we compare this with the definition of 'animalistic' in the Oxford dictionary we can agree with his use of the word, since it refers to animal like behaviour, particularly in physical and instinctive behaviour. We feel intellectually superior to animals, and we despise those who behave like them, thus, the use of the word *animalistic* looks suitable. Equally, the term works if we accept Bergson's idea that the comic character is absentminded and abandons social conventions. Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay...* p. 196.

<sup>76</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* , p. 195.

<sup>78</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 10.

broken the rule of being respectful with the authorities and is teasing the Mayor, although he is in an unfortunate situation –he is arbitrarily in custody. We enjoy the fact that he has violated the rule, and done something that we would also like to do.

Eco adds that the animalistic condition of the comic character is important, in the sense that we feel unconcerned about their fate. But we can refute this idea by understanding the fate of the comic character as temporary.<sup>79</sup> We do not need to despise them in order to be unconcerned about their destiny, because finally, at some point, everything will return to normal. Returning to Eco's claim, in order to recognise the breaking of the rule it is essential to know the rule. If there is no knowledge of the code that is being broken, then there will be no comedy. The transgression of the code, understood as a norm, can also refer to the violation of a stereotypical situation, enclosed in a *frame*.<sup>80</sup> When either of these situations occurs in the narrative, and is recognised, a comic effect is produced.<sup>81</sup>

This reinforces the earlier point that humour belongs to a specific culture, or group. Someone who does not belong to the group may identify a situation as 'humourous', but they do not understand the comedy because they do not know the code. If the viewer does not know the rule that is being broken, or the situation that is being altered, it will be impossible for him to participate in the joke. The code or the broken rule could be explained, but, according to Eco, this is something that is not allowed when there is an intention to produce a comic effect. In fact, a characteristic of jokes is their implicitness.<sup>82</sup> The norm 'debe estar presupuesta tanto por el emisor como

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<sup>79</sup> Zupancic, *The Odd One In.*, p. 131.

<sup>80</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 18-24.

<sup>81</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> Gregor Benton, 'The origins of the political joke', in *Humour in Society. Resistance and control*, ed. by Chris Powell and George E.C Paton (London: Macmillan Press. 1988), 33-55 (p. 40).

por el público. Si el hablante la explicita es un tonto o un torpe; si el público no la conoce, no hay efecto cómico'.<sup>83</sup>

During the presidential term of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, people used to tell a story about him: apparently someone told him that the people of Puebla had two faces, to which he replied, '*do you think that if I had two faces I would use this one?*'. In order to understand this joke we need to know that one of his most obvious characteristics was that he was very ugly, and also that he was from the state of Puebla, so that the allusion to the two faces of the people from Puebla also referred to him. Someone who does not have this information –who does not share the code- will not find this joke as funny as someone who does.

This portrays humour as a revolutionary expression, or as a social critique. But Eco states that this is just one side of comedy, and in fact, what humour is doing is to remind us of the existence of the rule, and even to reinforce it:<sup>84</sup> 'La comedia y el carnaval no son instancias de transgresiones reales: al contrario, representan claros ejemplos del reforzamiento de la ley. Nos recuerdan la existencia de la regla'.<sup>85</sup> Thus, humour 'often takes the hegemonic discourse –the norm- for granted, and the multiplication is involved in reflecting off of it, bouncing off of it'.<sup>86</sup> However, these are not hopeless affirmations. It is important to remember that there is more than one way to understand the comic effect. Furthermore, Eco declares that although humour re-establishes the *broken frame*, this does not force us to accept the rule or social code. Nevertheless, we cannot deny its existence.<sup>87</sup> In the example that heads this section, we recognise the Mexican tragedy, but that does not prevent us from trying to change it.

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<sup>83</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de ...', p. 15-16.

<sup>84</sup> Eco understands humour and carnival in a similar way to Bakhtin, who states that the laughter of the carnival 'is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and denies'. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de ...', p. 17.

<sup>86</sup> Callahan, 'Another book on ...', p. 163.

<sup>87</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de ...', p. 18.

Even though humour can work as a social critique and highlight the existence of the rule, at the same time it can criticise it. Humour is a freedom movement, but without promising liberation. Humour attacks the limits but from within. Thus, although humour gives us relief about the breaking of the rule, the breaking is only temporary, and in the end we know and accept the existence of a code. According to Eco, it makes us sad because we have noticed the truth. Afterwards ‘nos sentimos tranquilos y calmados, un poco enojados, con un matiz de amargura en la mente. El humor es un carnaval *frío*’.<sup>88</sup>

Zupancic made a connection between the code and the universal. A fact which is portrayed in comedy represents the universal, because ‘comedy produces its own necessity, universality and substantiality’.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps tragedy and drama are more universal than comedy, as Eco suggests, because they discuss well known human topics such as love and death.<sup>90</sup> Comedy speaks to all topics, but reflecting specific contexts and creating its own universality, and although not everybody will find humour within, others will generalise it: ‘*all the lawyers are...*, ‘*every Spaniard is...*’, etc. It is possible to make fun of all kinds of situations, characters and facts in the comic narrative: ‘there is no sacred thing or solidity that comedy could not rock to its foundations’.<sup>91</sup> The risk is in not finding it funny because it is an attack against the moral system of the viewer, or because the viewer does not recognise its references due to the fact that the code, the rule or the topic is not within his or her understanding.

Umberto Eco’s ideas of humour and comedy bear some resemblance to other authors already studied. But what it is interesting and important to note is the idea discussed above regarding the comic effect and its liberation, and at the same time, its power of oppression. When the rule is understood, there is a reinforcement of it, and

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<sup>88</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal”, and...’, p. 180.

<sup>90</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 12.

<sup>91</sup> Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal”, and...’, p. 181.

although it could be critical and mocking, ultimately there is a feeling of sadness and permanence. In this case, humour is simply the impression of a revolution, because finally, we know that the world works in the way that is being parodied, and there is no changing it. And if a change occurs, it will be to create new rules and codes.<sup>92</sup> Thus, jokes will provide victories, but only moral victories, and they will not change our reality.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, at least for a moment, we forget rules and hierarchies (as in carnival) and become equal or superior to those who oppress us.

### **Power to the people. Political humour**

*Dad, I'm considering a career in organised crime. - Government or private sector?*

Humour emerges in different situations and for different reasons – it brings relief, helps us cope, ridicules those in power, and so forth. Through humour a society discovers itself, including its fears and its status. Making jokes about those in power places us temporarily in a position of superiority, and creates a world in which faults are obvious: ‘El humorista ve el mundo, aunque no propiamente desnudo, por lo menos en camisa: en camisa el rey, que tan buena impresión causa cuando se le ve compuesto en la majestad de su trono’.<sup>94</sup> A society living under a repressive regime is a perfect place for jokes to emerge. As Freud suggested, laughing at that which oppresses us, gives us relief; and the feeling of liberation and victory is even greater if the listener identifies himself with the hero of the joke.

We have been speaking about humour in general, but now let us consider specifically *political humour*. ‘Humour may function to express common group

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<sup>92</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> Benton, ‘The origins of the...’, p. 54.

<sup>94</sup> Luigi Pirandello, ‘Esencia, caracteres y materia del humorismo’, *Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación*, 7 (2002), 95-130 (p. 119).  
<<http://www.ucm.es/BUCEM/revistas/inf/11357991/articulos/CIYC0202110095A.PDF>> [accessed 21 October 2010]

sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes, relieve awkward or tense situations'.<sup>95</sup> Hence, jokes about political figures show the mood of the population. In authoritarian regimes, political jokes will emerge through unofficial channels, expressing the feelings of a part of society, and underlining the faults and incompetence of those in power, which makes political jokes 'a tribunal through which to pass judgements on society where other ways of doing so are closed to them'.<sup>96</sup> Their position as public figures holding power makes them a good target for jokes, and highlights their failings and mistakes.

'Political jokes are the citizens' response to the state's efforts to standardise their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent',<sup>97</sup> and through these jokes, citizens freely express their way of thinking about those who hold power. Politicians are not necessarily more ridiculous than other people, but 'it is the combination of power without expertise that makes their stupidity more dangerous and more risible than that of other people'.<sup>98</sup> Political jokes are a way to 'take revenge', pointing to what the state refuses to recognise, and making fun of serious topics which seem laughable and ridiculous. George Orwell pointed out that 'every joke is a tiny revolution',<sup>99</sup> a contradiction of the speeches allowed by the state.

Wondering whether political jokes appear more frequently in free countries or in those in which freedom is limited, Christie Davies claims that in free societies, humour is less necessary as a mean of opposition, while in authoritarian societies, the act of humour will be a means of insurrection. It is more difficult to laugh at the stupidity of

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<sup>95</sup> R. Stephenson quoted by Paton, 'The comedian as portrayer...', p. 211.

<sup>96</sup> Benton, 'The origins of the...', p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>98</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...*, p. 95.

<sup>99</sup> George Orwell. 'Funny but not vulgar', in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. by Peter Davison, 20 vols (London: Secker & Warburg. 1998), 16, pp. 482-487 ( p. 483).

leaders who were chosen democratically, because they are the people's choice.<sup>100</sup> Of course, that does not prevent us from making fun of them, but it also explains the existence of many jokes and parodies in authoritarian countries. 'Laughter is often used for self-preservation and defensive action, or for some sort of temporary survival in horrible times'.<sup>101</sup> In some cases, humour will be the only channel to express disapproval and even slanderous allegations about those in power.

It is important to reiterate that the joke needs the cooperation of the listener to give it sense. Political humour is even more complicated because it refers to specific characters at a certain moment. In order to understand the joke, and recognise which characters are starring in it and why they are described as they are, it is essential to possess knowledge which is not necessarily shared by all members of a community. However, if they are part of the code, the joke will be understood. Also, if the subject of the joke has generated stress or discomfort, laughing about it will give a sense of relief and victory.

At this point it would be pertinent to ask, why do those in power allow society to make fun of them? One answer could be that, through humour, society is entertained and does not look for ways to change the status quo. Political humour maintains morale and is a harmless safety valve, a cold carnival: we get relief, we feel avenged, but nothing in our reality changes and we simply confirm the existence of the rule. Furthermore, 'in a society where it is forbidden or even dangerous to express political dissent, people will take delight in telling jokes that seem to evade this prohibition whether or not they themselves are strongly critical of the regime'.<sup>102</sup> In fact, restrictions do not always come from the authorities, but rather can be a form of self-censorship stemming from fear of the authorities. Those in power know that political

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<sup>100</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...*, p. 90.

<sup>101</sup> Callahan, 'Another book on...', p. 169.

<sup>102</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 176.

jokes are ‘a useful means of dissipating tensions and of keeping people happy, and that it would be foolish to deal with them too harshly’.<sup>103</sup> Another possibility is that to suppress jokes would make the politicians ‘look even more ridiculous. But states can and do use other laws –laws against economic sabotage, undermining national morale, and so on- to silence joke-tellers’.<sup>104</sup> Still, governments do have the power to censor or repress those who criticise them through humour. An example from Mexico occurred on 29 January 1969, when Rius, who was very critical of the government, was kidnapped and given a mock execution in order to intimidate him into stopping his critical drawings. But despite this incident, Rius continued as usual.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, humour by itself will not achieve a political change because ‘it reflects no political programme. It will mobilise no one’.<sup>106</sup> Despite political jokes criticising those in power and raising awareness, they are unlikely to bring change by themselves, although in some situations they are the only channel to express criticism. ‘In situations of extreme oppression, where power is laid bare, laughter may be one’s only defense’.<sup>107</sup>

When jokes *do* emerge against the rules that oppress us, we still have the choice to ignore the rule –even just for a moment- because humour does not offer us the impossible – permanent liberation from oppression – but rather a momentary escape. According to Trevor Griffiths, in his role play *Comedians*, humour is liberation: ‘a joke releases the tension, says the unsayable. (...) But a true joke, a comedian’s joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and the desire, it has to *change*

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<sup>103</sup> Benton, ‘The origins of the...’, p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>105</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, ‘De dos antiguas residencias de la Patria’ in *De San Garabato al Callejón del Cuajo*, coord. by Isabel Garcés (México: Museo del Estanquillo, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Editorial RM. 2009), pp. 14-49 (p. 41).

<sup>106</sup> Benton, ‘The origins of the...’, p. 54.

<sup>107</sup> Callahan, ‘Another book on...’, p. 159.

*the situation*'.<sup>108</sup> For Freud 'el humor no es resignado, sino rebelde; no sólo significa el triunfo del yo, sino también del principio del placer, que en el humor logra triunfar sobre la adversidad de las circunstancias reales'.<sup>109</sup> It brings us a feeling of rebelliousness.<sup>110</sup>

A further issue to mention is that humour is sometimes understood as the opposite of seriousness. Thus, sometimes the purpose of humour is simply to not take it seriously. Purdie claims that 'a joke's effects in the world are of no consequence'.<sup>111</sup> This would seem to contradict Orwell's idea of the tiny revolution that is contained in every joke. Gregor Benton explains that jokes are only moral victories, 'political jokes are revolutions only metaphorically'.<sup>112</sup> This would support the statement made by Purdie. We also use specific means of expression when we want to let our listener know that we are not speaking seriously, such as a wink or a different tone of voice.<sup>113</sup> This is a good alibi for those who use political humour, because they can always claim they should not be taken seriously, since, in the end, they were 'just joking'.

The comic character also plays a role. Eco suggested that we consider inferior those who break the rules through an act of humour, and that we have no sympathy for them. If we follow his idea, we can suggest that even if we do not feel sympathy for the comic character, we do for the action they perform in defying the rule. We feel avenged by the rule-breaking but also 'free of sin' because we ourselves did not commit the action. Laughing is a means of saying that we had nothing to do with it.<sup>114</sup> Someone else did it, and we cannot be punished for it.

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<sup>108</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (London: Faber, 1976), p. 20.

<sup>109</sup> Freud. 'El humor...' (para. 6 of 14)

<sup>110</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: the Mastery...*, p. 126.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>112</sup> Benton, 'The origins of the...', p. 41.

<sup>113</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...*, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 11.

Other authors consider that in fact, we take a liking to the comic character. As discussed earlier, Bergson believes that we treat the comic character as a playmate. The character is not concerned about the rules of society, he abandons social conventions, and we are amused contemplating his actions. For Purdie, we identify ourselves with comic heroes because they manipulate conventions to their advantage, they break the code in the way we would like to, and in fact, ‘in life, by making jokes we imaginatively supply ourselves the moment of degradation’.<sup>115</sup> In the Mexican film *Ahí está el detalle* (1940), the comedy character Cantinflas is wrongly accused of killing a man. It is impossible to understand Cantinflas’ speech to the jury since the connections of his different ideas make no sense. He also has no respect for any authority and makes fun of the judge and the lawyers. At the end of the sequence, all the attendants to the trial end up speaking in the same manner as Cantinflas, who is released himself.<sup>116</sup> Cantinflas is a perfect example of the comic character who challenges those in power. Since he does not recognise authority, he respects no limits on what he says. He challenges –and humiliates- them, and, as Purdie suggests, we ascribe to ourselves the act of defiance. We get relief not only from the feeling of being avenged, but also from the feeling of carrying out the insult without the fear of being punished.

Finally, according to Zupancic, the universe of the comic is indestructible, it never changes. It does not matter how ominous the situation, the comic character will always be able to overcome it and continue unaffected with his/her life.<sup>117</sup> This success helps us avoid feeling sorry for the comic hero, and to understand *their tragedy* as something they will be able to overcome. The strip from *Los Supermachos*, the first famous comic book by Rius, exemplifies this point. The main character, Calzonzin, is unjustly jailed, and when his friends try to release him, they are also jailed. They find in

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<sup>115</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...*, p. 65.

<sup>116</sup> *Ahí está el detalle*, dir. by Juan Bustillo Oro (Grovas-Oro Films, 1940) [on DVD]

<sup>117</sup> Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal”, and...’, p. 181.

this incident a good opportunity to complain about the authorities, but in the end, once they are released, nothing changes for them, and they continue as before, with the same feelings and the same state of mind.<sup>118</sup> But that does not undermine the characters' spirit. And they continue with the same conviction and energy in the following issues.

### **And ... the punchline: Some final thoughts on humour**

In humour we find relief, feelings of superiority, pleasure and enjoyment. But humour also makes us stronger. According to Freud, when we hear a joke about ourselves or about something that represents us or where we belong, instead of being offended we laugh; we have improved our critical thought and even fortified it.<sup>119</sup> It is 'el triunfo del narcisismo, en la victoriosa confirmación de la invulnerabilidad del yo'.<sup>120</sup> With humour, we not only become stronger, we also see the positive side of a bad situation, and even find a way to overcome it. This is because humour shows us the folly of the world, helping us face it 'and change the situation in which we find ourselves'.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, it is important to point out something critical in relation to humour and its success: as humans we do not laugh about the same things, and even more importantly, we need to have an open attitude to humour. According to Freud we need to be both *willing* to laugh, and also not adversely affected personally by the comic context.<sup>122</sup> In other words, the issue from *La Familia Burrón* about abuse of women – which we will discuss later- would not be funny or the humour would be less effective if we are personally affected by domestic abuse. Bergson would add that we need to

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<sup>118</sup> The issue was firstly published in 15 January 1966, and it is reproduced in Eduardo del Río 'Rius', *Mis Supermachos* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1990; repr. 2005), pp. 39-64.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 132.

<sup>120</sup> Freud, 'El humor...' (para. 6 of 14)

<sup>121</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 144.

neutralise our feelings because laughter is incompatible with emotions.<sup>123</sup> If we feel some emotional attachment to the situation or with the character, then laughter will be more difficult.

As we have seen, there are many factors to consider in an analysis of humour. According to Freud, we can find that jokes disguise those thoughts with the most valuable content. Thus, understanding humour in theoretical context helps us analyse its use and its effectiveness in Mexico during the period of this study, 1969 to 1976. The next chapter focuses on something very far from being funny: the political history of Mexico during that period.

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<sup>123</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...*, p. 145.

## Chapter 2

### Once upon a time there was a country: Mexico 1968-1976

*Pasa el tiempo, irreversible. No hay manera  
de medir el daño causado por los últimos  
presidentes, de Díaz Ordaz a la fecha.  
Han sido años de crueldad, despilfarro,  
frivolidad, impotencia.  
Desde Palacio no se vela por el país.  
Se cuida la sobrevivencia del sistema.  
Julio Scherer García (Los presidentes)*

In this chapter we turn our attention to the historical period of the presidential terms of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) and his successor, Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976). It will not be a complete description of those years, but instead the focus will be on a selection of issues that found their way into the comics and films analysed in the subsequent chapters. Readers may consult further references mentioned in the bibliography to learn about the period more generally. The historical issues presented here appear to be highly relevant for ordinary people. The intention of this chapter is also to place our sources in the historical context in which they were created. I start with the situation in Mexico at the end of the Díaz Ordaz sexenio, because without doubt, part of Luis Echeverría's presidency was influenced by the policies and crises of the previous term. Later, I offer a concise survey of the situation in Mexico in the early 1970s. The chapter ends highlighting the topics which were discussed through humour in the films and comics included in this research.

#### **Gustavo Díaz Ordaz**

In 1964, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was elected president of Mexico after a long period as a devoted militant and a political careerist in the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), traditionally the most powerful party in Mexico. By that time the PRI had held

power for thirty-five uninterrupted years.<sup>1</sup> When Díaz Ordaz came to power, Mexico was in the midst of a long period of social peace and economic stability known as the ‘milagro mexicano’.<sup>2</sup> Mexico – it was thought – should serve as a model for other developing countries.<sup>3</sup>

More broadly, the world was in the middle of the Cold War; Latin America had witnessed the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and its gradual turn toward the Soviet Union. These facts influenced Díaz Ordaz’s political decisions. He was concerned about how external events could risk the political interests of the PRI.<sup>4</sup> From his first presidential speech he demonstrated a concern to maintain and safeguard the apparent political and economic stability in order to defend the status quo built by his party.<sup>5</sup> During his presidential term he proved intolerant of any sign of subversion and responded categorically to the social movements that arose.<sup>6</sup> In this international context, and in a country in which the president is considered the highest patriarchal figure,<sup>7</sup> Díaz Ordaz acted as the guardian of a nation threatened by internal and external forces.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The PRI was established in 1929 under the name Partido Nacional Revolucionario. After some years of consolidation it changed its name in 1938 to Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, finally taking the name of Partido Revolucionario Institucional in 1946. *PRI / Línea del tiempo* <<http://www.pri.org.mx/LaFuerzadeMexico/NuestroPartido/LineaTiempo.aspx>> [accessed 23 December 2011]

<sup>2</sup> Elsa Margarita Gracida Romo, *El siglo XX mexicano. Un capítulo de su historia, 1940-1982* (Mexico: UNAM, 2002), pp. 76-79.

<sup>3</sup> Soledad Loaeza, ‘Gustavo Díaz Ordaz: Las insuficiencias de la presidencia autoritaria’, in *Presidentes Mexicanos Tomo II (1911-2000)*, coord. by Will Fowler, colección Biblioteca INEHRM, 2 vols (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 2004), 2, 285-346 (p. 301)

<sup>4</sup> According to Enrique Condés Lara, the heart of PRI ideology was the Mexican Revolution and the Cold War. The government used these ideologies to promote authoritarianism, prejudice against other cultures and values, and state paternalism. Enrique Condés Lara, ‘Años de rebelión y de esperanzas’, in *Asalto al cielo. Lo que no se ha dicho del 68*, Rubén Arechiga Robles and others (Mexico: Oceano, 1998), pp. 21-41 (p. 23).

<sup>5</sup> Loaeza, ‘Gustavo Díaz Ordaz...’, p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México. La historia y el significado de los rebeldes sin causa, los jipitecas, los punks y las bandas*, 2nd ed. (Mexico: Debolsillo, 2007), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Rafael Barajas Durán (El Fisgón), *Sólo me río cuando me duele*, (México: Planeta, 2009), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Even Gustavo Díaz Ordaz called himself ‘*siervo de la nación*’ and his party fellow called him ‘*Guardián de la paz de México*’. Eulalio Ferrer Rodríguez, *De la lucha de clases a la lucha de frases: de la propaganda a la publicidad*, 2nd ed. (Mexico: Taurus, 1995), p. 275.

In the previous administration, Mexico had won the bid to organise the 1968 Olympic Games, and it fell to the Díaz Ordaz administration to carry out the job. It was important to make the event remarkable.<sup>9</sup> However, in the Mexican psyche, his presidential term will be always be associated not with the Olympics but with a massacre which occurred just a few days prior to the opening ceremony. During the summer of 1968, a clash between students in the capital was strongly repressed by riot police. This was the trigger for a series of demonstrations which brought together students not simply from Mexico City, but around the country.<sup>10</sup> Their claims had political overtones, and they worried the government, because they were unaccustomed to responding to public opinion,<sup>11</sup> but these social movements showed that society was transforming. The authoritarian system was cracking, and society was clamouring for political change.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the PRI did not want active political participation from the citizens. The president was convinced that it was a plot to destabilise the country.

Díaz Ordaz believed that the student movement was organised and supported by communist countries,<sup>13</sup> although, according to the scholar Sergio Aguayo, it is questionable whether Echeverría or Luis Gutiérrez Oropeza –the chief of the *Estado Mayor Presidencial*- actually believed it or whether they simply used the specter of communism to cause fear.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the student movement and the rebel groups in 1968

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on the 1968 Olympics, their political relevance and social participation around the event, see Keith Brewster, ed., *Reflections on Mexico '68*, *Bulletin of Latin American Studies* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, Society for Latin American Studies, 2010) and Claire Brewster and Keith Brewster, *Representing the Nation: Sport and Spectacle in Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010)

<sup>10</sup> A deep narrative based on oral testimonies about the origins, development and the massacre on 2 October 1968 was written by Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco*, 2nd edn (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1998)

<sup>11</sup> Rolando Cordera Campos, 'Del desarrollo como crisis y de la crisis como transición', in *México a fines de siglo*, José Joaquín Blanco and José Woldenberg, Sección de Obras de Historia, 2 vols., (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 2, pp. 266-308 (p. 268).

<sup>12</sup> Loaeza, 'Gustavo Díaz Ordaz...', p. 287.

<sup>13</sup> However, at the end of his term, he declared that he did not believe that communism could succeed in Mexico because of the characteristics of the country and its 'individualist' society. Loaeza, 'Gustavo Díaz Ordaz...', p. 304.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication with Sergio Aguayo, 26 November 2008.

–and in the subsequent years- did not receive considerable support from international communist groups or countries, and even CIA ‘asentó que el conflicto se originaba en contradicciones nacionales y no por la intervención cubana o soviética, según el gobierno mexicano argumentaba’.<sup>15</sup>

In his paranoia, Díaz Ordaz did not hesitate to use the full range of repressive power at his disposal, in order to *safeguard* national security. He justified his actions by pointing out that ‘aunque gobernar no es imponer la voluntad del gobernante sobre el gobernado, si eso se necesita para imponer el orden, eso haré’.<sup>16</sup>

But the student movement in 1968 did not aim to threaten Mexican national security. It was a manifestation of the desire for change among certain sections of Mexican society, an evolution in their mentality and interests. A group of people emerged who wanted social change: respect for human rights, more social and economic opportunities, democratisation, and the modernisation of a political system characterised by the continuity of a single ruling party which was closed to civilian participation.<sup>17</sup> All these modern ideas seemed risky to those embedded in the political system and its structures, and their brutal repression confirmed that the government would go to any lengths to keep power and to preserve the system unchanged. After months of clashes between the student movement and the army and police, on 2 October 1968 (just some days before the opening of the Olympic Games) hundreds of students and other civilians were massacred at the hands of the army and paramilitary groups during a demonstration in Mexico City. The power of the government was made ruthlessly clear, and it was also clear how far the government would go in order to keep

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<sup>15</sup> Carlos Montemayor, ‘Lo personal y lo real’, *Proceso*, 5 October 2008, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Gustavo Díaz Ordaz quoted by Enrique Krauze, *La presidencia imperial: ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano, 1940-1996* (Mexico: Tusquest Editores, 1997) p. 300.

<sup>17</sup> Cordera, ‘Del desarrollo como crisis...’, p. 268 and Francisco Pérez Arce, *El principio. 1968-1988: años de rebeldía* (Mexico: Itaca, 2007), p. 45.

what they called the ‘social peace’. Years later, Díaz Ordaz would defend the decision to use violence.<sup>18</sup>

The end of the movement was tragic, fracturing Mexican society, leaving some with a feeling of hopelessness while others moved into urban guerrilla groups or armed movements.<sup>19</sup> However, this dreadful experience marked the beginning of a new social and political era<sup>20</sup> by making clear the necessity of change and democratisation. According to Soledad Loaeza, despite the tragic events of that year, they can be considered as ‘la primera gran derrota del autoritarismo posrevolucionario que marcó el fin de una etapa del desarrollo político’.<sup>21</sup> Díaz Ordaz’s successor, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, needed to organise his government with these new social demands in mind. Change was in the air.

Moreover, during Díaz Ordaz’s presidential term, GDP grew more than the two previous decades (from 2.9% to 4.1%),<sup>22</sup> and an increasing number of Mexicans were able to satisfy their basic needs, though many others remained stuck in extreme poverty.<sup>23</sup> Many believed that Mexico was becoming a First World country.<sup>24</sup> However, further social changes were underway, some of them destabilizing. The agricultural sector began to decline as the population –and its demands- rose.<sup>25</sup> Industrialisation generated social change, as many emigrated from the countryside to the cities. The

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<sup>18</sup> About his presidential term Díaz Ordaz said: ‘de lo que estoy más orgulloso es del año de 1968, porque me permitió servir y salvar al país del desorden, del caos, de que se terminaran las libertades que disfrutábamos’. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz quoted in ‘El lenguaje del control’, *Proceso*, 25 July 2004 <[http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?page\\_id=278958&a51dc26366d99bb5fa29cea4747565fec=192886&rl=wh](http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?page_id=278958&a51dc26366d99bb5fa29cea4747565fec=192886&rl=wh)> [accessed 1 November 2011]

<sup>19</sup> Sergio Aguayo, *La charola. Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia de México* (México: Grijalbo, Raya en el agua, 2001), p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Cordera, ‘Del desarrollo como crisis...’, p. 268.

<sup>21</sup> Soledad Loaeza, ‘México, 1968: los orígenes de la transición’, in Ilán Semo, Soledad Loaeza and others, *La transición interrumpida. México 1968-1988*, 2nd ed. (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, Nueva Imagen, 1994), pp. 15-47 (p. 19)

<sup>22</sup> Carlos Tello, ‘Sobre la desigualdad en México’, in *México a fines de siglo...* pp. 7-62 (p. 38).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Claire Brewster, ‘Changing Impressions of Mexico for the 1968 Games’, in Keith Brewster, *Reflections in Mexico ’68*, pp. 23-45 (p.32).

<sup>25</sup> Gustavo Gordillo, ‘La problemática del campo en la modernización’, in *México a fines de siglo...* pp. 309 -341 (p. 315). The chapter is also recommended to consult the complete data.

numbers of businessmen, workers and bureaucrats all grew.<sup>26</sup> Urban change was portrayed in comics and films, and *La Familia Burrón* is an excellent example. When the comic appeared in the late 1940s, the characters, from a low social class, struggled over money every day, but over the years –as the country lived through the *milagro mexicano*- the family saw an improvement in their way of life. They became lower middle class,<sup>27</sup> with access to some services such as electricity, running water and private bathrooms.

The president had plenty of freedom to designate candidates for political posts,<sup>28</sup> thus, Díaz Ordaz designated Luis Echeverría Álvarez as his successor, in the political tradition known as ‘*dedazo*’.<sup>29</sup> Echeverría wanted to show that he was open to social change, and that he would be a president who understood the contemporary democratic times and would deliver reform.<sup>30</sup> Beginning with his presidential campaign, he made ‘de la autocrítica la piedra angular de su propuesta de gobierno’.<sup>31</sup> Hence, when he took power he made it clear that he was open and tolerant of criticism and that he wanted to reach out to young people. He also recognised the country’s problems, including poverty, the uneven distribution of wealth and the existence of political prisoners –who were liberated following his orders.<sup>32</sup> He asked for the support and trust of youth and intellectuals and promised to fight against the ‘*emisarios del pasado*’, who were part of

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<sup>26</sup> Carlos Tello, ‘Sobre la desigualdad en México’... p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Harold E. Hinds, Jr. and Charles M. Tatum, *Not Just for Children. The Mexican Comic Book in the Late 1960s and 1970s*, Contributions of the Study of Popular Culture, 30 (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> Diana Margarita Favela Gavia, *Protesta y reforma en México. Interacción entre Estado y sociedad 1946-1997* (Mexico: UNAM, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, 2006), p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> In the practice known as *dedazo*, the president decided who the candidate would be from among a group of his closest colleagues, usually secretaries of state. For a description of how this practice worked, and how Echeverría’s designation occurred, refer to Jorge G. Castañeda, *La Herencia. Arqueología de la sucesión presidencial en México* (México: Extra Alfaguara, 1999), pp. 321-335.

<sup>30</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2. La vida en México de 1970 a 1988*, 2nd ed. (México: Planeta, 2007), p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Loaeza, ‘Gustavo Díaz Ordaz...’, p. 293.

<sup>32</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 11-12.

the political system before him, and who repressed people and restricted freedoms.<sup>33</sup> In fact, he was referring to Díaz Ordaz and the older class of politicians. Echeverría brought into his cabinet a new kind of political elite: the technocrats, young people who studied outside the country, with no fixed ideology, and who had not worked previously in a government office.<sup>34</sup> Carlos Monsiváis described the Mexican technocrats from that time as people ‘que observan con desdén los trámites electorales, el acarreo y el clientelismo, y profesan amor desbordado a la macroeconomía, los macroprocesos y los macrosalarios’.<sup>35</sup>

### **Luis Echeverría Álvarez**

By the 1960s, the PRI's power was consolidated. As they say in Mexico, it was a soft dictatorship, *la dictablanda*:<sup>36</sup> it created the rules of participation in the political system, decided policies, blocked avenues of citizen influence in decision-making.<sup>37</sup> There was little effective opposition – when it appeared it was co-opted or threatened. In Mexico, the *autoritarismo* was defined by ‘la carencia de canales institucionales para la participación política autónoma y no en la supuesta pasividad de la sociedad o en la existencia de un presidente omnipresente’.<sup>38</sup>

During the PRI rule political opposition was not effective. There were elections for legislators, senators, governors, the president and other public positions,

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Cabrera López, *Una inquietud de amanecer. Literatura y política en México, 1962-1987*, Debate y reflexión (Mexico: UNAM, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, Plaza y Valdés, 2006), p. 210.

<sup>34</sup> Roderic Ai Camp, *La política en México*, trans. by Stella Mastrangelo (Mexico: siglo veintiuno editores, 1995), p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, ‘En virtud de las facultades...’, in *La transición interrumpida...* pp. 113-126 (p. 118)

<sup>36</sup> Or to quote Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, a ‘dictadura perfecta’. Quoted in Will Fowler, ‘Goatsuckers, guerrillas and democracy: Mexico in the 1990s’, *Vida Hispánica*, 19 (1999), 12-16 (p. 13).

<sup>37</sup> Alberto Aziz Nassif, ‘La construcción de la democracia electoral’, in *Una historia contemporánea de México: Transformaciones y permanencias*, ed. by Ilan Bizberg, Lorenzo Meyer, Francisco Alba, 4 vols (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2004) 1, pp. 367-428 (p. 372).

<sup>38</sup> Favela, *Protesta y reforma en México...* p. xii.

undermining the image of a dictatorship or authoritarianism,<sup>39</sup> and other parties were allowed to take part. These other parties did not receive a significant number of votes and did not pose a real threat to the PRI; they were used as a means of claiming the existence of democracy.<sup>40</sup> When they achieved an electoral victory, the PRI did not recognise it, and if people insisted on defending the candidate, the army took control of the cities and persecuted the leaders of the opposition.<sup>41</sup> Opposition candidates often showed support and sympathy for the official candidate, or they opposed the candidate 'as a means of bargaining with the government for patronage positions, loans, contracts, and other favors'.<sup>42</sup>

The PRI had also co-opted the unions and bureaucrats, organised campaigns of fear among the population, and repressed those who called for political change or were gaining popularity and sympathy,<sup>43</sup> for example, the rail workers movement in 1958 and the student movement in 1968. It was not until 1977, after having survived state-sponsored ostracism and repression, that the *Partido Comunista Mexicano* (PCM)<sup>44</sup> gained enough strength to force the state to institute reform in which the party could legally participate in elections.<sup>45</sup> But this was not enough to consider that Mexico had democratised. This state of affairs helps us understand why in the comic *Los Agachados*, some of the characters discuss the absence of democracy, or why the citizens of San Garabato had been ruled by the same man, Mayor Don Perpetuo del

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<sup>39</sup> Favela, *Protesta y reforma en México...*, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> Aziz Nassif, 'La construcción de la democracia...', pp. 372-373.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Adler Hellman, 'Social control and the Mexican political system', in *Twentieth-century Mexico*, ed. by W. Dirk Raat and William H. Beezley (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 243-256 (p. 248)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> PCM had been working underground since 1940, but in 1973 a new electoral law allowed them to participate in official elections. Miguel Basañez, *El pulso de los sexenios. 20 años de crisis en México*, 4th ed. (Mexico: siglo veintiuno editores, 1999), p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Adler, 'Social control...', p. 247.

Rosal, for decades and had no way to complain about his abusive regime until they are visited by an inspector.

Thus, Mexican society was excluded from political life, and during the 1960s, the idea of democracy and the claims for greater inclusiveness gained currency, especially among the younger generations. But after the massacre in 1968, and another in 1971, many felt that change through the existing political system was impossible. Instead, some joined armed movements, including rural and urban guerrillas.<sup>46</sup> For others still, it was through cultural expression and the flowering counterculture movement that they discovered a way to show disagreement.<sup>47</sup>

Luis Echeverría Álvarez became president of Mexico on 1 December 1970. Like Díaz Ordaz, he had developed his political career in the PRI for many years, and was the Home Secretary under his predecessor. Because of that position many blamed him for orchestrating the massacre in Tlatelolco.<sup>48</sup> Echeverría understood that he had to find the way to change perceptions of the authoritarian regime but without losing power.<sup>49</sup> His answer was to promote the *apertura democrática*, understood as ‘free dialogue, self-criticism, freedom of expression, reforms oriented toward certain segments of the

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<sup>46</sup> Aguayo, *La charola...* p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> The Mexican countercultural movement began in the late 1950s and was popular during the 1960s and 1970s. José Agustín, *La contracultura...* p. 37. During the 1970s, the establishment opposed some of their cultural expressions, such as literature which showed the dissatisfaction of youth. José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 68 and José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Luis Echeverría was the first Mexican president to go before a jury when he was accused in 2006 of genocide because of the events of 2 October 1968. Francisco Gómez, ‘Llevarán a juicio a Echeverría por el 68; enfrentará cargo por genocidio’, *El Universal*, 30 November 2006, section México.

<<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/146053.html>> [accessed 1 August 2010]. Nevertheless, he was acquitted three years later due to the lack of evidence. Pablo Ordaz, ‘Absuelto de genocidio el ex presidente Luis Echeverría’, *El País*, 28 March 2009, section Internacional. <[http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Absuelto/genocidio/ex/presidente/Luis/Echevarria/elpepiint/20090328elpepiint\\_9/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Absuelto/genocidio/ex/presidente/Luis/Echevarria/elpepiint/20090328elpepiint_9/Tes)> [accessed 1 August 2010]

<sup>49</sup> Loaeza, ‘México, 1968: los orígenes...’ p. 19.

people'.<sup>50</sup> It aimed for an apparent change in political life. However, during his presidential term and despite his rhetoric, things did not change.<sup>51</sup>

Echeverría saw the importance of the mass media and used it to promote the achievements and values of the state. He wanted to gain credibility and improve his image.<sup>52</sup> He spoke of freedom in the media. Thus, he encouraged the press to ask whatever they wanted, and the intellectuals and artists to deal with any topic. The president 'reiteraba en público y en privado: un gobierno honrado y una prensa independiente son puntales de la sociedad democrática'.<sup>53</sup> According to the president nothing was prohibited, although in some cases, like the cinema, there was a group of censors<sup>54</sup> which gave recommendations to filmmakers and had the last word regarding whether a film could be shot or screened.<sup>55</sup> Comics and printed publications were censored under similar regulations.<sup>56</sup> In other cases, the government censored publications covertly, such as the newspaper *Excélsior* in 1976. Sometimes violent repression was used, as in 1971 against another student demonstration, and against the guerrilla groups.

Luis Echeverría created policies which represented a change of direction from previous administrations. He proclaimed the 'second stage of agricultural reform', increasing the productivity of the *ejidos*, making them collective and trying to increase

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<sup>50</sup> José Luis Reyna, 'Redefining the Authoritarian Regime', in *Authoritarianism in Mexico*, ed. by José Luis Reyna and Richard S. Weinert (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977), pp. 155-171 (p. 165).

<sup>51</sup> Luis Salazar, 'Agotamiento de la hegemonía mexicana revolucionaria y transición política', in *México a fines de siglo...* pp. 342-376 (p. 343).

<sup>52</sup> Héctor Aguilar Camín, *Saldos de la revolución. Cultura política de México, 1910-1980* (México: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1982), p. 175.

<sup>53</sup> Julio Scherer García, *Los presidentes* (Mexico: Debolsillo, 2007), p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> It is important to mention that this was created before Echeverría's term, in January 1957. Its original aim was 'prohibir todas las películas mexicanas y extranjeras que presenten desnudos y traten temas inmorales', although over time, it also forbade topics that were critical of the government. Eric Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa. La contracultura Mexicana y la crisis del Estado patriarcal*, trans. by Rafael Vargas Escalante (Mexico: Norma, 2002), p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Full information about the office in charge of censorship for magazines and comics can be found in Anne Rubinstein, *Del Pepín a Los Agachados. Cómic y censura en el México posrevolucionario*, trans. by Victoria Schussheim (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), pp. 172-193.

the harvest as much as possible. This policy was intended to make Mexico self-sufficient in agriculture. However, the expected growth in the agricultural sector never came; years of neglect meant that far more was needed.<sup>57</sup> The problem did not start during Echeverría's term but in the mid-1960s.<sup>58</sup> The crisis and poverty of the Mexican countryside and the peasants is portrayed and discussed in *Los Agachados* and in some episodes of *La Familia Burrón* when they visit their friend Briagoberto Memelas, a rural cacique, as well as in the film *Calzonzin Inspector*, in which all the inhabitants of the little town *San Garabato* suffer the ravages of crisis.

Echeverría 'promoted himself outside Mexico, traveling around the world, including to communist or left-leaning countries such as Chile, Cuba, China, East Germany and the USSR',<sup>59</sup> trying to become the leader of the third world, believing that after his presidential term, he could become General Secretary of the UN.<sup>60</sup> He also attended the United Nations to support the accession of China. His support of China was understood, in a way, as a message that Mexico would not do what the United States wanted it to.<sup>61</sup> However, some in the private sector started to believe that Echeverría had left wing tendencies, and were not pleased with some of his decisions. Links between the state and the private sector diminished, and the two sides openly disagreed.<sup>62</sup>

Echeverría, in attempting to gain the confidence of those who opposed the government in 1968, asked young people, mainly graduates of UNAM and other public schools, to be part of his administration. Some were reluctant, but others, many with no history of activity in PRI, considered it an opportunity, and they joined the government: 'Los profesionistas, en especial economistas y politólogos, aceptan su llamado al

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<sup>57</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia Mexicana 2...* p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> Gustavo Gordillo, 'La problemática del campo en la modernización', in *México a fines de siglo...* p. 309.

<sup>59</sup> Krauze, *La presidencia imperial...* p. 374.

<sup>60</sup> Personal communication with Carlos Montemayor, 15 December 2008.

<sup>61</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Basañez, *El pulso de los sexenios...* pp. 44, 55, 59.

cambio (exclusivamente verbal), porque el Estado es todavía el primer empleador y el PRI no maneja los espacios públicos disponibles'.<sup>63</sup> Those who accepted the offer became known as *aperturos*.<sup>64</sup>

Echeverría looked for the support of intellectuals. It was strategically important to gain their confidence, and he approached them believing that 'en el nuevo contexto post-68 la alta inteligencia del arte, el pensamiento y la investigación vestiría muy bien a su gobierno, y la cultivó'.<sup>65</sup> He used the same tactics as occurred with the unions, co-optation, and it worked. He took many on his foreign journeys, gave them presents and subsidised the trips in what Jorge Ibarguengoitia called (later popularised among artists) the *aviones de redilas*.<sup>66</sup> These actions were received sympathetically by the intellectuals.<sup>67</sup>

Echeverría also had a special interest in cinema and gave it significant economic support, almost nationalising the industry. He encouraged filmmakers to increase both output and quality. He invited them 'to deal with social issues and even Mexico's sacred past'.<sup>68</sup> The artistic supervision office (in charge of censorship) did not disappear, but continued banning certain topics and content.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, integrating intellectuals and artists into his social programs gave confidence to the people regarding the system

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<sup>63</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, '1968: la herencia en busca de herederos. (Primera de dos partes)', *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 56 (2008) pp. 18-26 (p. 20)  
<<http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/5608/monsivais/56monsivais.pdf>> [accessed 28February 2010]

<sup>64</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, 18 vols (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Gobierno de Jalisco, Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1994), 16, p. 8. The author describes one of these trips in which he participated. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> José Agustín, refers to these trips as *Jets de redilas* although the essence of the name does not change. José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 78-80.

<sup>68</sup> 'The contemporary era', in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers*, ed. by Joanne Hershfield, and David R. Maciel, (Oxford: SR Books, 2005), 193-196 (p. 194).

<sup>69</sup> Topics such as religion, sex, the army, the clergy, and the policies of the regime were still censored although, as director Marcela Fernández Violante points out, Echeverría's *sexenio* was marked by a new set of ideas, and was much less marked by the censorship of earlier regimes. Alejandro Medrano Platas, *Quince directores del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Plaza y Valdés, 1999), p. 187.

and the president. Many journalists did not need to be co-opted because they already supported the PRI president without reservation. In a practice which began under Díaz Ordaz and continued through the years, some journalists received bribes for favourable coverage of the government, its policies, and the presidential image. This practice was known as '*chayote*', and was very common and well known among the press.<sup>70</sup> Hence, the representation of the journalist in *Calzonzin Inspector* as someone who works closely with the local government and obeys the authorities submissively.

In 1972, Echeverría proposed an educational reform in which the school curriculum would be revised. This was an effort to satisfy the demands of a changing society. The official history now included information about Ché Guevara, Mao Tse Tung and Fidel Castro, adding to concern among some conservative groups of his left wing tendencies.<sup>71</sup> But the education reform went beyond public texts. The *preparatorias* that belonged to the UNAM were moved from downtown and were given new buildings in different areas of the city. Eight hundred and fifty-seven institutions were created to provide technical studies. Moreover, the Colegios de Bachilleres and the Colegio de Ciencias y Humanidades were created in order to satisfy demand for high school studies. UNAM had two extensions created outside the main university campus on the edge of the city.<sup>72</sup>

*La Familia Burrón* and *Los Agachados* contain references to the low salaries teachers professors receive, as well as their demands for better working conditions. *La Familia Burrón* is the only one of our sources in which young characters regularly appear -Reginito and Macuca, the children of the family. Both attend colleges to learn technical skills rather than high schools, and they do not have the ambition to go on to

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<sup>70</sup> Scherer, *Los presidentes*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>71</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 95.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. The author believes that the reason for creating new schools and building a new university campus was to make it more difficult for students to organise themselves, because the schools were decentralised.

university. In the film *El Águila Descalza*, the young characters are factory workers. The rich girl that Poncho, the protagonist, is secretly in love with, studied a technical career as an interior designer. So, even as the young were increasing in number and were attending higher education institutions in greater numbers, the films and comics that we consider did not discuss them. This does not mean that the topic of higher education was not present in other genres, but it is interesting that in a comic book such as *La Familia Burrón*- which evolved over fifty years – education never emerged as an issue. Eduardo del Río saw the relevance of basic education and, according to his point of view, two years after the education reform, the basic levels of education and the training and salaries of teachers were in crisis. He portrays his concern in *Los Agachados*.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to mention that during Echeverría's presidency, violence increased in high schools and universities. Young gangs called '*porros*' were controlled and paid for by the government, and they intimidated young people in order to maintain fear and undermine efforts to organise.<sup>74</sup> The Principal of UNAM at that time, Pablo González Casanova, pointed out the existence of these groups, but he suffered the consequences and was forced by the government to resign.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps these groups contributed to the idea of a lost and violent youth with no ideals or aims that was represented in *Hermelinda Linda* and also in *Los Agachados*.

Although Echeverría appeared to have left wing tendencies, much of this was simply rhetoric: 'si para una parte de la clase política la apertura comenzaba a vislumbrarse como una necesidad y para los intelectuales reformistas como una

<sup>73</sup> For example in issues 161 and 162.

<sup>74</sup> Inke Gunia, ¿"Cuál es la onda"? *La literatura de la contracultura juvenil en el México de los años sesenta y setenta* (Madrid: Iberoamericana: 1994), p. 259 It is important to mention that the *porros* existed before Echeverría's term. Carlos Montemayor mentions that they participated in some of the violence in 1968. Carlos Montemayor, *La violencia de estado en México. Antes y después de 1968* (Mexico: Debate, 2010), p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> A description of the facts that forced González Casanova to quit as a rector appears in José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 50-52.

posibilidad, para las víctimas directas de la represión ésta era solamente un engaño'.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, his populist speeches made the private sector suspect that the President was too radical and dangerous for their interests.<sup>77</sup> He approached Fidel Castro and gave asylum to those members of Salvador Allende's government in Chile who were exiled after the coup d'état.<sup>78</sup> But he did not offer support for the private sector, which did not want to follow the new path promoted by the government.<sup>79</sup> The private sector found the President too close to the communists, and weak on policies that satisfied their interests. Little by little, the private sector turned against the President, not only with speeches and other communications, but also by moving money out of the country and making the dollar the currency for business transactions.<sup>80</sup> This affected the Mexican economy in a serious way.

The most famous case regarding the confrontation between Echeverría and the private sector was the '*Excélsior affair*'. Since 1972 the private sector had been uncomfortable about the leftist editorial position of the newspaper *Excélsior*. The business leader Juan Sánchez Navarro discussed their concerns with the President, asking for his help in organising a boycott against the newspaper. Echeverría suggested they remove all their advertising because that was how the newspaper received its income. They agreed, but the president told Julio Scherer, the director of *Excélsior* at the time, that the private sector was planning to cancel their advertising, and that he could help by replacing it with advertising from state-owned enterprises. Thus, the newspaper might survive the boycott. Of course, the private sector leaders did not know this. Both *Excélsior* and the businessmen suffered the consequences of these actions. Echeverría pushed the private sector to continue with their plan, and at the same time

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<sup>76</sup> Marco Bellingeri, 'La imposibilidad del odio', *La transición interrumpida...* pp. 49-73 (p. 62).

<sup>77</sup> Basañez, *El pulso de los sexenios...* p. 49.

<sup>78</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 41.

<sup>79</sup> Cordera, 'Del desarrollo como crisis...', p. 273.

<sup>80</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia Mexicana 2...* p. 43.

gave money in secret to Scherer to continue production. Ultimately, the businessmen gave up and *Excélsior* survived.<sup>81</sup> The president had reasons to support *Excélsior*: Julio Scherer was a good friend, but, above all, he wanted to control the newspaper and by doing so, control criticism of the government. However, *Excélsior* never came into line, and in 1976 Echeverría organised another boycott, this time from inside the newspaper, in order to remove the leadership. The case of *Excélsior* shows that not all the journalists and mass media were co-opted. Some retained their professional ethics. In the film *Tívoli* there is a journalist whose luck is similar to those from *Excélsior*. He criticises on the front page of the newspaper he works for the decision to close the *Tívoli*. Afterwards, he is downgraded and sent to a different section of the newspaper.

In the *Excélsior* affair, when businessman Sánchez Navarro discovered this betrayal he redoubled his efforts against the government, supported by other businessmen in Mexico who were displeased with Echeverría. Investment in Mexico declined, capital left the country, and rumours began of a possible devaluation.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, all these events did result in a devaluation at the end of Echeverría's presidency. The devaluation was not only a consequence of private sector actions, but also the result of many poor economic decisions taken by Echeverría as well as external factors such as global recession and the increasing cost of oil.<sup>83</sup> By the end of his *sexenio* it was impossible to contain the crisis, although Echeverría and his cabinet tried. The economy was taking a turn for the worse, despite the fact that some authorities and businessmen believed that it was returning to normality.<sup>84</sup> By September 1976, devaluation had resulted in increased prices, a flight of capital, and the decline of the

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<sup>81</sup> A complete description of the *Excélsior* boycott can be found in Julio Scherer's book, *Los presidentes*, pp. 122-133.

<sup>82</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 111-112.

<sup>83</sup> Manuel Gollás, 'Breve relato de cincuenta años de política económica', in *Una historia contemporánea de México...* pp. 223-312 (pp. 238-239).

<sup>84</sup> Carlos Tello, *La política económica en México, 1970-1976*, 11th ed. (Mexico: siglo veintiuno editores, 1993), p. 156.

peso from 12.50 pesos to the dollar to 23 pesos.<sup>85</sup> These problems led to a severe and lasting economic crisis which was very difficult to overcome during the next few years.<sup>86</sup> The impact of the economic crisis became an important issue in the comics and films studied for this research, as we will see later. In *El Águila Descalza* we see the struggles of the working class with poverty and the difficulties of life in a big city; in *Mecánica Nacional* the characters argue about how they should cheat in their jobs to make more money; *La Familia Burrón* constantly discusses the rising cost of living, meaning that Regino must work harder and Borola must set up her own business in the *vecindad*; the characters in *Hermelinda Linda* live in a poor neighbourhood and also find it hard to afford everyday expenses. The women are forced to ask Hermelinda's help with birth control since their families cannot afford more children; on many occasions in *Los Agachados* the characters discuss poverty, and some issues are solely dedicated to explaining the economic crisis and the cost of living.<sup>87</sup>

## Violence

In spite of these apparent left wing tendencies and social policies, many things remained unchanged from previous administrations. One of them, as mentioned above, was the use of repression as a means of social control. In 1971, groups of students throughout the country carried out demonstrations, criticising the education reform plans and demanding the release of those political prisoners who were still in jail. They called for a demonstration on 10 June in Mexico City. Since the demonstration was not authorised by the government, the police asked the students to leave the streets, but instead they continued with their march. Suddenly, from one of the main streets, dozens of young

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<sup>85</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 114-115.

<sup>86</sup> More detailed information about the reasons for 1976 crisis and how it affected the Mexican economy can be consulted in Miguel Basañez, *El pulso de los sexenios...* pp. 48-60.

<sup>87</sup> For example, issues 30, 51, 100, 277.

men appeared and beat many of the students.<sup>88</sup> This mysterious group, which was armed with guns, cudgels and kendo weapons, was later identified as the *Halcones*, a group created by the intelligence authorities in order to act against subversive young people.<sup>89</sup> It was trained by Colonel Manuel Díaz Escobar, who apparently also created the *Batallón Olimpia*, the paramilitary group that started the attack against the students in Tlatelolco in 1968.<sup>90</sup> On 10 June 1971, the police and the riot police did not fight against the students or their attackers. However, they did allow the *Halcones* to attack, and they even gave them logistic support.<sup>91</sup> Many students were wounded or killed.<sup>92</sup>

The aggression was brutal. Immediately afterwards, Echeverría appeared in the media explaining that his government was not associated with the attack, and that those involved would be found and would pay for their actions.<sup>93</sup> This moment gave great credibility to the *Apertura Democrática*.<sup>94</sup> Echeverría added that these actions were organised by the *emisarios del pasado*, referring to the previous administrations and especially to his predecessor, Díaz Ordaz. The regent of the city and the Chief of Police were forced to resign.<sup>95</sup> However, no one was identified as part of the *Halcones*, and the

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<sup>88</sup> Enrique Condés Lara, *10 de junio ¡No se olvida!* (Mexico: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2001), pp.24-25. This book is a good source for information, not simply about 10 June 1971, but also the student movement more widely, the response of the authorities, and the political situation in general.

<sup>89</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, 'El Estado fuera de la ley', in Scherer García, Monsiváis, *Los patriotas...*, pp.141-199 (p. 172).

<sup>90</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 29.

<sup>91</sup> Pérez Arce, *El principio...* p. 88.

<sup>92</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* pp. 26-27.

<sup>93</sup> Montemayor, *La violencia de estado en México...* p. 129.

<sup>94</sup> Aguilar Camín, *Saldo de la revolución...* p. 179.

<sup>95</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 27-28.

investigations never yielded more information.<sup>96</sup> No one ever paid for those acts of violence.<sup>97</sup>

By this time, Echeverría's popularity had risen before the population because of his quick response and his promise of justice. Two of the most important intellectuals in Mexico, Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz, gave him their support in open letters published in *Excélsior*.<sup>98</sup> They pointed out that Echeverría was not Díaz Ordaz.<sup>99</sup> Yet, the *Halcones* repression showed clearly that the government would not allow demonstrations like those that occurred in 1968. The *halconazo* sowed fear among Mexicans regarding the strength of the repression; nevertheless, this did not prevent Eduardo del Río, 'Rius', from criticising the violence and questioning the facts of that day in an issue of *Los Agachados*.<sup>100</sup>

### **Guerrilla and rebel groups**

The violent repression against the demonstrations in 1968, and again on 10 June 1971, caused many to question using peaceful means to bring about change. The violence in 1971 was for thousands of young people a push to decide to take up violent means.<sup>101</sup> For them, armed struggle was the only way to prepare a revolutionary organization.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> According to Carlos Montemayor, based on declassified CIA documents, it was Echeverría himself who gave the orders to Colonel Manuel Díaz Escobar Figueroa to attack the students. In Montemayor, 'Lo personal y lo real'. Scherer García quotes an interview to Alfonso Martínez Domínguez, the Mayor of the city at the time, made by Heberto Castillo in which Martínez points directly to Echeverría as the man who orchestrated the massacre that day. Scherer, 'Los patriotas'... pp. 11-139 (pp. 51-57).

<sup>97</sup> Many years later, Luis Echeverría argued the facts, saying that 'Los estudiantes se pelearon con ellos [referring to Los Halcones]. Pero no hubo tal matazón realmente'. Echeverría quoted by Jorge G. Castañeda, *La herencia...* p. 72.

<sup>98</sup> Scherer, *Los presidentes*, p. 51.

<sup>99</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 27.

<sup>100</sup> The issue was published a year after the massacre, querying who the *Halcones* were and what happened on that day. Eduardo del Río 'Rius', *Los Agachados*, 98. 30 July 1972.

<sup>101</sup> Aguayo, *La charola...* p. 96. According to Sergio Aguayo, during the 1960s and 1970s there were around 1,860 people organised in 29 different groups who joined to the clandestine groups. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>102</sup> Bellingeri, 'La imposibilidad del odio', p. 65.

Thus they decided to fight against the government underground, using different kinds of pressure and a variety of aggressive methods.<sup>103</sup>

Belligerent groups were in urban areas as well as in the countryside. They organised themselves as guerrillas,<sup>104</sup> from a variety of backgrounds and training, although they were mostly left wing with communist tendencies. Their members were predominantly middle class young people with a high school or university education.<sup>105</sup> In 1959, in the southern state of Guerrero, the *Asociación Cívica Guerrerense* (ACG) appeared, a group organised by students and professionals which supported the rural population and fought against the local government.<sup>106</sup> Genaro Vázquez became its leader. One of its most important achievements was to push the national Congress to unseat the state government and to designate a provisional governor.<sup>107</sup> After being arrested in 1966 and escaping in 1968, Genaro hid in the mountains and organised his armed movement, *Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria* (ACNR).<sup>108</sup>

By 1967, in Atoyac de Álvarez, also in Guerrero, the school teacher Lucio Cabañas had gained popularity among the population for giving advice and supporting parents of school children, as well as oppressed peasants. He participated in various civil movements. Although he began peacefully, on 18 May 1967, when the Federal Police opened fire against the population during a demonstration, Lucio decided to

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<sup>103</sup> Since the 1960s, a variety of guerrilla movements emerged not only in Mexico but in other Latin American countries, including Guatemala, Colombia, Uruguay, Argentina. It was not simply a Mexican phenomenon, and this influenced the decisions taken by the different governments. See Judith Larson, 'La guerrilla en América Latina ¿terrorismo o guerra popular?', *Papers: revista de sociología*, 7 (1977), 91-112. <<http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/papers/02102862n7/02102862n7p91.pdf>> [accessed 23 December 2011]

<sup>104</sup> Before the late 1960s, the most recent and influential insurgent armed group in Mexico had been the peasant movement in the state of Morelos, led by Rubén Jaramillo, which started in 1943 and which was violently persecuted for almost twenty years. The group was finally stifled when Jaramillo was killed in his house with his wife and three children in 1962. Jaramillo's movement is fully described in Laura Castellanos, *México armado 1943-1981* (México: Ediciones Era, 2007), pp. 23-62. See also Elena Poniatowska, *Fuerte es el silencio* (Mexico: Era, 1980; repr. 2006), p. 41.

<sup>105</sup> Castellanos. *México Armado...* p. 180.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

create a guerrilla movement which would become later a popular army and a political party.<sup>109</sup> This was the birth of the *Partido de los Pobres* (PDLP).<sup>110</sup>

The government sent the army into Guerrero in order to stop the guerrilla movements, but they also organised various development programmes. The authorities modernised the area, bringing telecommunications, energy, and credit. It also built new roads, which in fact helped the army penetrate the mountain communities. All this was part of ‘una estrategia de combate y se proponían un objetivo: la desaparición, el exterminio de los movimientos armados. Cuando ese objetivo se alcanzó, los programas de desarrollo desaparecieron’.<sup>111</sup>

Genaro and Lucio remained in the mountains organising their groups, although they never worked together. In the early 1970, Genaro’s group was more visible in its activities. During the following year, the government increased the number of soldiers in Guerrero to 24,000, fully one-third of the total Mexican army.<sup>112</sup> The ACNR organised kidnappings of public figures, including politicians and businessmen, and demanded money to support their fight and to support families that had suffered repression, as well as demanding the release of some of their fellow partisans.<sup>113</sup>

Genaro died unexpectedly in a car accident with other members of the ACNR on 2 February 1972. That was the beginning of the end for the group.<sup>114</sup> After his death, Lucio and the PDLP increased their struggle, but the army was all over Guerrero. It placed check points in the roads, entered communities it believed supported the

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<sup>109</sup> Carlos Montemayor researched Lucio Cabañas’ guerrilla movement for years, writing a novel about it which combined fact and fiction. It was called *Guerra en el paraíso* and was first published in 1991.

<sup>110</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 120.

<sup>111</sup> Montemayor, *La Guerrilla Recurrente* (México: Debate, 2007)... p. 23.

<sup>112</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 126.

<sup>113</sup> Abel Barrera Hernández, Sergio Sarmiento, ‘De la montaña roja a la policía comunitaria. Violencia y militarización en la Montaña de Guerrero’ in *Movimientos armados en México, Siglo XX*, ed. by Verónica Oikión Solano, Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, 3 vols (Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2006), 3, p. 666.

<sup>114</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 135-136.

PDLP,<sup>115</sup> captured those they thought were members, tortured detainees and otherwise abused their power.<sup>116</sup> Many of those detained during that time were never seen again.<sup>117</sup> Despite this violence, the government refused to admit that there were guerrillas, and insisted that the violence came from criminals and bandits. ‘No existen guerrillas y si apareciera alguna tendríamos que combatirla inmediatamente,’ said the Minister of Defence in 25 May 1971.<sup>118</sup> The reality was very different. The government was using all its strength to exterminate the rebel groups, not only in Guerrero or the countryside, but also in the cities. Some groups were easily contained while others required the army, the use of strong violence, and even the creation of special forces to beat them.<sup>119</sup>

Despite official denials, at least part of the population knew about the existence of the guerrillas. Although our films do not refer to them, in the three comics there are numerous references to the guerrilla groups. Rius speaks openly about them<sup>120</sup> while in *Hermelinda Linda* there is a brief reference when a policeman confesses his crimes and decides to run away ‘a la Sierra de Guerrero’,<sup>121</sup> where Lucio Cabañas had his army. *La Familia Burrón* has also a reference to the urban guerrilla.

After the PRI candidate for the governorship of Guerrero, Rubén Figueroa, was kidnapped, the army began in May 1974 checking and destroying communities in the mountains, trying to find the whereabouts of Figueroa and Lucio’s guerrilla. In early

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<sup>115</sup> Carlos Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente*, p. 80.

<sup>116</sup> An example of these excesses is the events in the small town of El Quemado, where one hundred and six peasants were detained after being accused of helping Lucio Cabañas. Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 142.

<sup>117</sup> About this, Rosa Santiago Galindo, the mother of a peasant who disappeared during the *Guerra Sucia* in Guerrero, said to Julio Scherer in an interview: ‘Yo sabía que si lo había agarrado el gobierno, no lo iban a soltar, porque todo el que se llevaban ya no aparecía’. Scherer, ‘Los patriotas’, p. 103.

<sup>118</sup> Jorge Torres, *Nazar, la historia secreta. El hombre detrás de la Guerra sucia* (Mexico: Debate, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>119</sup> An example is the secret group called C-047 created in 1966, which did not depend on the DFS and whose work would be to spy on and fight subversive movements. Its head was Miguel Nazar Haro who later became (in)famous for the violence he used against government opponents. Torres, *Nazar, la historia secreta...* p. 26.

<sup>120</sup> Such as *Los Agachados*, 114.

<sup>121</sup> Óscar González, *Hermelinda Linda*, 373, p. 26.

September they rescued the candidate, though the guerrilleros managed to escape. During the following month, the army pursued Cabañas across the mountains and dispersed his brigade. Finally, on 2 December 1974, a squad attacked Lucio and his men. It is not clear how it happened, but during the attack Lucio Cabañas died and the PDLP with him.<sup>122</sup>

The guerrillas were also in urban areas. On 23 September 1965, the *Grupo Popular Guerrillero* (GPG), led by Arturo Gámiz, attacked a military barracks in the northern city of Madera, Chihuahua. They took the barracks by surprise, but were defeated and many were killed during the attack.<sup>123</sup> After this attack, the GPG almost disappeared, becoming the *Grupo Guerrillero del Pueblo-Arturo Gámiz* (GGPAG), which itself was quashed in 1968.<sup>124</sup> Since that frustrated attack in Madera, ‘México ha vivido en estado de Guerra de manera casi ininterrumpida’.<sup>125</sup>

The attack of 23 September 1965 inspired other urban movements, such as *La Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre*, created in Guadalajara in 1973, which took its name as a tribute to the attack in Madera. *La Liga* became the biggest urban guerrilla movement in Mexico.<sup>126</sup> It was created through a merger of a number of rebel groups from across the country. *La Liga* became stronger and quickly increased in number. They robbed and killed policemen and soldiers in order to obtain weapons and money. They also carried out what they called ‘*expropiaciones*’, which were armed robberies of banks, supermarkets, and so forth. It is interesting that an issue of *La Familia Burrón* presents a group of young people who want to perform the so-called *expropiaciones*, but they are described as men without any social ideals and whose main interest is to make

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<sup>122</sup> Barrera Hernández, Sergio Sarmiento, ‘De la montaña roja a ...’, p. 669.

<sup>123</sup> A description of the attack in Cuartel Madera can be found in the novel *Las armas del alba* (2003) by Carlos Montemayor.

<sup>124</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 99.

<sup>125</sup> Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente*, p. 24.

<sup>126</sup> Aguayo, *La charola...* p. 175. A chart with the number of militants in the main guerrilla movements can be consulted on this same page.

money without working because they are tired of being poor and consider that wealth is unfairly distributed. They are called ‘*los inconformes*’, and there are images which link them with guerrilla movements, such as posters of a guerrillero similar to those who fought in the Cuban revolution, or, as we just mentioned, the use of words related to guerrilla movements.<sup>127</sup>

In September 1973 *La Liga* attempted to kidnap a businessman, Eugenio Garza Sada, who died during the attempt. In the same year, *La Liga* kidnapped another businessman and a diplomat from Great Britain, demanding five million pesos and the release and transfer to North Korea of 51 political prisoners. Luis Echeverría decided against negotiating with any of the rebel groups.<sup>128</sup> *La Liga* decided to liberate the diplomat but to kill the businessman. *La Liga* was clearly violent in their acts and methods: ‘eran atroces las huellas del salvajismo desatado en su rostro y a lo largo del cuerpo. El Bajío se incendió de rabia y temor’.<sup>129</sup> Echeverría moved against them without mercy. ‘Con todas las armas, el gobierno se preparó para enfrentar el terrorismo urbano. Su razonamiento fue brutal: al terrorismo guerrillero enfrentaría el terrorismo de Estado’.<sup>130</sup> And the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS) was there to do the job.

At the end of 1973 the DFS, commanded by Nazar Haro, created the *Brigada Blanca*,<sup>131</sup> a group to fight against urban guerrillas -*La Liga* was one of many groups carrying out clandestine activities and confronting the authorities in the cities.<sup>132</sup> By

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<sup>127</sup> Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón*, 17195.

<sup>128</sup> Scherer, ‘Los patriotas’, p. 132.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>131</sup> The group began operating under the name *Brigada Especial* but changed it after confrontations with the *Brigada Roja*, a faction of the *Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre*. The group was comprised of 250 agents from the DFS, the Dirección de Investigaciones para la Prevención de la Delincuencia (DIPS), the military police, and the Policía Judicial. Torres, *Nazar. La historia secreta...* pp. 87-88.

<sup>132</sup> For example, Fuerzas Revolucionarias Armadas del Pueblo (FRAP) appeared in 4 May 1973, dissatisfied by government exploitation of peasants and workers. They kidnapped the American consul in Guadalajara, Terrance Georges Leonhardy, and released him after all their demands were met by the government. Castellanos, *México armado...* pp. 211-212.

1974 the DFS had weakened many of the rebel groups, including *La Liga*.<sup>133</sup> However, a further wave of kidnappings brought concern both to the public and to the private sector. The latter demanded solutions from the government.<sup>134</sup> Echeverría remained steadfast even after his own father in law was abducted.<sup>135</sup> The DFS was directed to find those involved in the kidnappings, get information using any method necessary, and punish those responsible. Many were detained and interrogated, including some who were already in prison, and relatives of guerrilla members.<sup>136</sup>

The decline of *La Liga* began in 1976 when they attempted to kidnap the sister of the newly-elected president, José López Portillo, to demand the release of all their members from prison. The attack was unsuccessful.<sup>137</sup> During that year *Brigada Blanca* continued hunting *La Liga*, and although left wing political organisations were clamouring for the freedom of the guerrilleros and the opponents of the regime, the Home Secretary insisted that in the country ‘no hay presos políticos ni “delincuentes políticos”, quienes están en prisión son simples “terroristas y saboteadores” ’.<sup>138</sup> By 1990, *La Liga* had completely disappeared.<sup>139</sup>

### **The counterattack**

Mexican intelligence services began operating in the late 1940s. One branch was known as the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS).<sup>140</sup> It was charged with collecting

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<sup>133</sup> Aguayo, *La charola...* p. 181.

<sup>134</sup> Thus, we should not be surprised about the negative depiction of the ‘*inconformes*’ in *La Familia Burrón* since they threatened ordinary people.

<sup>135</sup> Torres, *Nazar, la historia secreta...* p. 91.

<sup>136</sup> In fact, the father of one of the leaders of FRAP, after being secretly tortured, appeared on TV asking his son to release José Guadalupe Zuno Hernández, Echeverría’s father in law. The pressure worked and Zuno was freed. According to Aguayo, there are versions that Zuno Hernández was released because the government secretly agreed to liberate some jailed guerrilla members. Aguayo, *La Charola...* pp. 180-181.

<sup>137</sup> Scherer, ‘Los patriotas’... p. 133.

<sup>138</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 271-272.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>140</sup> Aguayo, *La Charola...* p. 62.

information on antagonistic groups, and fighting them with violent methods if necessary.<sup>141</sup> The DFS and its groups killed, tortured and disappeared people as their methods of repression. Luis Echeverría's presidential term was the bloodiest period in contemporary Mexican history, with three hundred people disappeared by security forces according to a report published at the time by Amnesty International.<sup>142</sup> Now we know that the number was, in fact, much higher.<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, official discourse remained focussed on social peace, and refused to accept the existence of guerrillas or its responsibility for repression. This dark chapter is known as the *Guerra Sucia*. The DFS played a key role.

According to Aguayo, one of the characteristics of the *Guerra Sucia* was the methods used in order to eliminate those considered to be enemies of the State.<sup>144</sup> The *Guerra Sucia* was a 'contrainsurgencia de fuerzas policiales y fuerzas militares basadas en la abolición absoluta de todo proceso legal. (...) [It is] una guerra que no llega a un enfrentamiento de contingentes regulares'.<sup>145</sup> In war there must be a code –written or implied- which is respected by all sides to the conflict. When one side breaks those codes, then there is a *Guerra Sucia*. Governments may refuse to recognise belligerence as war in order to avoid following international legal agreements.<sup>146</sup> According to Julio Scherer, both sides refused to respect a code of war: 'la guerra sucia fue sucia por

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<sup>141</sup> The rise to power of this service began during Díaz Ordaz presidential term, continued during Echeverría's *sexenio*, and continued until 1985. Aguayo, *La Charola...* p. 91.

<sup>142</sup> José Agustín, *Tragicomedia mexicana 2...* p. 84.

<sup>143</sup> According to the *Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos, Desaparecidos y Víctimas de Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos en México* (AFADEM), 1,200 individuals disappeared during the *Guerra Sucia*. Ximena Antillón Najlis, *La desaparición forzada de Rosendo Radilla en Atoyac de Álvarez. Informe de Afectación Psicosocial*, (Mexico: Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, 2008), p. 15. <[http://www.cmdpdh.org/docs/radilla\\_pasicosocial.pdf](http://www.cmdpdh.org/docs/radilla_pasicosocial.pdf)> [accessed 21 October 2011]

<sup>144</sup> Personal communication with Sergio Aguayo, 26 November 2008.

<sup>145</sup> Personal communication with Carlos Montemayor, 15 December 2008.

<sup>146</sup> Montemayor, *La violencia de estado...* p. 178.

ambas partes.(...) [However] no es lo mismo combatir desde el poder que desde las zonas empobrecidas de Guerrero, pobladas por campesinos que sobreviven'.<sup>147</sup>

The government's targets were mainly the guerrilla groups. Soldiers and federal police tortured, disappeared and killed people.<sup>148</sup> The DFS, their affiliated groups, and the army attacked not only the rebels but also civilians, including their relatives and communities, as in the case of the rural guerrillas. Members of the community were abducted and interrogated. Some never returned, instead becoming part of the list of *desaparecidos*, those whose destiny is unknown and were never seen again, alive or dead.<sup>149</sup>

The *desaparición forzada* (forced disappearance) began in 1969 in the state of Guerrero, but during the presidential term of Echeverría it spread.<sup>150</sup> The government always denied involvement in the abduction and disappearance of persons, but Aguayo discovered in the archives of the DFS that a large number of the people who are named as 'disappeared' were detained by the DFS, a coincidence which suggests responsibility on the part of the authorities.<sup>151</sup> In May 1975, when Luis Echeverría visited Guerrero, a number of the inhabitants of the small town of Atoyac asked him the whereabouts of eight hundred relatives who had been arrested by public forces. The president promised to investigate case by case, but there was no such investigation.<sup>152</sup> Even today, investigations of those who disappeared during the *Guerra Sucia* are still taking place.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Scherer, 'Los patriotas', p. 105.

<sup>148</sup> Monsiváis, '1968: la herencia en busca de...', p. 20.

<sup>149</sup> According to Adler, at the time, people disappeared 'in a variety of mysterious ways, one being the practice of dropping people out of airplanes into the Gulf of Mexico'. Adler, 'Social control and...', p. 255. More information about these *Vuelos de la muerte* can be found in Castellanos, *México Armado...* p. 253-254.

<sup>150</sup> Aguayo, *La Charola...* p. 189.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Castellanos, *México armado...* p. 165.

<sup>153</sup> One of the most famous cases is the disappearance of Lucio Cabaña's follower, Rosendo Radilla. He was taken by the army in 1974 and never seen again. His family has fought since in order to find his

Although the violent methods were officially denied, they emerge in references in some of the comics and films. Interestingly, however, the paramilitary groups are never mentioned. In *La Familia Burrón* the State Police (*Policía Judicial*) are said to be detrimental. On the other hand, the regular police and investigators do engage in torture to extract confessions. Some of the methods of torture are based on reality, such as the use of electric shocks, or pulling out fingernails.<sup>154</sup> *Hermelinda Linda* also makes reference to torture.<sup>155</sup> There are also references to forced disappearance in the film *Tívoli*, in which some of the characters are illegally abducted by governmental forces. They discuss people who suffered from such abductions and who were killed.

### Countercultural movements

Beginning in the 1950s, urban youth in Mexico sought change. The rules and codes imposed by society and the values promoted by the Revolution no longer fit the new generations.<sup>156</sup> The government tried to contain the spread of young cultural expressions -such as rock and roll- and to limit topics appearing in the mass media, with the aim of preserving the values that the PRI promoted.<sup>157</sup> Thus, young people expressed dissatisfaction in the way they dressed and spoke, the places they visited and the music they listened to. There was a new culture, a counterculture whose manifestations went against the establishment.<sup>158</sup>

During the 1960s ‘predominaban los valores como la obediencia, el sometimiento a la autoridad del padre, jefe de la familia, de los maestros (...) y de la

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whereabouts. On December 2009 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights demanded the Mexican government investigate the case and find the remains of Rosendo Radilla. ‘CIDH condena a México por guerra sucia’, *El Universal*, México, 15 December 2009

<<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/646213.html>> [accessed 1 August 2010]

<sup>154</sup> Different kind of tortures are described in Castellanos, *México armado...*, p. 220 or pp. 226-227.

<sup>155</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 363, pp. 10, 19.

<sup>156</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 16.

<sup>157</sup> Eric Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 47.

<sup>158</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 16.

patria, la entidad suprema'.<sup>159</sup> Middle class youth went through an identity crisis, since they did not feel part of those social values and way of life. Some participated actively in social movements or armed guerrillas, mostly during 1970s, but others joined countercultural movements as a way to channel their rage against the authorities.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, during the 1960s the hippie movement from the US had contact with Mexico, since some US hippies ventured south with an interest in Mexican culture. This included an interest in drug culture.<sup>161</sup> Young Mexicans found in hippie culture a way to express dissatisfaction with the establishment. They broke some rules, wearing long hair, dressing in psychedelic colours, but few actually left the family home or experienced free love<sup>162</sup> even though (like the US hippies) they may have supported the idea of a more liberated sexuality. This generation is portrayed in the film *Mecánica Nacional*. Young people appear enjoying 'sex, drugs and rock and roll', dressing like hippies, and enjoying themselves at a distance from the adults. The influence of US culture can be seen when a US girl observes the party and comments that she sees nothing Mexican in it. Sexuality is also raised when the daughter of the main character decides to exert her freedom by having her first sexual relationship that evening. But when she is discovered by her parents, she and her boyfriend are forced to get married to atone for their transgression of the moral codes.

The government opposed the countercultural movement, arguing that hippies threatened social values. Beginning in 1969, the government penalised their presence in Huautla, a small community famous for its hallucinogenic mushrooms, and those who were found there were beaten, jailed and deported.<sup>163</sup> In cities, the authorities pursued

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<sup>159</sup> Gunia, ¿"Cuál es la onda"?... p. 115.

<sup>160</sup> Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 177.

<sup>161</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 77.

<sup>162</sup> Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 177.

<sup>163</sup> Eric Zolov, 'Discovering a Land "Mysterious and Obvious": The Renarrativizing of Postrevolutionary Mexico', in *Fragments of a Golden Age. The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, ed. By Gilbert

those who appeared to be hippies, harassing them for the way they looked. When they were found taking drugs, they were jailed in Lecumberri, a jail containing the most dangerous prisoners, including the enemies of the State. In *Los Agachados* there is a reference to these arrests when one of the characters, who dresses in torn clothes, is mistaken for a US hippie.<sup>164</sup>

Mexican hippies, named *Jipitecas* by Enrique Marroquín,<sup>165</sup> generated their own spaces, but they also merged with other youth groups such as the middle class youth. *Jipitecas* shared a love of Latin American music and ballads with the middle class, and soon they also shared folk music, *Canto Nuevo*, salsa, rock and jazz.<sup>166</sup> Most the intellectuals welcomed the *jipiteca* movement.<sup>167</sup> However, others, such as Carlos Monsiváis<sup>168</sup> and Rius, influenced by the Latin American wave and the Cuban revolution, saw it as a kind of American imperialism, and they strongly criticised it. Rius dedicated an issue of *Los Agachados* to the hippie movement and its influence on Mexicans.<sup>169</sup> He also criticised them on other issues.<sup>170</sup>

From 1968 the group of *jipitecas* most resentful of repressive social rules and intolerance toward their cultural differences became known as *La Onda*.<sup>171</sup> The movement spread throughout the country, and took part in different cultural expressions

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Joseph, Anne Rubinstein, & Eric Zolov (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 234-272 (p. 261).

<sup>164</sup> *Los Agachados de Rius. Selección de la gran historieta de los años setentas* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2004), pp. 41-74.

<sup>165</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 77.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>167</sup> Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 180.

<sup>168</sup> Different essays in his book *Días de Guardar* criticise Mexican hippies and the Mexican *Onda* such as 'Con címbalos de júbilo', pp. 20-27, or 'Dios nunca muere', pp. 91-117. Carlos Monsiváis, *Días de guardar* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1970; repr. 2006).

<sup>169</sup> Eduardo del Río 'Rius', *Los Agachados de Rius. Selección de la gran historieta de los años setentas*, pp. 41-74.

<sup>170</sup> Such as issue 77 about drugs, and 36 about modern art.

<sup>171</sup> According to Inke Gunia, *La Onda* was the Mexican understanding of the American hippie movement. It started in the mid 1960s and by the end of the 1970s only few young people identified themselves as part of this movement. Gunia, ¿"Cuál es la onda"?... p. 161,163.

such as music, plastic arts, literature and cinema.<sup>172</sup> Filmmaker Alfonso Arau, who directed two of the films considered in this research, *Calzonzin Inspector* and *El Águila Descalza*, is considered part of this movement.<sup>173</sup> This explains one of the final scenes of *El Águila Descalza*: a psychedelic party in which a group of escapees from a mental hospital impersonate characters they actually believe they are, taking drugs and dancing to rock and roll.

Finally, *La Onda* created its own language, ‘un argot que incorporaba viejos coloquialismos populares, numerosos términos carcelarios, anglicismos y neologismos’.<sup>174</sup> This language is spoken by the youth in *Mecánica Nacional*. In the comic *Hermelinda Linda*, we hear the same language spoken by young people who act selfishly despite their father being very ill. This example shows the negative perception that much of society held about youth and the countercultural movement. However, as we see from other sources, this language was later emulated by other social groups.<sup>175</sup> Characters in *La Familia Burrón* constantly play with words in English. In *Calzonzin Inspector* the spoiled young daughter of the Mayor also uses English phrases (as does Calzonzin) and invents words by making them shorter or changing the ending.

By the end of the 1970s, the Mexican middle class had abandoned *La Onda*, whereas mainly poor and marginalised young people continued to listen to Mexican

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<sup>172</sup> For more on the *contracultura mexicana* and *La Onda*, refer to Victoria Carpenter, ‘When Was Tomorrow? Manipulation of Time and Memory in the Works of Mexican Onda’, in *(Re)Collecting the Past. History and Collective Memory in Latin American Narrative*, ed. by Victoria Carpenter (Oxford,: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 37-60. She analyses the literature of the time. For more on the cultural expressions from *La Onda* and the youth at the time, consult Parménides García Saldaña, *En la ruta de la onda* (Mexico: Editorial Diógenes, 1974). And for information on visual culture, see *La era de la discrepancia. Arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997* (Mexico: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Insituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2007). For cinema, see the article by Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón in this same publication, ‘Contracultura en los inicios del cine mexicano en súper 8’, pp. 62-65.

<sup>173</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 95.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>175</sup> This phenomenon can be explained by an idea proposed by Eric Zolov, who considers that the use of English by the middle and lower classes happened in order to break with the idea that it was a language that was used only by the upper class and that its use provided social status. Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 215.

rock and roll and read the writers of this wave.<sup>176</sup> But for the middle class it proved impossible to overcome their values,<sup>177</sup> which were deeply rooted and continued to be promoted by the government and families alike.

## Conclusion

Beginning in the 1950s, with the desire for social change, and continuing through the 1960s, part of Mexican society was seeking renovation: more democracy, more opportunities, a better way of life, economic improvements. But the government did not respond to its demands and it even punished attempts to transform. Mexico was not the only country facing such social pressures; they were part of a global wave. Many expressed opposition to the authorities by joining social movements, but when the authorities cracked down, some accepted defeat while others believed the only way to make progress was through armed struggle. Others searched for new ways to express disagreement, and began to organise and participate in countercultural movements. These organisations demonstrated the social desire for change as well as the determination to break with the authorities.

Despite Echeverría's attempts to project an image different from his predecessors, and despite the fact that his policies did benefit sectors such as cinema and culture, his regime was marked by violence, authoritarianism and abuse of power. Although the economy did suffer from his non-orthodox economic policies, in social terms he was just as authoritarian as his predecessors. During his presidential term there was strong repression against social movements, and his was a very violent period in Mexican history. Even though he promoted the *apertura democrática*, little changed. He

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<sup>176</sup> José Agustín, *La contracultura en México...* p. 90.

<sup>177</sup> Zolov, *Rebeldes con causa...* p. 321.

showed some tolerance to criticism from cinema, but journalism fared worse, and co-optation and repression continued against those who complained or criticised.

He was the first president to try to include young people in his cabinet, and while some did not trust his intentions, others joined the government. This did not change the policies, which were similar to previous administrations, but it did create a new bureaucracy. Echeverría was also the first president to work closely with intellectuals and artists, and his reasons were similar: he again sought to gain their sympathy and prevent criticism.

This paradox of an apparent tolerance combined with cruel repression makes it especially interesting to analyse the concerns and mood of the population using cultural methods. According to Echeverría, nothing was forbidden, but we know that this was not true. So, although films and comics enjoyed some freedom, the artists needed to be cautious about what they said and how. Humour was a useful means in this sense, as we will see in the following chapters.

### Chapter 3

#### Laughter and reflection, both for the same price: analysis of three comics

*Si los caricaturizamos es porque  
están haciendo muy mal su trabajo.  
Si les molesta que lo hagamos  
es que estamos haciendo bien nuestro trabajo.*  
José Hernández, Mexican cartoonist

In the following pages, I will integrate the theories of humour and the historical context discussed in the previous chapters with the visual sources. I will examine how the language of humour was woven into the narrative of comics, highlighting social issues and criticising the political situation in Mexico. I will also see how mechanisms of humour (exaggeration, incongruity, superiority, relief) point to a fault of the authorities or society, becoming acts of ‘true humour,’ since they are pointing to a social flaw. As I trace the social topics discussed in *Hermelinda Linda*, *Los Agachados* and *La Familia Burrón*, we will come to a better understanding of the concerns of the Mexican society at the time. I will also be able to show how humour was used to highlight these matters in a country under a repressive regime, and in turn, the benefits that readers and artists enjoyed by using it. I will not try to define something as ‘Mexican humour’ since, as Roger Bartra states, the idea of ‘*lo mexicano*’ is subjective and many of the studies which try to define it do so by resorting to stereotypes from an intellectual point of view or from the point of view of those in power.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I examine the universe of humour *in its own right*, but which is situated in the particular historical context of 1970s

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía. Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1986; repr. 2007), pp. 13-16. This is not to deny the existence of something we could call ‘*lo mexicano*.’ Numerous essayists discuss it, such as Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). However, for this research, ‘*lo mexicano*’ will be understood as something seen only indirectly, ‘como un estilo, como una atmósfera inaprehensible directamente, de los personajes y las acciones de una novela, de un tratado de derecho civil o de la obra de un filósofo’. Jorge Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*, 3rd edn (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Vida y Pensamiento de México; repr. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), p. 17.

Mexico, and which contains codes telling us that we are witnessing acts of humour, as discussed in chapter one.

This chapter draws on analysis of forty five issues of *Hermelinda Linda*, seventy eight of *La Familia Burrón* and thirty seven of *Los Agachados*. The number of issues analysed depended on the availability of the materials. The national library in Mexico has an important collection of *La Familia Burrón*, but *Los Agachados* was consulted through private collections, which provided a fair amount of copies. *Hermelinda Linda* issues are more difficult to find, and unfortunately, not even Óscar González, his creator, has a complete collection. He is missing almost all the years considered for this research, so, only a few of them could be consulted in his private collection, and the other issues were obtained through collectors, who indeed, are not too many.

First, I will briefly outline the history of these three comic books, discussing their creators, their impact in Mexico, the content and structure. This will help us become familiar with them inside and outside their pages. This will be followed by the analysis which is organised and justified by the theories of humour discussed in chapter one. These are incongruity, exaggeration, superiority, relief, and breaking of the rule. The first two help us to identify humour, while the others are outlets which explain the use of humour to enunciate certain ideas and the benefits obtained by doing so. The images were examined through the methodology described in appendix one which, broadly, observed not only the image, but also the written narrative, such as balloons and captions. With this methodology it was possible to find elements that can be labelled as humour, as well as facts which are related to social preoccupations at the time. The analysis works as a microscopic observation. We will start by observing small fragments of the discourse and just one mechanism of humour. By adding more mechanisms and observing larger pieces of narrative, we will notice that the contents

are richer and carry more information about the social imaginary of Mexican society and its concerns. At the end of this chapter we will have a panorama of the issues that were discussed through humour, and how comics helped to do so. However, it is important to highlight the fact that the following examples and discussions are not the only ones presented through these comics, but to undertake a complete analysis of all their mechanisms would be an enormous work that is unnecessary for the aims of this research. Nonetheless, in the appendix, the reader will find a chart with a list of all the social topics present in these three comics which shows the mechanisms of humour that were used. This will help to obtain a broader perspective of social concerns (and this is also discussed in the conclusion of this chapter).

***La bruja de la Bondojito: Hermelinda Linda, a comic book just for adults***

In 1965, the publisher Editormex was struggling with financial problems. The director and owner, Giorgio Torelli, was looking for a project which could save them from bankruptcy, thus, the Art and Editorial Director –the artist Óscar González Guerrero– came up with the idea of a comic book that mixed witchery and mystery. So, in that year the first number of the comic book *Brujerías* appeared, which was full of intrigue and paranormal situations, and its main character was a witch named Hermelinda.

Three years later, as *Brujerías* was gaining popularity, the governmental committee in charge of regulating and censoring periodical publications considered *Brujerías* to be a bad influence for the population, and therefore should be cancelled. Óscar González proposed changing the mood of the comic book, keeping the witchery topic but treating it with humour. He also had the idea of keeping the protagonist, Hermelinda, but changing her image to a more caricaturised one. The representation of Hermelinda was inspired by one of Óscar's male colleagues, and it was portrayed as a

lady missing one eye, her face was full of pimples, and she had a big belly. Her image was grotesque, and in order to bring more hilarity, by the use of irony, the name of the witch was changed to *Hermelinda Linda* González (the surname came from her creator, who decided to give her his own name).

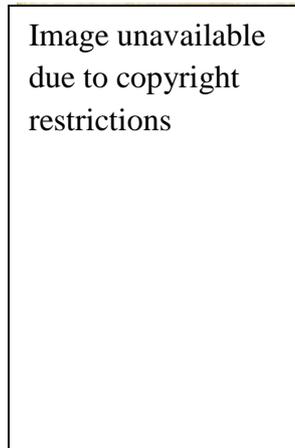


Image 3.1. 'Hermelinda Linda'. Óscar González  
Hermelinda Linda (12 June 1979) (in colour)

In March 1968, the first issue of *Hermelinda Linda* appeared. It was well received and gained fame quickly, reaching 220,000 copies of the weekly issue in its best period at the end of 1969, and around 110,000 in the early 1970s, and 76,000 at the end of the decade.

*Hermelinda Linda* was so popular that it saved Editormex from bankruptcy, and also generated enough profits to buy new machines for printing and to create another publishing house, Editorial Litorel. During the 1970s, *Hermelinda Linda* - as was the case with *La Familia Burrón*- was one of the most popular comic books in the country, it was exported to other countries in Latin America,<sup>2</sup> and in fact sold better than the US comic books which were gaining a market share in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> *Hermelinda Linda* was so successful that in 1984 there was a movie inspired by the adventures of this witch, and

<sup>2</sup> Anne Rubenstein, *Del Pepín a Los Agachados. Cómic y censura en el México posrevolucionario* (México, Fondo de Cultura Económica), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Harold E. Hinds, Jr. and Charles M. Tatum, *Not Just For Children. The Mexican Comic Book in the Late 1960s and 1970s* (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 19.

two years later the formula was repeated with a sequel, although the author did not participate in the production of these films.<sup>4</sup> However, the Mexican comic book industry was declining and at the end of the 1980s *Hermelinda Linda* appeared for the last time.

The stories in this comic book are mostly related to crimes, mystery, cheating, and love affairs. Because of the topics, the use of witchcraft in the stories, the reference to sex and violence –including death and murder– and the semi-naked cartooned women, the comic was considered to be just for adults. Some of the images are bloody, women and men are represented in sexual positions and talk openly of sexual desires, women are voluptuous, and murder and crime is described in detail. *Hermelinda Linda* did not fit into the moral code of a conservative Catholic country. So, the comic had on the cover the lettering ‘*Revista cómico-satírica para adultos*’, to make clear that the content was not proper for minors.

The comic is full of details which enlighten the reader about the time when the story is developed (usually contemporaneous), some background on the characters, and the society in which they live.<sup>5</sup> Some of the young characters dress in clothes which were fashionable in the 1970s, they make reference to the Olympics which were taking place in Munich in 1972,<sup>6</sup> and Hermelinda lives in a real neighbourhood in Mexico City, known as Bondojito.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the observation of these details is relevant for our purpose. Some of the characters also capture the language of the period, portraying the

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Óscar González, 15 July 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Francesco Casetti and Federico Di Chio define these details as *indicios* which provide information about the specificities of the place and person portrayed. For further information, consult annex one of this research.

<sup>6</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 368.

<sup>7</sup> According to Óscar González, the reason why Hermelinda is set in this neighbourhood is because one of his collaborators lived there and he used to tell stories about the place which inspired the comic. Personal communication with Óscar González, 15 July 2010.

countercultural manner of speech.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although some of the stories are merely fantastic or the main topic is related with a mystery or a crime, it is interesting to observe how the characters communicate and the places in which the stories occur.

As just mentioned, after *Brujerías* was banned, the image of *Hermelinda Linda* was completely caricaturised when she became the hero of her own comic book, and her cartoon features were more exaggerated than the rest of the characters, who had more human-looking characteristics. The witch lives in the neighbourhood called Bondojito, an area in Mexico City which was at that time, -since the city has grown plenty in the last years, on the Northern periphery. That part of the city was not wealthy, and the people who lived there belonged to the working class and this is portrayed in the comic. Although a real neighbourhood was used to locate the stories, it would be possible to imagine the place as fictitious. However, throughout the issues there are multiple references to Mexico City,<sup>9</sup> which points the reader to the fact that the stories take place there.

Hermelinda's house is next to a cemetery in a still undeveloped area where the streets have no pavement and lack some essential services such as electricity. Besides earning money preparing witchcraft for anyone who can afford it, Hermelinda works taking care of the graves by keeping them in good condition, and charging monthly the relatives of the deceased for this service.

There are no impossible tasks for Hermelinda and she does not have moral issues about what her witchery is required as long as the client pays the fees. However, Hermelinda knows that those who deserve it, will pay for their pernicious acts, and her

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<sup>8</sup> As when a spoiled young man says to his father: 'Déjame aquí, *vetarro*' and '¡Con mucho susto, mi 'viernes'...! Using *vetarro* and *viernes* as a way to refer to the father (*Viejo*), and 'Con mucho susto' instead of 'con mucho gusto'. *Hermelinda Linda*, 377.

<sup>9</sup> As some examples, in issue 364 the main characters go to Chapultepec, a famous park in Mexico, or in issue 370-15 one of the characters is saying where her lover lives mentioning different actual neighbourhoods in the city.

magic will punish those who are hurting others, sometimes by a side effect that the person will need to be aware of, and which is always mentioned by Hermelinda. In fact, Hermelinda enjoys the misfortune of those who wanted to use sorcery to harm or kill others.

The witchcraft always works and helps attain the goal; however, an outcome often turns the potion against the person who is using it, or against someone who is committing a crime. In the issue in which a man gets some chewing gum which forces people to tell the truth,<sup>10</sup> the man realises that his son is a liar who has skipped school and that his wife is unfaithful. The man cannot handle all this truth and dies. In the next issue, the adulterous wife is killed by her lover. So, it is through these unexpected reactions, or through the side effects that Hermelinda warned about, that the user of the magical potion will discover a reality that maybe he/she did not want to learn, such as the secret feelings of the wife in the previous example. Also those who act wrongly will be punished, and this punishment is somehow related with the witchcraft. Therefore there is always a lesson to learn, and we realise that, although we would love to use sorcery to solve our biggest problems, there is a risk involved and is always better to fight to reach our own aims instead of trying to find the easiest solution. Furthermore, by observing how the wicked characters suffer the consequences of their acts, we might learn that wrongdoing is always penalised.<sup>11</sup>

The use of humour is very important in this comic book, since the topics that are discussed can be cruel, serious, and even violent. Without witty comments and comical situations, the content of the plots could be compared to that of the gutter press but with caricatured images. Humour as a narrative tool changes the mood of the content and

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<sup>10</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 372, 373.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication with Óscar González, 15 July 2010.

makes it easier for the reader to deal with despicable situations. I will discuss this further during the analysis of the comic.

Occasionally, Hermelinda appears on the last page finishing the story as a moral, but in a funny way.<sup>12</sup> Since the stories are more related to crime and low passions, there is no happy ending. However, a sharp comment from Hermelinda or a punch line will break the stress, although also inviting reflection. Either case, at the end, the only one who enjoys the results of the witchcraft, and the problems which unleash it, is Hermelinda, the omnipresent observer, and of course the reader.

### *El Callejón del Cuajo número chorrocientos: La Familia Burrón and the representation of Mexico City*

Gabriel Vargas was a gifted child who, from an early age, proved that he had a natural talent for drawing. His talent was openly recognised for the first time when he participated in an international drawing competition when he was only fifteen years old, and was awarded second place.<sup>13</sup> Afterwards, he began working for the Mexican newspaper *Excélsior* as an illustrator. In 1938, the owner of one of the most important publishing houses (the Revolutionary General José García Valseca), asked Vargas to create a comic book to compete against another successful Mexican comic: *Los Supersabios*. Thus, the artist created one of his most iconic comic books: *Los Superlocos*,<sup>14</sup> a comic that lasted for almost fifteen years. It was in *Los Superlocos* that some of the most famous characters in Mexican popular culture appeared for the first

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<sup>12</sup> For example, when Hermelinda creates magic chewing gum which make people tell the truth, she comments at the end: 'No es siempre agradable conocer la verdad. A veces, más vale hacerse el tarugo'. Afterwards she invites the reader to have a piece of gum, but reassuring them that they are 'inoffensive'.

<sup>13</sup> Maira Mayola Benítez Carrillo, *Gabriel Vargas. Cronista gráfico* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, 2010), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Juan Manuel Aurrecochea Hernández. 'Los Superlocos – Pepín' <[http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd\\_ver\\_serie&vl\\_id\\_registro=31&vl\\_orden=&vl\\_serie=&vl\\_salto=1](http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd_ver_serie&vl_id_registro=31&vl_orden=&vl_serie=&vl_salto=1)> [accessed 16 May 2011]

time: Regino Burrón and his demanding and eccentric wife Borola Burrón.<sup>15</sup> It was in 1948, while Vargas was working on *Los Superlocos*, that he created another comic which would become the longest-running ever in Mexican comic book history. The hero of the story was Regino Burrón and his family, and the publication was named 'El Señor Burrón, o vida de perro'. It changed its name in 1953<sup>16</sup> and became *La Familia Burrón* -la serie más longeva, influyente y reconocida de la historieta Mexicana-<sup>17</sup> whose main characters were members of this lower class family. They included Regino Burrón, a conservative-minded barber; his wife Borola, a housekeeper who constantly tries to earn money and liberate herself from social oppression; and their children, Reginito, Macuca, and later their adopted child, Foforito.

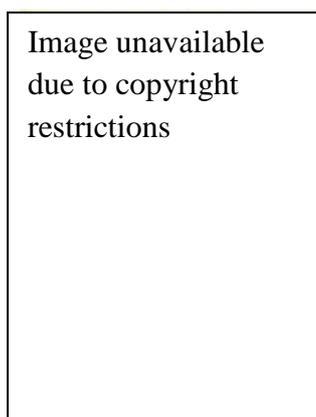


Image 3.2. 'La Familia Burrón'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (19 December 1980) (in colour)

The comic became a success right away. The weekly publication run varied from 70,000 to 110,000 copies,<sup>18</sup> although the print run even reached half a million issues<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Juan Manuel Aurrecochea Hernández. 'Los Superlocos – Pepín' <[http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd\\_ver\\_serie&vl\\_id\\_registro=31&vl\\_orden=&vl\\_serie=&vl\\_salto=1](http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd_ver_serie&vl_id_registro=31&vl_orden=&vl_serie=&vl_salto=1)> [accessed 16 May 2011]

<sup>16</sup> Aurrecochea Hernández, 'El Señor Burrón o vida de perro' <[http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd\\_ver\\_serie&vl\\_id\\_registro=154&vl\\_orden=argum entista&vl\\_serie=&vl\\_salto=1](http://www.pepines.unam.mx/index.php?seleccion=cd_ver_serie&vl_id_registro=154&vl_orden=argum entista&vl_serie=&vl_salto=1)> [accessed 16 May 2011]

<sup>17</sup> Armando Bartra, 'Debut, beneficio y despedida de una narrativa tumultaria. Piel de papel. Los pepines en la educación sentimental del mexicano', *Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre la historieta*, 2, 1 (2001), pp. 67-90.

<sup>18</sup> Harold E. Hinds and Charles Tatum, 'Images of Women in Mexican Comic Books', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1,18 (1984), p. 154.

until the 1980s, when the industry as a whole declined. During all the years that the comic lasted, Gabriel Vargas personally worked on it with a small team of talented and productive artists.<sup>20</sup>

In *La Familia Burrón*, the story is usually linear, and starts by presenting the characters that will be at the centre of the adventure. Often it begins by discussing something unrelated to the plot, but soon the main topic emerges. For example, in one issue, the story starts with Borola and her daughter in the market arguing with various stallholders because of the high price of food. However, after her discussion, Borola comes up with the idea of opening her own market, which becomes the subject of the story.

The members of Burrón's family interact with friends and relatives who are archetypes of figures from the Mexican social imaginary: the *caciques* from rural Mexico, hippies, very rich families, oppressed and submissive women, abusive men, scavengers, criminals, and others. *La Familia Burrón* was a catalogue of recognisable Mexican characters. Through their adventures, the comic discussed 'contemporary issues like urban migration and changing gender roles that readers confronted in their daily lives'.<sup>21</sup>

Mexico City plays an important role in the stories. The characters suffer the day-to-day reality of a city that is modernising and bringing all kind of novelties, although poor citizens such as *La Familia Burrón* and their neighbours do not benefit from social welfare. In contrast to *Los Agachados*, where the story takes place in a slow-moving small town, the characters stop to talk for a long time, and few people are seen moving

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<sup>19</sup> Amalia Rivera, 'La Pícaro Borola y la vigencia de la insumisión', *La Jornada*, 7 July 2004, section Triple Jornada a Portada, <[http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/07/05/informacion/71\\_borola.htm](http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2004/07/05/informacion/71_borola.htm)> [accessed 10 May 2011]

<sup>20</sup> Anne Rubenstein, *Del Pepín a...*, pp.53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Don M. Coerver, Suzanne B. Pasztor, Robert Buffington, *Mexico. An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Culture and History* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2004), p. 105.

around them, in *La Familia Burrón* the images show people moving in every direction, sometimes with kinetic signs indicating that they are in a rush. These elements give the idea that Mexico City never stops. In this case, *El Callejón del Cuajo* is the allegory that represents poor urban society. However, the Burrón family is not the poorest in the neighbourhood. We can appreciate after reviewing many issues that their house is the most comfortable and best looking of the *vecindad*.

As noted by Sergio Pitol, ‘La historieta de Vargas reproducía el melting-pot vigente en la ciudad de México y su inmensa movilidad social a mediados de este siglo’.<sup>22</sup> The characters are victims of a city that is growing and becoming a major capital, with all the consequences that involves: travelling on crowded buses, immigration, poor services, insecurity and crime, the abuse and corruption of the authorities as well as their negligence. *La Familia Burrón* is a ‘familia de clase baja, cuyas historias reflejan aspectos de la vida cotidiana’,<sup>23</sup> in which the characters lived similar experiences as real people. The author ‘created typically Mexican characters and placed them in an authentically Mexican environment’,<sup>24</sup> but *El Callejón del Cuajo* and its inhabitants were portraits of life in the city, and they did not pretend to be a synecdoche of life in the entire country.

That does not mean that *La Familia Burrón* did not include references to other parts of the country and characters from different social strata. It includes a variety of characters and situations that many Mexicans from different parts of the country would find familiar, although they are presented from the perspective of a Mexico City inhabitant. There are very rich people, peasants, *caciques*, politicians, authorities, people in extreme poverty, children, etc. The main intention of Vargas was ‘describir la

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<sup>22</sup> Sergio Pitol, ‘Borola contra el mundo’, *La Jornada*, 26 May 2010, section Opinión <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/05/26/opinion/a06a1cul>> [accessed 12 June 2009]

<sup>23</sup> Benítez Carrillo, *Gabriel Vargas. Cronista...* p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Hinds and Tatum, ‘Images of Women...’, p. 154.

vida familiar del mexicano pobre de clase media y aproximarnos al proletariado y al lumpen proletariado'.<sup>25</sup> But it is this diversity of characters that creates a better –and wider- understanding of the Mexican society at the time.<sup>26</sup>

The stories usually come to an end in the same issue or occasionally in the following one (similar to *Hermelinda Linda*). However, as with *Hermelinda Linda*, there is no happy ending for the characters. Borola will never succeed in her illogical enterprises, which usually involve a way to make money. For other characters, such as Borola's brother, Ruperto Tacuche, justice will never come. The comic contains some elements of melodrama (an ill and disabled child, abused women, exploited children, impossible love relationships, etc.). However, even when the approach is a humorous one, there is never a happy ending in the adventures of the characters. Perhaps a drama will be solved, such as Ruperto proving his innocence on every occasion that he is accused of a crime; however, he will never be able to clear his name and prove that he is a reformed criminal. Borola will always return to her routine as a housewife, her female neighbours will always be abused, and all of them are condemned to live in poverty. As Susan Purdie has warned, comedy does not have happy endings, since 'a happy ending moves the audience out of their joking understanding'.<sup>27</sup> The characters will not enjoy a happy ending, but neither will they resign themselves to fate. They continue with the same aims and behaviour in the next issue, without having learned from the experience suffered in the previous adventure. They make the same mistakes with, of course, similarly unsuccessful consequences.

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<sup>25</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, 'En los ochenta años de Gabriel Vargas', *La Jornada*, 10 May 1998, section La Jornada Semanal <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/1998/05/10/sem-monsi.html>> [accessed 1 June 2009]

<sup>26</sup> A catalogue of some of the characters of the comic which is a good example of the diversity of profiles of them was made by Carlos García Tort and Miguel Cervantes, 'Los Burrón, *Dramatis personae* o un elenco cachetón', *La Jornada*, 10 May 1998, section *La Jornada Semanal*, <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/1998/05/10/sem-garcia.html>> [accessed 1 June 2009]

<sup>27</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 116.

In 2008 Gabriel Vargas said: ‘el fin de la revista ni yo lo voy a ver, yo sigo trabajando, y cuando me muera ahí se acabó todo’.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, after 61 years of being published, the last issue of *La Familia Burrón* appeared on 26 August 2009. Almost one year later, on 25 April 2010, the author died at the age of 95.

***Chayotitlán, el ombligo de México: Los Agachados, a comic book for political awareness***

In 1964, the cartoonist Eduardo del Río, ‘Rius’, created one of the most famous comic books in Mexican history: *Los Supermachos*. The stories are set in a small town called San Garabato in rural Mexico, and all the characters are stereotypes that belonged to the Mexican social imaginary. The author used this comic to discuss ‘current topics related with the political and sociocultural values of contemporary Mexico’.<sup>29</sup> Thus, *Los Supermachos* worked as a means to discuss the country’s problems and the abuse of power by the oligarchies.

But the government would not permit Rius’s criticism, and in December 1968, the artist was abducted and given a mock execution, apparently by the army.<sup>30</sup> This was not to be the only pressure applied on Rius. In 1967, the editors of *Los Supermachos* had asked him not to be as critical of the authorities as he was. Therefore, he decided to quit after producing issue number 100,<sup>31</sup> and begin a new comic book with a different publisher. The location and characters were similar, and that was how *Los Agachados*

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Todos somos *La Familia Burrón*’, *Milenio*, 16 November 2008.

<<http://impreso.milenio.com/node/7015176>> [accessed 6 May 2010]

<sup>29</sup> David William Foster, *From Mafalda to Los Supermachos* (USA, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers – Boulder & London, 1989), p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, ‘De dos antiguas residencias de la patria’, in Carlos Monsiváis, Rafael Barajas *et al.*, *De San Garabato al Callejón del Cuajo* (Mexico: Museo del Estanquillo, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Editorial RM, 2009), 14-59 (p. 41)

<sup>31</sup> Eduardo del Río ‘Rius’, *Mis Supermachos* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2006), p.

came into being in 1968.<sup>32</sup> *Los Agachados* exceeded the sales of the previous comic, reaching at its peak approximately 100,000 copies.<sup>33</sup> However, both comics were part of Rius's attempt to create a comic book industry different from the US one, which was not pornographic or in bad taste, as he believed the Mexican industry was at the time.<sup>34</sup>

This time, Chayotitlán was the fictional town where adventures were set. Many of their inhabitants are Mexican stereotypes, as in *Los Supermachos*, and 'the village characters would have been instantly recognizable to urban readers as tropes'.<sup>35</sup> The main characters are: a lazy ignorant indigenous man called Reuters Nopálzin, a young man who could not keep his mouth shut and whose favourite activity was to drink 'pulque'; and Profe Gumaro, a schoolteacher with left wing tendencies, who patiently answered his neighbours' questions. Authority was embodied in Licenciado Trastupijes, the corrupt mayor of Chayotitlán and a member of the RIP, a reference to the national party, PRI.

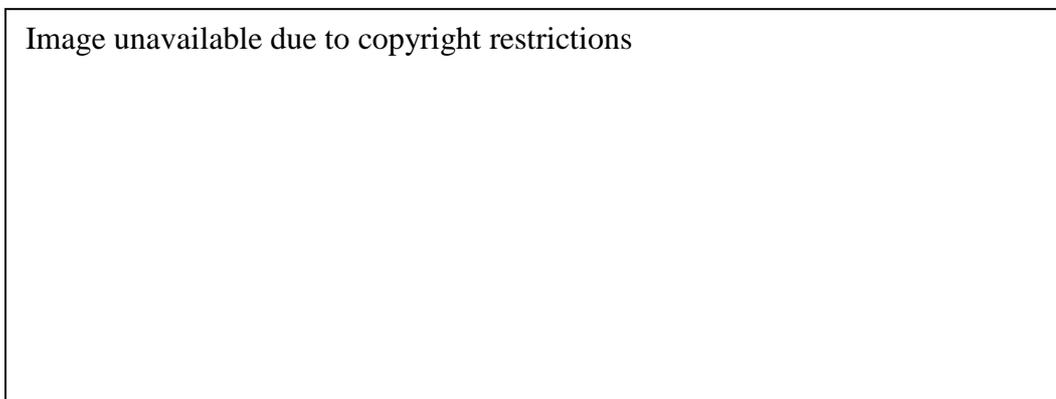


Image 3.3. 'Characters from *Los Agachados*'. Eduardo del Río 'Rius', *Los Agachados* (n.d.) (black and white)

Chayotitlán worked as a microcosm where the Mexican readers could recognise their daily lives and concerns. Usually the characters would present the issue early in the

<sup>32</sup> Anne Rubenstein, *Del Pepín a...*, p. 284

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Coerver, Suzanne B. Pasztor, Robert Buffington, *Mexico. An Encyclopedia...* p. 106.

<sup>35</sup> Bob Agnew, '¡Viva la Revolución! *Los Agachados* and the Worldview of Eduardo del Río (Rius)', *Studies in Latin America Popular Culture*, 23 (2004), p. 3.

story, such as the Licenciado asking his private secretary to check the electoral preferences in the town.<sup>36</sup> This would reveal the lack of democracy and social concern from the party in power, the PRI. It might also start with some of the characters discussing a national issue or having a casual chat that would lead to discussion of a national concern. There were five characters who held knowledge and the rest of the citizens would listen attentively: as mentioned, Profe Gumaro, who in fact happened to be the son of Calzonzin, the main character from *Los Supermachos*; Don Ruco, an old veteran of the Mexican Revolution who has knowledge of those times; Don Céfiro, a peasant who has his own opinion polling company, who reads books and newspapers, and teaches Spanish to a native who carries Céfiro's dictionary everywhere; Profesor Hans, a German ex-Nazi scientist who enlightens the citizens with his knowledge of the natural sciences, although he has radical and violent ideas to solve problems because of his Nazi background; and finally 'El Mesías', a hermit who behaves in a Socratic way, is usually treated by the citizens as a lunatic although after proving his statements, he usually convinces them. The rest of the citizens work as an audience that is willing to learn. The authorities of Chayotitlán embody all Mexican authorities and therefore carry all their faults and mistakes. There is nothing positive in them. The citizens do not respect them since their behaviour is abusive and selfish. Every time they appear in an issue, it will be to reveal a truth about themselves: corruption, abuse, exploitation, etc.

The topics discussed are varied and current: lack of democracy, the government of president Luis Echeverría, the massacre in Tlatelolco, abuse by the authorities, corruption, poverty, social services, the educative reform, and others. However, through *Los Agachados*, Rius also discussed subjects such as the history of the Mexican Revolution, the history of comic books around the world, vegetarianism, clues for a

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<sup>36</sup> Eduardo del Río 'Rius', *Los Agachados de Rius. Selección de la gran historieta de los años setentas* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2004), p. 76.

good diet, and hippies, among others. Rius used one of the characters to ask about the topic, and the 'wiser' citizens then discuss the answer. However, with the passage of time, and as the comic gained popularity, Rius began changing the format. He introduced a technique which later would become his hallmark. From 1971 onwards<sup>37</sup> he used a collage technique, pasting images which were not related to the story and adding balloons making the images say whatever he wanted them to say: 'frequently, the character belongs to a distant time and place, but his balloon is filled with slang and Mexicanisms'.<sup>38</sup> The images were usually used during the explanation of a topic and would not have later relevance in the narration. Thus, the stories in *Los Agachados* became less narrative and more didactic. In some issues, the usual characters would not appear at all,<sup>39</sup> and the comic became 'less recognizable as a standard historieta'<sup>40</sup> and looked more like ideological pamphlets or bulletins. In 1977, Rius abandoned the comic<sup>41</sup> and started writing and illustrating books known as *Para principiantes*, in which he discussed some of the issues he had previously discussed in *Los Agachados*.<sup>42</sup> He never worked on a comic book again.

## Comics and Mechanisms of Humour

### Incongruity

In chapter one different theories regarding the role humour plays in helping us understand the political content of Mexican comic books and films from 1969 to 1976

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<sup>37</sup> Bob Agnew, '¡Viva la Revolución!...', p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Paula K. Speck, 'Rius for beginners: a study in comic book satire', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 1 (1982), pp. 13-35 (p. 118).

<sup>39</sup> Issue 269 and 277 are good examples about this.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Agnew, '¡Viva la Revolución!...', p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Bob Agnew. 'Eduardo del Río (Rius) & Los Agachados'

<[http://www.latrobe.edu.au/mexico/topics/eduardo\\_del\\_rio.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/mexico/topics/eduardo_del_rio.html)> [accessed 20 May 2009] The author adds that between 1978 and 1981 the comic book was reissued. In 2004 the publishing house Grijalbo Mondadori published a book containing 8 number of *Los Agachados* from different years selected by the author.

<sup>42</sup> Bob Agnew, '¡Viva la Revolución!...', p. 2.

were discussed. In that chapter we saw that, as Paul McGhee points out, ‘the quality most frequently emphasized through the centuries has been incongruity’.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, I will start our analysis observing how incongruity was part of various acts of humour in the comics studied here in order to express political discontent, to portray the social imaginary, or/and to criticise society. Since we already discussed the characteristics of the incongruity in humour, we can just remind ourselves briefly that we recognise it in ‘todo aquello que despierta interés y produce desconcierto, o sea, ante todo, el disparate, la contradicción’.<sup>44</sup> We also see incongruity when an element in the narrative frustrates our expectations, is inappropriate, does not belong to the context, or does not correspond with the presented stereotypes.

But on some occasions incongruity is not enough to transform a regular act into an act of humour, and this is because, as McGhee states, incongruity is necessary in humour, but insufficient by itself.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, I will trace which relevant mechanisms are used in these comic books to bring difficult topics into discussion. In the three comic books incongruity is used to trigger hilarity. However, those jokes which refer to political or social reality are always related to an outcome which is based on the comic book’s context, and brings a benefit to the author, the reader, or both. These include relief, the possibility of aggression, becoming distanced from real life situations, and others. I will examine these mechanisms in this chapter. I begin by showing how these mechanisms reveal the social mood and by uncovering them, the discussion of the content and its interpretation becomes more complex and rich.

*Hermelinda Linda* is an incongruous comic itself since the stories are about ‘real’ witchery, magic potions and evil spells, which themselves are illogical topics. But

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<sup>43</sup> Paul E. McGhee. *Humor. Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979), p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud, *El chiste y su relación con lo inconsciente* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2008), p. 153.

<sup>45</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 10.

the humour comes not only from the topic of witchery, since there are other such stories, such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, or *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling. They may actually contain some jokes, but they are part of the fantasy genre, not comedy. So the hilarity of *Hermelinda Linda* comes from other elements, not witchery per se. Sometimes the stories are violent, the drawings gory, and the ending is fatidic (or fateful). Thus, *Hermelinda* will add some humorous comment at the very end to remind us of the comedy genre. Such is the case of the episode in which two swindlers deal with chinchillas and *Hermelinda* bewitches the animals so that they grow into giants and kill the confidence tricksters. The images are macabre, but on the last page *Hermelinda* says that she kept one hundred chinchilla furs with no plans to sell them because she does not want to cause a ‘rupture’ in the stock market.<sup>46</sup> After the violent images and the seriousness of being swindled, *Hermelinda* turns the situation back to a humorous one by saying something unexpected, and reminding us that this is a comedy.

In *La Familia Burrón*, although the story takes place in a neighbourhood in downtown Mexico City, and the settings are well-known urban locations, the main incongruity comes from the lead character, Borola Burrón. Borola is exaggerated not only in the way she looks but also in the actions she carries out. Her ideas and behaviour go beyond what we would consider ‘normal’. Her behaviour is unrealistic and absurd, such as constantly intimidating people with her musket, building a cannon to protect her adopted child, Foforito, from his abusive father,<sup>47</sup> and becoming a kind of masked superhero to protect her female neighbours from their partners’ maltreatment.<sup>48</sup> Also, the activities that Borola carries out can be illogical, such as building a pool on

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<sup>46</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 367, 32.

<sup>47</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17187, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17186.

the flat roof of the *vecindad*<sup>49</sup> or transforming the *vecindad* into a medieval castle.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to *Hermelinda Linda*, the drawings in *La Familia Burrón* are very caricatured and exaggerated, reinforcing the notion that the content is part of the universe of humour.

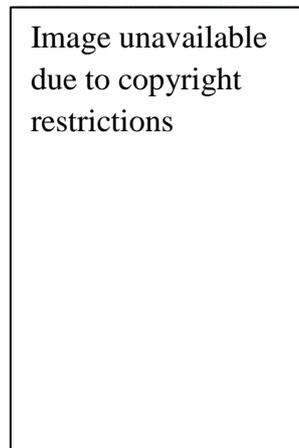


Image 3.4. 'Incongruity in *La Familia Burrón*'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (6 January 1969) (in colour)

Compared to these two comics, incongruity in *Los Agachados* is less obvious. Although the drawings are less detailed (for example, the lack of elements in the characters and settings), the characters are not as exaggerated as in *La Familia Burrón*, nor as realistic as in *Hermelinda Linda*. The topics that the characters discuss are very serious, such as the social security services or the lack of democracy. At times, Rius uses a serious tone to discuss topics, giving the impression that he is indoctrinating his readers. Therefore, incongruity and other elements from the language of humour are vital for this comic book; otherwise it could be considered a political booklet with images. In *Los Agachados* the incongruity emerges in a different way. While someone is explaining or discussing something serious, such as Profe Gumaro who often lectures other characters, another character will interrupt by saying something inappropriate. Another technique is to state an idea and present a single scene with a comment or joke that is

<sup>49</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17192.

<sup>50</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17196.

out of place. An example is the panel in which the caption mentions that the users of the IMSS (the social security agency) have a low level of education. The illustration is of a humbly-dressed barefoot woman yelling at the doctor: ‘¿Anémica? ¡Eso lo será usted y con quien duerme!’.<sup>51</sup> In this case, the ignorance of the woman and her mindless comment are the incongruity that introduces humour, since the information in the caption is far from funny, and is merely informative.

Another technique used by Rius, which in fact is one of his characteristics, is the insertion of images which do not belong to the comic narrative, along with a balloon making a point or a comment about whatever is discussed. This gives the idea that the image is making a statement. Usually the information in the balloon contains more information about the topic, or an incongruous comment provoking hilarity in contrast to the serious topic. For example, in the same issue about the IMSS, the caption refers to patient complaints about the IMSS’ services. The statement is illustrated with a clipping in black and white, probably from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that portrays a carpenter. A balloon is added in which the character comments: ‘Pos que se vayan a un consultorio particular’.<sup>52</sup>

Without these strategies, it would be more complicated to understand *Los Agachados* as a humorous media because of the amount and kind of information it contains. In contrast with *Hermelinda Linda* and *La Familia Burrón*, whose stories have a narrative often used in comic books, *Los Agachados* is a political comic whose main objective is to relate political and historical information, mainly from the author’s own ideological perspective.

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<sup>51</sup> *Los Agachados*, 84, p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

### **True humour: humour as social complaint**

The incongruity in these three comic books might work as a tool to introduce humour, although this is not the only strategy. Incongruity as a trigger to cause hilarity is not enough to generate discussion of political or social topics. In order to unveil political discontent or to know how the social imaginary at the time viewed the authorities, or society itself, it is necessary that incongruity be linked to an outcome of humour. We can explain this with an example. When we have a narrative that is interrupted by a comment out of context, and that comment refers to and criticises a political figure, then there is a second intention beyond simply generating hilarity. Following Freud, the joke is a means of aggression.<sup>53</sup> Following Bergson, it highlights their faults and provides a corrective.<sup>54</sup> In an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, Regino Burrón, the head of the family, arrives late to a working appointment because he was busy somewhere else. Once he arrives, his client tells him: ‘Por lo visto usted es una persona pobre pero le gusta levantarse como político, a medio día’.<sup>55</sup> The comment is discordant since it is not related to the story. It emerges in order to criticise Regino’s delay, but instead of just saying ‘Regino, you are late’, the woman decides to compare him to Mexican politicians, who, in the social imaginary, are lazy and wake up after midday. The incongruity here is linked to the faults of politicians: their laziness. This is not the only element belonging to the universe of humour in this brief example, though the purpose of mentioning it is to show that incongruity as a mechanism of humour is linked to other elements from the language of humour when we are analysing political content.

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<sup>53</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...*, p. 100, and Sigmund Freud, ‘El humor. 1927 [1928]’, in *Obras Completas de Sigmund Freud. Freud Total 2.0*, trans. by Luis López-Ballesteros y de Torres, 2nd edn (Argentina: Ediciones Nueva Héliade, 2002) [On CD-ROM] (para. 7 of 14)

<sup>54</sup> Bergson, p. 197-198.

<sup>55</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17224, p.12.

Humour in combination with the intention of the outcome helps us understand the social group and the period in which the act of humour appeared, as we will see below.

Incongruity and exaggeration are linked to corrective mechanisms to provide a message about the state of society or politics. Since what we are looking for are political and social references to Mexican reality, then we will need to find an element from the theory of humour which links the joke to political content. The way that various mechanisms are connected depends on the aim of the comment or situation. One possibility is to use the comical element as punishment, since the comic expresses ‘an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective’.<sup>56</sup> Humour does not promise to solve the flaw, but at least it gives society the opportunity to uncover it.

For example, in an issue of *La Familia Burrón*, Borola builds a motorboat to ‘rescue’ people from a remote area of Mexico City who have suffered a flood. Borola’s action is illogical, not only because she does not have the training or the tools to construct a motorboat, but also because the one she builds has the same features as a car (tyres, a steering wheel, and in fact runs like a car but floats like a boat). As Borola’s actions tend to be, her behaviour in the boat is exaggerated, arguing with the passengers, charging too much money, and then building a bigger motorboat on the flat roof of the *vecindad* in order to transport more people and earn more money. But Borola is the only one who offers transportation to this isolated community, bringing a service that the authorities do not provide. A woman boarding the boat comments: ‘Caray, hasta que nos pusieron servicio de lanchas. Por mucho tiempo estuvimos incomunicados’.<sup>57</sup> She is criticising the authorities for failing to help and for their lack of attention to communities in difficulty. Thus, humour is used to point out the lack of support from

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<sup>56</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An essay...* p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17160, p.13.

those in power for citizens in trouble. Other members of the community, even the private sector –Borola is actually charging for the service- had to respond instead.

The abandonment of the authorities is also represented in *Los Agachados*. The Mayor of Chayotitlán, Licenciado Trastupijes, wants money for a business deal with China. The idea is illogical from the beginning, since the town is very poor and has few inhabitants or products. The image of the Licenciado is exaggerated. He is represented wearing a loose-fitting shirt (known as guayabera) and sunglasses, in the style of the Mexican President Luis Echeverría at the time.

Image  
unavailable due  
to copyright  
restrictions

Image 3.5. ‘Licenciado Trastupijes’. Eduardo del Río ‘Rius’,  
*Los Agachados* (6 January 1969) (in colour)

When Trastupijes’ secretary advises him to visit a locality belonging to his district where the inhabitants are very poor in order to collect taxes, the Licenciado rejects the idea. He states: ‘...capaz que si voy, se ponen a pedirme escuela, carretera, hospital, no, no..’.<sup>58</sup> In this case it is a representative of the authorities who are portrayed. However, the message is the same: those in government neglect the needs of the population. Through comedy, a truth that should be corrected is revealed.

There are more examples that could be cited, and they will be presented later in this chapter because they include other elements from the universe of humour which

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<sup>58</sup> *Los Agachados*, 77, p. 3.

need to be highlighted. The same happens in the previous examples, and this shows the complexity of the study of humour and how much an act of humour can contain.

### **Abuse of power**

Another topic which is discussed through the combination of these previous elements (incongruity, exaggeration, corrective) is the abuse of power, whether from those in government or those in positions of power, such as policemen and civil servants. Those in charge of ensuring order are portrayed in all three comic books as feared characters, not only by the criminals but by the citizens themselves. This creates a reality in which the roles are reversed, which in fact is not too far from reality. Thus, readers can recognise themselves in the adventures -and misadventures- of the characters, and distinguish references to their own reality.

There is an episode in *Los Agachados* in which Licenciado Trastupijes orders his private secretary, Bedoyo, to arrest a man who is painting graffiti on the walls which appears to be anti-government propaganda. Trastupijes insists on arresting the man without using violence while Bedoyo thinks to himself ‘*Chin.. ¿cómo se hace pa detener a alguien sin golpearlo?*’<sup>59</sup> This reaction is exaggerated and illogical since we trust that the authorities have various means of non-violent detention. However, the scene also highlights a social concern: the abuse of power. There is a similar scene in which the local police are looking for someone who robbed a visiting Member of Congress, a *diputado*. Working separately, the two policemen each arrest an innocent civilian, framing them with the crime. When they are presented to the authorities, both badly injured, one of the accused says: ‘¡Ni cierto! Me jue a sacar del bote y me amenazó de muerte si no confesaba..’ The other man adds: ‘¡Y a mí me sacó Cambujo de mi casa y a

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<sup>59</sup> *Los Agachados*, 71, p. 6.

puro macanazo me convenció! Yo ni sé de qué se trata..’<sup>60</sup> The actions of the policemen are exaggerated, and so are the methods they use to solve the ‘mystery’ are since we know that it was Nopalzin, another character, who robbed the *diputado*. However, what the situation is communicating is the existence of these practices in Mexico and the need to change them. We may laugh because we have been ‘reminded of our own world in a peculiar, uncanny way’.<sup>61</sup> Laughter is a means of highlighting the abuse of power, and punishing those responsible, even if the scene itself seems a ridiculous caricature of reality. By enjoying the muddle in which both policemen are trapped when the truth emerges, we are saying to the authorities: ‘You take advantage of the community and violate their human rights, and I know it’.

Another example of official abuse can be found in *La Familia Burrón*, when a thief is captured by the police and one of the officials says to him: ‘No vamos a perder tiempo contigo. Si no abres la bocota, te metemos las patas en plomo derretido’.<sup>62</sup> The detective’s threat sounds out of proportion with the crime and is probably unlikely to happen, although [sadly] we cannot deny the existence of such treatment. We realise that the attitude of the investigator is not commensurate with his motivation,<sup>63</sup> and thanks to this exaggeration and the incongruity of the statements, in addition to other clues such as knowing the characteristics of *La Familia Burrón* or the caricaturised images, it is possible to recognise this situation as part of the universe of humour. When we connect the funny circumstances to our reality, we understand that they are exaggerations, but we condemn their abuse by laughing and ridiculing them. The comics are an acknowledgement that reality can be as absurd, and cruel, as the cartoons,

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<sup>60</sup> *Los Agachados*, 39, p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Pfaller, ‘The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic: The Aesthetic Effects of the Thought Experiment’, in *Lacan. The Silent Partners*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 202.

<sup>62</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...*, p. 81.

but they are also the only safe channel to talk about the authorities and their faults as we will see later in this chapter.

These mechanisms of comedy were used not only to point out the faults of the authorities but also to criticise flaws in society and some of its most prominent members. A good example appears in *La Familia Burrón*, when Cristeta Tacuche, Borola's wealthy aunt, is trying to escape from her suitor. Cristeta is a caricature and illogical character, with disproportionate plumpness and extraordinary wealth.

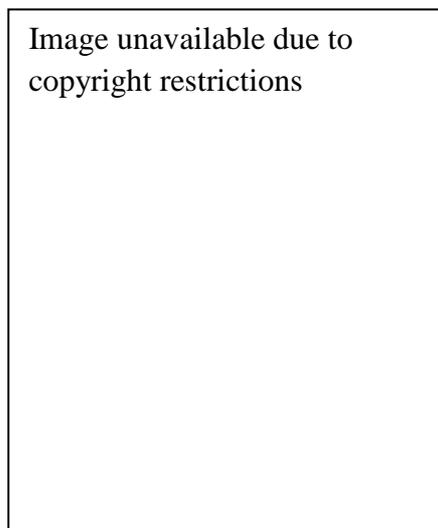


Image 3.6. 'Cristeta Tacuche'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (n.d.) (in colour)

She goes to the airport and buys a ticket to leave the country, and while paying, she says to the airline representative: 'Que se le quede todo el cambio, ninguna noticia a los diarios ¿eh?' and the woman at the airport desk replies: 'Con su dinero, me volvió muda'.<sup>64</sup> Clearly, dishonesty is not simply a characteristic of the authorities, but rather of society more widely. The woman at the airport desk tells Cristeta that she will be discreet about Cristeta's trip, but only if she is paid. She makes it clear that the reason for being discreet is the money. The situation works as an allegory which emphasizes the unscrupulousness of society.

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<sup>64</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17190, p. 20.

Machismo is another topic which emerges. It is no surprise since ‘el machismo mexicano marca la cultura del país en casi todos los niveles, y esto incluye el humor’.<sup>65</sup> Hence the ‘macho’ is a common and traditional figure in the Mexican imaginary. In fact, his usual representation tends to be caricatured and exaggerated, such as ‘El Charro Matías’ of Abel Quezada, or the characters performed by Andrés Soler like ‘Andrés Parra’ in *El Ceniciento*, or ‘Laureano’ in *La Oveja Negra*, during the golden age of Mexican Cinema. *La Familia Burrón* reflects machismo in Mexico very well. Borola constantly confronts her traditional-minded husband Regino, demanding more freedom and, Borola tries to liberate her female neighbours from the oppression they suffer from their abusive husbands. Nevertheless, her absurd actions are doomed to fail. On many occasions she will admit to her submissive role as a Mexican woman and to the fact that her thoughts are influenced by machismo.

In one of her adventures, Borola considers that the women in her vecindad are suffering too much abuse at the hands of their husbands and she wants to help them to overcome their misery.<sup>66</sup> But Borola thinks that the same women are the ones to blame for this abuse since they do nothing to make themselves look more attractive to their partners, a macho point of view. Borola’s solution is very interesting because it contains a good dose of incongruity and exaggeration: she thinks that the ladies should dress as ‘playmate bunnies’. She designs fancy rabbit dresses, which, in fact, make them look exactly like rabbits. So her solution to their problem is unsuccessful, and even some of the women are punished by their partners for dressing in such a strange manner. Another example of machismo occurs in this same issue, when a man arrives home for a visit. His wife comments: ‘¡Betito, qué gusto me da que vengas a la casa! Como mis

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<sup>65</sup> Rafael Barajas Durán, *Sólo me río cuando me duele. La cultura del humor en México* (Mexico: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2009), p. 106.

<sup>66</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17165.

hijos nunca te ven, creen que son huérfanos de padre'.<sup>67</sup> The element of surprise brings the joke to life,<sup>68</sup> since we could be expecting a complaint about the man's absence. Instead, his poor abused wife surprises us. We recognise the same elements previously mentioned, but also observe the family neglect by some men of their families. The woman's comment points out and criticises this male behaviour.

Thus, humorous comics not only discuss the faults of the authorities but also of society. In the three comics considered for this research, there are references to machismo, as well as dishonesty on the part of some citizens, such as taxi drivers, waiters, bureaucrats, and neighbours. The phenomenon is repeated in some of the films as we will see in the next chapter.

## **Relief**

An important attribute of humour is not only the possibility of discussing topics which concern us, but also the pleasure we enjoy after a joke. Freud tells us that humour is 'un medio de conseguir placer a pesar de los efectos dolorosos que a ellos se oponen'.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the benefit of humour is the transformation of our fears and concerns into comfort and relief. In this part, I will concentrate on the pleasure that readers may gain through witnessing a hilarious situation. What we will find is that representations of uncomfortable situations, when done through humour, produce relief in the reader.

The *diputados* are a frequent butt of jokes in the three comics, since people enjoy making fun of figures of authority, and the enjoyment will be even greater if those whom they are laughing at have the features which are emphasised during the act of humour. As Rafael Barajas says: 'Nada se parece más a un diputado corrupto de los que

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<sup>67</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17165, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of humour* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company. 1984), p. 284.

<sup>69</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 235.

dibujaba Rius en los sesenta como un diputado corrupto de los setenta'.<sup>70</sup> Also, as discussed in the first chapter, it is easier to make fun of political leaders who were not elected democratically,<sup>71</sup> which was a reality of Mexico during this period.

*La Familia Burrón* is the only comic that presents a recurrent character who is a *diputado*, but that does not prevent the other comics from referring to these political figures and highlighting their defects, as we will see later. They agree in terms of the profile they present of these public servants. In *Los Agachados*, the *diputados* are presented in various ways when characters talk about them and share negative opinions of them. In *Hermelinda Linda*, they are mentioned only in conversations, but opinions of them are no more favourable than in *Los Agachados*. According to the ordinary people, the *diputados* are lazy, incompetent, and abusive of their position of authority which they did not obtain democratically. They are paid from the citizens' taxes without doing a proper job. In an issue of *Los Agachados*, two characters call them 'artículos superfluos' and 'artículos decorativos'.<sup>72</sup>

By ascribing these characteristics, the comic is communicating what many citizens may think about these public servants but do not say openly, or cannot because they lack a public forum to do so. The readers enjoy the fact that someone is insulting those in power; the joke is a good mechanism 'para hacer viable la agresión o la crítica contra la autoridad'<sup>73</sup> and by laughing at the negative comments about the *diputados*, the readers could relieve the energy used to contain these thoughts. Finally, the relief of this energy is transformed into pleasure.

Freud also proposes that through insults a joke is possible, and that it also works the other way around: through the joke it is possible to launch an insult. Therefore,

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<sup>70</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 190.

<sup>71</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and their relation to society* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 1998), p. 90.

<sup>72</sup> *Los Agachados*, 30, p. 10.

<sup>73</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 102.

humour can be used as a safety valve to say what we repress socially because it ‘frees us from the chain of our perceptual, conventional, logical, linguistic and moral systems’.<sup>74</sup> The image of the *diputados* is a good example; their abilities in power are described with unfavourable, but enjoyable, criticism. In *Los Agachados* some characters are discussing the failure of the Mexican Revolution, since it did not bring the social welfare that was expected. A man is reading aloud from a newspaper: ‘México tiene casi 10 millones de desocupados’, and a caption next to the image adds ‘(sin contar diputados)’.<sup>75</sup> This can be considered an incongruity, since the first sentence refers to the unemployed, and the punchline is a kind of misunderstanding about the meaning of the word, assuming that ‘desocupado’ means ‘idle’. However, besides the ‘possible confusion’ this is also a way to share what we think about the *diputados*.

In a different issue of *Los Agachados*, Professor Hans, the German scientist who lives in Chayotitlán, is explaining what calories are, and he says that we expend calories with the physical activities we undertake every day. The comment is illustrated with a clipping of a man in black and white on a vintage bicycle saying: ‘Hasta un diputado se desgasta, aunque no lo crean’.<sup>76</sup> The image is incongruous by itself because it is something unexpected inserted in the narrative, but the comment about the *diputados*, besides being illogical and inappropriate, can work as a safety valve to express an opinion which would not be done publicly, namely, to point out their lack of activity. Moreover the quotation is exaggerated since it is obvious that even the laziest person – and by saying this I am not referring to the *diputados*, burns calories. But as can be seen, with the combination of these mechanisms of humour we are describing what we think of the *diputados* in a playful, and harmless, way.

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<sup>74</sup> Harvey Mindess quoted by Raskin, *Semantic Mechanism...* p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> *Los Agachados*, 282, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> *Los Agachados*, 51, p. 12.

One last example from *Los Agachados* appears on the front page of issue 71. ‘El Mesías’, a hermit and preacher who gives speeches on all kind of subjects, says ‘¡Parásitos!’ while the Licenciado Trastupijes scolds him by telling him: ‘Óigame! ¿Qué se trae usted con los diputados?’<sup>77</sup> Without more context, Trastupijes connects parasites to *diputados*, meaning that the *diputados* live at other people’s expense, weakening them without killing them. His unreasonable and exaggerated reaction surprises the reader, since nobody claimed that the *diputados* were parasites, and it is Trastupijes himself who is ascribing this adjective to them. But this is in fact a confusion, a common element for comedy, and El Mesías is using ‘parásitos’ as a noun, referring to the microorganisms that live in our stomachs, and not as an adjective since the whole issue is about stomach parasites, their danger and their prevention. But we draw pleasure from this mistake. We enjoy the fact that someone has referred to the *diputados* in the way we might think of them, even if we do not express our views directly. We live in a community of social rules. Society as a whole, and those in power repress our desire to insult figures of authority.

The subject is repeated in *Hermelinda Linda*. Hermelinda prepares a magical concoction in front of the man who requested it. While doing so, she recites the ingredients that she is using, and one of them is ‘las cenizas de un pañuelo de diputado activo’. When she says this, her client replies: ‘¡Eso es casi imposible!’<sup>78</sup> This situation contains incongruity, not only because they are preparing a magical potion, but also because of the ingredient itself, which seems unreasonable. To state that it is almost impossible to find an active *diputado* is an exaggeration as well. The whole situation allows the reader to express what he/she might think since, as discussed previously,

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<sup>77</sup> *Los Agachados*, 71, front page.

<sup>78</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 366, p. 7.

comedy is a way to raise a matter for discussion, even those which our consciousness prevents us from talking about in social situations.<sup>79</sup>

So, humour liberates us from the social oppression of repressing our thoughts, and is also a safety valve, bringing relief by pointing out the ridiculousness of the authorities. In issue 17280, Borola says to her friend, the *diputado* Gorraez, something that we would enjoy saying to this public servant face to face. When she visits him to borrow some money to organise a street party, the *diputado* tells her that he cannot help her because he is in a hurry to get to the Cámara de Diputados. To this apology, Borola replies: ‘No me vengas con cuentos. Sobran los que van como tú sólo a levantar el dedo’.<sup>80</sup> The name of the *diputado* is also a play on words. In Mexico, ‘vivir de gorra’ means to get things without paying and without effort.<sup>81</sup> Also relevant is that in the image of the *diputado* Gorraez, we see the representation of all *diputados*. He embodies all of them; therefore, by giving him this demeaning name, we are insulting all *diputados*, and feel relief for the opportunity of insulting them without consequence.

The *diputados* are among the authorities most satirised in these three comic books. They became an synecdoche of all government authorities. Perhaps it was safer to criticise them since their power is legislative, and it would be more difficult for the authorities to repress criticism. Also, in a country in which democracy is questioned, these positions are a good target to make fun of. It seems appropriate to review the different descriptions that appeared in our sources and by doing so, construct an image of the *diputado* from the social imaginary. Besides those features just discussed, they are also referred to as clumsy and lacking the proper education and expertise to do the job. There is an example of this in *La Familia Burrón*, in which Borola is trying to

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<sup>79</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 119.

<sup>80</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17280, p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> Luis Fernando Lara, *Diccionario del español usual de México* (Mexico: Colegio de México, 2010) <<http://dem.colmex.mx/Default.aspx>> [accessed 31 March 2011]

collect a large amount of money to pay bribes to release her brother from jail. She visits her old friend, the *diputado* previously discussed. During their conversation, the *diputado* says ‘...pa’llegar a diputado lo primero que se necesita es no ser tarugo.’ To his statement, Borola comments: ‘Permíteme que me guarde mi canija opinión’.<sup>82</sup>

The situation here is different from those analysed earlier since the *diputado* is not doing something which can be judged by the reader, nor is he not acting in an exaggerated way. In this case it is Borola who criticises and humiliates the *diputado* face to face. With her answer she is avoiding saying what she might really think. For Borola, the *diputados* are not intelligent. Borola is perhaps saying something that people would like to say but would carry risks. Thus, when someone else pronounces the insult on our behalf, we feel avenged and relieved. The character is acting in the way we would like to, but without bringing us any consequences.<sup>83</sup> And again, the energy that we use to contain these thoughts is freed, bringing to us some pleasure and comfort.

But the *diputados* are not the only ones who are characterised as total failures. The political class in general tends to be criticised in these comic books. In the same issue previously described from *Los Agachados*, in which Trastupijes believes that El Mesías is calling the *diputados* parasites, he thinks that El Mesías refers to government employees in the same way.<sup>84</sup> His ignorance and his private secretary’s become evident when Bedoyo –the secretary- asks Trastupijes what ‘parasite’ means and Trastupijes gives the wrong definition. Trastupijes’ confused answer generates the hilarity. It is also an exaggeration since it is hoped that a politician and a secretary would know the meaning of the word ‘parásito’. This act of humour is an admissible way to describe the

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<sup>82</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 16914, p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...*p. 207, and M.K. Rothbar quoted in Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> *Los Agachados*, 71, p. 10.

authorities as *'ignorant'*. By making fun of them, we enjoy the benefits described earlier.

Similar phenomena appear in *Hermelinda Linda*, and with the same aims. When Hermelinda uses dough to create a child, she asks the reader whether he/she is wondering if the baby will grow up and have a normal life, since it is made of flour. She clarifies: 'otros parecen haber sido hechos de cemento, con cerebro de estropajo, y andan dando lata por ahí... en la "polaca"...'.<sup>85</sup> By laughing we might agree with Hermelinda's caustic comments about politicians. We ascribe the insult to ourselves and commit the offense indirectly<sup>86</sup> knowing that we will not be punished, since it was Hermelinda who said it.

As can be seen, witty comments against political figures can be a good way for the population to express freely their feelings and concerns. Comedy seems to be a perfect means to insult them. Through humour, defects can be exaggerated in order to make them more hilarious, to make it clear that we have recognised them, or to highlight a flaw which should not exist or should be corrected.

The *diputados* are one of the favourite targets when comics attack public servants, apparently expressing what the population really thinks about them. Another characteristic attributed to them is dishonesty, a very serious accusation and hard to prove –especially during the authoritarian PRI's rule. Yet it was a *vox populi* at the time – a common belief manifested through the jokes in the comic books, where opinions about dishonesty could be presented without proof of the kind journalism would normally be required to demonstrate. We can assume that such ideas belonged to the contemporary social imaginary when the comic books were published.

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<sup>85</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 178, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Los Marcos de la "libertad" cómica', in Umberto Eco, V.V. Ivanov and Monica Rector, *¡Carnaval!*, trans. by Mónica Mansour (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984; repr. 1998), p. 10.

In the same episode in which Borola visits the *diputado* to ask him for some money, he tells her that he does not have enough money since his salary is not as big as she thinks. Borola, in disbelief, replies ‘Ya sé que ustedes [diputados] no viven del triste sueldo, si no de las sabrosas ganancias que obtienen’.<sup>87</sup> Again, we enjoy the insolence of Borola, saying what she thinks about the *diputados*. We would like to say the same, and we ascribe to ourselves Borola’s comment. We also feel safe since the comic book is a controlled environment, and even if Borola is punished for her comment, she will overcome it. Comic characters ‘always rise from the chaos perfectly intact’<sup>88</sup> as Alenka Zupancic states. Even if we do not sympathise with Borola, we will enjoy her misfortune, as Umberto Eco proposes.<sup>89</sup>

For this research I make a distinction between corruption, to be discussed later in this chapter, and dishonesty. The comics paid special attention to corruption, because it was a serious concern. I understand corruption as requesting and taking bribes (and it was not simply the authorities who were corrupt). Dishonesty has a broader meaning of untrustworthiness, such as when police engage in robbery or politicians steal money from their fellow citizens. So it is not only the *diputados* who are portrayed as dishonest. The language of humour helps readers discuss, and criticise, the authorities. It is a way to signal that we have noticed their faults, and that they should correct them. Politics in Mexico seems to be a profitable career because of the bribes, corruption, and dishonesty. But the dishonesty of the politicians also comes from electoral machinations

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<sup>87</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 16914, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Alenka Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal”, and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It’, in *Lacan. The Silent Partners*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 181.

<sup>89</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 10.

when the PRI used various tactics to ensure triumph and to fill the plazas and theatres with so-called followers during their proselytising demonstrations.<sup>90</sup>

In *Los Agachados*, Nopalzin becomes the voice of readers who share with him the idea that the PRI cheated in the elections. His absentminded<sup>91</sup> statements bring satisfaction as well as comfort, in the same way that Borola's insults to the *diputado*. Nopalzin and some neighbours are playing football on the street and they need a referee. Licenciado Trastupijes volunteers to be the referee, and, Nopalzin comments: '¿Usté de árbitro? Uy no, mejor uno que no sea del RIP.. son medio chuecos para contar y ser jueces'.<sup>92</sup> We not only enjoy the impudence but also discuss something that the government refused to admit and citizens were not allowed to debate, namely, that the elections were fixed in the PRI's favour. But this example is slightly different from the situation between Borola and the *diputado* since the character of the *diputado* was the generalisation of all *diputados* because in humour the facts and characters are presented as universal, as Zupancic proposes.<sup>93</sup> However, in this case from *Los Agachados*, Nopalzin is referring openly to all the members of the RIP (the way that Rius refers to the acronym PRI). Thus, the insult is directed specifically at PRI members, and, at a time when the Mexican government did not tolerate criticism, such comments were widely enjoyed and appreciated by opponents of the Regime and by those who were not strong critics of the government but recognised the reality of the situation.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> These tactics are part of the co-optation and corporatism that prevailed in Mexico under PRI rule, as described by Roderic Ai Camp, *La política en México*, trans. by Stella Mastrangelo (Mexico: siglo xxi editores, 1995), pp. 27-32. The fraudulent methods used by PRI to win elections for many years can be consulted in Enrique Krauze, *La presidencia imperial: ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano, 1940-1996*, (Mexico: Tusquest Editores, 1997) p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> According to Henri Bergson absentmindedness is a great source of comedy, *Laughter. An Essay...*, p. 146.

<sup>92</sup> *Los Agachados*, 44, p.10.

<sup>93</sup> Zupancic, 'The "Concrete Universal", and...', p. 180.

<sup>94</sup> Davies, *Jokes and Their Relation...* p. 176.

As we may remember, Freud also suggests that jokes are a vehicle for some of the most valuable thoughts because the speaker finds him/herself in a safe environment to express his/her thoughts.<sup>95</sup> The sharp criticisms that we find in our sources can be very enriching for learning about the social concerns of the people. To exemplify this, there is another example from *Los Agachados* which also contains exaggeration and incongruity, as well as humour, to bring relief. The Licenciado Trastupijes informs his fellow politician, Municipal President Epitacio, that he will not be the candidate for the next elections since '[Epitacio] no sabe cómo robar'. To make such a statement so straightforwardly is an absurd exaggeration, but we also recognise the truth in, and celebrate the fact that someone has expressed, those thoughts. More topics appear during the conversation of the two politicians; they decide that the next RIP candidate should be someone honest and Epitacio wonders where they could find an honest candidate. Trastupijes says: 'Bueno, lo que se dice honrado, honrado, está medio difícil: nadie se mete al partido aplanadora para seguir pobre..'.<sup>96</sup> In this example, the mechanisms of humour are the same as those just mentioned. Following Freud, we can decipher that in the social imaginary, politicians took up the career not to support voters and improve the country but for their own benefit, and that virtually all PRI members were dishonest. As Freud suggests, and as we have demonstrated, we find relevant thoughts and concerns in jokes. In fact Mexican popular philosophy has a saying that supports this idea: 'entre broma y broma, la verdad se asoma'. Sadly, we do not know which came first, Freud or the proverb.

We have seen that in the universe of humour situations are momentarily allowed.<sup>97</sup> Hence, comics are a perfect environment for society to read accusations

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<sup>95</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 88, and Freud, 'El humor...' (para. 11 of 14)

<sup>96</sup> *Los Agachados*, 26, p.6.

<sup>97</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: the Mastery...* p. 43.

without fearing the consequences. An example of this is when the police are referred to in *La Familia Burrón* as ‘Acólitos del diablo’. This nickname is constantly used by the characters, not simply when they are talking about the police but also when they are speaking to them face to face. The police never seem troubled or contradict those who refer to them in such a way. The reader enjoys the references to the police as ‘Acólitos del diablo’ since he/she would like to say the same. In one issue Borola and Macuca are followed by a man on the street. Borola says ‘Déjenos de seguir o llamo un acólito del diablo ¡Usted dice!’<sup>98</sup> In another issue, Bella Bellota has been looking for her boyfriend, Ruperto, because days have passed since he was arrested and there has been no information on his whereabouts. When Bella finally finds Ruperto, she asks him in front of the guards: ‘¿Estás bien, no te han maltratado los acólitos del diablo?’<sup>99</sup> Given the police’s representation, there is a good reason to give them that despicable name. I will discuss this topic later, and I shall examine how humour permits topics to emerge, and also how humour helps the reader overcome difficult issues. I will turn to these issues in a discussion of the super-ego in relation with abhorrent topics.

### **Things that are temporarily permitted**

I discussed in chapter one the idea that through humour we might overcome some of the most intolerable situations,<sup>100</sup> since we detach ourselves from the circumstances portrayed, and although we recognise the situation as familiar, we momentarily enjoy that someone else is suffering instead of us<sup>101</sup> and we see how the characters overcome their tragedy episode by episode. The characters are indestructible as Zupancic

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<sup>98</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17194, p.30.

<sup>99</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p.16.

<sup>100</sup> George E.C. Paton, ‘The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality’, in *Humour in Society. Resistance and Control*, ed. by Chris Powell and Gregor Benton (London: MacMillan Press, 1998), 206-233, p. 207.

<sup>101</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, pp. 10-11.

alleges.<sup>102</sup> So, through the misfortunes that the characters must overcome and the hilarious ways they find to solve them, we also recognise the misfortunes that the population suffers in their day to day lives. As an example of this, in an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, Regino and Briagoberto Memelas, a town *cacique* and a friend of the Burrón family, go out partying and get into trouble in a cabaret. When the police arrive, one of the policeman asks his chief: ‘¿Entramos repartiendo patines y macanazos?’,<sup>103</sup> a statement that criticises the violence of the police. Regino and Briagoberto are jailed and the last caption of the comic reads: ‘Aunque la señora Burrón recibe pronto el aviso que su marido se encuentra en el bote, nada puede hacer por no contar con dinero. Don Briago no supo cómo perdió su cartera durante las “investigaciones”’.<sup>104</sup> The situation should be understood as humorous, otherwise we would feel stress on behalf of the characters, but we are acquainted with the events: the abuse and dishonesty of the authorities. In this case, to witness the comic characters suffering the abuses sets us apart from that reality, even if we have suffered from this abuse ourselves. We find pleasure either by finding that someone else lives the same situation and overcomes it, or simply by forgetting that we ourselves suffer abuse at the hands of the authorities in our daily lives. Either way, humour works as a defence mechanism<sup>105</sup> and helps prevent us from ‘being overtaken by the fearfulness of the situation’.<sup>106</sup> Finally, as discussed in chapter one, after laughing about a problem that concerns us we are more able to face it and perhaps find a solution, or a way to live with it!

Another mechanism of humour that we discussed previously was superiority. We understood this mechanism in two different ways, one related with the idea of

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<sup>102</sup> Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal” and...’, p. 181.

<sup>103</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17171, p.32.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>105</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 240.

<sup>106</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 232.

feeling better than someone else,<sup>107</sup> and the other one with the idea of the relationship between the ego and the super-ego.<sup>108</sup> We will start by showing how a feeling of superiority was used in the sources to discuss different social and political topics, understanding superiority as placing oneself above others and finding funny those who are different and ostensibly inferior.<sup>109</sup>

### **Superiority**

The way that the police is criticised in *Hermelinda Linda* brings us pleasure and relief when they are represented as the way that society understands, namely, as corrupt. The police abuses citizens through acts of corruption, such as in an issue in which a woman visits her son-in-law in jail, trying to deliver a basket of food. The son in law cannot be visited because he is in the infirmary, so she must leave the basket with the guard. She asks the policeman not to eat the food, and he replies: ‘Ni siquiera lo probaría... si me da una “corta”...’.<sup>110</sup> Afterwards the lady pays some money, asking the policeman to overcome temptation, and he replies: ‘Por cincuenta “locos”, soy capaz de quedarme sin comer siete días...’<sup>111</sup> The way in which the characters openly discuss corruption might be funny because it is unreasonable and distorted. But the policeman’s lack of dignity, in first asking for money not to eat the food and later mentioning that for that amount of money, which is very little, he would not eat for a week, is an example of superiority theory. The reader feels superior both because he/she would not participate in such an open act of corruption, and also because he/she would not promise to stop eating for seven days just for money. These actions denigrate the policeman and set the reader

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<sup>107</sup> Such as Bergson, Critchley, Zupancic, Eco.

<sup>108</sup> Such as Freud.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Hobbes mentioned by Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London, New York: Routledge), p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 363, p.20.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

apart and the reader enjoys the policeman's behaviour by finding him inferior. Later in the story, the policeman and other colleagues turn into birds by eating the food because it contained a magic potion. The reader enjoys their punishment, since their behaviour was ridiculous, almost animalistic, and feels no sympathy for them. The reader feels too superior to have any compassion for someone who behaves like that.<sup>112</sup>

But we also feel sympathy for a character who puts him/herself in a superior position through his/her actions. We take credit for the insult ourselves, as Purdie suggests.<sup>113</sup> In an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, the wealthy mansion of Titino Tinoco is robbed and he calls the police. During the investigations, the chief of police suggests that Floro Tinoco, the child of the family, is the thief. His father's immediate reply is: 'A mi mono le doy cuanto desea, así que descártelo de los sospechosos. Orita mismo tiene para comprarlo a usted y a su manada de tecos',<sup>114</sup> In this situation we see the corruption of the police, but we also notice that Titino Tinoco has no qualms about telling the police that his son has enough money to bribe them all. It is interesting that the policeman does not contradict Mr Tinoco, essentially admitting the allegation. However, besides the exaggeration and the inappropriateness of speaking so forwardly to an authority figure about his corrupt behaviour, Mr Tinoco is also insulting someone in a position of power. Therefore, we appropriate the comment as if we were the ones who degraded the police. As we can see, the situation brings us enjoyment through different means, and permits us to criticise and humiliate by making 'a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed',<sup>115</sup> an authority figure whose behaviour is improper, as well as pointing out something we would like to change.

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<sup>112</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...*, p. 65.

<sup>114</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 28.

<sup>115</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 197.

But the reader may not feel superior only to those characters he/she looks down on. The reader also sympathises with other characters, although that does not prevent him/her feeling superior to them. That is why it is possible to laugh at their tragedy. We reflect that we are better than them and we do not suffer the same luck. To get to this point, we must remember that, as Bergson said, humour requires us to anaesthetise our feelings.<sup>116</sup> We also need ‘cierto grado de complicidad o de indiferencia y la falta de todos aquellos factores que pudieran hacer surgir poderosos sentimientos’<sup>117</sup> so, we do not feel worried about the luck of the characters and we allow laughter to emerge.

Poverty was a social concern during the 1970s in Mexico, and the adventures of *La Familia Burrón* took place in poor communities. In an episode in which Borola is trying to buy a steak in the market, the man in the stand tells her: ‘¿Filete? Esa carne no es para ti, sólo los adinerados pueden comerla.’<sup>118</sup> What the butcher is pointing out is the excessive cost of the meat, and that he recognises Borola’s poverty. We may laugh because we are not in Borola’s situation and we can buy steak, however we might still find this moment funny because we see our concern about the cost of food represented in the scene. Humour sets us in a different situation at least for the time that the joke lasts. When we laughed at Borola’s misfortune, at least for a moment we forgot our situation, our own economic difficulties, and Borola was the one who suffered, not us.<sup>119</sup> But humour does not change reality permanently, and once the moment of hilarity has passed, we recognise ourselves enduring the same problem.

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<sup>116</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...*, p. 145.

<sup>117</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 144.

<sup>118</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17166, p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, pp.18-20.

### Superiority and antithesis

In the first chapter I suggested that we find it funny when someone is denigrated, but the butt of the joke is in fact, our antithesis, because in this way we use humour as a mean of aggression.<sup>120</sup> Thus, part of this work is discovering who was considered the antithesis of society. It is interesting to observe that the antitheses of those citizens portrayed in the comic books are the politicians and the police. Since their actions tend to be detrimental and, instead of working on behalf of the community, they abuse it, support the delinquents, and, in fact, they themselves are the criminals, it can be a delight to mock them, to exaggerate their faults, and to enjoy the punishment they receive.

In the issue previously described from *Los Agachados*, the residents of Chayotitlán are playing football, and Profe Gumaro realises that the Licenciado Trastupijes pretends to know about sports just to get on well with potential voters. Gumaro mixes terms from different sports, asking senseless things, and Trastupijes does not realise the mockery. The situation is funny because of the incongruity of the comments and the fact that Trastupijes' populist pretentions are punished by ridiculing him. Nevertheless, readers find this situation even funnier because the butt of the joke is not only someone in a position of power, the municipal president, but also their antithesis, the authority that exploits the citizens. Thus, the pleasure obtained is greater than if the joke is only about someone that we have no relation with.

We find another example in *Hermelinda Linda*, but this case is a kind of 'enriched' example. Hermelinda creates a magic chewing gum that forces people to tell the truth unintentionally, and the chewing gum unleashes a series of revelations from various people who reveal their real selves: policemen are corrupt killers, doctors are

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<sup>120</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 100.

incompetent and dishonest, and the only ones who do not have a dark side are normal citizens. At the end of the story, Hermelinda says to the readers: ‘Ya sé lo que están pensando. No vendo chicles para discursos políticos’.<sup>121</sup> The situation is illogical since magic chewing gum does not exist, but we enjoy the fact that the authorities are presented in a way that corresponds with our thinking. With Hermelinda’s last comment, we are directed to a negative characteristic about Mexican politicians: they lie in their political speeches. By saying this about an antithesis figure of authority, we enjoy denigrating the politicians. One more point to add about this example; we should remember that according to the superiority theory, when we insult someone through the language of humour, it is the triumph of the powerful over the vulnerable.<sup>122</sup> It would look like it is the contrary in this example, since the authorities had more power than citizens. Nevertheless, during the moment of humour, and while the laugh lasts, we put ourselves in a superior position. The butt of the joke is someone ridiculous that just deserves to be mocked, while we are not. Furthermore, we laugh because the character believes that he/she indeed is superior, which makes him/her look even more ridiculous.<sup>123</sup> Thus, the pleasure of the act of humour comes not only from the insult to the authorities and from saying what we really think about them, but also from the humiliation of considering them inferior and pointing out their ridiculousness.

As we have seen, the police is another group that is constantly portrayed critically in these comics, and whose actions are portrayed as harmful for the community, transforming them into the antithesis of the upright citizens. Thus, the stories contain hilarious and exaggerated images of the police performing ridiculous actions or looking clumsy and caricatured, since the readers enjoy humiliating and

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<sup>121</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 373, p. 32.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Hobbes mentioned by Critchley in *On Humour*, p. 12.

<sup>123</sup> Zupancic, ‘The “Concrete Universal” and...’, pp. 183-184.

gaining a sense of victory over them. In the story of *La Familia Burrón* in which the wealthy Tinoco's family is robbed, Mr Titino Tinoco calls the police as soon as he notices the crime. When the chief of police answers the phone, he is at his desk eating a burger and drinking a soft drink giving little importance to the crime. We might think that Mr Tinoco phoned at a bad time, when the policeman was having his lunch, but everything in the frame has a reason for being there. In this case, the elements in the frame are pointing out the police chief's lack of professionalism. This is reinforced after Mr Tinoco describes the robbery and informs the police he knows of no suspects and complains that the police have no suspect. The policeman replies: '¡En la torre! Yo creí que nos señalaría a algunos sospechosos. En realidad, vamos a cambiar un chorro',<sup>124</sup> which expresses unwillingness to do his job or achieving results.

A similar image appears in the episode previously described when Bella Bellota is looking for Ruperto in different prisons. She speaks with the head of the jail, a policeman who is playing tick tack toe by himself.<sup>125</sup> The exaggeration and incongruity here are the idea of an adult policeman playing this children's game by himself while working. However, beyond the absurdity is the intention to insult all policemen, through generalisation and to point out that the police were unprofessional. As we have seen, the characteristics and the mechanisms of humour in both examples are the same, and provide the same benefits to the reader.

### **Differences are funny**

When I discussed the superiority theory in chapter one, I mentioned that we also laugh about those characters that we think are different, since we consider ourselves above

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<sup>124</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 22.

<sup>125</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 15.

those differences,<sup>126</sup> or we think that something is ridiculous though we ourselves are not. Therefore, our reaction is to judge them with laughter.<sup>127</sup> We already established the differences between members of society and figures of authority. However, there can be great pleasure in portraying those who, in fact, the reader might feel greater difference, namely foreigners.

In order to laugh about foreigners, we can consider Zupancic's idea on universalization. When someone from a specific nationality is portrayed with particular features, we ascribe those characteristics to 'all the people' that the character represents. For example, a Spaniard is usually represented in the Mexican folklore with thick eyebrows, wearing a beret and smoking a cigar.<sup>128</sup> Through this image we generalise about Spaniards and we assume that the description of this character will belong to all of them, becoming part of the social imaginary. This is what we call a stereotype.

Image unavailable  
due to copyright  
restrictions

Image 3.7. 'Gallego'. Eduardo del Río 'Rius', 2010. *Ni independencia ni revolución* (2010) (black and white), p. 32.

Stereotypes are exaggerated and absurd. The way that a stereotype works is that there is a feature –or a series of features- which are chosen and emphasised in order to recognise the character we are referring to and to make him/her funny. However, laughing at their differences and ridiculing them is an act of superiority,<sup>129</sup> and even if those foreigners

<sup>126</sup> Critchley, *On Humour...* p. 69.

<sup>127</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 136

<sup>128</sup> This stereotype is repeated in some of the sources, such as *Calzonzin Inspector and El Águila Descalza*.

<sup>129</sup> For example, in February 2011, TV celebrity Jeremy Clarkson was criticised because he referred to Mexicans as lazy, feckless and overweight among others characteristics. He argued that he was 'just

are in better position than us, at least we have the satisfaction of feeling superior for a moment and signalling their differences and defects, or what we consider as a difference or defect!

An example of this last statement is the representation of foreigners' speech. In an episode of *Hermelinda Linda*, two Canadians are doing business in Mexico. We recognise that they are foreigners because of the portrayal of the way they speak: 'Y para que "osté" no pensar que ser trampa, nosotros firmar contrato certificado de recompra, enseñar a cuidar y vender alimentos'.<sup>130</sup> We also recognise the Spaniards in *Los Agachados* because of the written representation of their accent and the kinds of words they use, which are uncommon among Mexican speakers. For example, Don Falangino, the Spanish shopkeeper says to the Licenciado Trastupijes: 'Pero sí que es ust'e necio, rediez y reveinte! ¿Cuál revolución dice uste'?',<sup>131</sup> The way they look is also an exaggeration and a means of ridicule which make us feel better: they are dirty and smelly, it is impossible to see their eyes because of their bushy eyebrows, they wear a waistcoat and they normally work as shopkeepers.<sup>132</sup>

In the last example we can also highlight the name of the character, which refers to the Spanish political party *Falange Española de la JONS*. The character, in fact, is a Franco supporter and has right wing points of view, so his name gives us more information, as well as generating hilarity. By knowing this we understand that Spaniards who are portrayed are those ones with a similar background and not all

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joking', but comedian Steve Coogan responded to Clarkson by saying that comedy was not about reinforcing prejudices but challenging them. Steve Coogan, 'I'm a huge fan of Top Gear but this time I've had enough', *The Guardian*, 5 February 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2011/feb/05/top-gear-offensive-steve-coogan>> [accessed 8 February 2011]. In social humour we elevate ourselves to the position of superiority in order to offend and also to point to a flaw. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore that Clarkson's comment could be considered humorous as well because, as Freud says, an insult makes the joke possible.

<sup>130</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 367, p.5.

<sup>131</sup> *Los Agachados*, 282, p.2.

<sup>132</sup> Check *Los Agachados*, 51 or 282.

Spaniards. Thus, the generalization is narrowed. So, observing the foreigners that these comic books refer to and make fun of, reveals to us which countries had contact with Mexico, and which foreigners were generating discomfort, or were considered inferior or superior, needing to be ridiculed.

In both examples, the foreigner is represented as an opportunist who abuses the weak. In *Hermelinda Linda*, the Canadians are swindlers who are trafficking chinchillas (we discussed this story earlier), but when they are discovered by Hermelinda and have to escape and carry out their fraud somewhere else, one of them says that they will find a way to restart their business ‘Mientras haya funcionarios cándidos’.<sup>133</sup> In *Los Agachados*, Don Falangino is visited by his cousin who has just arrived from Spain. Falangino describes how well his business is doing, and explains: ‘Aquí nadie te dice nada si subes todos los días los precios..¡bendito país!’<sup>134</sup> We see that both foreigners are abusing Mexicans. However, according to what they say, we also notice that the Mexican authorities are involved, either through their negligence or through corruption, which we infer because of another statement of Don Falangino: ‘...aquí hay que estar bien con la autoridad o no se hacen los negocios’.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, through these acts of humour, we not only criticise the actions of some foreigners, but also we have the opportunity to make fun of their faults. Their features are exaggerated, such as their linguistic mistakes and the way they look, and through this mechanism we feel superiority and relief. We obtain a little revenge over them. But we also realise that the abuse will not be possible if it not for the participation of the Mexican authorities, who tolerate them. In both comics we had a chance to criticise and ridicule them, at least temporarily.

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<sup>133</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 367, p. 29.

<sup>134</sup> *Los Agachados*, 51, p. 7.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

Differences between groups of youth are also portrayed. Those who are most caricatured are hippies who are represented as imitators of US hippie culture, and their portrait is not positive. When Hermelinda notices a terrible smell in her house, she goes out trying to find the reason for it. She finds a group of long haired hippies smoking cannabis and with their eyes glazed over. They start insulting Hermelinda although she cannot understand them: ‘¡Zape, “arrugas”...! ¡Cúchile! “Que te volatices... te esfumes, o desaparezcas... eso, si no eres producto de las visiones de la “yerba”...’.<sup>136</sup> Their drug addiction is described in order to criticise it and to demonstrate social concern about the use of drugs. Their language is distorted and seems ridiculous since Hermelinda can hardly understand what they are saying. The scene points to the differences between the way that hippies and ‘ordinary’ people express themselves. Later in the story, Hermelinda goes to a party organised by the hippies, and there is a live band playing called ‘*The sucios*’. The name represents the common perception of the way hippies looked. Giving such a name to the band ridicules them and sets us in a superior position, since we have better hygiene. However, it is also interesting that the name of the band is half English and half Spanish, suggesting that society considered Mexican hippies to be influenced by the US (or Anglo-Saxon) culture. The comic name for the band not only criticised their appearance, but also the fact that young Mexican hippies adopted foreign cultural patterns which can be understood in opposition to their national culture, but also as traditionalism or xenophobia.

Rius insists on this image of hippies, and youth in general, as influenced by foreign cultures, especially US culture. According to the German scientist, Professor Hans, the government tries to ‘confundir ideológicamente a la juventud’ through

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<sup>136</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 176, p. 2.

movies, radio, and TV by presenting ‘como “ideal” el sistema de vida Americano’.<sup>137</sup> The image that accompanies this caption is a young man with a heart over his head (denoting love) looking at a soldier, a blond actress, a hippie, and a secret agent. Again, through the act of humour, the author is pointing out that Mexican youth is overly influenced by the USA (promoted by the Mexican authorities) and he is denigrating the attitude of young people toward US culture, adoring and emulating it. After these examples we can see that Mexican hippies and ‘contraculturos’ were not readily accepted socially. They were rejected because of their way of thinking and they were labelled as drug addicts and emulators of US youth. We described this phenomenon in chapter two.

Another characteristic of the young was their activism, which was widespread until 1971. Afterwards many young people participated in underground movements and various belligerent activities, such as urban and rural guerrilla groups or the Mexican Communist party. Although in *Hermelinda Linda* the characters and situations are usually exaggerated, in some cases, when referring to youth, this distortion of reality is focused not only on their emptiness but also on their demonstrations and other forms of political activism. Hermelinda’s neighbour, Esteban, loses his mind and shows no sign of intelligence. His children, who are in their 20s, arrive home and realise what the situation is. The language of the son is similar to that of the hippies in one of our earlier examples. He is portrayed as a lazy young man who lives at the expense of his father. He asks about his father’s health: ‘¿Ya se alivió mi vetarro?’ and when he realises that his father is still ill, he adds: ‘¿Quién me va a dar entonces para mi cine y mis tortugas?’<sup>138</sup> This exchange highlights the lack of concern of the son for his father. When Esteban’s daughter gets home and learns that there is no money for her either, her

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<sup>137</sup> *Los Agachados*, 77, p. 21.

<sup>138</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 378, p. 6.

reaction is no more compassionate. The girl says: ‘¡Y luego se asombran de que hayan motines y manifestaciones...!’<sup>139</sup> Both their reactions are unreasonable and out of bounds, and the exaggeration in the language they use is a means to poke fun at the way young people spoke. However, in the social imaginary of some social groups, this act of humour can also be considered as means of showing disapproval of the students’ actions and the lack of sense of their demands.

In the story in which a spoiled young man is driving his motorcycle outside Hermelinda’s house, since Hermelinda cannot gain justice through the authorities, she hypnotises him, so that he thinks his motorcycle is cursed. During his hallucination, the boy thinks he will die, and he yells: ‘Morir tan joven y sin haber encabezado una manifestación’<sup>140</sup> The comment surprises the reader, triggering a comic effect. In this passage, the situation is also generalising about youth and implying that all young people used to participate in demonstrations. We see that they disguise this pursuit with revolutionary aims. Nevertheless, their claims are clearly not social, and they are portrayed as a selfish and spoiled generation.

This portrayal of youth shows how, even after the repressions of Tlatelolco in 1968 and the *Halconazo* in 1971, some sectors of society still clung to the 1950s idea of a lost generation rebelling against the status quo and the authorities for no reason, or simply following US values. This shows Mexico’s deeply-rooted traditionalism and the lack of understanding of a generation that was echoing a shift in global values.

Yet there are other characteristics of young people in *La Familia Burrón*, such as the case of Avelino Pílongano, who accuses his friends (los inconformes) of being a gang of criminals and not *guerrilleros*,<sup>141</sup> and also Burrón’s children –Macuca and

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>140</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 377, p. 27.

<sup>141</sup> I will analyse this example in the section called ‘Speaking the Unspeakable’.

Reginito- who are contrasted with the youngsters from *Hermelinda Linda*. Although both Macuca and Reginito dress fashionably (wearing peace and love medals, go-go style clothes, etc.), they are submissive with adults, especially with their parents. Macuca and Reginito do not contradict their parents, despite Regino's old fashioned way of thinking and Borola's eccentric behaviour.



Image 3.8. 'Reginito and Macuca'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (n.d.) (black and white)

They are an example of virtue in a sexist culture in which the father is the unquestionable figure of authority in the family. Macuca kisses her father's hand while she promises that she does not have a boyfriend,<sup>142</sup> and Reginito helps his father working in his barber shop when he is not at school. Even more, Foforito, Burrón's adopted child, rarely speaks and does not often contradict his adoptive parents, though he is wise and observant. For example, when Borola wants to show off in front of a very rich family she states 'si ellos presumen de mucho, nosotros también', and Foforito replies: '¿Podemos presumirles de mucho qué? Será de hambre'.<sup>143</sup> Despite this exception, Foforito and many of the kids portrayed rarely speak except when asked to, and instead appear playing or watching the happenings around them.

The image of these young people and children is funny because of the caricatured features and its resemblance to reality. Nevertheless, the representation and

<sup>142</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17280, p. 28.

<sup>143</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17170, p. 30.

the actions of their antithesis, such as the disrespectful youngsters in *Hermelinda Linda*, the pseudo-revolutionaries *los inconformes*, or Foforito's dismissive macho father, Susano Cantarranas, are those which contain more characteristics related with what we have discussed as part of the universe of humour, and who bring more comedy and enjoyment to the reader.

### **Superiority as a triumph of the super-ego**

As previously discussed, superiority theory also proposes that we laugh about those situations that concern us or frighten us because our super-ego takes the role of an adult comforting a child, pointing out the triviality of the child's fear.<sup>144</sup> Moreover, the super-ego reveals to our ego that what we are observing belongs to the universe of humour, and it is a controlled environment and cannot harm us, even when reality can be very different. What Freud tells us is that the super-ego shows that the phenomenon that worries the ego is, in fact, minor or harmless. We could argue that some situations presented in comic books are scary and deadly, such as torture or domestic violence. However, what the super-ego tells the ego is that the ego should not be concerned. Even though we also may be at risk in our daily lives, we are not suffering at that moment. The character is suffering instead, which is why we are allowed to laugh. Finally, when we witness stressful situations in the comics, the super-ego manages the fear and converts it into laughter. This helps us forget for an instant that we occasionally suffer too. For a moment, we see the light side to cope with our fears.

Some of the examples previously discussed also present the triumph of the super-ego over the ego. But I will introduce new examples with other social and political topics to better understand of how this works. We have discussed machismo

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<sup>144</sup> Freud, 'El humor...' (para. 13 of 14)

and how it constantly appears in these three comics, since it was an important concern for the Mexican society.<sup>145</sup> Machismo is expressed in different ways, such as the abuse of women, lack of respect, cheating, abandonment and lack of responsibility, among others. In *Hermelinda Linda*, Caralimpio, a man with a record for being unfaithful, is found with another woman by one of his partners and she asks him for money to support her and their children. He answers: ‘Cometí un error’ and she replies: ‘Ocho errores, Caralimpio... ocho errores que comen...’ [referring to their children].<sup>146</sup> Her answer is a surprise, and that is part of what generates humour. Nevertheless, although we recognise the tragedy of the woman (which is the tragedy of many women), our super-ego will tell us that we are witnessing a *mise-en-scene* and that the situation is fiction. The characters are fictional but the issues are real. The super-ego explains that we should not be concerned about the woman since she does not exist, therefore, it is right to laugh. Perhaps we would not find this story funny if it had happened to someone we know, but since we recognise that it is a possible world,<sup>147</sup> and not the real one, then, we permit ourselves to laugh.

The same happens in *La Familia Burrón*, when Borola tries to help her female neighbours get economic support from their partners. She becomes an unmasked heroine self-called ‘Entrometida, la mujer que meterá en cintura a todos los maridos cábulas’.<sup>148</sup> The tragedies that the women suffer day by day described in the issue are terrible, but the exaggeration and eccentricity of Borola’s solution develops the humorous side of the situation, and our super-ego identifies this. Even when our ego tells us that we are discussing a painful topic, the super-ego will help us cope by

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<sup>145</sup> Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) and Roger Bartra in *La jaula de la melancolía* (1987) make interesting analysis about it.

<sup>146</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 172, p. 20.

<sup>147</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 55.

<sup>148</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17186, p. 15.

controlling our fear. We could argue that women might not find the portrayal of machismo funny, at least in the previous cases in which the woman is the one that suffers the abuse directly. But McGhee tells us that ‘females are typically less concerned than males with the issue of dominance and infallibility’, and laughter, after centuries of submissiveness, helps them cope with adversity, and facilitating a resolution to their difficulties.<sup>149</sup> McGhee adds that this is not only the case for women, but for other groups which have suffered historical oppression. I will develop this idea further in the next chapter, when I discuss the *politically incorrect*.

Another social concern is the dishonesty of the authorities. As already discussed, it appears that citizens prefer to confront the delinquents themselves rather than those who are supposed to protect them. Through the years, this has become a common representation.<sup>150</sup> The police do not like to admit that they are untrustworthy, and people would feel insecure about describing a policeman directly as a criminal. So, the comic books are a good way to reveal our real thoughts. In *La Familia Burrón*, when a group of scavengers find a bag of money, Susano Cantarranas suggests notifying the police. Another character says: ‘De plano seremos tres guajolotes si llevamos el dinero a la comisaría. Nosotros lo encontramos y otros se lo clavan ¿no?’<sup>151</sup> Later, after telling the police about the find, a policeman confirms our idea of their dishonesty when he tells the scavengers: ‘¿Para qué avisa? [about the find] ¿Dónde lo tiene? Vamos a mita y mita ¿quihubo?’<sup>152</sup> The idea of unscrupulous police causes fear and discomfort, but again, the situation is exaggerated since we would not expect a policeman to speak so blatantly or with that slang. The comics reinforce our suspicions of real life police behaviour. Perhaps we feel superior because we do not behave in that despicable

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<sup>149</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* pp. 204-206.

<sup>150</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 55.

<sup>151</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17161, p. 6.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

manner, but also our super-ego lets us know that we should not be concerned about police dishonesty because in this particular case, we are not the ones who are suffering. In any case, the policemen in these comics are ridiculous and do not deserve fear, only laughter. They may have power, but in these images they are inferior because their behaviour is grotesque.

During the period we are studying, an important social issue was the violence and repression that many suffered. As we saw in chapter two, the country did not have a free press, and journalists were persecuted and silenced, sometimes violently. There were few public channels to discuss this, so comic books and films were a means to open discussion. In *Los Agachados*, Don Ruco is asking about Nopalzin's whereabouts because he had a nightmare in which Nopalzin was kidnapped by court officers. When Profe Gumaro hears about Nopalzin's dreamlike abduction he says: '¿Desde cuándo Reuter Nopalzin es periodista?'<sup>153</sup> Gumaro's comment is unexpected and he is saying something that he is not allowed to discuss publicly: that the journalists suffered persecution. We laugh because the situation described is scary, and 'we often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us'.<sup>154</sup> Our super-ego has triumphed over the ego and has recognised that this is an act of humour. We should not be scared, but rather should enjoy the insult.

As Freud suggested, the ego is a severe master. It points to situations and characters which should concern us. Nonetheless, the super-ego embraces the ego by convincing it that the situation is a harmless act of humour. Perhaps afterwards we will need to deal with the problem, but meanwhile we should realise that the issue is presented in such a way as to deserve nothing more than a laugh. During the period studied here, many parts of Mexican society were concerned about the lack of

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<sup>153</sup> *Los Agachados*, 43, p. 2.

<sup>154</sup> Critchley, *On Humour...* p. 56.

democracy, even if the official Party could not be challenged. In the *Los Agachados* issue just quoted, Trastupijes believes that there is a conspiracy against him and says to the policeman: ‘¡Quieren acabar con la democracia en Chayotitlán!’ and the policeman replies: ‘¿Cuál?’ The policeman himself gives voice to our beliefs. But Trastupijes’ answer surprises us: ‘¡Así se dice, hombre!’<sup>155</sup> pointing out the lack of democracy, despite the official speeches. We laugh at the revealed truth and at the possibility of discussing a topic that we are not allowed to question. Our ego will tell us that lack of democracy is not funny at all, but the super-ego will reveal that the taboo is presented in a funny way and that this representation is a safe way to discuss the topic.

### **The breaking of the rule**

In chapter one Umberto Eco’s approach to humour was discussed in which he proposes that the comical appears when a rule or a code that we recognise is violated. Eco explains that this violation also occurs when it happens to a stereotypical situation that is inserted in a *frame of reference*.<sup>156</sup> In that case we laugh because something unexpected happened –altering the frame. A situation that we already know in a specific way was interrupted. Thus, Eco’s idea is related to incongruity theory and the manifestation of the unexpected. I will now turn to a consideration of the idea of the violation of a rule. As discussed, what we need to know first is the existence of the rule, without which we would not recognise that it was, in fact, transgressed. Equally, we must know the stereotyped situation, since we would not notice it being broken otherwise.

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<sup>155</sup> *Los Agachados*, 43, p. 25.

<sup>156</sup> Eco simply calls this a ‘frame’ but I will call it ‘frame of reference’ in order to avoid confusion with comic and film vocabulary. Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’. For the purpose of this work.

The violation of the rule may come from the characters when they are engaged in an activity, which is why it is so important that the comic character is animalistic – and that we feel no sympathy for his/her actions.<sup>157</sup> In *La Familia Burrón*, Ruperto is waiting for his girlfriend outside her house when the police stop and try to arrest him without giving him a reason. The policeman threatens him: ‘Si no quieres sentir que las piernas se te doblan al recibir un cachazo, súbete al carro sin protestar’. Ruperto replies: ‘A un hombre honrado no se le puede detener.’ The policeman ignores Ruperto’s comment and pushes him inside the patrol car while saying: ‘¿Qué no?’<sup>158</sup> In this case a policeman is breaking a code: an innocent man cannot be detained by police. And as we have seen, this is a common representation of the police in the three comic books. They create a carnivalised situation in which the criminals are the authorities, and the civilians are abused by them. However, the Mexican reality was indeed upside down like in carnival, and citizens often suffered abuse, as stated in chapter two. In this example we feel relief that someone is portraying policemen as abusive. This is another violation of the rule since the artists who created *La Familia Burrón* were discussing a taboo topic, the abusiveness of our authorities. They violated the rule that indicates that we should not make fun of the authorities, so here we have two mechanisms which trigger laughter.

We recognise Umberto Eco’s proposition when police dishonesty is discussed. In *Hermelinda Linda* a policeman asks the witch to help him change the ashes of a thief who died in a fire before confessing where he hid all the money he robbed from the bank. Hermelinda asks the policeman: ‘¿Y qué les parecerá a los del banco?’ and the policeman replies: ‘Señora, los del banco siempre están asegurados...’.<sup>159</sup> The

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<sup>157</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 10.

<sup>158</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 5.

<sup>159</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 1743, p. 10

policeman is not acting in the way that we would expect a policeman to behave, as happened in the previous example from *La Familia Burrón*. The policeman is breaking an ethical code when trying to discover the money that the thief robbed. His behaviour is reprehensible, and according to Eco this will bring us pleasure when he is punished. We feel no sympathy for the man who transgressed the rule, and we enjoy the punishment meted out for his transgression. For breaking the deal, he made and disobeying Hermelinda's advices, he disappears transformed into dust.

As we have seen, through humour the reader and the artist get pleasure by expressing, or seeing expressed, what they would like to criticise but cannot. By enunciating banned topics or forbidden thoughts we are also breaking a rule, even if this is a self-censorship. Even when we are not the ones who directly insult someone we do not like, or point to a fault that should be corrected, we take ownership over the insult as if we were the ones to have made it. But as in the previous example, perhaps we do not like the person who infringed the code, and our pleasure will come from the naked truth (Freud) and from the misadventure of the character who broke the code. In *La Familia Burrón*, in the episode in which Borola is trying to collect money for a party, she visits an old friend from her childhood who tells Borola that she is married with a highway patrolman and they are rich because 'de puras mordidas se embolsa un millón mensual', and adds: 'cuando yo lo conocí, ya era muy rico, era vigilante de tránsito de un crucero muy importante. Después se dio cuenta que sorprender parejas de enamorados era una mina de oro y se metió de patrullero'.<sup>160</sup> The woman's statement is exaggerated since it seems unlikely that someone can become rich simply by demanding bribes from lovers caught in their cars. However, the exaggeration helps uncover the corruption of policemen, which citizens are familiar with, and we get relief when Borola tells her

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<sup>160</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17280, p. 16.

friend: ‘Estos huesos son los que dan dinero a manos llenas’. This is something we would like to say openly about police extortion. Again, we find this moment funny because the situation describes the violation of a rule that expects policemen to be truthful and not accept bribes. If we consider the police as our antithesis, then the enjoyment will be greater. Also, if we do not feel sympathy for the policeman’s wife, we will also greatly enjoy it when Borola beats her because the lady refuses to lend her money.

As we have seen, politicians are some of the favourite characters to make fun of and criticise. In *La Familia Burrón*, Juanón Teporochas, another town cacique, believes that his friend Briagoberto Memelas has died, and he organises a funeral which a large crowd attends. When his assistant expresses surprise at Juanón’s ability to summon people, Juanón replies: ‘¿Tú crees que llegué a cacique por menso y tarugo? Soy político y sé manejar la borregada’.<sup>161</sup> Juanón is contradicting what Borola, and some other characters, think about politicians, since he states that because he is smart, he can bring people to political meetings. In this act of humour, it is temporarily allowed to discuss how politicians used to bring people to propaganda events. Here we see a politician admitting his fault, denigrating himself and all politicians in similar positions.<sup>162</sup> Pointing to this fault reminds us of the existence of the fault. We enjoy making fun about the politicians, criticising and ridiculing them, pointing to the problems that should be changed and making them look ridiculous. However, reality is as ridiculous as the scenes in the comic books. About this, Eco writes that ‘el humor intenta restablecer y reafirmar el marco roto. No funciona para que aceptemos ese

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<sup>161</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17228, p. 26.

<sup>162</sup> *Borregada* is a way to refer to the people who participate in event or accept whatever is ordered without questioning. Lara, *Diccionario del español...* <<http://dem.colmex.mx/Default.aspx>> [accessed 8 April 2011]

sistema de valores, pero por lo menos nos obliga a reconocer su existencia'.<sup>163</sup> To notice the fault, does not force us to admit our destiny, but uncovers the broken rule, as if we belonged to a distorted reality such as the one portrayed in the comic. Sadly, that is exactly how Mexican reality is portrayed.

In *Los Agachados*, Licenciado Trastupijes wants to jail the hippies who are in Chayotitlán. Nopalzin is arrested because he looks just like a hippy: '...son unos greñudos que andan con guitarras y en fachas medio raras.'<sup>164</sup> When he is presented to Trastupijes, Trastupijes tries to speak to him in English believing that Nopalzin is a foreigner. Nopalzin starts making fun of Trastupijes by saying random words and sentences in English that are related with products or well-known slogans. In this case, Nopalzin is making fun of the authority, a violation of a norm since we would not behave like that if we were arrested. The licenciado is also shown as absentminded, not recognising his fellow citizen, not a flattering description for the authority. But even when Nopalzin is in trouble we might not be concerned about his luck. This may be because he is an animalistic character who deserves his fortune, or because we understand that comic characters are indestructible as discussed in chapter one, and we trust that misfortunes will be overcome.

In chapter one, we saw that in order to recognise the violation of a rule, it is essential to recognise the code that has been broken. When Borola wants to fly in Floro Tinoco's personal plane, a small plane in which Floro can hardly squeeze, Floro refuses. Borola gets angry with him and complains by saying: '¡Egoísta, mal amigo, comunista!'<sup>165</sup> The plane, Floro and the scene itself are illogical because of the proportions of the plane and Floro, and the idea of a personal mini-plane being used in

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<sup>163</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 17.

<sup>164</sup> Rius, *Los Agachados de Rius...* p. 50.

<sup>165</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 16950, p. 7.

Mexico City. What we suggest here is that the first system broken is the one related to logic and plausibility. Besides, Borola's reaction of calling Floro 'communist' could be considered absurd, but as Simon Critchley proposed, humour is a kind of insider knowledge,<sup>166</sup> and by knowing that communists were blamed for many problems,<sup>167</sup> we enrich our analysis and understand that the author is also making fun of the use of the word 'communist' as if it referred to something evil. Borola is transposing the term 'communist' from its political meaning to an offensive meaning, changing the frame in which the word should be understood. In order to understand why Borola is doing this, we need to know the Mexican reality, and how the government at that time blamed the communists for various attacks and misfortunes that occurred throughout the country.<sup>168</sup> Borola will be 'insulted' in a similar way by a friend when, during an argument, the woman yells: 'Vieja anticuada, mojigata, mala amiga, comunista'.<sup>169</sup> In this example, before calling the other person communist, there is a series of insults, so we can see that 'comunista' is also used as an insult. Part of the hilarity comes from changing the frame for this word, using it as an insult, and making fun of how the authorities used that word to refer to 'malicious' or 'harmful'. By using the word in this way we are also ridiculing the authorities.

This statement is even more obvious in an episode from *Los Agachados*. When Licenciado Trastupijes is questioned about the reason for some prisoners being in Chayotitlán's jail, he answers: '¡Son comunistas! ¿Les parece poco? ¡Hemos gastado millones en decirlo: parece increíble que haya gente que no lo crea!' A journalist adds:

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<sup>166</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 67.

<sup>167</sup> Even Rius made fun of this when on the front page of *Los Agachados*, 22, he blamed the communists for the defeat of Mexico in the 1972 World Cup.

<sup>168</sup> For example, the 1968 students' movement in Mexico.

<sup>169</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 16964, p. 28.

‘Pues sí: siendo rojos, tienen que ser asesinos y rateros.’<sup>170</sup> By exaggerating the comments of Trastupijes, who in this case embodies the Mexican authorities, we find expressed something that part of the population believed about the government blaming the communists. Thus, the statements will bring satisfaction to the reader. We also notice that the authorities are not only exaggerating but also spending money to promote a negative image of the communists, which denigrates the authorities and portrays them as behaving incorrectly. But if we did not know how the Mexican authorities at that time were reacting against the communists and how they were excessive in blaming them for the troubles of the country, we would recognise an incongruity but not what the social context is referring to. In comedy, ‘el marco transgredido debe estar *presupuesto* pero nunca *explícito*’<sup>171</sup> since, if the transgression is made explicit, then the comic effect is lost. Political humour requires the reader to know the code, otherwise the interpretation would be limited and true humour would remain simply as incongruent humour.

A similar scene occurs in *Hermelinda Linda* with reference to civil servants. Hermelinda complains to the authorities about the noise and smoke coming from the motorcycle of a young man outside her house. The civil officer explains that he cannot do anything since the father of the young man is a well-known politician. He says: ‘Yo quiero conservar mi chamba’.<sup>172</sup> The man is saying that the authorities cannot work against those in power or their relatives, which of course goes against the proper way that an authority should work. But we realise that a truth about how authority operates has been revealed. Even if we find Hermelinda’s situation funny we also recognise that this is the unfortunate reality. As Eco states, humour criticises a fault, and we

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<sup>170</sup> *Los Agachados*, 40, p. 16.

<sup>171</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 14.

<sup>172</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 377, p. 7.

understand it if we belong to the cultural context in which the fault occurs. But for the reader, to realise that the scene is a possible world which portrays our society might bring a feeling of rebellion but also of sadness. We discover that what looks like an odd world is in fact the way that the world really is. Humour ‘no funciona para que aceptemos ese sistema de valores, pero por lo menos nos obliga a reconocer su existencia’.<sup>173</sup> Corrupted bureaucrats do not exist only in comic books, but they are part of our daily reality, and to admit it brings us discomfort. We enjoy that Hermelinda takes revenge on the young man who misbehaves, and that the behaviour of the authorities was revealed. However, after the pleasure, Eco states that we will feel sad, knowing that we are not able to change reality, at least by making jokes.<sup>174</sup> That is the point when the *cold carnival* emerges: after witnessing the act of humour and insulting the authority we feel relieved, avenged but finally, upset.

We can say the same about corruption. When Borola is trying to find a way to release her brother from jail, she mentions a possibility: ‘El dinero ablanda a cualquiera. Préstame medio millón de pesos para repartirlo a manos llenas entre los representantes de la justicia’.<sup>175</sup> Later in the story she adds: ‘Un cañonazo de quince mil chuchos no lo aguanta el más honrado de los jueces’.<sup>176</sup> The way that Borola refers to corruption is inappropriate, and this generates comedy, but she also refers to a topic that can generate stress in the population, namely citizens gaining justice through corruption. And to admit it, according to Eco, is a way to reinforce the code, so, we criticise at the same time that we admit our destiny. The liberation is only for the soul, when we ridicule the authorities. Real freedom does not come through humour, but at least we set ourselves – just temporarily- in a situation in which we feel superior. Eco claims that at the moment

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<sup>173</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 18.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>175</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 16914, p. 6

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

of the joke we are too wise to believe the truth. Freud, on the other hand, believes that we recognise the truth but that our super-ego helps us to deal with the painful situation. Either way, we are witnessing true humour: an act in which humour reveals a social reality that the community recognises, criticises and punishes with laughter.

But as we have seen, humour allows society to criticise itself, and corruption is not only practiced by the authorities but also by members of the community. In *Hermelinda Linda*, a clumsy man is trying to find out what sport suits him best, and while trying the high jump, he falls down over a woman. The woman chases him, accusing him of being a degenerate and a rapist. She explains to Hermelinda: ‘¡Hace víctima de sus degenerados apetitos a señoras dignas como nosotras!’<sup>177</sup> The witch tells her that the man would pay any damage, and after Hermelinda compensates her with some money, the woman is satisfied. She abandons her accusations, and instead of going to the authorities to denounce the offense, the woman decides that a crime can be fixed and forgotten when the right price is paid. The clumsiness of the man is funny but the lady’s reaction reveals how people can forget even a serious moral harm (according to the lady’s initial accusations) when they are paid. This shows that in this society, everyone has a price. The broken system here is the abuse of society by itself and the lack of social values.

There are other ways to discuss dishonesty. When Briagoberto Memelas visits Mexico City, he asks a passer-by where to go partying. The man answers: ‘un lugar alegre, donde lo roban pero no tanto como en otros lugares, es el cabaret “Las Maracas”.’<sup>178</sup> In another scene, Borola describes how petrol salesmen abuse customers: ‘Con esos cuates hay que andarse muy listos. El otro día le caí a uno que con un bote

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<sup>177</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 368, p. 27.

<sup>178</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17171, p. 26.

vacío, puesto al revés fingió que le echaba un libro de aceite.’<sup>179</sup> In *Los Agachados* a taxi driver is portrayed saying to a potential customer: ‘Voy a entregar, pero si dan un cien, los llevo.’<sup>180</sup> The taxi driver is saying that he will take the person to his destination only if he pays him more money, because his work shift is finished. Borola describes how some employees cheat customers, and the man speaking to Briagoberto is claiming that leisure places used to abuse their clients. In all these situations, society is failing. It is abusing itself. But the characters who suffered the abuse are animalistic –as Eco argues –or we feel superior to them; therefore, we feel no sympathy for them and in fact we enjoy their tragedy. However, a social truth has been revealed, and noticing it darkens our enjoyment and brings a sour taste. The readers recognise the reality and to reveal it brings them relaxation, but also bitterness.<sup>181</sup> Reality has been criticised and exposed it, but at the end, the world is as ridiculous as it was portrayed. Even if the norms are attacked, humour cannot destroy or change them.

A final example of this mechanism of humour is found in discussions of machismo. When Briagoberto is visiting the Burrón family, Borola interrupts his conversation with Regino, which bothers Briagoberto. Briagoberto replies: ‘Oiga esto, Güereja. La casa se hizo pa’la mujer, la taberna pa’los hombres. Así que váyase a su cocina y cierre el pico ¿’tamos?’<sup>182</sup> Briagoberto’s attitude shows his macho way of thinking, but he is also the generalisation of Mexican men (and even women) who thought the same way. Also, knowing the character from previous issues, we know that he behaves in a macho way, does not respect women, has children with different women and does not support them financially. He drinks, fights, carries a gun, and in general is an absurd character. But all this caricaturing of Briagoberto as a ridiculous character

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<sup>179</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17189, p. 33.

<sup>180</sup> *Los Agachados*, 269, p. 8.

<sup>181</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 20.

<sup>182</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17171, p. 25.

allows us to discuss the existence of machismo in an enjoyable manner. According to Eco, by recognising that our world is like the one portrayed, we are not only admitting but perhaps also reinforcing machismo, since humour is a safety valve and a means of transforming displeasure into amusement. This does not mean that we will stop fighting against whatever causes us distress, simply because we have found an enjoyable way to deal with it. What Eco claims is that humour is a way to confront the codes from the inside, so by ridiculing an attitude or situation, we are undermining them from within. We recognise how ridiculous our world can be, and consequently we might be motivated to change it.

As previously suggested, machismo is not only encouraged by men, but also by women, as we see when Borola's starts a private car hire business and she is hired to drive Onofre and another child to school. She drives very fast and carelessly, which causes Onofre to fly out of the car and injure himself. He starts crying and does not want to get back into the car. Borola scolds him: '¡Nada, tú te subes y seguimos adelante! Vengo con una pareja de machitos, no con dos mariconetes.'<sup>183</sup> Different mechanisms of humour emerge in this example, such as incongruity and exaggeration. However, we can see how Borola's statement sets machos in a position of superiority. Machos do not cry, and boys should behave like machos from an early age, bearing all kinds of pain. She uses insulting words from the macho vocabulary, namely 'mariconete' and 'de todo el catálogo de insultos machistas, lo más agravante es llamar a un hombre 'maricón'...'.<sup>184</sup> By referring to Onofre in this way, she is reinforcing a macho sexist culture that insults men (and male children) who show weakness. We recognise the situation, and by laughing we point to this social fault, and perhaps condemn it. The act of humour reminds us that we live in a macho-ruled society.

<sup>183</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17189, p. 18.

<sup>184</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...*, p. 150.

Although the act itself will not change social behaviour, by recognising the absurdity and ridiculousness of it the habit is weakened. Part of the relevance of humour is that it invites us to reflect on our society and environment, and perhaps to find a proper manner to change it.

### ***Speaking the Unspeakable. Torture inserted in an act of humour***

As we saw in the previous chapter, during Luis Echeverría's presidential term, there were governmental groups responsible for torture, abuse of authority, and forced disappearances. The issue of human rights was not openly discussed in the mass media and was publicly denied by the authorities; however it was well known that this abuse occurred and that the targets were considered to be enemies of the state.<sup>185</sup>

Torture is a serious topic which affects not only those who suffered it but also their friends and loved ones, who themselves feel human rights have been violated by the authorities.<sup>186</sup> During this period, the army committed abuses in communities around the country to get information about the social movements. There were paramilitary groups as well as intelligence forces carrying out these acts. Torture was known by the population but was discussed only *sotto voce* because of the fear of suffering the same physical abuse.

Popular and commercial comic books kept a distance from topics related to the army, and there was a taboo 'que impedía representar al Ejército Mexicano como algo más que una noble institución al servicio del bienestar público, particularmente en el

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<sup>185</sup> Examples of these abuses were described in chapter two.

<sup>186</sup> Sergio Aguayo, *La charola. Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia de México* (México: Grijalbo, Raya en el agua, 2001), p. 189.

campo.’<sup>187</sup> But this does not mean that something as difficult and strong as torture was not portrayed in their pages. It is interesting that in the issues of *Hermelinda Linda* and *La Familia Burrón* which were researched for this study, only the police were described as a government institution abusive of their power, using torture to get information and maintain social peace. The army, the intelligence services (such as the Dirección Federal de Seguridad) and paramilitary groups are not present in these comics. On the other hand, in *Los Agachados*, army abuses were portrayed, and criticised, and there were also a few references to the secret intelligence forces.

As mentioned earlier, in *La Familia Burrón*, police wrongdoing is signalled by their nicknames, such as ‘Los Ángeles del Infierno’<sup>188</sup> and ‘acólitos del diablo’. In fact, the local police are not the only ones referred to in a negative way. The Policía Judicial<sup>189</sup> are called ‘*perjudicial*’ in a clever word game which expresses the idea that this police force was detrimental to the population instead of supporting and helping it. We find such language in an issue of *La Familia Burrón*, and also in one from *Los Agachados*, suggesting that this was a common way to refer to these forces. From the comment of one of the characters in *Los Agachados*, the Policía Judicial is more feared than the regular police: in an episode in which two policemen are trapped in a jail, they hear a voice outside and wondering who it could be, one answers: ‘de la perjudicial, mano: a esos sí hay que tenerles miedo’.<sup>190</sup>

To give such nickname to the police generates comedy through the mechanism of incongruity. Also, through this act of humour we find a safety valve to express our

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<sup>187</sup> Carlos Bonfil, ‘El violín y la carreta’, in *La Jornada*, 29 april 2007, section Cultura, <<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/04/29/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a09a1esp>> [accessed 21 May 2010]

<sup>188</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17196, p.14.

<sup>189</sup> The equivalent for this police force could be the Federal Police Agents. In another word game the Palacio Negro (Mexico’s city jail) is called Palacio Prieto, playing with the words but also making references for the reader to interpret and relate with someone or something from the Mexican reality.

<sup>190</sup> *Los Agachados*, 97, p. 26. As explained in chapter two, there were many reasons for fearing the federal police, since the torture and abuse they inflicted was known.

fears of the police, since our super-ego reminds us that we are witnessing a fictitious situation - a possible world rather than the real one. The police character from *Los Agachados* is expressing the view that the Policía Judicial are worthy of fear. Assuming we agree with the statement, we take ownership over the insult as if we were the ones who stated it, as in the case previously discussed of the ‘acólitos del diablo’. We are also pointing out that the police, rather than supporting and helping citizens, are detrimental. This is a fault that should be corrected, and by expressing what we think about them we gain the feeling of victory. We identify ourselves with those who are referring to the police in such a way. It is a moral victory over the authoritarian and violent police. We feel safe expressing such views about the Policía Judicial since we are not the ones committing the offence – we know the consequences and adhere to social norms which prevent us from insulting a [violent] authority.

So is it justified to refer to the police and the Policía Judicial in such a way? According to these three comic books, there is plenty of reason the police deserve such infamous nicknames. Also, by giving the Policía Judicial that nickname, the characters are breaking the rule that requires them to respect the authorities. The violation brings enjoyment although also reminds us that we should not make fun of them or criticise their practices, even when they are violent, since we could also be victims. But as long as someone else performs the transgression, we feel avenged and also innocent.

Not only are the police portrayed as violent, but they also speak openly and without shame about their mistreatment of detainees. Likewise, the characters in the comics speak of the techniques the police often use, to be examined in later examples. Either way, in these three comics we can see that the general population knew of official violence.

## Police

As seen above, the police appear both useless and dishonest, and perhaps this is why they use brutality to solve cases and catch criminals. The application of violence was justified by the authorities giving reasons of security and stability, as discussed in chapter two. But relating the abuse to incompetence is a safe way to discuss the topic without linking it to the political authorities. Police have neither ethical codes nor respect for the citizens. They can detain anyone without needing evidence or an arrest warrant, and they can even use violence to take someone into custody. In an episode of *La Familia Burrón*, Ruperto Tacuche is jailed because the factory in which he works is robbed, and the owner and the authorities know about his criminal past even when there is no evidence to inculcate him, and despite the fact that Ruperto has abandoned his criminal activities because of his love for Bella Bellota, although only the reader knows that. But since he appears to be the most obvious culprit, then no further investigation seems necessary. But, as we will see, the police tortured their suspects to extract confessions, even from innocent people, as we will see.

In the episode in which Ruperto is accused of robbing a jewellery shop, he is interrogated by police investigators who in fact are referred to in the caption as ‘Ruperto’s tyrants’.<sup>191</sup> There is good reason to refer to them that way, as we see from the severe punishment that Ruperto suffers from them in order to make him confess. He is questioned for hours under powerful lights, and a group of policemen beat him up. But because he does not say who his accomplices were, because he did not commit the crime, one of the investigators threatens him: ‘Te vamos a dar una última oportunidad, si no la aprovechas, te haremos hablar de otra forma’.<sup>192</sup> This is a reference to the use of

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<sup>191</sup> ‘Ruperto se encuentra frente a sus verdugos, que diga, frente a los investigadores’, *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 11.

<sup>192</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 13.

more cruel torture methods, which is confirmed in the next frame when Ruperto, along with crude language from one of the policemen represented with visual metaphors, receives severe electric shocks.

The reader feels concerned about Ruperto's well-being, but the exaggeration in the caption, which describes the frame as 'una descarga de un millón de voltios hace prenderse a Ruperto como foco de cinco mil watts',<sup>193</sup> tells the reader not to feel too concerned since, although torture is a terrible practice which did occur in Mexico at the time, this is a *mise-en-scene* and a comic, and Ruperto will overcome it. It is the triumph of the super-ego over the ego, as Freud pointed out. We know that comic characters overcome tragedy and that the universe of humour is indestructible.<sup>194</sup> Therefore, when Ruperto is taken to his jail cell badly injured and says '¡Ay, ay! mejor mátenme pero no me den toques',<sup>195</sup> we might feel concerned about his safety and we may not find his tragedy funny. However, since the circumstance is presented in an act of humour, we understand that Ruperto will be fine. He will never be able to change his destiny –this is in fact the disjuncture that causes the situations, but he will overcome his misfortune and continue his life unaffected. Furthermore, this stigmatisation of Ruperto by his criminal past is what makes him the usual suspect for the authorities, and this eternal tragedy makes him a ridiculous character which might cause laughter in the reader.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Zupancic, 'The "Concrete Universal" and...', p. 181.

<sup>195</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 14.



Image 3.8. 'Ruperto being tortured'. Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón* (n.d.) (colour)

The police talk openly and unashamedly about using cruel and violent methods to get confessions and mete out justice. In the episode of *La Familia Burrón* in which Tinoco's mansion is robbed, when the police arrive, the chief of police warns the family: 'No se asuste de los procesos que utilizamos para hacer hablar a los sospechosos', and asks Mr Titino Tinoco 'Señálenos con quién empezamos. Para que su esposa y usted no se impresionen mucho, los haremos hablar a garrotazos.'<sup>196</sup> This refers to the fact that they could use even more violent methods to get confessions. Likewise, when Ruperto is arrested on suspicion of having robbed the factory where he works, and the police want him to confess, an officer tells him: 'Dentro de un rato, en medio de horrorosos gritos, nos confesarás dónde tienes guardada la fortuna que robaste'.<sup>197</sup>

The torture described and presented in some issues of *La Familia Burrón* is very detailed and closely-related to some of the torture methods used at the time,<sup>198</sup> from beatings to more technologically-advanced methods, which are referred to as 'adelantos científicos en las investigaciones'.<sup>199</sup> However, they are caricatured and mixed with the

<sup>196</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p.22.

<sup>197</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17185, p.33.

<sup>198</sup> For more references, check Laura Castellanos, *México armado 1943-1981* (México: Ediciones Era, 2007), pp. 224-227 and 248-254.

<sup>199</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p.13.

use of colloquial language and comic expression. For example, in order to extract a confession, the police chief says to Mr Tinoco, in the episode about the robbery, that they can do ‘una simple “manita de puerco”, hasta sacarles las uñas una por una, o colgarlos de la lengua’,<sup>200</sup> and he adds that the reason for using violence is because ‘es difícil sacarles la verdad con palabras suaves y cariñitos a los hampones. Con ellos hay que usar la fuerza y la violencia’.<sup>201</sup> These methods, which are described by the police chief himself, also include skinning the arrested person, pouring boiling oil in the suspect’s ears and lighting torches in their eyes.

In *Hermelinda Linda* there are also some references to torture, although not as many as in *La Familia Burrón*. In the episode previously discussed in which a man named Nicanor is jailed after robbing a bank is visited by his mother in law, in their first meeting he explains to her what the police are doing to him: ‘tratan de que les diga dónde escondí los billetes, pero no lo van a conseguir... yo soy más duro que ellos...’.<sup>202</sup> This comment leads the reader to believe that he has been tortured. This is confirmed when Nicanor thinks to himself that the witch Hermelinda is his last hope since ‘ya van tres noches seguidas que me llevan al “pocito”...’,<sup>203</sup> pointing out which torture he has suffered specifically. As we have seen, these difficult subjects are *softened* with mechanisms of humour such as exaggeration. This ‘sugar-coating’ makes it easier for the reader to deal with torture and discuss it more widely.

Later in the story of Nicanor, his mother-in-law goes to visit him again, but a policeman informs her that he is in the prison’s hospital. The woman’s comment about this fact is ‘canallas... deben haberle atizado duro.’<sup>204</sup> This comment points out that

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<sup>200</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17191, p. 22.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>202</sup> *Hermelinda Linda*, 363, p.5.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Nicanor was a victim of police brutality. In contrast with the cases from *La Familia Burrón*, in which the police openly speak about their behaviour, the policeman says that the woman is spreading lies. However, when he explains that Nicanor is in the hospital because he slipped on a banana peel, we infer that he is lying because of the foolishness of his alibi. It brings humour not only for being directly related with a common image—slipping on a banana peel – but also for the ridiculous and unsuitable comment. All these cases are evidence that the characters already know about police brutality. In this case the discomfort of readers in talking about torture is again alleviated by the use of not only exaggeration but also incongruity. In other words, even though some of the torture methods described were used by police at the time, others are exaggerated and illogical, such as hanging someone from the tongue or giving them an electric shock of a million volts. As McGhee points out, once we have perceived this incongruity, we recognise that we are witnessing an act of humour. This helps us discuss the topic and live with it, since ‘a person must be in a better position to cope with conflict after humor than before it’.<sup>205</sup>

### **The Breaking of the rule**

Such an unfavourable portrayal of the police, targeting them as a constant butt of jokes, gives us the impression that people were afraid of them and had no sympathy for them. This confirms the previous idea of the police as the antithesis of the citizens. In *Los Agachados* there is a comment from Trastupijes which supports this idea, when Trastupijes is asking Bedoyo to arrest El Mesías without using violence, and adds:

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<sup>205</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origins...* p. 21.

‘Tenemos que darle al pueblo la nueva imagen del gobierno: que ya no odien a la policía..’<sup>206</sup>

The performance of the army is also strongly criticized in *Los Agachados*. When Rius is wondering what exactly Echeverría’s Apertura Democrática is, he discusses the role of the army, and how it abuses citizens. A caption reads: ‘Y prosiguen las detenciones arbitrarias, las golpizas, torturas y amenazas a miembros de la oposición...’<sup>207</sup> The frame is illustrated with a soldier who looks like Adolph Hitler, with the same moustache and hair. In this case, the incongruity is that something unexpected is inserted in the narrative : the image. By recognising the element that does not correspond, we understand the joke. However, in this case, the element that distorts the image has political implications, and by recognising Hitler, we understand that the author considers Mexican soldiers to have behaved in similar ways, such as violating human rights. The caption makes this plain. The violence of the soldiers is confirmed in a previous issue when Professor Hans explains that the government has not found a way of conducting a dialogue with the students - only violence – and the frame shows a soldier wearing a gas mask beating a student.<sup>208</sup> The pleasure and relief are similar to what was previously described, such as discussing army violence through an act of humour: since it is a taboo topic, the enjoyment from insulting them will be greater. It is a safe way to discuss the issue, and perhaps the only harmless way, to take revenge on this wrongdoing.

Even though *Hermelinda Linda* and *La Familia Burrón* do not speak about paramilitary groups and secret police, in *Los Agachados* the reference is straightforward. In the issue in which the 1971 attack against students is discussed, Rius

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<sup>206</sup> *Los Agachados*, 71, p. 4.

<sup>207</sup> *Los Agachados*, 115, p. 12.

<sup>208</sup> *Los Agachados*, 77, p. 20.

speaks openly about the paramilitary group Los Halcones even as the government denied their existence. The comic refers not only to Los Halcones, but to other paramilitary organisations which had been previously reported by the left wing press: ‘la existencia de diversos grupos “secretos” semi-policíacos y semi-militares, destinados a asesinar, golpear, ametrallar y destruir todo movimiento de oposición al régimen.’<sup>209</sup> It explains that these groups recruit young delinquents or members from the army or the *pentatlón* (cadets), or even hooligans. In a different issue, there is a reference to the secret police and their abuse when the government blames the communists for boycotting a space trip: ‘Seis “culpables” aparecieron un día en los separos de la secreta: eran 6 comunistas que habían confesado su crimen, pagados por Corea del Norte...’<sup>210</sup> The plot of the issue is illogical since is about a Mexican mission to the moon that is a disaster because it is organised in a corrupt way. But again, the reader finds an opportunity to talk about something forbidden in a gentler way.

### **Forced Disappearance**

In some issues of *La Familia Burrón* and *Los Agachados*, there are elements which are related to forced disappearances. Not only could someone be arrested without a warrant, as mentioned above, but they could also be held without communication or official information on their whereabouts. We already discussed the story in *Los Agachados* in which Don Ruco is looking for Nopalzin because he had a dream in which Nopalzin was abducted by the authorities, and Profe Gumaro refers to the fact that journalists suffered that punishment. These little allusions were some of the channels to express common understandings that these events occurred. Political prisoners are mentioned

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<sup>209</sup> *Los Agachados*, 98, p. 2.

<sup>210</sup> *Los Agachados*, 269, p. 23.

only in this comic; their detention is usually arbitrary since the offense is to be perceived in opposition to the government.

Nopalzin asks Don Céfiro a naive question: ‘¿A poco pa ser preso político hay q. pensar?’ and he replies: ‘Bueno... pensar, pero diferente al gobierno..’.<sup>211</sup> Don Céfiro’s answer demonstrates that those who opposed the government were treated as enemies, persecuted and jailed. However, publicly, they were accused of crimes against public order, and Don Masiosare, another client in the pulquería where Nopalzin and Céfiro are talking, interrupts: ‘¡Mentira! ¡Esos tipos no están presos por sus ideas, sino por sus delitos..!’<sup>212</sup> When he is asked which crimes he is referring to, he explains: ‘Hombre, pues asaltar señoras, quemar camiones, insultar policías, robar taponos de coches... ¡en fin!’<sup>213</sup> These were the customary accusations used to jail the regime’s opponents. The mechanisms of humour here are Don Cefiro’s unexpected answer and the way he plays with the discourse, as well as Nopalzin’s silly question. But when the other man interferes in the conversation, the comedy is in the character’s very name: ‘Don Masiosare’, since ‘Masiosare’ refers to a part of the Mexican national anthem [mas si osare un extraño enemigo], making clear that the character supports the establishment.

We might also recognise that the topic concerns a reality that we are familiar with but about which we do not speak of openly because of the implications. The discussion of the taboo topic and the incongruity liberate us and give us the impression that we ourselves criticised the repressive practices of the government. According to the comic, to complain about the abuse publicly is dangerous. We see the image of a peasant standing in front of a grave while making a comment about those who

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<sup>211</sup> *Los Agachados*, 40, p. 20.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

demanded land reform: ‘consiguieron lo q. pedían: tierra...’.<sup>214</sup> This is known as true humour: a social reality has been revealed, the violence of the authorities, and our laughter is also part of our condemnation of the practice. However, there is little we can do, so when the enjoyment ends, it turns to sadness, the sadness of being reminded how the world is, namely very similar to the one just portrayed.

We might feel that the abuse and murder of opponents should be discussed with seriousness, but besides using humour as one of the few channels to express concerns and objections, it is also ‘un recurso para adaptarse a la crueldad y al terror de una realidad específica; [...] es un ejercicio de estoicismo en la medida en que es un acto de libertad en el que el individuo busca la aceptación del destino’.<sup>215</sup> Humour is also rebellion, and it might help us change our destiny –instead of accepting our fate, as Barajas proposes- since ‘by occasionally stepping back from the seriousness of the situation and approaching it with a sense of humour (sometimes called ‘looking on the light side’), we are presumably better able to deal with the source of the problem’.<sup>216</sup> Thus, when citizens suffer horrific attacks, humour will be a way to discuss them, make fun of them, and ridicule those who inflict the suffering. They help us cope with the pain and live with it, and they help us search for answers. Help assume the problem by transforming it into a joke, which enables us to reduce it to something smaller and more silly.

In an issue of *La Familia Burrón* described earlier, Bella Bellota is looking for Ruperto after she learns that he was detained by the police. She gets to the police station for the second time and asks: ‘Señor, perdone que venga otra vez aquí pero es que en

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<sup>214</sup> *Los Agachados*, 98, p. 10.

<sup>215</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 31.

<sup>216</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 21.

ningún lugar me dan razón del Señor Ruperto Tacuche'.<sup>217</sup> Regino Burrón suffers a similar fate when he is detained by the police in the episode in which his wife builds a castle in the *vecindad*. In the last caption of the issue, as we see Regino in jail, we read: 'El maestro peluquero permanece incomunicado más de un mes'.<sup>218</sup> We know that depriving someone of their freedom was a practice used by the authorities against their opponents, and to find references to it is an interesting phenomenon. We find funny the situation in which Regino Burrón ends up because all the situations in the story are illogical. We understand that we are witnessing an act of humour in which, in fact, nobody is hurt. Finally, and this is probably the most important reason for finding these tragedies funny and being able to laugh about the fate of the characters is that comic characters overcome every tragedy. Indeed, they are immortal: 'it seems that nothing can really get to them, which somehow contradicts the realistic view of the world that comedy is supposed to promote'.<sup>219</sup> It does not matter how big the explosion, such as when Borola throws a match inside a gas tank with terrible results,<sup>220</sup> or how brutal the torture, the comic character will reappear in the following issue in the same spirit, ready to live new adventures. And also to suffer new tragedies, which perhaps will make us laugh once again.

## Guerrilla

Even when the Mexican authorities denied the existence of guerrillas, some of the comics made reference to them. In *La Familia Burrón*, Avelino Pílongano, the bohemian poet of the *vecindad*, belongs to a group called '*Los inconformes*' which is a group of young people who discuss current events from a left wing, almost communist,

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<sup>217</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17164, p. 15.

<sup>218</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17196, p. 34.

<sup>219</sup> Zupancic, 'The "Concrete Universal" and...', p. 181.

<sup>220</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17189.

point of view. This group makes reference to the *peñas*, youth groups who gathered to listen to music and read poetry.<sup>221</sup> The name of the group is exaggerated since it is a means both to label the members and also their activity: to complain. *Los inconformes* wear patched clothes, some of them have long hair, live in a simple room of a roof, and on the walls of their room there is a poster with an image of a guerrilla member. This information narrows the group of young people that the images are referring to, portraying '*los inconformes*' as being similar to those who participated in the social demonstrations of 1968. One of them is reading in the news about a wedding reception organised by wealthy people attended by almost two and a half million guests, and comments: 'Mientras algunos tienen dinero de sobra, otros padecemos por no tener qué llevarnos a la boca' and Avelino, cracking up, replies: 'Aparte de ser un prángana, eres un pobre de espíritu. Sólo los tontos se atormentan'.<sup>222</sup> The news is exaggerated and illogical, but Avelino makes fun of his friend's point of view because he considers himself superior in spirit. Avelino does not complain about the lack of material things, although his friend is actually talking about not having enough food. However, the friend shows less social concern when he states: '¡Estamos cansados de ser pobres, necesitamos hacer una expropiación en un banco y repartirnos la lana!'<sup>223</sup> This statement reflects much less social idealism, and in fact is blatantly arguing in favour of criminal behaviour.

We should also highlight the use of the word '*expropiación*'. As we remember from chapter two, '*expropiación*' was the word used to express thefts organised by guerrilla or belligerent groups to get money to continue working underground. However, in this case, the rationale is to share the money out among themselves,

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<sup>221</sup> They are portrayed as the *jipitecas* described in chapter two.

<sup>222</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17195, p. 5.

<sup>223</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17195, p. 8.

without pursuing any social aim. The dialogue between these characters is a way to criticise those groups which organised these kind of illegal acts, portraying them as selfishly seeking their own wealth rather than following a social goal. We may agree with Avelino and despise *'los inconformes'* because of their anti-social behaviour, and not concern ourselves about whether they succeed in the robbery. Alternatively we can place ourselves above all the characters and feel superior to all of them. Later in the story, Avelino defines what he understands as an *'expropiación'* when he says to his poor mother that he will participate in one in order to support her: *'Orita mismo me voy a hacer una expropiación para cubrirte de dinero. Tomaré por la fuerza lo que no es mío'*.<sup>224</sup> Avelino's reaction is exaggerated. However, his statement is pointing to what an *'expropiación'* could mean in the social imaginary, and by saying this is suggesting that in fact an *'expropiación'* might not be a solidarity action but rather a crime. If we agree with Avelino's point of view, then, we will appreciate the fact that someone dares to tell the young men that they are simply criminals and not social fighters.

In this story, Avelino becomes the voice of righteousness by condemning the lack of spirituality of the young men for not accepting their poverty with dignity. Despite being portrayed as a hippie and a bohemian, he expresses the view of many about the guerrillas' actions: *'Yo acepto todas las teorías [...] pero no estoy de acuerdo en llevar a la práctica el abuso, el atropello a los sistemas y leyes establecidas'*.<sup>225</sup> And once the young men carry out a robbery in a bank, Avelino condemns them by saying: *'Tantos días [...] nos pasamos discutiendo. Todo para que mis amigos los idealistas resultaran unos rufianes'*.<sup>226</sup> If we sympathise with Avelino, we might take credit for the criticism ourselves and will enjoy the fact that someone is telling these young men what

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>225</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17195, p. 12.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

we think about them. However, if we do not agree with Avelino, then we will enjoy the triumph of ‘los inconformes’ in their robbery and enjoy the tragedy of Avelino when he tries to do the same to get money for his mother, and the police capture him.

We can see a similar description of youth in *Los Agachados*. In an issue in which the usual characters do not appear in the story, and instead Rius expresses his opinions about what happened on 10 June 1971, he makes a statement about youth: ‘Para los jóvenes, solo hay una forma de lucha política: la violencia. Todo lo demás, (partidos, sindicatos, toma de conciencia, estudio) es cosa del pasado..’. The caption is illustrated with an image of a young man dressed in hippie style saying: ‘Es para viejitos fresas, maese!’<sup>227</sup> This example points out the concern about youth that people like Rius have and might share with other part of the population. The image of the hippie ridicules him by overstating his features, his language and even his statement. And the same messages from the previous example from *La Familia Burrón* are apparent in this one. These examples show us how Mexican society was divided over social movements – whether armed or pacifist – and had a poor understanding of this younger generation.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, humorous comic books have social relevance. They are used as a channel to discuss topics which are banned in open discussion in repressive societies, including Mexico during the regimes of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and Luis Echeverría Álvarez. In a country in which the mass media were co-opted, with a low level of literacy and where it was dangerous to show dissent, the *monitos*, as they are known in Mexico, were a great means to open discussion of taboo topics. Their availability, low

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<sup>227</sup> *Los Agachados*, 98, p. 20.

price, and the simplicity of reading and understanding them, with their combination of colourful images and enjoyable simple texts, made them perfect vehicles for dissent.

Although these comic books were not the only ones that portrayed Mexican reality at the time, their 'sugar-coated jokes' made it possible to discuss even the most horrendous topics. It facilitated wider discussion and consideration of these issues. Also, because of the nature of the medium, the authorities found it easier to allow their criticism, despite the fact that some authors were subjected to pressure from the authorities. For example, Rius suffered violent abuse because of his opposition to the government, and Óscar González, was required to stop making his comic book *Brujerías*.

Despite their criticism, comic books enjoyed a certain freedom. They are a relevant public record, and serve as a social barometer for the study of social history. Through humour we point to situations that generate anxiety or that we would like to change, not only in our personal lives, but also in our society. Even if we are unable to change them, at least we find relief highlighting faults and seeing them ridiculed by the comic characters. Thus, the comic character becomes a playmate who enunciates those things that we believe but dare not say. Even when we disagree with the comic character, we find satisfaction, because we enjoy his/her misfortune. As discussed, comedy has no happy endings.

Comic books became a microcosm which represented the world for those readers with similar perspectives. The comics were not a source of propaganda, but they were a means through which readers found the world represented in the way they conceived it. If the reader was not familiar with the topics or the social critique, then the act of true humour would not emerge. The reader might understand the situation as comical without understanding the social complaint. In this case, the comic books

would be mere entertainment. Yet they clearly go beyond pure amusement, and that makes them relevant and interesting for students of social phenomena.

In *Hermelinda Linda*, *La Familia Burrón* and *Los Agachados*, there were numerous references to what were considered to be social problems at the time. In their pages the government, public servants, and police, were criticised. Nevertheless, because of self-censorship, the army was not criticised, and *Los Agachados* was the only one that openly disapproved of the Mexican army. The most recurrent groups portrayed were governors, *diputados* and police, who were described as lazy, negligent, dishonest, untrustworthy, lacking expertise, incompetent, corrupt and abusive of their power.

However, the authorities were not the only ones questioned, society more broadly also came under scrutiny. Machismo was revealed and ridiculed, principally in *La Familia Burrón* and *Los Agachados*, while *Hermelinda Linda* portrayed machismo but with minimal criticism. The comic books also criticised the behaviour of the youth and their portrayal is unflattering. Young people were described as selfish, moaners, emulators of foreign values (principally US ones), immature politically, prone to involvement in violent groups such as guerrillas, drug-taking hippies, ignorant of moral values, and disrespectful of adults. Foreigners and the common stereotypes that were part of the social imaginary were represented and exaggerated, which help us construct a better knowledge about what the Mexicans thought about those from other nationalities. Finally, poverty was approached through humour as a way to point out its existence and in order to take account of this social tragedy.

In this chapter I examined how humour and images link us to real life situations, and in these comic books we recognise how some of the situations are related to real ones. At the same time, we understand that they belong to a world that does not exist,

that is fictional. The way to achieve this is by using different mechanisms of humour, which allow readers to understand that they are witnessing an act of humour. They help the readers to deal better with the topics, despite their harshness, as seen in the section entitled *Speaking the Unspeakable*.

We also saw how, by following the comic characters, the reader participates in the expression of feelings and concerns, and even takes revenge on the oppressing authorities. The characters from these three comics became the voice of those who sought to complain about the social and political situation, but who lacked a voice to do so. Characters in the comics thus became the spokespersons of the oppressed and an important register for studying the contemporary social imaginary.

Through this examination we gain an understanding of how the image works in combination with the humorous discourse to benefit the reader in different ways, according to his/her worldview. Furthermore, we saw how they liberated their readers without offering total freedom. We cannot change our reality permanently through humour, but its benefits are undeniable.

Without a doubt, these comic books were a safe tribune for the people, a great pleasure, although a cold carnival at the same time, and all at an affordable price. Society could recognise itself in their pages, assume the role of the main characters, enjoy the punishment of the oppressors, and all that without worrying about the fatality of the cartoon characters or their ominous destiny.

Perhaps Doña Paquiderma, a character in *La Familia Burrón* was already ahead of us. She said to Borola Burrón lucidly in one sentence what we have been discussing in this chapter. When Borola made fun of Doña Paquiderma's husband, she replied: 'Es que uste dice unas cosas que duelen muy feo, no mide su boca para decir sus

claridades'.<sup>228</sup> That is what humour in comic books did in order to complain about the social and political situation and to offer a critique of the authorities and society itself. Through humour and the language of the comics, these three authors were able to portray and criticise the concerns of the time.

Cinema worked theoretically in a similar way. However, it was more closely watched by censorship committees, more often co-opted by the authorities, more dependent on governmental money, and more elitist because of the cost of going to the cinema.

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<sup>228</sup> *La Familia Burrón*, 17189, p. 25.

## Chapter 4

### Laughter and reflection, coming soon to a cinema near you: analysis of four films

*El humor es la gran coraza  
con la que uno se defiende  
de este valle de lágrimas.*  
Camilo José Cela

In the previous chapter I discussed the use of humour in comic narratives to indict the failings of the authorities. We recognised those humorous expressions related to political issues and considered the rationale (and benefit) for using humour to criticise. However, we also saw that humour was used to highlight social tensions – flaws which should be corrected – which indicates that at least a part of society was aware of their role in making Mexico a better country. I will undertake a similar analysis in this chapter, but focusing instead on films.

I will begin by outlining briefly the state of Mexican cinema from 1969 to 1976. Although it is tempting to explore the history of film and filmmakers in Mexico more broadly, I will confine this discussion to the general circumstances of Mexican cinema immediately prior to Luis Echeverría's time in office, focussing on how his policies influenced filmmakers, and the changes that were experienced in the film industry during his presidential term. The intention is to illustrate why certain topics –such as Mexican politics, society, sexuality, among others- were discussed in some films during this period when they had not been widely discussed before.

Interest in the cinema began early, when the invention of the cinematographer was presented to the President Porfirio Díaz. A few years later the first Mexican filmmakers appeared, but, according to Andrea Noble, it was not until the 1930s that the

industry finally blossomed.<sup>1</sup> This decade was the so-called *Golden Age* of Mexican cinema in which a large number of Spanish language films were produced, and the industry received support from the United States.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the 1950s, the industry was producing a fair number of films, though the quality was questionable. They lacked imagination, repeated the formulas of *comedias rancheras* or melodramas, and included various styles of musicals and dancing.<sup>3</sup> Without a doubt, cinema 'had entered a period of general decline'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there was no place where the filmmakers could have a professional training. Thus, in the early 1960s a group of young people created the *Grupo Nuevo Cine* and 'called for a renovation of Mexican cinema',<sup>5</sup> influenced by the *New Cinema* wave in Europe. Also around these years, the national university (UNAM) created film classes and later a film department.<sup>6</sup> However, despite these phenomena, and despite the appearance of some high quality artistic films, the industry was in crisis. The massacre in Tlatelolco on 2 October 1968 undermined efforts to treat new critical topics in commercial films. It is important to mention that the independent film industry was very active but did not reach a wide audience because the official distributors blocked the work.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when Luis Echeverría took office in 1970 the situation was critical: US Cinema was gaining

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Mexican cinema's Golden Age, its relation with the US, and the effects of World War II, consult Seth Fein, 'Golden Age Mexican Cinema', in *Fragments of a Golden Age. The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, ed. by Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubinstein and Eric Zolov, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 159-198.

<sup>3</sup> Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema. Reflections of a Society. 1896-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> David R. Maciel, 'Cinema and the State in Contemporary Mexico, 1970-1999' in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Films and Filmmakers* ed. by Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 1999), 197- 233 (p. 200). According to John King, the Golden Age started its decline at the end of the Second World War, and by the early 1950s, it had finished. John King, *Magical Reels. A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London, New York: Verso, 1990; repr. 1995), p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> Jesús Salvador Treviño, 'The New Mexican Cinema', *Film Quarterly*, 3-32 (1979), 26-37 (p. 27).

<sup>7</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 112.

ground in Mexico, the *Golden Age* and its stars were just a memory, and censorship had demotivated critical and artistic filmmakers.<sup>8</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, the Echeverría *sexenio* began with a divided society and with low trust in the State. Seeking to gain the confidence of the population, Echeverría established the *apertura democrática*, which included the arts and culture. Furthermore, he sought to become a leader of the Third World: ‘regarding cinema as a means to promote Mexico throughout the world, he set about supporting Mexican film and seeking to raise it to international prominence once again’.<sup>9</sup> He called on intellectuals to discuss topics without fear of censorship. His brother was a film actor known in the industry as Rodolfo Landa, and the President named him as the president of the *Banco Cinematográfico*, an institution in charge of funding film production and distribution.

During his term, three state production companies were created: CONACINE, CONACITE I and CONACITE II. These companies provided opportunities for young filmmakers to release their work. The *Grupo Nuevo Cine*<sup>10</sup> launched important projects which were successful not only in Mexico but beyond<sup>11</sup> such as *En este pueblo no hay ladrones*, *El Topo* and *Reed: México Insurgente*.<sup>12</sup> Some films which addressed controversial topics or were not attractive for commercial channels were supported by the state through these companies, which helped improve the quality of Mexican cinema. They benefited not simply the new artists, but even ‘some established directors like [Alejandro] Galindo and [Luis] Alcoriza took advantage of this climate to also

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<sup>8</sup> Maciel, ‘Cinema and the State...’, p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Ramírez Berg. *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> According to Charles Ramírez Berg, it was Grupo Nuevo Cine which made this successful period possible. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Maciel in Hershfield, *Mexico’s Cinema...* p. 202.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Bought, ‘Developing History/Historicizing Development in Mexico Nuevo Cine Manifestoes around “la Crisis”’, *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 34.2 (2004), 25-37 (p. 33) This article is a good reference for those interested in knowing more about Grupo Nuevo Cine, their aims and their work.

make their own statements'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, according to Mexican actress Diana Bracho, the state cinema became 'la alternativa más digna en cuanto a temática y realización',<sup>14</sup> and with the introduction of new topics and approaches, a new market was opened as well.<sup>15</sup> Another important achievement was the opening of a film school, the Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica (1975), and the Cineteca Nacional, a complex that included screening theatres and an archive to conserve original reels of commercial Mexican films as well as copies of some foreign films.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, during Echeverría's presidential term Mexican cinema enjoyed a renaissance<sup>17</sup> with the release of critical and polemical work. However, some filmmakers were still cautious about the issues they raised, and in order to avoid censorship some avoided topics such as religion, the army or the official party (PRI).<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, filmmakers enjoyed a period of creative freedom which sadly would not last long. José López Portillo became president following Echeverría, and in another act of nepotism, he appointed his sister, Margarita López Portillo, as the director of the newly created *Dirección de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía*. Margarita reversed some of the previous policies including the closure of the *Banco Cinematográfico*. She called for private finance to participate again in film production, and banned controversial films by saying that all Mexican films should be 'family-orientated'. She invited foreign filmmakers to work in the country because she considered Mexican filmmakers to be less talented.<sup>19</sup> Those who had enjoyed state support in the previous *sexenio* 'had to face lower budgets, stricter censorship, and tighter distribution

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<sup>13</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Diana Bracho. 'El cine mexicano: ¿y en el papel de la mujer... Quién?', *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos*, 2-1 (1985), 413-423 (p. 416).

<sup>15</sup> Sergio Olhovich in Treviño, 'The New Mexican Cinema' ... p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> Noble, *Mexican National...* p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Maciel, 'Cinema and the state...', p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

policies',<sup>20</sup> and although during López Portillo's *sexenio* more films were made than in the previous period,<sup>21</sup> the quality was arguably weaker in terms of themes and production. The Mexican cinema would have to wait more than twenty years before it could reemerge.

## Films

In this research I will analyse four films: *Mecánica Nacional*, *Tívoli*, *Calzonzin Inspector* and *El Águila Descalza*. Here I describe them briefly and discuss their creators, to help the reader contextualise them. They are organised chronologically. More information about each plot and the films themselves will be drawn in throughout this chapter.<sup>22</sup> Next we turn to an analysis of them according to the conceptual framework developed in earlier chapters. We will see how mechanisms of humour such as incongruity, exaggeration, superiority and relief were used to criticise the political and social reality, and how filmmakers and audiences benefitted from doing so. We will also point out the most common topics discussed through humour, leading to reflections in the conclusion about the relationship between the recurrence of the topics, the contemporaneous history, and the reason for using humour as a mean of expression.

*El Águila Descalza* (1969). This was the first film directed by the actor Alfonso Arau. At the time he made the film, he was a well-established actor and was known for his dancing skills, as well as for the dancing duet he formed with the dancer and actor Sergio Corona. According to Emilio García Riera, it was during a working trip to Cuba

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<sup>20</sup> Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude...* p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> Complete specification of these films can be reviewed in the masterpiece by Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, 18 vols (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Gobierno de Jalisco, Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1994), 14-17.

with Corona that Arau became politicised, taking on ideas that would later influence the content of *El Águila Descalza*.<sup>23</sup> He reviewed the archive of Televisión in order to learn more about film language, and he was influenced by US silent cinema as well.<sup>24</sup>

He began filming in 1969. The story line was based on a homonym graphic novel that he had previously created with Héctor Ortega—another actor.<sup>25</sup> The film follows the adventures of Poncho (Alfonso Arau), a factory worker whose dream is to make the world a better place. The supposed owner of the factory is actually a frontman, and the real owners are foreigners (later we learn that they are *mafiosos*). Because Mexican law did not allow foreign capital to participate in those kind of enterprises, the frontman works as the manager and provides cover for the real owners. Thus, we should not be surprised about the name of the factory: *La Malinche*.

In his efforts to change the world, Poncho becomes a masked hero self-named *El Águila Descalza*, a clumsy imitation of US superheroes, wearing a baseball cap that covers half of his face, a football shirt, and of course no shoes.



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due to copyright  
restrictions

Image 4.1. 'Poncho, El Águila Descalza' . *El Águila Descalza*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (1969) (in colour)

*El Águila* fights masked wrestlers who work for an ex-gangster from Chicago (also performed by Arau) who wants to take control of the factory to exploit the workers, and to marry the factory owner's daughter, with whom Poncho is in love. Poncho is helped

<sup>23</sup> Emilio García Riera. *Historia documental...* 14: 1968-1969, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Perla Ciuk. *Diccionario de directores del cine mexicano 2009*, 2 vols (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 2009), 1, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...* 14: 1968-1969, p. 229.

by Chona, his workmate, who does not believe that the world can be changed by one man, but who has a political and social sensitivity. Therefore, she tries to organise a strike against the gangster and his henchmen in order to bring back workers' rights. Getting involved in a series of misunderstandings and unlucky circumstances, and by getting help from unexpected places, Poncho and Chona manage to free the workers, although they do not have a happy ending.

The film was produced independently, which allowed Arau the freedom to give it the perspective he wanted.<sup>26</sup> In 1971 it was released with State support. *El Águila Descalza* achieved great success not only with the general public but also with film critics, and garnered three awards from the Mexican film academy.<sup>27</sup> José de la Colina and García Riera declared respectively that this was 'el primer gran *film* cómico mexicano' and 'la mejor cinta cómica realizada hasta hoy en México'.<sup>28</sup> And this was just the beginning of the successful career of Arau as a director. In his next film, the blockbuster *Calzonzin Inspector*, he would develop further his humorous and critical perspective on social and political issues.

*Mecánica Nacional* (1971). This film was directed and written by a more experienced director, the exiled Spaniard, naturalised Mexican, Luis Alcoriza. He had worked with Luis Buñuel and participated in writing the script of Buñuel's famous film *Los olvidados* (1950). Alcoriza started his career as director in 1961 and in 1963 his film *Tiburoneros* proved that he was 'a major talent, capable of making distinguished films if given the opportunity'.<sup>29</sup> After making several earlier films, he found this opportunity during Echeverría's *sexenio* to make his masterpiece, *Mecánica Nacional*.

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<sup>26</sup> Treviño, 'The new mexican cinema...', p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude...* p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Cited by García Riera in *Historia documental...* 14: 1968-1969, p. 232.

<sup>29</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 107.

The film was shot in 1971 and the premiere was one year later, advertised with the slogan ‘¿de veras los mexicanos somos así?’<sup>30</sup> The story is about a middle class group from Mexico City that goes to a rural area where they will spend the night and where they will watch the end of a car race the following morning. During their time in this strange camping area surrounded by cars and people sleeping on the ground, various scenes occur which enlighten us about who these people are and how they think. They are in fact allegories of prominent Mexican stereotypes. About this, Alcoriza said to Tomás Pérez Turrent: ‘los de *Mecánica Nacional* son ficciones, pero sin embargo todos son reconocibles’.<sup>31</sup> The characters included Eufemio, a macho father (Manolo Fábregas) offended by the loss of virginity of his daughter during the evening; his wife Isabel (Lucha Villa) who suffers from his lack of respect and interest; his mother Doña Lolita (Sara García) who dies during the evening from indigestion; his *compadre*, Güero Corrales (Pancho Córdova), a man whose confidence and strength come from the gun he carries, which he repeatedly reveals to intimidate people; and Gregorio, an army general (Héctor Suárez), who is not respected because he is wearing civilian clothes rather than his uniform.

The leading actors had already had a long and successful career in the industry: Fábregas ‘whose film and stage career had consisted mainly of roles as suave and sophisticated types’,<sup>32</sup> and Suárez with numerous film credits, Villa as an actress and a *Ranchero* singer, and Sara García well known for her roles as a sweet grandmother, from which she gained the nickname *Abuelita del cine nacional*.<sup>33</sup> All contributed to

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<sup>30</sup> The slogan was used to promote in the daily billboard in *El Universal*, 26 April 1973, Section Cultural, p. 7

<sup>31</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...*, 14: 1968-1969, p. 256.

<sup>32</sup> David William Foster, *Mexico City in Contemporary Mexican Cinema* (Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002), pp. 58-59. This book contains an interesting symbolic analysis of the film’s treatment of Mexico City, pp. 57-66.

<sup>33</sup> Bracho, ‘El cine mexicano...’, pp. 413, 419. The name *Abuelita del cine nacional* can also be found in various publications, including on the front page of the magazine *Somos*, dedicated to the actress, 200, 11 (Mexico: Editorial Televisa, 2000).

Alcoriza's satire since Lucha Villa sings dreadfully, which disappoints the audience's expectations, and Sara García does 'a grotesque parody of herself'<sup>34</sup> by misbehaving, swearing and eating without manners.

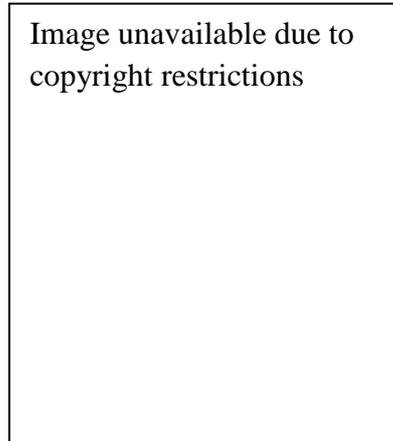


Image 4.2. 'Doña Lolita, Gregorio, his girlfriend, Eufemio and Isabel'.  
*Mecánica Nacional*, dir. by Luis Alcoriza (1971) (in colour)

*Mecánica Nacional* is an exaggeration of Mexican behaviour, principally of those from Mexico City. The film is Alcoriza's view of modern Mexican society in times of economic boom, a society in contact with other cultural expressions. The characters are caricatured and exposed to extreme situations. Alcoriza was prudent, given that he was Spanish, and he included a Spanish couple having a feast and behaving like animals. This couple, according to García Riera, was Alcoriza's way to criticise his compatriots<sup>35</sup> and make it clear he was not setting himself above Mexicans.

The film was screened for thirty nine weeks in theatres,<sup>36</sup> a success for a Mexican film. Along with *El Águila Descalza* and *Calzonzin Inspector*, it featured in a Mexican film festival organised in Paris in 1973.<sup>37</sup> Alcoriza remained active during Echeverría's presidential term and made four more films—none as successful as *Mecánica Nacional*—in which he also explored the Mexican psyche. After the

<sup>34</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p 122.

<sup>35</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...*, 15: 1970-1971, p. 257.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...*, 16: 1972-1973, p. 158.

Echeverría *sexenio* he continued working but without the same support, though this did not diminish the quality of his films. He died in Mexico in 1992.<sup>38</sup>

*Calzonzin Inspector* (1973). Following his success with *El Águila Descalza*, Alfonso Arau created a second political comedy, this time fully produced by the state company CONACINE, which he directed and starred in again. The film was shot in 1973 and released one year later, featuring in cinemas for fifteen weeks.<sup>39</sup>

Arau adapted a short story written by Nikolai Gogol called ‘The Inspector General,’ using the characters of *Los Supermachos*,<sup>40</sup> a very successful comic book by one of the most influential Mexican cartoonists, who we discussed in depth earlier: Eduardo del Río, ‘Rius’. In the film, the oligarchy of a rural town hears of the visit of an inspector who will check the well-being of the citizens. The town is ruled by the cacique Don Perpetuo del Rosal (Pancho Córdova). The confusion begins when two strangers, Calzonzin (Alfonso Arau) and his friend Chon Prieto (Arturo Alegro), suddenly appear in the town and are mistaken for the inspector and his assistant.

Led by Don Perpeuto, the oligarchy portrays San Garabato, the small, down-at-heels town, as a developed place where laws and rights are respected. They also put on celebrations to make the inspector feel welcome. They even bribe him with prostitutes and money, although in reality look down on him because he is an Indian. Calzonzin and Chon enjoy the misunderstanding even after they notice what is happening. They relish their ability to abuse those in power. When the poor, exploited inhabitants of San Garabato ask Calzonzin for his help, and give him a genuine welcome with simple presents, Calzonzin realises that he has taken the farce too far, and that it is time to

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<sup>38</sup> Alcoriza died in 1992, but his last script, *Pesadilla para un rico* was shot in 1996 by the Spanish actor and director Fernando Fernán Gómez. Bernard P.E. Bentley, *A Companion to Spanish Cinema*, Monografías A, 266, (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), p. 296.

<sup>39</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...*, 16: 1972-1973, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Treviño, ‘The New Mexican Cinema’, p. 29.

leave. But the two are caught and punished by Don Perpetuo, who makes Calzonzin risk his life in a bullfight. Calzonzin does not even have the support of the ordinary citizens from San Garabato, perhaps because they were also deceived by him.

As Treviño points out, this film portrays ‘the hypocrisy and corruption of many of Mexico’s most revered institutions: government, the church, and the military’.<sup>41</sup> Many of these topics are diluted in simple jokes, love stories and even an exaggerated ending in which all the bullfight attendants throw bags full of coloured dust. In fact, *El Águila Descalza* has a similar ending, but the fight involves sacks full of powdered drugs.

In any case, the tolerance of the authorities in allowing this movie to be screened – and indeed, in financing it - is remarkable, because the previous administration had censored the comic *Los Supermachos*. Ironically, Rius participated in the film script and even drew the images to illustrate the posters that advertised it.<sup>42</sup>

The film was well received by the public and was nominated for four Ariel Awards in Mexico, winning two. It also won best movie in the Third World film festival in Cairo in 1976.<sup>43</sup> José López Portillo’s administration did not benefit Arau, and in fact one of his films, *Mojado Power* (1980), was never released in Mexico though it won an award in France and was nominated for an Oscar as best foreign film.<sup>44</sup> His biggest success came in 1992 with the film *Como agua para chocolate*, from the novel written by his ex-wife Laura Esquivel. The film cost millions of dollars and won 21 awards

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<sup>41</sup> Treviño, ‘The New Mexican Cinema’, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> A copy of the poster can be consulted in Rogelio Agrasánchez Jr., *¡Más! Cine Mexicano. Sensational Mexican Movie Posters 1957-1990* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), p. 115, and another poster may be found in García Riera, *Historia Documental...* 16: 1972-1973, p. 176.

<sup>43</sup> García Riera, *Historia Documental...* 16: 1972-1973, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> ‘ARAU Incháustegui, Alfonso’,  
<[http://escritores.cinemexicano.unam.mx/biografias/A/ARAU\\_inchaustegui\\_alfonso/biografia.html](http://escritores.cinemexicano.unam.mx/biografias/A/ARAU_inchaustegui_alfonso/biografia.html)>  
[17th September 2011]

around the world.<sup>45</sup> It is considered as one of the first *New Mexican Cinema* films, but that is another story.

*Tívoli* (1974). This film was shot in 1974, and one year later, when it was released, the Mexican film industry was at its height. Theatres had been refurbished so that a sense of dignity was restored, the cost of cinema tickets had begun to rise after a price freeze so that filmmakers had more resources, and a film did not need to reach a specific return in its first weeks in order to keep showing.<sup>46</sup>

The director was Alberto Isaac, a young multi-talented director. He was a swimmer and represented Mexico in two Olympic Games; he was also a school teacher, a journalist, a cartoonist and a script writer.<sup>47</sup> Isaac had already proved his talent when his first film *En este pueblo no hay ladrones* won second place in the First Experimental Cinema Competition in 1965.<sup>48</sup> Afterwards, he was entrusted to make a documentary about the Mexico City Olympic Games in 1968, and two years later he made another documentary focused on the World Cup that took place in Mexico that year. Before *Tívoli* he had directed other films including the internationally-acclaimed film *El Rincón de las Vírgenes* (1972).

*Tívoli* benefited from the financing of the recently created Conacine, which is evidence of government interest to support artistic, socially-concerned cinema.<sup>49</sup> The film is set in 1950s Mexico City, and, though a banner at the beginning warns the audience that all the scenes and characters are fictional and that ‘cualquier semejanza

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<sup>45</sup> The Internet Movie Database, *Como agua para chocolate*, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103994/>> [ 1 October 2011]

<sup>46</sup> García Riera, *Historia Documental...* 17: 1974-1976, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ciuk, *Diccionario de directores...* p. 413 and ‘ISAAC Ahumada Alberto’, <[http://escritores.cinemexicano.unam.mx/biografias/I/ISAAC\\_ahumada\\_alberto/biografia.html](http://escritores.cinemexicano.unam.mx/biografias/I/ISAAC_ahumada_alberto/biografia.html)> [29th August 2011]

<sup>48</sup> King, *Magical Reels...* p. 133.

<sup>49</sup> García Riera, *Historia documental...* 17: 1974-1976, p. 7.

con hechos y personas de la vida real será casual naturalmente’,<sup>50</sup> the word ‘naturalmente’ invites us to think about the irony. Furthermore, the story is of the nightclub *Tívoli* which indeed existed and was closed in 1959 due to the extension of one of the main avenues in Mexico City, Reforma, so, the similarity between reality and the film is clear.<sup>51</sup>

In the film, the performers from *Tívoli*, led by its star *Tiliches* (Alfonso Arau) fight the arbitrary closure and demolition of their theatre. At first, they visit the authorities and work through bureaucratic channels. When they fail and lose one of their cabaret stars who is seduced by the money of the engineer in charge of the project, they try to organise a demonstration in the main plaza, *El Zócalo*, claiming violation of their civil rights. After failing again, they decide to give up and continue performing until the closure. In an abuse of authority, the artists are kidnapped by El Hombre, apparently the Mexican President – and pushed to perform at a private party where the authorities, including the regent of the city, are present. The sketch they perform is mostly political, but it pleases El Hombre and he even laughs at it. But nothing will change the authorities’ decision. The Regent carries on with his plans to demolish *Tívoli*. There is an obvious double standard, since he insists that is a place of vice and depravity, while visiting prostitutes. The *Tívoli* has no future and the artists decide to organise a final show, full of semi-naked women, puns, and many political jokes critical of the government.

Alberto Isaac himself designed the posters that advertised the film, including captions indicating that the film was irreverent and contained political jokes, with illustrations of caricatured policemen and semi-naked girls.<sup>52</sup> The film was not well-

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<sup>50</sup> *Tívoli*, dir. by Alberto Isaac (Conacine-Dasa Films, 1974) [On DVD]

<sup>51</sup> The story of the real theater *Tívoli* can be consulted in Armando Jiménez, *Sitios de rompe y rasga en la Ciudad de México. Salones de baile, cabarets, billares, teatros* (Mexico: Océano, 1998), pp. 240-245.

<sup>52</sup> Some of the posters are reproduced in García Riera, *Historia documental... 17: 1974-1976*, p. 64.

received by the critics<sup>53</sup> but the public enjoyed it and it ran for twelve weeks in the theatres. According to García Riera, it showed the ‘indignación que le causaba [to Isaac] el ejercicio del poder que disfrazaba de moralismo su arbitrariedad, su corrupción y su desprecio por la opinión pública’.<sup>54</sup> *Tívoli* was full of cabaret routines and is an accurate reconstruction of the burlesques from the 1950s.<sup>55</sup> The fact that it takes place in the distant past may explain why the government tolerated it and even financed it. But in a country where the same party had ruled for forty-five years, criticism against the government referred to the current state party. Therefore, *Tívoli* is a good example of the tolerance and openness of the Echeverría administration.

The next presidential period was not productive for Alberto Isaac. His work was blocked by Margarita López Portillo after he criticised Mexican investment in a U.S. film production.<sup>56</sup> In 1983 he was appointed director of the recently created *Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía* and he tried to rebuild the Mexican cinema.<sup>57</sup> He continued directing and writing movies until his death after a heart attack in 1998. The film industry lost a great creator, but also lost a great cartoonist, sportsman and journalist.

## **Films and Mechanisms of Humour**

### **Incongruity**

At this point I will show how the use of humour allowed discussion of topics that were not welcome in other media, such as TV or newspapers, or which were too traumatic. The language of humour made it easier to keep certain topics in the social imaginary so

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<sup>53</sup> García Riera criticised the film and years later reconsidered his opinion and mentioned that the critics were unfair with the film. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>55</sup> Mora, *Mexican Cinema...* p. 130.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

that they could be confronted later. We saw in chapter three that incongruity, as a mechanism of humour, can trigger laughter. However, simply to point it out in a text is not enough to understand the social criticism within the act of humour. The relevance of incongruity as a language of humour is particularly important when studying films. This is because part of the incongruity in comics comes from the idea that they are cartoons and they are published regularly, which helps the reader to understand the genre of the comic, and the characteristics and features of the characters. Meanwhile, films usually have less than two hours to develop their content and the intentions of the screen writers. Therefore, to recognise the elements of incongruity will help the audience to understand that the film belongs to the genre of comedy, helping it to choose the most appropriate reading mechanisms in order to grasp what the author wishes to express.

We should be clear that the presence of incongruity is not enough to label something as humorous. In the previous chapter I discussed the case of *Hermelinda Linda*, a comic whose main subject is witchcraft, arguing that the presence of witchery as something illogical was not enough to trigger humour or to understand this comic as part of the universe of humour. The same phenomenon occurs when analysing films. However, I will begin by presenting examples of incongruity in some of the films, and show how they can help readers to label the text as a *comedy*. During the development of the chapter I will consider other mechanisms of humour as well, and will discuss reasons for using humour to express certain ideas. I will also analyse the content of the scenes (social and political criticism) through these mechanisms of humour.

As discussed earlier, incongruity is essential for humour<sup>58</sup> and as might seem obvious, it is present in all the films analysed here. Nevertheless the incongruity is more

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<sup>58</sup> Paul McGhee, *Humour. Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and company, 1979), p. 10.

evident in some films than in others.<sup>59</sup> *El Águila Descalza* addresses various serious topics, such as labour exploitation, poverty, drug dealing, and others. The construction of humour is important in that the viewer understands the issues at stake but does not feel concerned for the safety of the characters or become upset with the topics raised. From the beginning, the main character, *El Águila Descalza*, is presented as someone clumsy who emulates the stereotypical US heroes, such as Superman, Batman, or even the thief Robin Hood, but without their grace and success. For example, we see him trying to enter a house in order to recover the roller-skates belonging to a poor child which had been stolen by a rich spoiled child. He first fights with the family dog in the garden. He is humiliated by the dog, which bites him and rips his clothes while he runs awkwardly, in contrast to the elegance and style of the super heroes as we know them. When he finally gets into the house, he does it clumsily, dropping objects and making noise, causing the child to wake up. The behaviour of *El Águila* is discordant when we compare it to the hero stereotype, and this introduces us into the language of humour.

However, *El Águila* is not the only incongruent character. Others include the assistants of Mascalzone (the villain of the story), who dress like wrestlers. To have these evil helpers dressing that way seems absurd and it contrasts with the famous wrestler films from the end of the 1950s to the 1970s. In these films, wrestlers such as the legendary Santo or Blue Demon were the heroes. So it is incongruous to have them here in exactly the opposite role. However, it is necessary to know the broken frame that reveals the incongruity, as Umberto Eco suggests. Just to see wrestlers as a villain's henchmen is already a 'mismatch'.

Working class exploitation is one of the social issues tackled in the film. But the subject is softened with incongruity. Poncho (*El Águila*) and his mates test pogo sticks

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<sup>59</sup> It is important to highlight that for the time being, I will focus only on incongruity, though other mechanisms of humour will be discussed later in this chapter.

in their job, which would not be absurd if not for the fact that they test them by jumping on them for hours. Thus, the film not only speaks the language of comedy, but also raises the serious topic of exploitation (in a playful way).

*Calzonzin Inspector* is a screwball comedy in which situations become mixed up because of misunderstandings and unlikely events. The core of the story relates to the confusion of the main character, Calzonzin, with a governmental inspector. This triggers all kinds of odd events, such as the mayor of the village trying to marry his daughter to Calzonzin, and offering him money and prostitutes and organising a feast in his honour.

One of the first incongruities is when Calzonzin and Chon Prieto are trying to escape from a shootout by commandeering a plane they discovered. The idea that they could fly a plane is silly, and they also behave in an illogical way by drinking *aguardiente* and singing while piloting the plane; however, it is even more illogical that after the plane explodes in mid-air, they survive not only the explosion but also the fall.<sup>60</sup> It is worth mentioning that the scenes that took place just before these events involved serious issues, such as the discussion of an abducted journalist and the repression of some local *caciques*. These facts could be stressful for the audience but the subsequent circumstances make clear to us that this is a comedy and that we should not be concerned about the characters or the situations at least while watching the film.<sup>61</sup>

*El Águila Descalza* and *Calzonzin Inspector* have similar endings. One of the final scenes in *El Águila Descalza* is a fight (with sacks full of drugs) between the patients of a mental hospital, the villains who dress as wrestlers, and Poncho's factory co-workers. The confrontation ends up in a chaotic psychedelic party. In the case of *Calzonzin*, just before the Mayor and the authorities of San Garabato discover that the

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<sup>60</sup> *Calzonzin Inspector*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (Conacine-Estudios Churubusco Azteca, 1973). [On DVD]

<sup>61</sup> We might remember that the universe of humour is indestructible, and the characters always overcome their dramas, as Alenka Zupancic suggests in 'The "Concrete Universal" and...', p. 181.

real inspector has arrived, there is a long scene of a fight with fruit, and later, with bags of coloured dust that people throw at the authorities. Eventually it becomes a battle in which all the festival-goers participate. These scenes use a simple mechanism to trigger humour, namely the absurdity of throwing things at each other.<sup>62</sup> However, in both cases there is more than innocent incongruity – the acts of humour play another role, such as offending and humiliating someone in power, and criticising the psychedelic wave, so famous at the time. I will discuss these two examples later in this chapter; the point here is to show the presence of incongruity as a source of humour and as a way to indicate to the viewer that what he/she is witnessing is a comedy.

All the characters in *Calzonzin Inspector* can be labelled as incongruent as well. Some of their actions are unreasonable, for example, the devout women who believe that Calzonzin and Chon are angels because they saw them falling from the sky. They are blinded by religiosity and do not question the human condition of the men. But the analysis of characters goes beyond the way they behave, and it is important to consider the way they look and speak, and what they say. Calzonzin's clothes immediately alert us to the fact that he is a comic character. He wears a blanket as though it was a poncho, but it is not only the wearing of the blanket but also the fact that it is an electric blanket, and he uses the cable as the belt of his clothes. The way he dresses defies logic, which makes him a comic character.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the authorities fit the characteristics of comic actors suggested by Bergson: their movements are exaggerated, they are unsociable since they abuse ordinary citizens, they are automatons because they act without

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<sup>62</sup> Known as *slapstick*, it is the kind of comedy that has 'tartazos, encontronazos físicos y siempre con una actividad frenética y dinámica', Juan Campos, *Comedia. Humor y sátira en el cine* (Valencia: Editorial La Máscara, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Comic characters abandon social conventions and logic, and we see this clearly in Calzonzin. Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), p. 196.

analysing or judging their actions, and they are also absentminded,<sup>64</sup> they did not realise that Calzonzin was an impostor. The policemen talk openly about their abuse of power, Mayor Don Perpetuo del Rosal uses various silly methods to convince Calzonzin that San Garabato is well governed. Their actions are, as Bergson proposes, directly related to social life although they are indeed insufferable for society.<sup>65</sup>

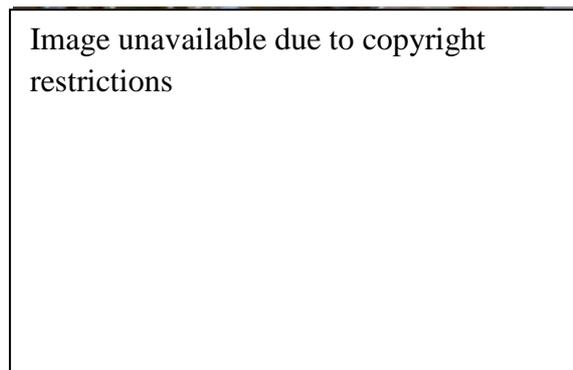


Image 4.3. 'Calzonzin and Don Perpetuo del Rosal'. *Calzonzin Inspector*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (1973) (in colour)

The incongruity of *Mecánica Nacional* and *Tívoli* also speaks of social and political criticism.<sup>66</sup> However, there are examples of *innocent* humour too. In *Mecánica Nacional*, the language of humour is established at the beginning when we see a group of men painting the finishing line for a car race on the highway. Suddenly an ambulance passes and spoils part of their work, and the painters whistle and curse the ambulance. We might enjoy their misfortune, or feel sorry or upset about it, but the unexpected situation develops the comedy of the film as well. In the next scene, we see the front of the garage that belongs to Eufemio. The facade says: '*Afinaciones científicas*', referring to the method that is used to tune cars. We would not expect to describe a tune-up as 'scientific', and putting them together is an incongruity. These incongruities can be considered as *indications* (which Francesco Casetti and Federico Di Chio understand as

<sup>64</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* pp. 138-147.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

<sup>66</sup> Freud would suggest that the humour in these films is tendentious, since it is not innocent, it tries to attack or reveal a truth. Freud, *El chiste y su relación con lo inconsciente*, trans. by Luis López Ballesteros y de Torres (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2000), p. 93.

*indicio*)<sup>67</sup> which set the audience in the comic narrative, helping them understand the film's genre, and prepare themselves to laugh.<sup>68</sup>

There is another example of humour and incongruity that is worth mentioning because it exemplifies clearly the use of this mechanism in the film. While camping, Doña Lolita, the grandmother of the family, becomes very ill and needs to go to the doctor. The person in charge is a young man on his motorcycle, nicknamed *Apache*. He promises to get a doctor by saying: 'Vivo o muerto se lo traigo'.<sup>69</sup> The absurdity is obvious since a dead doctor will not be able to save the old lady.

*Tívoli* is a more complex film in its language of humour. As can be seen in the synopsis, *Tívoli* discusses serious topics, making it a challenge to turn the situations comic. Just as in *Mecánica Nacional*, many of the acts of humour in *Tívoli* make social or political statements, so that the use of incongruity is particularly important. I will go into greater detail in the next section, but one interesting episode is worthy of mention: an artist is trying to convince the owner of the cabaret to let him perform in the show. His act consists of a dancing rooster, although we do not know how he makes the rooster dance. Tiliches, the main comedian, asks how long a rooster lasts, and the artist replies: 'Pues se electrocutan como tres diarios'.<sup>70</sup> It is absurd that someone could electrocute three roosters per day just as part of his cabaret act, not only because it is cruel, but also because it is probably not profitable. So, this is an absurdity whose sole intention is to entertain through the presentation of an illogical situation.

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<sup>67</sup> Francesco Casetti, Federico di Chio, *Cómo analizar un film*, trans. by Carlos Losilla (Barcelona: Paidós Comunicación, 2007), p. 113. This information is also explained in appendix one of this thesis.

<sup>68</sup> We can do this by freezing our fears and emotions as Bergson suggests in *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 145.

<sup>69</sup> *Mecánica Nacional*, dir. by Luis Alcoriza (Ramiro Meléndez-Producciones Escorpión, 1971) [On DVD]

<sup>70</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1974.

### **True humour: humour as social complaint**

We will follow the same analytical steps as in the previous chapter, which will help us trace how the combination of incongruity and exaggeration are used to make a political statement. Reviewing what we have already said, when the story is interrupted with something unexpected which breaks the logic according to an established frame, laughter emerges.<sup>71</sup> But if the unexpected action targets or refers to someone or something, and criticises it, then we have true humour.<sup>72</sup>

I will start by pointing out how incongruity and exaggeration interact to shed light on the behaviour of the authorities. As we know, through humour we express thoughts that we would like to articulate but do not because our ego represses us, reminding us of our fears and taboos. With the use of humour, our critical thought is suborned and confused.<sup>73</sup> When a situation ridicules those in power, then the intention is not only to criticise but also to show the ridiculousness of their rules, the way they behave, or their negligence towards those whom they govern.

First, we need to understand that the film *Calzonzin Inspector* is an allegory of what happens in Mexico, that it is a version of situations and facts we are familiar with.<sup>74</sup> When analysing the comic *Los Agachados*, we understood *Chayotitlán* as a microcosm of Mexico. Likewise, there are sufficient signs in *Calzonzin Inspector* to make us believe that San Garabato works as an allegory of the country as well.<sup>75</sup> An early caption at the beginning of the film warns us: ‘Cualquier parecido de los personajes de esta película con personas vivas o tontas instituciones, funcionarios, etc.,

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<sup>71</sup> Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1984), pp.33, 38.

<sup>72</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p.132.

<sup>74</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and their Relation to Society* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), p. 1

<sup>75</sup> For reasons of economy, we will not describe the referents that lead us to believe that the characters belong to a certain social imaginary. However, the Mexican flag and the state party logo appear at different moments in the film, making it easier to support this statement.

es una pura y celestial chiripada'.<sup>76</sup> Since we are not passive viewers, we might interpret this caption as an irony since 'sometimes we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done'.<sup>77</sup> The use of language and the knowledge of the comic that the film is based on, as well as some other 'reading clues' enable us to understand that the characters and situations are caricatures of real people, and that will help us understand the social and political life of Mexico at the time.

As in the comics examined earlier, official neglect is an issue in some of these films. In *Calzonzin Inspector*, when the Mayor, Don Perpetuo del Rosal, believes that the inspector is already in town, he gives unreasonable instructions to his close collaborators, fact that points out the incongruence, to make the inspector believe that San Garabato is well governed. He orders the demolition of a wall to make the inspector think that there are building works underway, and that the town council is working. This is an exaggeration of the fact that real authorities tried hard to display apparent achievements. Don Perpetuo makes his dishonesty even more evident when he says: 'Y si el inspector pregunta sobre el dinero que mandaron de monumentos para tapar el hoyo de la iglesia, hay que decirle que sí, que se tapó pero que se volvió a agujerar'.<sup>78</sup> It is hard to imagine that someone would believe what he suggests. This is clearly an act of humour, but it also reveals that the authorities did use public resources for the benefit of the citizens. Later in the film, a truck full of medical equipment arrives to give the impression that the hospital is in suitable condition. Again, we have amusement alongside a critical statement, since we clearly recognise our own world in this comic farce.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>77</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 127.

<sup>78</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Pfaller, 'The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic: The Aesthetic Effects of the Thought Experiment', in *Lacan. The Silent Partners*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London, New York: Verso, 2006), pp.198-216 (p. 202).

Don Perpetuo, who embodies the Mexican authorities, is aware of his poor performance as Mayor, and he tells his constituents that if they complain about him, they will get into trouble. This might be a strong statement, and to forbid protest is a delicate matter that might upset the audience, but the exaggeration in the movements and dialogues of the characters highlight the spirit of the comedy. While Don Perpetuo is giving this order, a journalist who is a supporter and who is hurriedly following him, collides with a lamp post, a common *slapstick* technique.

In various moments in the film *Tívoli* there are comments critical of the negligence of the authorities. However, the comment or the action that conveys this criticism does not use the language of humour; this means the comment is not ‘wrapped’ in a joke, or the action is not illogical or portrayed by an exaggerated character. So what prevents us from a feeling of concern for the characters? Do we feel upset or do we understand that we are witnessing something from the universe of humour? The film as a complete text gives us enough clues to understand that it is a comedy, so that even when the situations are stressful, we recognise them as part of the universe of humour. We might also understand them as fiction, which will help us relax during the screening.<sup>80</sup> Also, as Casetti and Di Chio suggest, we usually go to the cinema with some expectations and knowledge about the film.<sup>81</sup> In other words, the atmosphere of comedy is set even before the film begins. Nevertheless, for the ‘distracted’ member of the audience who has no idea about the genre, Isaac uses a strategy to diminish the seriousness: once the difficult issue is presented, a funny comment or action follows immediately, which may or may not be related. Thus, after tensing up the audience, Isaac relaxes them with a joke. Two examples: the Tívoli’s

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<sup>80</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1958), p. 33. This would be the case if we do not enter into the semi-hypnotic state that Morin describes in which we feel that we are part of the story and narrative and in which we perceive the same feelings as the characters.

<sup>81</sup> Casetti, Federico di Chio, *Cómo analizar un film...* p. 24.

artists are in a coffee shop discussing their options and how to prevent the cabaret from being closed. They discuss the abuse of the authorities, how their families will be affected by the closure, and how the outlook is not promising. This could put the audience in a low mood, but the sadness is interrupted after the owner of Tívoli, Quijano, spills sugar in his coffee, because Tiliches set him up. The surprise for Quijano, who did not expect the joke, and the fact that the boss has been humiliated in front of his workers (part of the theory of superiority discussed in previous chapters) brings enjoyment to the audience, dulling their previous concerns and reminding them that this is a comedy.

Another example occurs when Tívoli's owner hires a lawyer to help him with the cabaret's demolition. The lawyer, the Licenciado Pantoja, organises a meeting with the neighbours who will lose their houses with the extension of Reforma Avenue. The neighbours dress in humble clothes, and one of them, an old lady, describes how she was pushed by two men to sell her house to the municipal authorities. Another neighbour, a blind man, describes that he was pushed as well. The lawyer asks:

Licenciado Pantoja: ¿Y cómo eran estos señores?

Blindman: ¡Sepa!

Pantoja: (in a derogatory manner) No le estoy hablando a usted, compañero, le estoy hablando a la señora.<sup>82</sup>

The exploitation that the residents are suffering is interrupted by this inappropriate and absurd scene, since the blind man would not have been able to see the men for obvious reasons. But the blind man's unexpected answer triggers the comedy and eases the abuse of authority of which they are victims. And it is this abuse of power that I will discuss next.

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<sup>82</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1974.

### Abuse of power

Just as in the previous chapter, I will now trace how humour, with the support of the mechanisms of incongruity and exaggeration, aims to be a corrective by portraying abuses of power. Like in the comics, the authorities come in for sharp criticism. They are portrayed as people who take advantage of their superior position for their own benefit.

In *Calzonzin Inspector*, Don Perpetuo gives instructions to the policemen about the actions that should be taken to impress the supposed inspector: ‘Pónganme en la sombra a los opositores, rojillos, borrachos y feos’,<sup>83</sup> he commands. He yells and his movements are exaggerated. His order to imprison those who are ugly is absurd and arbitrary. It is unexpected. But beyond the elements that make us laugh, we also notice that official abuse is clearly portrayed. Don Perpetuo articulates no legal reason for jailing these people. He adds as he brandishes a gun: ‘No’ más me fallan y ¡los espero en el presupuesto!’<sup>84</sup> In this scene we witness various abuses of power, threats with a firearm and threats to manipulate the bureaucracy and the finances at whim. We know that this is an exaggeration of the real world, but it helps us criticise the authorities and to use our laughter as a mechanism of protest.<sup>85</sup>



Image 4.4. ‘Don Perpetuo with a basket on his head’. *Calzonzin Inspector*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (1973) (in colour)

<sup>83</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Rafael Barajas Durán ‘El Fisgón’, *Sólo me río cuando me duele* (México: Editorial Planeta, 2009), p. 20.

However, after this demonstration of abusive behaviour, Don Perpetuo is punished. While everyone is hurriedly leaving his office to carry out his orders, Don Perpetuo mistakenly puts a basket on his head thinking it is his hat. His clumsiness is revealed, and his ridicule will help us cope with his misbehaviour.<sup>86</sup>

The films also portray the abuse of power by ordinary citizens. Those with more power than others abuse the less fortunate, just as we saw in the comics. A clear example appears in *Mecánica Nacional*. Early on, before the main characters have gone to where they are planning to camp, they gather in Eufemio's garage. A man delivers some blocks of ice, probably for keeping the food fresh during the trip. Eufemio complains that the delivery is late. They start arguing, and finally Eufemio offends the driver. A fight starts but Eufemio's *compadre*, Güero Corrales, interrupts by saying that if Eufemio offended the man then he should apologise, but at the same time he shows the pistol in his belt to the driver. '¿Cómo la ve?' asks Corrales. '¿Pues cómo quiere que la vea?'<sup>87</sup> replies the driver, while leaving defeated. Eufemio's friends start shouting at the driver telling him that he was a coward for not confronting Eufemio. In this case, Corrales' gun gives the men the power to insult and intimidate the ice seller. It also makes them feel stronger and put them in a condition of superiority. I will return to this example when I integrate the superiority mechanism in my analysis.

Another example from *Mecánica Nacional* occurs while driving to the car race. Eufemio and Quijano, in separate cars, are forced by the police to leave the highway because of the traffic ahead. A car behind is pressuring them to move to one side, which causes Eufemio and Quijano to get out of their car and start arguing with the other driver:

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<sup>86</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 203.

<sup>87</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

Eufemio: Como ciudadanos, tenemos los mismos derechos. Este es patrimonio nacional [...]

Quijano: (while showing his gun) Y si no, nos los tomamos.

(Again Quijano uses his gun as a threat. But the driver replies):

Driver: Mire, no arme bronca. Mejor vamos a cerrar el paso para que no entre nadie más. Mientras menos seamos pues más espacio hay para hacer nuestra pachanga. Ahí traigo dos pomos de ron.

(...)

Quijano: Nosotros llegamos primero, esto es propiedad privada.

Eufemio: Los primeros que llegamos tenemos más derechos.<sup>88</sup>

The way the two characters change their attitude towards the other driver makes them look foolish, and the way they speak and act is caricatured. However, what they reveal is how citizens abuse their fellow citizens for their own benefit. It is also interesting how they change their discourse, first speaking of equality and later, when they suddenly see how they can take advantage of their situation, arguing that those who arrive first have more rights. Since they arrived ahead of others, they claim that the property is 'private.' Although they are depriving other drivers of the space, the way they change their minds and their rude behaviour makes easier for the audience to tolerate and even enjoy their conduct, in contrast to abuse described in a more 'serious' mood.<sup>89</sup>

In *El Águila Descalza*, neighbours from the *vecindad* where Poncho lives abuse his generosity and kind-heartedness, and ask him for various favours without thinking of him. Poncho is leaving late for work, and neighbours approach him with requests: an old lady wants him to take some clothes to the tailor's shop, a woman asks him to take her husband's lunch to the factory where Poncho works as well, and a young woman wants him to return the milk to the grocery store because it was spoilt. She gives him

<sup>88</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>89</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 101.

the milk in a metal pot, which makes it almost impossible to carry and cycle. He also has to share his bicycle with Chona, increasing the difficulty in performing all the tasks. Along the way, Chona criticises the neighbours for abusing Poncho, but he justifies his actions:

Poncho: Tú ayudas a uno y a otro y a otro. Si todos ayudaran, el mundo sería otra cosa, mariposa.

Chona: Ayudando de a uno por uno ¿cuándo vas a acabar? ¿sabes cuánta gente hay? [referring to the people that need help].

After Chona says this, we can see that Poncho is observing a humbly-dressed family with six children on the pavement. They look poor and sad. Poncho adds: ‘Pues sí, bastantes, pero alguien tiene que empezar’.<sup>90</sup> Poncho’s figure is laughable, since he is struggling with all the things he is carrying as he cycles. The neighbours were not concerned about his safety when they asked for his help, and only Chona, who in fact is secretly in love with him, complained about their requests.



Image 4.5. ‘Poncho on his bike and a policeman’. *El Águila Descalza*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (1969) (in colour)

This sequence shows us poverty and abandonment by the authorities, but it is the previous images just before Poncho and Chona have this conversation that help us deal with the serious facts: Poncho almost crashes against a window pane being carried by two men, he crashes against a truck, and there are various images inspired by silent cinema which remind us that despite the serious issues discussed, this is a slapstick.

<sup>90</sup> *El Águila Descalza*, dir. by Alfonso Arau, (Producciones Jaguar S.A. de C.V., 1969).

Poncho states that someone must start helping those in need, which makes us think that the authorities were not doing their job. The poverty of the family Poncho sees on the pavement reveals how the authorities abandoned citizens in need. What this example also shows is the complexity of an act of humour. The humour in this example conveys more information, in the appendix where more details regarding the topics and mechanisms of humour employed are available.

Machismo as abuse of power is another phenomenon discussed in all these films. For the moment, we will examine it as an abuse inflicted by men on women, although there is more subtlety in machista behaviour than this simple definition.<sup>91</sup> Later in this chapter I will examine other manifestations of machismo since this phenomenon is relevant in the Mexican psyche and has cultural resonance.

All four films contain moments in which women are treated as objects and as inferior to men. This can be observed repeatedly in *Tívoli*, since the cabaret targets a male audience which wants to see semi-naked and naked women performing on stage. But in fact the male artists who work in the theatre are also abusive in their behaviour toward the women. Backstage, female dancers walk around semi-naked, which pleases the male staff, and Tiliches frequently touches them lustfully without complaint from the women. During a performance in which the star *vedette*, Eva, is touched and kissed by a member of the audience who had climbed onstage, no one from the theatre steps in to protect her, and indeed, Tiliches smiles at the scene.

The abuse of men over women can be seen more clearly in the final show of the cabaret, when at the end all the artists appear onstage to thank the audience. As Eva steps forward, members of the audience start to call for her to undress by yelling

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<sup>91</sup> Based on the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* <<http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/>> [accessed 2 October 2011]

‘¡pelos, pelos!’<sup>92</sup> Tiliches and Quijano try to remove her clothes but she is reluctant. This might bring tension, but finally Eva stops the men, and decides to remove her clothes by herself. The way she was treated is definitely sexist, although the stress is relieved with the absurd, and vulgar, yelling of the audience. As Freud suggests, through humour we find pleasure in sexual references and socially unacceptable comments because ‘hace posible la satisfacción de un instinto (el instinto libidinoso y hostil) en contra de un obstáculo que se le opone y extrae de este modo placer de una fuente a la que tal obstáculo impide el acceso’.<sup>93</sup>

Women are also portrayed as objects in some of the scenes of *Calzonzin Inspector*. A parade is organised in honour of Calzonzin, and he leads the crowd in their procession around the town. His friend Chon is not with them, because he is watching the parade from a balcony, surrounded by women. When Calzonzin notices Chon he tries to show that he can also get women. He embraces the woman marching next to him without asking her permission; he does not even know her, she is just carrying a banner. This in turn provokes Chon try to compete with Calzonzin. He attempts to embrace Lupe, the girl next to him, but Lupe prevents him to do so. Since everyone believes that Calzonzin is the inspector, he is in a position of power, and the girl allows him to hold her. Chon’s luck is not the same. But the rejection will not stop him and later in the story, when Lupe is cooking a banquet for Calzonzin, Chon again tries to touch her. She rejects him again, but this time with a flirtatious smile. At the end of the film, Lupe and Chon end up together, a triumph for macho behaviour over the submissive woman, since we saw no effort on Chon’s part to win her heart.

*Mecánica Nacional* is full of moments of machismo, and I will examine them in depth when I discuss the mechanisms of relief and superiority. However, I will mention

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<sup>92</sup>Isaac, *Tivoli*, 1974.

<sup>93</sup>Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 97.

an example here because it is part of a pattern that we see in other films. Before starting their journey, Eufemio is checking that everything is ready. He goes into the kitchen where his wife Isabel and his mother Lolita are preparing the food they will take. Eufemio starts giving orders in an authoritative way: ‘¿Qué pasó con la pastura? Ya ni chicles de menta. ¡Apúrense!’ When Isabel complains that they are delayed because they are cooking as though for an army, Eufemio scolds her by saying: ‘Pues déle gracias a Dios, con el hambre que hay en el mundo’ and while saying this, he smacks her on the bottom as if she were a child. Subsequently, his mother, Doña Lolita, tells him she has prepared his favourite tacos and he replies to her affectionately: ‘Mi cabecita blanca, adorada de su hijo’<sup>94</sup> while kissing her on the forehead.

As seen in the comics, the mother is represented as saintly and as someone who will always looking after her children, no matter their age. While the wife is there to obey her husband, the mother is an angelical figure that is adored by her son. The exaggeration of the macho character and the way he expresses himself through slang are incongruous. He is saying something that perhaps makes no literal sense, until we understand the expression is a double-intended.<sup>95</sup> This converts the macho image into something funnier. Later, Eufemio’s abusive behaviour and the contrast between the mother and the wife becomes excessive when, after thinking that Isabel cheated on him, he beats her in front of those present, and forbids her from approaching his dead mother’s body by saying ‘Las mujeres como tú no tienen derecho a nada’.<sup>96</sup> He assumes the right to label his wife and to decide about the fate of his dead mother. To portray the machismo using the language of humour ‘les asegura en el oyente una acogida mucho

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<sup>94</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>95</sup> Expressions which change meaning through a slight alteration are a means of humour, the more so when it is related to a taboo topic, such as sexuality. Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* pp. 35-37.

<sup>96</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

más favorable de la que, no obstante su posible certeza, hubieran obtenido expresados en forma no chistosa'.<sup>97</sup>

## Relief

As with comics, in cinema humour is used as a language to discuss topics or situations that we repress because of fearing punishment or social discomfort. Through humour we celebrate an issue being criticised and our antithesis punished. We do not fear punishment ourselves since it was not us who commit the action.<sup>98</sup> A 'joke's effects in the world are of no consequence'.<sup>99</sup> Thus, considering which issues are treated by the films is a way to understand what was considered by society to be wrong, since 'humour as a cultural and historical phenomenon [...] reveals values, beliefs and concerns'.<sup>100</sup> To see these topics embedded in an act of humour brings relief because the thoughts we were not brave enough to articulate have been expressed, or because the comic character fulfils our deep desires.<sup>101</sup>

Some of these films have no qualms about describing public servants in an uncomplimentary way. Such is the case in *Calzonzin Inspector*, where through exaggerated and illogical situations, those in power are ridiculed and their flaws highlighted. The highest authority is Don Perpetuo, the Mayor, who embodies many of the faults and poor behaviour attributed to Mexican politicians. Among all the characters analysed for this work, Don Perpetuo seems to be the most exaggerated and the one that portrays the most faults attributed to real politicians.

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<sup>97</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Los marcos de la "libertad" cómica', in *¡Carnaval!*, trad. by Monica Mansour, ed. by Umberto Eco, Victor Ivanov and Mónica Rector (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica), pp.99-20 (p. 11).

<sup>99</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 60.

<sup>100</sup> Mintz quoted by Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 39.

<sup>101</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 10.

Don Perpetuo is an uneducated man who can barely read. However, this has not prevented him from ruling San Garabato for more than thirty years, according to one complaint to Calzonzin. We notice his limited literacy early in the film when the postman delivers a letter which announces the news of the Inspector's visit. When the Mayor tries to read the letter aloud, he starts to stutter and is unable to complete even a sentence, so he hands it back to the postman to read instead. We also note Perpetuo's ignorance once he hears that the Inspector is already in town. However in this scene the policeman who delivers the information is also portrayed as ignorant, and we have a case in which two figures of power are humiliated simultaneously:

Lechuzo (policeman): Dijeron [Calzonzin and Chon] que vienen disfrazados de 'incróspidos' [sic]

Don Perpetuo: ¿Incróspidos, babosos? ¡Será de intrépidos!<sup>102</sup>

Calzonzin will also insult Don Perpetuo by calling him 'analfabestia' and 'cerebro de mosquito'<sup>103</sup> in a letter that he sends to his friend Pujuy, the unfairly jailed journalist, a letter which is later intercepted and read out loud by the postman. When Perpetuo hears this, he snatches the letter away and tries to read it himself; however, he fails again and has to give it back to the postman to be informed of its contents. This supports Calzonzin's judgement of the Mayor's capabilities, revealing a common perception of the personal qualities of the authorities and exemplifying Purdie's comment: 'texts construct such funny figures in the way we usually need to think of actual authorities – as illegitimately, and therefore ineptly, holding their power'.<sup>104</sup> By witnessing these representations we feel comfort – the joke has insulted those in power, temporarily

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<sup>102</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...* p. 65.

liberating us from their control and the respect we are forced to give them. While the laughter lasts we feel a mood of rebellion.<sup>105</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the citizens of San Garabato talk openly of Don Perpetuo's corruption. For example, Lechuzo and Arsenio, the two policemen, are ordered to arrest political opponents, drunks, and ugly people (clearly a despotic and absurd order). While they are arresting some men Lechuzo says to Arsenio that one of the detainees was speaking badly of Don Perpetuo. When Arsenio asks what the man said, Lechuzo replies:

Lechuzo: Dijo que era un viejo asesino, burócrata y corrupto.

Arsenio: ¿Y cómo sabes que hablaba de Don Perpetuo?

Lechuzo: ¿Pos [sic] de quién más?

The scene fills us with pleasure, because humour helped us to express 'political resentments, grievances and grumbles'.<sup>106</sup> Besides, we enjoy Lechuzo's depiction of Don Perpetuo, and the energy that we use to repress those same thoughts is released. We laugh but at the same time we feel safe because someone else is delivering the insult.<sup>107</sup> But we also relish the clumsiness of the policeman, the jailed man never mentioned the Mayor by name, but Lechuzo assumed he must have been speaking of Don Perpetuo. To portray both authorities, the police and the rulers, as inept and corrupt is a means to discuss a banned topic openly.

### **Humour and Superiority**

Police corruption and arbitrary exercise of power created many problems for citizens, and they were sharply criticised through humour. This was a recurrent topic in both comics and films, and their depiction was unflattering in both media. The Police was

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<sup>105</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 102.

<sup>106</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 85.

<sup>107</sup> Freud, *El chiste...*, pp. 147-148.

referred to as *Acólitos del Diablo* by Borola Burrón,<sup>108</sup> which would be an appropriate nickname for them in some of the films too.

Popular perceptions of the police are evident in *El Águila Descalza*. As Poncho and Chona are cycling to the factory, discussing how to make the world a better place, Poncho says that there are not only good people in the world but also ‘*gente de mala fe.*’ As he says this the image focuses on a traffic policeman, connecting his statement to the policeman. Without saying so directly, we understand what the director implies, and we derive pleasure from this description: it accords with our views of the merits of the police. The sequence itself is not funny, but as the shot unexpectedly changes and shows us the policeman, we have the feeling that he has been insulted. If we open the semantic unit and look forward in the sequence, we see that just immediately after this statement, Poncho reveals his secret identity as ‘El Águila’. Later he imagines himself as the statue of a celebrated hero, highlighting his clumsiness and absurdity. The audience is thus reconnected to the comic character and to the world of comedy.

It is worth mentioning that the police appear five separate times in the film, and each time they seem to be acting unprofessionally. The first occasion is when Mascalzone arrives the airport. A customs officer tries to check his violin case but Mascalzone intimidates him so he backs down. The second time is when Poncho is riding his bicycle carrying things for other people. A policeman tries to stop him and Poncho almost runs over him as in old silent films.<sup>109</sup> The third time is the scene described in the previous paragraph, of a traffic policeman. The fourth occasion is when Poncho and Chona decide to go to the Public Ministry to complain about the abuse that the workers are suffering in the factory. At the entrance, a policeman criticises Poncho

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<sup>108</sup> Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón*, 17194, p. 30.

<sup>109</sup> Again, if the policeman is our antithesis, we celebrate the fact that he is almost knocked down by Poncho and that he looks ridiculous trying to stop Poncho. To ridicule him is a small vengeance. Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...* p. 65.

for the way he is dressed. They argue and so, instead of supporting them, the policeman tries to frustrate their mission. The final time is at the end of the film, when the police arrive and try to stop a fight in the factory in which Mascalzzone, his henchmen, and Poncho (among others) are involved. When the police arrive, Don Carlos, the owner of the factory, blames Poncho and Chona for the melee, and the last scene of the film shows Poncho and Chona running away from the police. In this final scene, even though it was not the fault of the police that Poncho and Chona were confused with the criminals, we still see that the police are portrayed as the enemies of innocent citizens. This prevents the audience from feeling sympathy for them or constructing a positive image about them.

Police indolence is even more obvious in *Mecánica Nacional*. When Eufemio is leaving the city with his family and friends, the traffic slows to a point where it is impossible to move in any direction. There are traffic police in the area, but the only help they give is to say ‘vamos, vamos, adelante, circulen, no se detengan’.<sup>110</sup> Obviously, this absurdity represents the comic moment. As discussed earlier, Eufemio and some other men decide to close off their own parking area and the policemen there do nothing to prevent them from committing this abuse.

During the evening Doña Lolita, Eufemio’s mother, becomes very ill after eating too much. Her fellow campers try to help in different ways, such as suggesting home-made and herbal remedies, but nothing works. Some try unsuccessfully to get an ambulance, and finally they leave for the city to bring a doctor. However, they never requested help from the police, who could have called an ambulance or tried to free the roads for the family to leave. The police do not try to help, even just to check on the safety of the campers. When finally in the morning El Apache leaves on his motorcycle

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<sup>110</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

to find a doctor, he sees a policeman and yells ‘¡intocables de chisguete!’<sup>111</sup> This expresses the audience’s view of police inaction: they appear but are inactive, failing to come to the help of ordinary citizens, and people know this. The scene works as a safety valve: we construct that fictional policeman as a representation of the real police, and we assume Apache’s insult as if it were ours, even though we ‘are inhibited by normative conventions from saying or cannot articulate/express so readily or so well’.<sup>112</sup> As we have seen, the act of humour makes insults possible. In a real-life situation we would hesitate before insulting an authority figure, knowing the consequences, especially in an authoritarian country.

While the family is deciding how to return with the corpse to the city, one of Eufemio’s friends proposes the unthinkable: to take it the same way it came, in the car. When finally Eufemio and his friends manage to put Lolita’s body in the car, they start out only to find themselves stuck in traffic again. Three patrol cars are parked at the roadside but the police do nothing to help the traffic move faster. Another driver notices that Eufemio is carrying his mother’s corpse. A policeman is informed, and after gathering a crowd around the car to pray for Doña Lolita’s soul, the policeman offers to escort them into the city. Someone yells: ‘¡hasta que sirvieron para algo!’<sup>113</sup> The insult makes the joke possible and vice versa. Thus, *Mecánica Nacional* discusses serious topics such as the death of a relative, the disinterest by the authorities, machismo, social abuse, and others, but through Alcoriza’s focalisation, it remains a satirical and amusing film.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> George E. C. Paton, ‘The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality’ in *Humour in Society. Resistance and Control*, ed. by Chris Powell and George E.C. Paton (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), 206-233 (p. 207).

<sup>113</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

## Superiority

We have seen that humour helps us deal with difficult topics, such as the loss of family, and it helps us deal with abuse and oppression. But it also gives us the chance to take revenge on those blamed for our unhappiness and discomfort. Here I will continue to discuss the representation of corruption in these films through different characters. However, we now turn to the superiority theory, which asserts that denigrating someone in power brings pleasure because we ourselves feel superior while the act of humour lasts. Our positions are momentarily reversed. Humour is one way to express banned thoughts, how we attack those who cause us distress, and how we triumph temporarily. For an instant, we are the powerful ones. The higher the authority, or the more discomfort it has caused us, the greater the pleasure derived by making fun of them.

*Tívoli* has an interesting example. There are various sketches in the last show of the cabaret, one of which is about corruption. It is a musical-comedy routine which begins with a thief robbing a couple. A policeman arrives and interrupts the act, snatching the loot from the thief's hands. The figure of the policeman is silly: he wears roller-skates which he controls with difficulty, and his face is painted as a clown, an excessive and disproportionate representation of disrespect.

The policeman and the thief start checking the booty and both start arguing. The policeman draws his gun but it is broken, and immediately the thief gives him his own gun. The idea of the police and thieves working together reminds us of a similar scene in *Los Agachados*, in which *Nopalzin* agrees to pay the police a percentage of his robberies for not being arrested or reported.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the police and the criminals are very similar and indeed the line that separates their behaviour and interest is very thin. While we would expect the policeman to protect the couple, he works instead in

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<sup>114</sup> Eduardo Del Río 'Rius', *Los Agachados*, 39.

complicity with the criminals. This juxtaposition creates the joke,<sup>115</sup> but we recognise that the exaggerated image echoes reality.

While the thief and the policeman argue, the sergeant arrives in his patrol car and the policeman hands him the sack with the booty, saying ‘para su almuerzo’.<sup>116</sup> Despite the policeman being in a position of inferiority and being abused by his superior officer, he avenges himself by insulting the sergeant. The sergeant throws the sack into the back of the patrol car where there are many other sacks and obviously, taking robbed articles from other policemen is part of his duties, confirming our suspicion that police and criminals are very similar.

The sketch continues with the sergeant returning to the police station where the department Chief is flirting with the sensual women who surround him. After a series of events which include the sergeant behaving like a dog on his knees, and the chief of police barking as well, the chief puts all the bags into a suitcase and brings them to the office of an elegantly-dressed man. A secretary appears and announces: ‘El hombre espera’. The elegant man is frightened, and yells ‘El hombre!’ He too kneels, giving the suitcase as an offering. A shield hanging on the door says ‘Dedo, hueso y lana’ with the figures of a finger pointing down, dentures, and the peso sign.<sup>117</sup> The sketch uses the idea of the carnival, where everything is upside down, and to offend the authorities by comparing them to criminals is an act of humour because it is ‘playing with aggression

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<sup>115</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 222.

<sup>116</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1974.

<sup>117</sup> The image of the finger refers to the tradition known as *dedazo* in which the president chooses candidates for political positions, including his successor. During the PRI’s rule, ‘el presidente goza[ba] de una libertad sin límites para designar a los candidatos políticos y apoyar a los líderes de organizaciones populares oficiales mediante la estructura del partido oficial’. Diana Margarita Favela Gavia, *Protesta y reforma en México. Interacción entre Estado y sociedad 1946-1997* (México: UNAM, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, 2006), p. 75. The denture makes reference to the corruption of the authorities, also known in Mexico as *mordida*: ‘cantidad de dinero que exige un policía, un burócrata o un funcionario para no aplicarle la ley (...) o para ayudarlo a aprovecharse indebidamente de alguna cosa’. *Diccionario del español de México*, coord.. by Luis Fernando Lara (Mexico: Colegio de México, 2010) <<http://dem.colmex.mx/Default.aspx>> [accessed 14 June 2011]

or with that what which is prohibited'.<sup>118</sup> Once the audience recognises that the sketch is criticising real authorities, then the enjoyment will be greater since an act of daring and rebellion are presented in a safe or inconsequential manner.<sup>119</sup>

### **Social corruption in relation with Superiority**

Humour points to faults we would like to change but cannot. It 'changes the situation in which we find ourselves, or lights up the everyday by providing an "oblique phenomenology of ordinary life" '<sup>120</sup> helping us to deal with issues which cause displeasure. Mexican bureaucracy is a recurrent topic not only in comics, as we saw in the previous chapter, but also in films. From high ranking civil servants to those less powerful, but who nonetheless wield the little power they do have unfairly, there are numerous characters that are described, and criticised, through humour.

For example, in the film *Tívoli* the authorities in charge of public works use their positions to make money illegally. The engineer Reginaldo works for a private company in charge of public works in Mexico City. He leads an eviction on land that was occupied by poor people, but his interest and motive is not because they live there illegally but because he wants to build something which will be profitable and will give him, and the authorities, a good return. While presenting the project to a group of journalists, Reginaldo explains that two buildings will be erected in the area and a journalist asks: '¿Aquí van a colocar a la gente desplazada ahora?' and Reginaldo replies: 'Bueno, no precisamente a los mismos que usted ve'.<sup>121</sup> Clearly the development is not intended to benefit those most in need. In fact, Reginaldo shows his disdain for poor people when he explains that he will be in charge of the extension of

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<sup>118</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 176.

<sup>119</sup> Mary Rothbart quoted by Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p 40.

<sup>120</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 20.

<sup>121</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1974.

the Avenida Reforma and will demolish areas full of ‘plebs’. Reginaldo’s sense of superiority is evident, but the ‘plebs’ get their revenge.

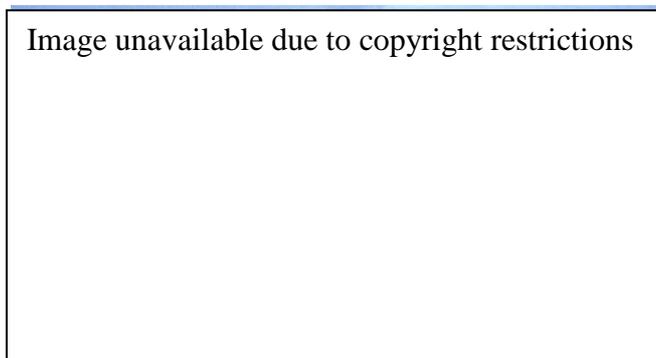


Image 4.6. ‘The official photograph’. *Tívoli*, dir. by Alfonso Arau (1974) (in colour)

When the journalists take the official photo of the engineer and other authorities, a displaced old man manages to appear in the shot, showing that the poor cannot be erased so easily from the national image.

Later, Reginaldo mentions to his assistant that the Reforma project is a deal worth more than 60 million pesos. His assistant asks:

Assistant: ¿Y cómo arreglaste eso? ¿Al 30 porciento?

Reginaldo: N’hombre, hay que hacer 3 o 4 partes. Ni modo. Cuatro tajadas. Me llevo el 20 nomás. ¿Y cómo va lo del contrato de las jardineras de Insurgentes? Me ha estado fregando mucho el arquitecto Landín.

Assistant: Se cayeron las que levantamos apenas el mes pasado.

Reginaldo: ¡Pues mejor, Tarugo! Así las volvemos a hacer.

The dialogue illustrates how the private sector profits from public works projects, as long as the money is shared with others, although in this case it is not clear who Reginaldo will share the money with. The act of corruption is evident. To see it portrayed helps us to admit its existence, but also permits us to discuss it safely. As Critchley suggests, ‘by showing us the folly of the world, humour does not *save* us from that folly by turning our attention elsewhere [...] but calls on us to face the folly of the

world and change the situation in which we find ourselves'.<sup>122</sup> But what helps us to understand that this corruption is part of the universe of humour? As we saw before, this act has been inserted in a humorous text: the whole film. We have also shown that, by opening the semantic unit to more than a single dialogue or a scene, the audience relates difficult situations (corruption) to funny ones (the displaced old man in the photograph). At the end of the scene the assistant says that the flower boxes have collapsed. The fact that Reginaldo celebrates that the flower boxes are already broken is an unexpected as well as an unreasonable answer, showing elements of incongruent humour. But Reginaldo's answer is also an act of true humour: taxpayers' money was used to pay the same contractors over and over, and to coat this truth with humour helps us to admit reality without feeling sorrow,<sup>123</sup> at least while the enjoyment lasts.<sup>124</sup>

On a lower administrative rank, but still with power, are civil servants. In *Tívoli*, when the performers go to the Mayor's office to complain about the closure of the theatre, they are received by a bureaucrat whose job consists of directing cases to the Mayor according to their relevance. They are in a waiting room with people whose appearance is more modest than the artists, and nobody attends to them even though they have apparently been waiting for a long time. The bureaucrat is contemptuous of those who have come to discuss their problems, and he is also contemptuous of his secretary, revealing his sense of superiority to all of them. But when engineer Reginaldo arrives, the bureaucrat immediately changes his attitude and he acts servile and attentive. His rude behaviour is unacceptable but humour softens the scene.

Another man is discussing his problem with the bureaucrat, who tells him to wait for a minute. The bureaucrat opens his desk drawer and, instead of searching for documents or other information to deal with the case, he reads a comic book. Our

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<sup>122</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 18.

<sup>123</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 207, 240.

<sup>124</sup> Eco, 'Los marcos de...', p. 20.

expectation is confounded. The breaking of the frame of reference surprises us, and because the situation is out of context, we have a comic moment. Besides, since the frustration does not hurt us, even if we feel badly for that man we are not that man, the enjoyment is greater. Our anxiety or indignation are transformed into pleasure. Later in the scene, we also see a secretary solving a crossword puzzle instead of working. These images help us deal with the idea that far from helping citizens, civil servants are idle and disrespectful and through the act of humour we undermine the frustrations that these facts cause us.

The authorities and the oligarchies are those most commonly denounced in the films studied for this research. That does not mean that the faults of other citizens are not criticised. They are less frequent but there are some examples that are interesting to consider. As we know, in 1968, the media, and especially the press, was criticised for not being impartial and for its support of the government. During the student demonstrations the press was referred to as *¡Prensa Vendida!*<sup>125</sup> The idea of a pro-government press is raised in some of the films; journalists are depicted as corrupted by the system, and those few who are not, and who dare to challenge the decisions of the authorities, are punished.

The journalist in *Calzonzin Inspector* is a man who works closely with Don Perpetuo's office. He does whatever the Mayor asks him to do, even if it is something irrational, like announcing that it was 'prohibido ensuciarse por orden de la autoridad'.<sup>126</sup> He also participates actively in the events organised by the government, such as leading a demonstration for Calzonzin and reading his supposed biography, obviously invented by the journalist since they do not know who Calzonzin actually is.

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<sup>125</sup> Raúl Jardón, *1968, el fuego de la esperanza* (Mexico: siglo veintinuno editores, 1998), p. 204. According to Jardón, referring to the press that way was one of the students' slogans during the movement.

<sup>126</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

During another event, the journalist is in charge of testing the sound system, and he tries it by repeating the sentences: ‘la revolución’, ‘las conquistas revolucionarias’, ‘los principios democráticos’.<sup>127</sup> The journalist enunciating these phrases shows that they often repeated the same language as the government, as if they were subordinates of the State. Portraying their clumsy subservience humiliates them, something that we probably could not do without the help of humour. Thus, the joke reveals truth as well as rebellion.<sup>128</sup> The fact that the press and government worked so closely together is also represented in a scene in which the journalist is in charge of procuring prostitutes for Calzonzin and Chon, following Don Perpetuo’s orders. Apparently, this was a regular practice among high ranking public servants,<sup>129</sup> so this scene portrays actual despicable practice and simultaneously criticises the closeness of journalists and government officials. Again, the insult enables us to denigrate journalists who lack professional ethics, making clear that we know about their unscrupulous practices. Laughing confirms the knowledge, and brings relief at the same time. By ascribing these negative features to the journalist, we create ‘a painful impression of the person against whom it [the insult] is directed’,<sup>130</sup> making the act of humour a safety valve as well as a vehicle for criticism.

But just as the unethical journalists and obsequious mass media are denigrated, their antithesis is also portrayed, and their courage is punished by those in power. In *Tívoli*, there is a group of journalists who supports the artists’ resistance. While they are having dinner with the performers, they agree to write about the Mayor’s arbitrary decision on the *Tívoli*. However, one of them is later penalised after he publishes a front page piece

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* pp. 93, 102.

<sup>129</sup> Rogelio Cárdenas Estandía, *Luis Echeverría Álvarez: Entre lo personal y lo político* (Mexico: Planeta, 2008), p. 92.

<sup>130</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 197.

with the heading: 'La demolición del Tívoli, Abuso de autoridad'. Over a drink, he explains to Quijano and Tiliches:

Journalist: Me mandó llamar el jefe de redacción y me dijo: 'La regaste. Desde ahora ni una palabra más sobre el teatro. Estás castigado a sociales.' (...) El jefe me la puso fácil: 'O sociales, o renuncia.'

Tiliches: Ahora es reportero de sociales, por hocicón.

Quijano: Oye, ¿por qué no cambias de periódico?

Tiliches: Va a ser igual en todos los periódicos. Ni una palabra sobre el Tívoli. ¡Salud por la libertad de prensa!<sup>131</sup>

For independent journalists as for the Tívoli itself, this situation is not promising. Yet Isaac does not simply leave us with a difficult situation, but breaks the stress with comic effects. In this case, the conversation between these men is interrupted by another man who is very excited about the showgirl dressed as a devil. Tiliches finally replies with exasperation: '¡Ya hombre, estamos hablando de cosas serias y tu nomás viéndole las tetas al diablo!'<sup>132</sup> Tiliches expresses irritation by making reference to his friend's lasciviousness and to a sexual part of the body, triggering hilarity because nudity is considered a taboo topic and to hear someone talking about it playfully brings enjoyment.<sup>133</sup> The tension is fully broken when the man replies to Tiliches: '¿Y qué no están buenas?'<sup>134</sup>

### **Superiority and antithesis**

In the previous chapter we saw that by studying those whom a society makes fun of, we can identify those who are the antithesis of society. We enjoy making fun of those who are detrimental to society: 'Humor appreciation is facilitated when the respondent feels

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<sup>131</sup> Isaac, *Tivoli*, 1974.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 226.

<sup>134</sup> Isaac, *Tivoli*, 1974.

antipathy or resentment toward disparaged protagonists'.<sup>135</sup> We ridicule those in power because it is a moral revenge, and it places us in a position of superiority. 'Laughing is a feeling of sudden glory where I find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense'.<sup>136</sup> In humour we laugh at those who are inferior to ourselves, even if our superiority is temporary and comes from a simple act of humour.

Gregor Benton asserts: 'political jokes are a powerful transmitter of the popular mood in societies where this mood can find no officially sanctioned outlet'.<sup>137</sup> Since President Echeverría invited filmmakers to portray *any* topic, they had an ideal space to point out how those in power made decisions and engaged in behaviour that was detrimental to the public. Politicians and others in democratically elected positions are represented as working against the greater social good, as we saw in the comics. Their caricatures are grotesque and exaggerated; many of the leaders did not gain their positions democratically, which makes it easier to make fun of them.<sup>138</sup> Thus, they seem as the antithesis of the average citizen are punished with the whip of our laughter.

Don Perpetuo expresses his disdain for the town and the residents he rules on various occasions. For example, when he is discussing with his close supporters, known in Mexico as *Fuerzas Vivas*, why an inspector wish to visit the town, the journalist suggests that it must be part of an international conspiracy. To that suggestion he replies contemptuously, portraying his low opinion of the town: '¿Pero cuál conjura internacional? ¡Si en este pueblo se camina tres meses y no se llega a ningún lado!'<sup>139</sup> He also comments in a different scene 'Al pueblo, pan y circo, no cabe duda': the only thing they need to be happy is a festival organised by the authorities. The role of the

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<sup>135</sup> Zillman, D., and Cantor, J. R., quoted by McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 24.

<sup>136</sup> Thomas Hobbes quoted by Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 12.

<sup>137</sup> Gregor Benton, 'The origins of the political joke', in Chris Powell and Gregor Paton, *Humour in Society...*, 33-55 (p. 33).

<sup>138</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 90.

<sup>139</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

authorities ought to be to respect and serve those who they govern, therefore to see how they look down on their constituents causes anger. But the over-emphasis of the character faults of Don Perpetuo makes it easier to digest his attitude. Don Perpetuo prefers his citizens to be enjoying the festival than raising political issues, and when they begin throwing sacks of coloured dust at him, he furiously takes out his gun and condemns this enjoyment at his expense. We enjoy the punishment he receives by imagining ourselves among the crowd, throwing objects at him. If Don Perpetuo embodies all the politicians we despise, so much the better.

As discussed, humour helps us to cope with adverse reality since it establishes a distance between the source of our discomfort and ourselves. Thus, in humour, some actions and situations are tolerated and this works in different directions:

- ▶ We tolerate situations in which the characters suffer abuse or misfortune because we put to one side our emotions (Bergson), we understand that the actions are performed in a fictional world which is indestructible (McGhee, Paton, Zupancic), or we break the link that connects us with the character or the situation (Crichtley). We may also enjoy the adversity of the comic character because we feel superior or we do not sympathise with him/her (Eco).

- ▶ To make fun of the authorities or those who cause us discomfort is welcome because someone is doing to them what we would like to do but dare not because we know the consequences (Freud), and we feel avenged. The feeling of victory is even greater if we identify ourselves with the comic character (Bergson) who is punishing them, and if we identify the butt of the joke as our real antagonist (Freud).

- ▶ We can see these theories in practice in another sequence from *Calzonzin Inspector*. When finally the ‘real’ people from San Garabato approach Calzonzin, believing he is an inspector, they complain about Don Perpetuo and his policemen:

Peasant: Ya va pa'treinta años de aguantarlo [referring to Don Perpeuto]  
(...)

Two men: ¡Nos muerde y roba!, ¡Queremos justicia!

Calzonzin: *Wait a minute, wait a minute*, pa'todos hay [sic], nomás que no se me amontonen [sic]. (Calzonzin asks everyone to organise and take turns speaking. The woman starts complaining)

Market seller woman: Que me 'patian' [sic] señor. Arrastran a mi morralito que es mi hijo, roban mi fruta y se la tragan y sacan centavos de mi itacate. Y por si fuera poco, le meten la mano a una y la perjudican. (panning the humble peasants from San Garabato from Calzonzin's perspective with slow music. We see Calzonzin moved by the sincerity and poverty of the people)

Peasant: ¡También señor, queremos decirle lo de ese par de matones! (pointing to Lechuzo and Arsenio who just arrived at the demonstration)<sup>140</sup>

The scene is softened by *Calzonzin's* use of English, which is an incongruity. The people complain about the length of time Perpetuo has held power (there is no re-election in Mexico and no one is allowed to hold power for more than six years), as well as his dishonesty and corruption. Even his name is revealing: Perpetuo, suggesting how long he has been, and will be, in power: forever.

The crowd carries on complaining. They explain how the policemen are violent with women and children, they steal, molest women and have even killed people, one of the attendants calls them 'matones'. However, although their abuse is a serious issue, we all get some revenge when the people begin beating them with their hats and slapping them on the head. That does not change reality, but it gives us a chance to attack those who offend us.

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<sup>140</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

### **Differences are funny**

As mentioned earlier, the features of some characters will be exaggerated in order to make them match stereotypes, and occasionally, these features help us to distinguish what a culture finds to be different. Thus, a certain character may become the allegory of those we consider different and laughable. Once we recognise which social groups are the butt of jokes we will understand who are disliked or considered as inferior by a society in a specific time.

First, in these four films there is at least one Spanish character. In *Calzonzin Inspector* the Spaniard wears a beret, has bushy eyebrows, and smokes a cigar. They also have small businesses as in *Calzonzin Inspector* where the Asturian Don Fiacro owns a cantina called 'El Sanatorio'. In *El Águila Descalza*, the Spaniard has a general store. In both films these men are disrespectful and condescending to Mexicans. However, when they try to mistreat the comic characters, whom they consider inferior, they themselves suffer humiliation and punishment.

When Poncho tries to return his neighbour's spoilt milk to Don Alejo, the Spaniard in *El Águila Descalza*, they start arguing in a very interesting sequence, not only for the dialogues, but also for the visual scene:

Don Alejo (DA): Y dile a esa hija de la mala vida...

Poncho: Hijo de la mala vida será usted, explotador de mujeres indefensas.

DA: ¿Explotador yo? Mira que se está rifando una hostia y tú tienes todos los boletos.

P: ¡Pues aviéntate hijo de Hernán Cortés, que aquí está tu arbolote de la noche triste!

DA: ¡Y tú, indio emplumado, hijo de la gran... Tenochtitlán!

Chona: ¡A mucha honra!

P: Puritita raza de bronce.

DA: Raza de majaderos, eso es lo que sois. Largaos si no queréis que os queme las patas a los dos.

P: ¿Patas? ¡Si no traemos alpargatas!

DA: ¡Indios patarrajadas!

Chona: ¡Gachupín!

P: ¡Hijo de tu Real Madrid!<sup>141</sup>

In this example, we see how, as Critchley suggests, ‘humour is local and a sense of humour is usually highly context-specific’<sup>142</sup> because in order to understand fully the argument, we need to know the vocabulary the speakers are using and the references they are making. Otherwise we would not understand the core of the joke. For example, when Poncho says to Don Alejo ‘aquí está tu arbolote de la noche triste’, we should know that in 1520, while trying to conquer Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Hernán Cortés lost an important battle in the outskirts of the city, and he reacted by crying underneath an *ahuehuete* tree. Poncho refers to this tree as a symbol of Spanish defeat, and instead of just saying ‘I’ll beat you’, he is creative and expresses the same through a frame of reference that the Spaniard is familiar with.

We can see what Mexicans consider laughable about Spaniards, as well as what they believed that Spaniards thought about Mexicans. The language and manner of speaking of the shopkeeper is exaggerated and thus the audience is clear about his nationality. They also find this ‘different’ way of speaking to be funny, otherwise it would not be emphasised. Also, by observing the expressions that both sides use to offend the other, we see that both feel superior. They each become their opponent’s antithesis. After being called ‘Hijo de Hernán Cortés’, Don Alejo tries to offend the couple by calling them ‘indios’, but Chona and Poncho reply by saying they are proud of it. If we take the side of Don Alejo, we will be glad that someone insults Mexicans; however, if we are on Poncho and Chona’s side, we will be relieved that they did not

<sup>141</sup> Arau, *El Águila Descalza*, 1969.

<sup>142</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 67.

feel offended and even that managed to use the insult as an as an opportunity to show their national pride.

The visual part of this scene is also relevant. During the whole dispute, we only see a high-angle long-shot of the shop behind the roundabout in the middle of which there is a statue of Miguel Hidalgo, the Mexican independence leader. Since we are a perceptive audience, we infer that this is not a fortuitous image. To have the image of the figure that sought independence from Spanish rule signals how some Spaniards still believed that they were superior to Mexicans, or is a metaphor that questions how much independence we had achieved since the nineteenth century. This is a serious topic inserted into an act of humour, a vehicle to discuss national autonomy.

In *Calzonzin Inspector*, Calzonzin will transform how the Spaniard Don Fiacro's put on airs into an aggression. What triggers the argument is Calzonzin's refusal to pay for the drinks he had with Chon:

Don Fiacro: Mira si sois brutos ustedes los indios que creíais que los españoles y los caballos eran la misma cosa.

Calzonzin: Y todavía lo seguimos creyendo.<sup>143</sup>

Every attempt by Don Fiacro to offend Calzonzin and the *indios* is turned into an insult of the Spanish, empowering Calzonzin despite the difficult situation he and Chon are in. Thus, Calzonzin finds a way to call the Spaniards 'animals' and accuses them of plundering Mexico, bringing great pleasure for the audience since 'the more positive one's attitude toward the victor and the more negative one's attitude toward the butt, the greater appreciation of the humor'.<sup>144</sup> These last two examples make reference to the

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<sup>143</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>144</sup> LaFave quoted by McGhee, *Humor. Its Origins...* p. 24.

relationship between conquerors and conquered, still an issue more than five hundred years later.<sup>145</sup>

### US citizens

US citizens are also portrayed in the films, and because their depiction does not differ greatly from the comics, we will not give it a great deal of attention. In *Calzonzin Inspector*, one of Don Perpetuo's close supporters is an US. He is well-off but his Spanish is poor. When Don Perpetuo reports to the private sector about the inspector's visit, the US man says:

US Man: Yo como extranjero, mi posición es 'dolarosa' [sic]. No poder dar más ayuda que simbólica.

Don Perpetuo: ¿Simbólica? ¿No podría ser milbólica?

AM: Yo como 'sucio' [sic] suyo... (Don Perpetuo interrupts him)<sup>146</sup>

The amusement comes from the exaggeration in the accent and the malapropism in the man's Spanish. The words he confuses, which are related to the word 'money', represent an act of true humour since they reveal that USs in Mexico were in a good economic position, interested in business, and supported the Mexican State. The man also mistakenly but revealingly uses the word 'sucio' while talking of his relationship with the Mayor, suggesting that their relationship was not always above board.

The belief about foreigners making dodgy deals in Mexico is reinforced in *El Águila Descalza* with the participation of the mafia in the factory where Poncho works. Mascalzone is an US mafia boss from Chicago who wants to keep Don Carlos' factory. While the gangster is managing the factory he is abusive and treats the workers as

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<sup>145</sup>According to Marco Antonio Landavazo, 'hispanophobia' has been part of Mexican national identity from early in the Spanish colonial period until the present. It is less strong now because of the more recent 'yanquiphobia', remaining more a cultural tradition or 'bad habit,' as he suggests. Marco Antonio Landavazo, 'Languages of Nationalist Violence: Notes on Mexican Hispanophobia', in *Political Violence and the Construction of National Identity in Latin America*, ed. by Will Fowler & Peter Lambert (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 37-53.

<sup>146</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

slaves, and he plans to keep the factory illegally. Don Carlos does not in fact own the factory. The mafia own it and Don Carlos is an illegal front man. In Mexico at the time it was forbidden for foreigners to open businesses. Therefore, the name of the factory is very revealing: *La Malinche*, referring to the indigenous woman who supported Hernán Cortés during the Mexican conquest.

The US characters in *Mecánica Nacional* are two young girls who are camping with the crowd. They dress in a hippie style and while observing the Mexicans enjoying themselves camping, one of them comments: ‘There is nothing Mexican here!’ making reference to the influence of the USA on Mexico. To lose national identity is dreadful, but the discomfort is interrupted with an amusing comment from a young Mexican man who holds the girl while saying ‘We are!’<sup>147</sup>

### ***Politically incorrect? Superiority as the triumph of the super-ego***

Humour helps us understand social concerns in a specific cultural group. Through humour, we reveal our real thoughts and identities. Humour can ‘tell you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be.’<sup>148</sup> Studying humour helps us create a ‘radiography’ of who we are, without having to openly admit it. After observing three situations in *Mecánica Nacional*, *Calzonzin Inspector* and *Tívoli*, we need to ask: is it fair to laugh at those with a disability or those with different ideas or beliefs? By making fun of them we are helping them to deal with difference or to integrate them into a ‘democratic universe’ of humour? Or is making them the butt of our jokes *politically incorrect*?

I will start with an example from *Mecánica Nacional*. Early in the film there is a scene in which two men come to Eufemio’s garage to deliver ice. One of them has a

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<sup>147</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>148</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 75.

marked limp and when Eufemio sees him he calls him *'rumbero'*. This is rude since it refers to his disability: he appears to be dancing the rumba while walking because of the movement of his hips. Eufemio also offends the other man and when the driver asks Eufemio to stop the insults, Eufemio replies: *'Me canso, me fatigo y me extenúo, porque para eso soy muy hombre. Y usted es un méndigo infeliz que ni existe'*.<sup>149</sup> If we find the scene funny, Eufemio's reply offers us absolution. It is the belief in his superiority which makes him offensive. But this feeling of superiority makes Eufemio look ridiculous. His grotesque behaviour is laughable. Thus, our laughter is not directed at the ice seller but the ridiculous attitude of Eufemio, and indeed, through our laughter we are condemning it. Humour then is a corrective.

Another reason for finding this situation comical is because of the combination of frames of reference. Eufemio labels the man a *'rumbero'* (combining the man's hip movement with the movement of a rumba dancer). To join separate frames of reference and embody them in the ice seller highlights his difference. 'The sudden change in the expected meaning of certain words leads to a sudden restructuring and interpretation of the whole'<sup>150</sup> and that is what gives place to the joke. Thus, the mix of frames of reference, and the politically incorrect nickname are the elements that generate laughter. We are not laughing at the man's disability but at the overlapping frames of reference.

A different example comes from *Calzonzin Inspector*. Calzonzin is enjoying a parade in his honour, along with the village grandees. Suddenly, the journalist notices that someone in the parade, who is supposedly part of the football team, is missing a leg and walks with crutches. The journalist runs out and takes him from the line, saying: *'No, tú no. Nada de malas impresiones. Además no llevas bien el paso'*.<sup>151</sup> The journalist claims the man's disability gives a bad impression, a comment that someone

<sup>149</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>150</sup> Gestalt Theory quoted by McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p.11.

<sup>151</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

might find funny for being inappropriate and for the superior position in which the journalist places himself. But when the journalist adds that the man is out of step, it becomes obvious that the scene should not be taken seriously. The comment is improper and ridiculous, but it is part of the universe of humour.

Perhaps at this point we feel uncomfortable about laughing, but we should remember what Bergson said about humour: we need to anaesthetise our emotions, otherwise, the situations that concern us, even if they are presented through the language of humour, will overwhelm us instead of helping us discuss or cope with them.<sup>152</sup> In humour, things are temporarily permitted, including making fun of those we should treat with respect. Even if someone finds these jokes tasteless, humour may be the best way to understand a society contemporaneously. As Jimmy Carr said in explaining his controversial joke<sup>153</sup> about British soldier amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan: 'If a silly joke draws attention to the plight of these servicemen, then so much the better'.<sup>154</sup> Perhaps if a topic is very controversial, humour can enable us to cope with trying situations, and it gives us the opportunity to tackle issues in a less formal and more enjoyable environment.

Finally, considering these acts of humour from a psychoanalytical perspective we might believe that 'by occasionally stepping back from the seriousness of the situation and approaching it with a sense of humor (sometimes called 'looking on the

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<sup>152</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 145.

<sup>153</sup> During a live comedy show in October 2009, Jimmy Carr said: 'Say what you like about these servicemen amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we're going to have a \*\*\*\*\* good Paralympic team in 2012', in 'Anger over Jimmy Carr's joke about war amputees', *The Telegraph*, 25 October 2009, section UK News, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6427618/Anger-over-Jimmy-Carrs-joke-about-war-amputees.html>> 25 October 2009 [accessed 23 September 2011].

<sup>154</sup> Stephen Moss, 'Jimmy Carr: 'I thought my Paralympics joke was totally acceptable'' *The Guardian*, 5 November 2009, section Culture <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke>> 5 November 2009 [accessed 23 September 2011].

light side'), we are presumably better able to deal with the source of the problem',<sup>155</sup> in this case, how those with disabilities are considered different.

The film *Tívoli* provides another example, where the theatre has two dwarfs among its artists. He is a magician and the woman is his assistant. During their sketch, they are heckled by the audience, which yells, whistles and throws objects. The magician begs: 'Estimado público, por favor déjenme trabajar' over and over, but the crowd does not stop. Finally, exasperated, he takes the microphone and says: 'Estimado público, vayan y chinguen a su madre'.<sup>156</sup> We would not be able to laugh if we were disturbed by the offenses or if we felt personally affected.<sup>157</sup> But, as Freud suggests, by approaching the situation through humour, we reject suffering and transform the painful effect into pleasure.<sup>158</sup> It is the super-ego convincing our tough criticism that it is right to laugh, for different reasons: we are not ourselves suffering the opprobrium, or they are not conscious of their misfortune and will overcome it because they are characters in a comedy. Moreover, the magician confronts the audience and insults them, bringing him the pleasure of revenge. We laugh about his unexpected but justified anger. If someone with the same disability observes the scene, we could expect him/her to use it as a way to 'mejorar el pensamiento, fortificándolo, y asegurándolo así contra la crítica'.<sup>159</sup> The act of humour would make him/her, and ourselves, stronger against those ones who would be little us. Thus, humour is an environment in which to discuss the issue 'by enabling us to cope with sources of conflict and distress'.<sup>160</sup> It has a therapeutic benefit.

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<sup>155</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 21.

<sup>156</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1974.

<sup>157</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 225.

<sup>158</sup> Freud, 'El Humor...', (para. 6 of 14)

<sup>159</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 132.

<sup>160</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 227.

### **Superiority as the triumph of the super-ego**

As with comics, we see in films how the concept of machismo is portrayed through the mechanism of superiority related to the super-ego. This corroborates our point that machismo was a social concern of the era. In *La Familia Burrón*, Mexican women are represented as abused by men, usually their partners. Cinema is more grounded in reality than comics, and so even when situations are exaggerated and within the universe of humour, it is more difficult not to feel concern for the safety of the women. Because of this realism ‘cinema was obliged to encounter humour almost straight away’.<sup>161</sup> As we know, humour distances us from reality, helping us cope with the strong scenes.

The strongest and most graphic abuse of women occurs in *Mecánica Nacional*. Eufemio is a Mexican macho, he defines himself in this way, and he believes that his wife, Isabel, must be devoutly dedicated to him, unquestioning of his decisions or behaviour. He is an authoritarian husband, tries to seduce another woman in presence of Isabel, and offends her verbally and physically with no regret. As he tells her in an argument: ‘Te debes a mí, vieja música’.<sup>162</sup> As a macho, ‘el solo hecho de ser el hombre dominante, el líder de la manada, da muchos derechos, incluso sobre la vida y la muerte de los demás’.<sup>163</sup>

While Eufemio and Güero Corrales are flirting with a woman, Isabel and her *comadre* (Güero’s wife) decide to go off with two other men. The comadre is kissing a man while another man tries to seduce Isabel, when they are discovered by Güero Corrales. He tells Eufemio that both wives were cheating on them. Güero Corrales and Eufemio react with violence. When the Comadre denies that she cheated on her husband, Güero takes her by the neck as if he were going to strangle her and says: ‘Pero

<sup>161</sup> André Breton quoted by Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 57.

<sup>162</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>163</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 110.

no se va a poder [cheat on him]. Porque yo soy muy macho. Y puedo matar, y perdonar. Lo que no aguanto es que me vean la cara de...'.<sup>164</sup> According to Barajas, 'el macho puede abusar o burlarse de los demás, pero absolutamente nadie abusa de él'.<sup>165</sup> The humour in this case points out faults by magnifying them. These scenes are far from funny on their own, but despite the harshness of the scenes and topics we know that they belong to a comedy text.

We need the help of our super-ego to tolerate these scenes. To witness abuse is difficult. In various scenes in which Eufemio abuses Isabel they are surrounded by people who do not come to her aid. Mechanisms such as relief help us deal with it because we recognise it as a *mise-en-scene*. We also distance ourselves from the character who suffers. Through superiority we also penalise Eufemio by laughing at his behaviour, but we will need our super-ego to triumph over our ego. Our super-ego must convince our ego that we should not concern ourselves for the safety of Isabel because she is a film character. We need to understand the facts as a 'possible world', a *distorted reality*, but not *the reality*.<sup>166</sup> Even if we suffer from machismo ourselves, humour helps us 'detach'<sup>167</sup> allowing us to repress our feelings and understand the scene as a critical statement. We understand that it is socially acceptable to laugh, and doing so releases the energy that we used to contain our pain, relaxing us and helping us overcome the tragedy. Thus, the big challenge for the filmmaker is to make clear to the audience that they are within the universe of humour. Special signs are necessary which make the genre clear,<sup>168</sup> such as incongruity or exaggeration.

Other symbols of machismo include the portrayal of mothers considered as saints and daughters as virgins, pure before the eyes of society. Charito is the daughter

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<sup>164</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>165</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 115.

<sup>166</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 55, Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 1.

<sup>167</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 62.

<sup>168</sup> Purdie, *Comedy. The Mastery...* p. 13.

of Eufemio and Isabel who, during the night, loses her virginity with her boyfriend, Güero Corrales' son. They are discovered by Eufemio, who becomes very upset. He kicks his daughter, shouting '¡A esta desgraciada la voy a matar a patadas!' The situation is serious and violent, but the seriousness is interrupted when the boyfriend tries to stop Eufemio and says '¡Ya no le pegue! ¡hay que hacer el amor y no la guerra!'<sup>169</sup> The use of the countercultural slogan is unexpected and helps the ego relax.

It is important to emphasise that Eufemio wears a jacket that says 'Mexico' on the back, and his behaviour can be seen as an allegory of the Mexican middle class male. Recalling that the slogan of the film was '¿de veras somos así los mexicanos?' we recognise the film as a portrait of Mexican society. To admit that Mexican society thinks and behaves in this way may be hard to confront, especially if you are Mexican, but the language of humour is a tool which facilitates discussion and management of the issues. The role of the super-ego is vital; without it, discovering the ridiculousness of this reality would overwhelm us. The super-ego helps to find the funny side. It helps to deal with problems and look for ways to overcome them.

One further topic which calls for the triumph of the super-ego relates to the disrespect and humiliation of indigenous communities, and although only *Calzonzin Inspector* contains such references, they are repeated several times, inviting us to consider the issue carefully. When the policemen inform Don Perpetuo that the inspector is in town, Lechuzo describes the outsiders by saying: 'parecen nacos patarrajada, con el perdón de usted, pero luego luego uno se afigura [sic] que vienen disfrazados'.<sup>170</sup> We infer from Lechuzo's comment that an indigenous person could not hold an important public office, at least in the social imaginary. A woman confirms this idea during a speech in the school, when she says: '[Calzonzin] llegó hasta nosotros en

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<sup>169</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>170</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

un disfraz imaginable'. Don Perpetuo demonstrates disrespect for indigenous people when he speaks of Calzonzin: 'Si por lo menos fuera gente de apariencia respetable, pero indio, flaco y prieto, para acabarla de amolar (...). Sin embargo es bastante listo...'. Calzonzin himself enunciates the disdain that indigenous people are held in when during the parade he says to Don Perpetuo: 'En otras partes nada más lo ven a uno como asunto folklórico, de indio patarrajada no lo bajan a uno'.

Clearly these expressions show contempt, but the exaggeration of the characters, situations and statements underline the comical character of the scenes, and once the comedy is revealed, our super-ego helps us cope with the anger that their racism arouses. We also appreciate Calzonzin taking advantage of the confusion by setting himself in a position of superiority – 'uno de los ingredientes fundamentales de la comedia es el disfraz, el engaño'.<sup>171</sup>

### **The breaking of the rule**

As we know, situations which disrupt established frames of reference are humorous. However, 'the laughable borrows its special quality from some persons or group of persons who happen to laugh at it',<sup>172</sup> in other words who share social frames. 'Having a common sense of humour is like sharing a secret code',<sup>173</sup> and if the frames that the comedy alludes to are alien, we would recognise the incongruity but not the underlying social reference. In comics, certain characters whom we expected to behave in a certain way (the frame of reference) in fact behaved differently. Showing characters' excesses makes it possible to criticise them, bringing satisfaction. Humour gives us this satisfaction. When we laugh at the wrongdoing of these characters we point out their faults, the broken rule, and how ridiculous they are.

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<sup>171</sup> Campos, *Comedia. Humor y...* p. 71.

<sup>172</sup> Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms...* p. 17.

<sup>173</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 68.

Bergson and Umberto Eco differ regarding the relationship between the comic character and the spectator. Bergson considers that ‘the comic character is often one with whom, to begin with, our mind, or rather our body, sympathises’,<sup>174</sup> while Eco considers that the comic hero is ‘alguien con quien no simpatizamos porque es un personaje innoble, inferior y repulsivo (animalesco)’.<sup>175</sup> If he/she is punished we feel no concern because we do not ‘sentimos obligados a compadecer a un ser tan inferior’.<sup>176</sup> Our research suggests that both assertions are valid. If the comic character performs an action that we would like to do and we enjoy their transgression, then, as Bergson suggests, we will treat the character as a soul-mate or put ourselves in their place,<sup>177</sup> such as when Calzonzin makes fun of Don Perpetuo. But if we condemn them, such as Eufemio abusing his wife, we will distance ourselves and enjoy the retribution they receive for their behaviour.<sup>178</sup> Such characters seem *animalistic*.<sup>179</sup> Though the two perspectives are opposites, they help us understand contrasting aspects of human behaviour.

An example from *El Águila Descalza* illustrates Eco’s perspective. A policeman fails to help Poncho and Chona get help from the abuses they endured in the factory. The policeman prevents Poncho from entering the *Ministerio Público* because he is dressed as El Águila. They begin arguing, and the policeman tells him: ‘Ya terminó el carnaval’.<sup>180</sup> This suggests that the policeman is making a value judgment, rejecting Poncho’s right to dress as he wishes, and also blocking his access to justice. They start a ‘word challenge’:

Poncho: Te enseño

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<sup>174</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 194.

<sup>175</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 10.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay...* p. 194-195.

<sup>178</sup> In this case Eufemio’s machismo is the broken rule (the rule of gender equality), and his punishments include an unfaithful wife and a daughter who loses her virginity.

<sup>179</sup> I explained the term ‘animalistic’ in chapter one.

<sup>180</sup> Arau, *El Águila Descalza*, 1969.

Policeman: La lengua

Poncho: De hambre

Policeman: Serás burro

Poncho: Si no soy azul marino (looking at the policeman in his blue uniform)

Policeman: Brincos dieras

Poncho: En tus huesos<sup>181</sup>

The first expectation, that the police must help those in need, is frustrated when he makes it difficult for Poncho and Chona to enter the *Ministerio Público*. Poncho also broke the rule that we should respect the authorities and not make fun of them. Nonetheless, the fact that the policeman was unhelpful and rude makes us happy that Poncho offended him. Poncho took revenge on those policemen who do not help ordinary citizens. If we do not sympathise with Poncho, we will celebrate the fact that once he manages to get into the Public Ministry, he is mistaken for a madman and taken to a mental hospital. So, both characters pay for their transgression. If we are concerned about Poncho's destiny, we may remember that 'regardless of all accidents and catastrophes (physical as well as psychic or emotional)<sup>182</sup> that befall comic characters, they always rise from the chaos perfectly intact'.<sup>183</sup> For his part the policeman was morally defeated but nothing else affected him.

In *Calzonzin Inspector* we find other rules transgressed, such as the manipulation of crowds by politicians. Once the authorities know about the arrival of the inspector they start mobilising the population to take part in various events. Some people are forced to participate against their will, and others receive something in exchange for their participation. For example, some of the peasants from San Garabato are taken in a truck to the parade for Calzonzin. One of the organisers tells them that

<sup>181</sup> Arau, *El Águila Descalza*, 1969.

<sup>182</sup> Poncho is a character that greatly exemplifies these statements. He manages to escape from the mental hospital, he overcomes his romantic disappointment when he does not get the girl that he loves, he is unhurt when he crashes his bicycle, and he survives even when he is shot repeatedly with a machine gun!

<sup>183</sup> Zupancic, 'The "Concrete Universal" and...', p. 181.

‘nada de pulque ahorita compañeros porque luego ni se acuerdan de lo que hay que gritar de la borrachera que traen’. The participants also receive new *sombreros* but the organiser explains: ‘en vista de la espontánea colaboración demostrada cada uno de ustedes va a recibir cinco pesos. El pulque después, cuando se acabe el acto y regresen los sombreros’.<sup>184</sup>

The practice known as ‘acarreo’ is illustrated in this scene. *Acarreo* refers to the practice of requiring people to participate in official events by offering a payment or threatening them with the loss of their jobs or benefits.<sup>185</sup> It was a well-known practice during the PRI government.<sup>186</sup> Here, the broken frame of reference refers to the contrasting image of people offering support and admiration though they have no real interest in the person they are supposedly supporting. The ruse is obvious when the organiser instructs a man to be clear about what the people should yell ‘porque luego se ponen a gritar “Viva don Lázaro” y cosas así’.<sup>187</sup> A similar scene happens in another celebration for Calzonzin, when a peasant yells ‘Viva Zapata’ and another one adds ‘Viva el que dijimos desden [sic] antes’.<sup>188</sup> During the parade we see a woman being paid after she approaches Don Perpetuo to show her support and lets him carry and kiss her baby.

The frame of reference that we could label ‘honest support’ is altered by this reality, and we learn that the world is closer to the broken frame of reference than to the ‘correct’ one. Thus, these are acts of true humour: a social fault has been exposed and denounced. Part of the comedy comes from the unexpected request to return the

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<sup>184</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>185</sup> The phenomenon is identified as *Patrimonialismo* by Favela Gavia and described as a mechanism in which ‘los gobernantes dan privilegios a algunos grupos particulares a cambio de reconocimiento y deferencia (...) El clásico acuerdo político requiere la subordinación oficial de los grupos sociales a la tutela del partido a cambio de acceso a diferentes beneficios’ in Favela Gavia, *Protesta y reforma...* p. 9.

<sup>186</sup> A famous event in which civil servants rejected this practice occurred during a ceremony in 1968 when they began shouting ‘¡no vamos, nos llevan!’ and ‘¡somos borregos!’ Carlos Monsiváis, *Días de Guardar* (México: Ediciones Era, 1970), p. 265.

<sup>187</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

sombreros, indicating that they are simply dressing the citizens up for the event. The ‘social wrong’ is revealed by those who perform it, so we feel no concern for them when we laugh.

Everyone in town participates in the parade, making banners, marching and witnessing it. Some women throw confetti and clap, but we see one throwing rubbish from her bin instead. Her behaviour is wrong but she is punishing the authorities and those who accept payments to take part. If we approach this from Bergson’s perspective, we celebrate her insolence: she is doing something we would not dare, for fear of the consequences. There is another group of people paid to participate in the festivities, a group of strong men who first pretend that they are the sick people from the hospital, and later dress up as prisoners. Since their condition as ‘acarreados’ does not vary from the previous examples, we will not examine them. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that we are aware of them.

In these examples, the issues are very explicit and exaggeration is part of the comedy. However, if we did not know the practice of *acarreo*, then we would recognise the incongruity but not the social grievance. Knowing what the scene is making reference to gives us a fuller understanding and increases the benefits of the comedy, but also the subsequent *cold carnival*, as we will see next.

### **Corruption of society**

We have seen how those in a position of power can abuse others, even if the line that separates them is very thin, for example, the case of civil servants. In *Mecánica Nacional*, a group of people are talking about how they charge for their services. The TV technician explains that he lies to his customers about what he needs to repair, and Eufemio says that he also carries out work that a car does not need in order to charge

more. The butcher adds that he gets his beef from the black-market. Güero Corrales tries to justify how these underhand practices help keep society afloat:

Güero Corrales: Es filosofía pura. Acá la dama fayuquera, con todo respeto, le compra carne al técnico en bueyes y se le desorganiza la panza, y luego va con el doctor, y el doctor en lugar de darle carbonato la opera. Pero luego ¡ah! se le descompone el carro al doctor y va aquí con mi compadre, y resulta que mi compadre se lo tranza, pero luego a mi compadre se le descompone la tele y tiene que caer aquí con el ingeniero electrónico y este se lo abrocha...

Sergeant Major: ¿Usted en qué equipo juega?

Güero Corrales: Ah, yo tengo una funeraria ¡y ahí los espero a todos!<sup>189</sup>

The abuse is very explicit, and humour helps to ‘expand social knowledge’<sup>190</sup> by developing this social truth. We recognise that even when the facts belong to a *mise-en-scene*, they refer to our reality, and ‘sonreímos porque nos sentimos tristes de haber descubierto, aunque solo por un momento, la verdad. Pero en ese momento nos hemos hecho demasiado sabios para creerla’.<sup>191</sup> We were smart enough to know that the scene belongs to a fictional world, even if it does refer to a reality we know. Helped by humour, an uncomfortable truth was revealed. By facing up to it we understand more about our social reality. True humour ‘tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in, and perhaps indicates to us how it might be challenged’.<sup>192</sup>

As we have seen, humour relaxed us, liberated us, saddened us, and finally called our attention to what is wrong in society. Eco states that humour does not offer us freedom.<sup>193</sup> Benton warns us that jokes ‘are moral victories, not material ones’.<sup>194</sup> Yet

<sup>189</sup> Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

<sup>190</sup> McGhee, *Humor. Its Origin...* p. 43.

<sup>191</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 20.

<sup>192</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 11.

<sup>193</sup> Eco, ‘Los marcos de...’, p. 19.

<sup>194</sup> Benton, ‘The origins of...’, p. 41.

we may feel consolation in Critchley's view that humour can be a tool used against the management<sup>195</sup> to undermine it. In every joke there is hope for the future.<sup>196</sup>

***Speaking the unspeakable. Torture and abuse inserted in an act of humour***

In the previous chapter we saw how comic books addressed difficult, and banned, topics such as the use of torture and forced disappearance. We reviewed how through mechanisms of humour, graphic artists were able to denounce abuses that the authorities refused even to admit, much less condemn or explain. Although the films reviewed for this chapter do not discuss torture, there are references to abductions ordered by the authorities.

Obviously, abduction is a violation of human rights, and to find a means to discuss it is important, not simply for the immediate targets but for the population more widely. It keeps the topic on the social agenda and keeps alive the possibility of a resolution. An example appears in *Tivoli*. A group of men in suits arrive at the theatre and announce to the manager that they have an official order to detain the actors. Quijano tries to bribe them but they refuse the offer, and put the comedians in the car. On the road, Tiliches realises that they are not going in the direction of the police station, which makes all the actors nervous. One of the actresses asks if they are going to be killed, but gets no response from the agents. Another actor comments: 'Así agarraron a mi primo Gilgardo. Na'más no lo volvimos a ver'.<sup>197</sup> They are taken to a luxurious mansion where the President, who is addressed in the film as 'El Hombre', is giving a party. The artists are treated very politely, but that does not alter the fact that they were brought there against their will. They are forced to present one of their sketches in front of El Hombre and his guests. After their performance, they are invited

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<sup>195</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 11-18.

<sup>196</sup> Davies, *Jokes and their Relation...* p. 99.

<sup>197</sup> Arau, *Tivoli*, 1974.

to have dinner in the kitchen, later abandoned on the street in the middle of the night to make their way home by themselves.

Although nobody is hurt, their rights have been violated. They were taken against their will, and required to perform without being asked and without payment. The abuse of authority is clear. Perhaps the abuse is not equal to that inflicted on Ruperto Tacuche in *La Familia Burrón*, but nonetheless, one actor made reference to the abuse of his cousin, and another believed they would be killed. These scenes reinforce knowledge of the existence of these practices. A truth has been expressed. The situation is not in itself funny but there are some moments of comedy that break the stress. That does not mean that we do not feel anxious for the artists, but with humour inserted in the narration, our ego is convinced more easily by the super-ego not to be frightened. The first comic moment comes when the actors are forced to go with the agents. One of the agents is struggling with an actress dressed as a little boy:

Agent: ¿Es usted hombre o mujer?

Chapas (actress): Soy más hombre que usted, y más mujer que su chingada madre, güey.<sup>198</sup>

Various mechanisms help us deal with the women's abduction. Although Chapas' rights are being transgressed, and she is insulted about the way she looks, she makes an unexpected and disrespectful comment which turns the situation through humour. As Freud suggests, the insult makes the joke possible.<sup>199</sup> Chapas gains power by degrading the abductors, setting herself in a superior position at least momentarily. This accords with Critchley's view that jokes make us powerful. We confront our fears while taking revenge. When the actors are in the car and discussing the possibility of being killed, one of the abductors turns on the radio and a children's song is broadcast. The unforeseen event disrupts the stress. Moreover, the sketch they perform for *El Hombre*

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<sup>198</sup> Arau, *Tivoli*, 1974.

<sup>199</sup> Freud, *El chiste y su relación...* p. 136.

criticises the abuse and dishonesty of the authorities, helping both the actors and the audience overcome their fears.

The exaggerations in *Calzonzin Inspector* make it easier to enjoy what we are witnessing. At the beginning of the film, Calzonzin is participating in a peasant meeting where they are complaining about local government abuse, and Calzonzin mentions: ‘O somos o nos hacemos, porque como dijo el otro día el compañero periodista Chano González ‘El Pujuy’, quien se encuentra indebidamente incomunicado en la cárcel municipal...’.<sup>200</sup> Calzonzin is an exaggerated character, the language he uses is relaxed and informal, and these features make us less inclined to worry about the plight of the journalist. The abuse of journalists was also discussed in *Los Agachados*, as well as forced disappearance in *La Familia Burrón*, which confirms suppositions of the existence of these practices. Later in the film we see the authorities violating citizens’ rights in San Garabato, when the police go to ‘enjaular a la oposición’.<sup>201</sup> The operation starts with the policemen driving around the town in their ‘van’, which is a horse cart with a giant wooden cage. Arsenio, hangs on the back making the sound of a siren. The first stop is in Don Lucas’ pharmacy where a group of men are reading poetry aloud. One of the policemen asks the other:

Lechuzo: ¿A poco don Lucas es subversivo?

Arsenio: ¡Claro! ¿No ves que lee libros?<sup>202</sup>

The authorities considered the opposition to be cultured, perhaps because the social movements of 1968 and 1971 were led by university students and intellectuals. This is also an allegory of who the authorities were afraid of. The scene criticises the practice of jailing people for being educated, as well as triggering laughter for its silliness. When the policemen burst into the pharmacy they start beating the men, telling them they are

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<sup>200</sup>Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

under arrest. When one of the victims asks about the reasons for his arrest, Lechuzo says that it is for hiding weapons. However, the so-called weapons are the bottles of liquids and chemicals, which shows how the police fabricated evidence to justify their actions. The situation becomes even more absurd when Lechuzo opens the till, takes the money and points out: ‘¡Ah! Con que dinero para propaganda subversiva, ¿no?’<sup>203</sup> But there is no evidence that the money is for anything other than legitimate business purposes.

The scene is so exaggerated that even when we recognise fragments of reality, we are able to enjoy it. The absurdity is taken to the extreme when the policemen arrest a man in a *pulquería*. The man resists, saying he is not drunk. Lechuzo replies ‘pero está feo, que es peor’.<sup>204</sup> The bizarre explanation shows how arbitrary stupid the authorities can seem when they try to justify their actions. To laugh about it ‘es triunfar, al menos por un instante sobre situaciones insostenibles e intolerables como el dolor, la crueldad, la violencia’.<sup>205</sup>

## Army

Religion, the president and the army were institutions that filmmakers rarely raised, fearing censorship or rejection.<sup>206</sup> But some did criticise the army. In comics, Rius was very critical of the armed forces, and in films, *Calzonzin Inspector* and *Mecánica Nacional* offer equally unflattering portraits. *Calzonzin Inspector* presents a crude caricature of the army. Two men in particular embody the institution (they are supporters of Don Perpetuo): a very old General who can barely move by himself, and a

<sup>203</sup> Arau, *Calzonzin Inspector*, 1973.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Barajas, *Sólo me río...* p. 12.

<sup>206</sup> Jean Nakamichi, ‘El cine mexicano era rosa, ahora es real’, *La Crónica de Hoy*, 16 September 2010, section Espectáculos <[http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id\\_notas=532281](http://www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?id_notas=532281)> [accessed 30 November 2011]. Armando Manzo Vieyra, ‘La censura en el cine mexicano’, *Libertad de palabra*, 21 March 2011, section Reflector <<http://www.libertaddepalabra.com/2011/03/la-censura-en-el-cine-mexicano/>> [accessed 30 November 2011] and Bracho, ‘El cine mexicano...’, p. 417.

young one whose job is to carry the old General around town. Every time the General appears, the representation reinforces his advanced age. During the parade he moves in a strange way, accompanied by two young soldiers. His strange walking is revealed with a close-up of his feet, where we notice he is wearing roller-skates. The soldiers pull him along the route of the march. Later, in the letter in which Calzonzin describes the people of San Garabato, he explains that he wanted to throw peanuts at the old General and his assistant, and while this is said in voice-over, both men turn into monkeys.

The incongruity and exaggeration are obvious. We understand the army as an aged institution, where the leader can barely look after himself. Its personnel are stupid, like monkeys, and steadfastly loyal to the government. We cannot deny the importance of expressing such views of an institution that appears untouchable. Given its role countering the student movement in 1968, and its abuses in rural communities throughout the 1970s, such references will clearly touch a chord with the audience.

Gregorio is a man dressed in civilian clothes but who identifies himself as an army Major in *Mecánica Nacional*. He is travelling with his so-called wife, we discover later that she is a prostitute he hired for the weekend – to Acapulco when they get caught in the traffic caused by the racing fans. Trying to see the cause of the tailback, he climbs on top of his car and causes the men around, including Eufemio and his friends, to mock him. Immediately he loses his temper and takes out his gun and threatens them:

Gregorio: ¿De qué se ríen imbéciles? Sepan que soy Mayor y no permito que nadie...

Man: ¿Es, o nomás así le dicen, porque, dónde está el uniforme?

Man 2: Ahí está, ¿ve? Porque si trajera uniforme, puro respeto.

Little boy: ¡Un uniforme es la patria!

Man 2: Seguro m'ijo [sic], pero así de turista, ni quien te pele, güey.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>207</sup>Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1971.

The men make it clear that they have no respect for the Sergeant Major without his uniform. The uniform constructs a soldier, not the gun Gregorio is using to try to intimidate them. This mockery is enjoyable, but the unforeseen comment of the child reveals that it is those in uniform, such as the army and the police, who represent the country, not the citizens. The audience realises the place they occupy in the social pyramid. Several bystanders make fun of the Sergeant Major by calling him ‘chaparro’ and making fun of him. Neither his gun nor his position in the army can stop them from mocking him. Some even try to seduce his girl, including Eufemio and Quijano. Soldiers may be in a position of superiority when they are on duty, but once they are not, they are the same as the rest of us.

Alcoriza also criticised the army in his next film, *Las Fuerzas Vivas* (1975), representing soldiers as mercenaries, but in this latter case, the story took place during the Mexican Revolution. Still, it would appear that Echeverría made good on his promise to tolerate the discussion of a variety of topics.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, the issues raised in these films do not differ greatly from those in the comics. Despite the censorship cinema had suffered historically, various topics were tolerated even when they were critical of the government and public institutions. However, it is important to make clear that we can only make this statement in reference to the films considered here, because every director might have had different experiences regarding the level of censorship (or self-censorship) exercised.

*Calzonzin Inspector* and *Tívoli* are related directly to politics and political decisions. *Calzonzin Inspector* is a satire that ridicules negligent politicians and the oligarchy that supports them, while *Tívoli* shows how the authorities mistreated the

population. They were made in different settings, one in the countryside, the other in the city, but both offer us a wider image of how politics was perceived. *Mecánica Nacional* and *El Águila Descalza* discuss politics, but the core of their stories appear apolitical, such as camping in the countryside or a Mafia-controlled factory in need of rescue by a 'superhero'. Thus, all four films shed a critical light on the contemporaneous concerns of the population and their political mood at the time.

Their social and political critique was articulated through the language of humour, even if not all comments or descriptions used humour. Such a strategy helped viewers understand the seriousness, but serious issues were embedded in comedy. Once we understand ourselves to be in the universe of humour, we relax. But this is not the same as salvation: comfort and relaxation may only last as long as the joke, or the film, and indeed, discovering the absurdity of our reality can be discomforting too, especially if we are emotionally connected to these issues.

We see how important it is for these films to remind the spectators that they are witnessing fiction, based on real situations, perhaps, but still a fiction. The filmmaker uses tools such as exaggeration and incongruity to make the comedy clear. This is of vital importance in order to relax the spectators and transform their stress and repression into pleasure, despite the characters' misfortunes. If the film is not understood as comedy, then the viewer may feel that laughter is inappropriate. The sense of unease and sadness would prevent them from enjoying the humorous portrayal of controversial or painful topics.

The directors used different strategies to establish the satire. A common strategy is to exaggerate defects. An example is Don Perpetuo from *Calzonzin Inspector*, a grotesque representation of a political leader. Another strategy is to construct a character that seduce the spectators because of their charisma, their actions, or the

invitation to make them our ‘playmate’ or assume their role. Once we sympathise with the character, we will enjoy their attacks against those we do not like. This is the case of Poncho/El Águila Descalza, who despite his clumsiness, confronts the authorities, helps those in need, and overcomes his own difficulties.

The use of exaggeration helped the audience maintain the ‘comedy mood’. We saw exaggeration in the characters themselves, and also in the situations in which they were involved. The characters from *Mecánica Nacional* are a good example. In a single day they experience the grandmother’s death, cheating, sexist violence, and other problems. Eufemio is aware of his misfortune when he says: ‘¡Son demasiadas cosas pa’que le pasen a uno![...] De que la desgracia llega se trae a sus cuatitas’.<sup>208</sup> But they always manage to overcome their misfortunes. Finally, after all the suffering, the characters show us that they are able to defeat adversity. They make their way home together, as a family, escorted by the police because they are carrying Doña Lolita’s body in the car. As so often, Eufemio finds the light side of the situation, and says: ‘Nunca pensaste que ibas a tener un entierro así mamacita. Como el de un ministro’.<sup>209</sup>

Another technique used to dilute the seriousness of the situations was to give the comic characters a moment of triumph, so we see them in a position of superiority from time to time. There were various means of doing so, such as making fun of those oppressing them or in higher positions, giving them a moral victory. These are tools to help us deal with misfortune and prevent sadness from causing stress.

Since films need to develop a story situated at a specific time, it would be difficult to make every scene funny without confusing the viewer in a chain of incongruities. In order to keep the comic mood and also raise serious topics, the director inserted something funny just before or after the critical issue, so the audience was

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<sup>208</sup>Alcoriza, *Mecánica Nacional*, 1974.

<sup>209</sup>Ibid.

relaxed or to break the tension afterwards. Alberto Isaac used this technique in *Tívoli*. In one example, the artists drive around, demonstrating, and finally park in the *Zócalo* expecting the president to hear their story. Tiliches claims: ‘Señor Presidente, que no se diga que en el caso del Tívoli se venga a demostrar que los poderes se ejercen por encima y sin tomar en cuenta al pobre y humilde individuo individual’ (Tiliches starts crying). ‘Señor Presidente... no nos oye ni un carajo’.<sup>210</sup> The scene is moving, but the sadness ends when a policeman arrives to escort them away. They realise that the truck has broken down and everyone needs to get out and push it. The silliness of the situation takes the viewer back to the comedy genre.

The topics in these films are diverse, some criticising the authorities and the politicians, others describing social needs, and others criticising society itself – its abuse and corruption. Authority figures such as politicians, police and the army are represented negatively. The police are portrayed as negligent in *Mecánica Nacional* and *El Águila Descalza*, and as oppressive in *Calzonzin Inspector*. Politicians are described as corrupt, indifferent, oppressive, and violent, including Don Perpetuo from *Calzonzin Inspector*, and El Hombre and the Mayor in *Tívoli*.

The appearance of the army in *Calzonzin Inspector* and *Mecánica Nacional* is interesting since, as we know, it was rarely criticised. This may be an act of goodwill by the Echeverría administration in order to live up to his promise that anything could be discussed. In the previous chapter we saw that Rius was sharply critical of the army, and perhaps these filmmakers decided they could take the risk too. Rius published his comic in a private press with a limited number of issues every other week, and with a specific reader in mind: the left wing middle class. On the other hand, the films of Arau and Alcoriza were supported by the government and gained the approval of the censorship

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<sup>210</sup> Isaac, *Tívoli*, 1972.

board. Rius criticises the army in some issues of *Los Agachados*, while Alcoriza made an army major one of his main characters, portraying him as a violent machista who spends his weekend with a prostitute, although he opposes dishonesty on the part of ordinary citizens. Although Arau's soldiers are only minor characters in *Calzonzin Inspector*, they are idiotic every time they appear on screen, making it obvious what image he wanted to create. Both cases merit attention because these films were well received by viewers and by the Film Academy in Mexico. *Mecánica Nacional* was selected for screening in several countries and represented Mexico in international festivals and presidential visits.

These films also portray corruption in society, and how ordinary citizens abuse fellow citizens when they are in a position of superiority (even a minor one), or when they have a chance. We saw how men abused women through sexist behaviour, putting themselves in a position of superiority, controlling everything around them, as they are another despotic authority. We noticed that those who were different suffered humiliation, such as the disabled or the Asian artist from Tívoli who is insulted by Tiliches. To realise that we can be abused by the authorities, our neighbours and even our relatives might be hard to digest. However, humour helps us discuss these topics. We find in humour a way to overcome the abuse: our criticism becomes stronger. In the universe of humour, characters who suffer abuse find revenge. To see that our society is abusive is a concern, but humour relaxes us and invites us to reflect on the issues, and perhaps find a way to change things. Humour does not promise that we will not feel touched or upset, but while it lasts we will transform our worries into enjoyment. Afterwards, we may be worried or sad, the feeling of a *cold carnival*, but this makes us aware of the need to do something to change our reality, that it is uncomfortable.

In the section *Speaking the Unspeakable*, we analysed how a serious topic such as forced disappearances could be addressed through the language of humour, making it easier for the public to talk about such disappearances and perhaps to overcome it. It would be wrong to say that films were the only media used to raise this topic, since comics did as well. There were other channels, although limited, to draw attention about disappearances, such as pamphlets or word-of-mouth, but to find a playful way to broach this behaviour helps us think about it without being overwhelmed.

Another practice that was savagely caricatured in *Calzonzin Inspector* was the *acarreo*, bringing people to official events to pretend that the government has supporters. The topic is not exclusive to films, as we noticed some references to it in the comics, but it is the insistence and exaggeration throughout the film that makes us think that Arau wanted the audience to reflect on it. The *acarreo* might seem like a mild practice that does not harm anyone, but often people were forced to attend events and appear to support the government. It was a way to construct an image of legitimacy for a government whose democratic credentials were very questionable. To show how ridiculous this practice was, Arau exaggerated it so much that it became a grotesque (but funny) irony of reality. The film will not change reality, although once we notice how absurd reality is, we might find the will to oppose it.

It seems clear that during the Echeverría *sexenio* there was greater tolerance of open dissent. We will return to this issue in the conclusion, as well as a consideration of the similarities and differences between films and comics, and what difference the language of humour made to the discussion of these issues. However, a final reflection here on the use of humour to attack those we consider our antithesis. In these films we see that the authorities, including civil servants who control access to state services were considered to be adverse for society. But abuse of power is more widespread. In

*Mecánica Nacional* we witness a conversation in which ordinary citizens described how they abused others for personal gain, justifying it by saying that this was how the economy worked. We noticed how people made fun of those who were different, and therefore seemingly inferior. All this makes us wonder who exactly *is* the antithesis of society in a country in which everyone abuses everyone else, in which people are violent, sexist, corrupt, and abusive. Mexico appears to be a country in which the authorities oppress its citizens, those with a little power abuse those with less, institutions are corrupt and citizens fear them in the same way they would fear criminals. But people also abuse fellow citizens, which invites us to reflect on what in fact is redeemable in this Mexican society. Is there any hope for it? I argue that several characters show us that we can be optimistic about the future. Despite Calzonzin being a fraud, he feels moved by the adversity of San Garabato's inhabitants; Poncho from *El Águila Descalza* dreams of and fights for a better and fairer society; other downtrodden characters fight for their rights, including the characters from *Tívoli*; and some still believe in the importance of the family, maybe in their very own way, such as Isabel in *Mecánica Nacional*.

Perhaps the various issues discussed in chapter three and four are disheartening, but they are also a call to arms. In the meantime we can have a laugh about it as long as we remain inside the language of humour.

## Conclusion

This research has shown how humour is a language through which ideas are communicated. Humour can be a means to express 'serious' issues. When our critical thought is strong enough to cope, humour can be the perfect language to discuss harmful or dangerous topics such as repression, abuse and injustice. To use humour does not promise that the statements presented will be accepted, or that we will be pleased with them, but at least they have a better chance of not being rejected by our critical thought. In the Mexico of Echeverría, films and comics used humour to highlight social reality, and they became a good means of disclosing those thoughts that could not be discussed openly. 'Serious' criticism in other media, such as newspapers, was foreclosed. Laughter does not change reality, and comedians do not tend to lead revolutions, so the authorities proved more tolerant of humour as a means of expression. Even so, these media *did* help express social opposition, kept it on the agenda, and for that we can say that they formed part of the public record. In a regime in which criticism was tolerated according to the whim of the authorities, jokes inserted into films and comics were some of the few avenues through which topics could be discussed. Both the authorities and certain sections of society found themselves target of barbed wit which contained messages which were lost on no one.

This thesis connected three distinct fields of analysis: humour, visual culture (comics and films) and the authoritarian regime of Luis Echeverría Álvarez. The principal goal was to determine how humour was used to express political and social dissent through comics and films, what topics and issues they addressed, and the reason why they used this language. We came to understand humour as a language, and comics

and films as texts. These media spoke the language of humour; they expressed distinct messages, being one of them political.

As we saw, there are various perspectives on the nature of humour, and why it can be used as a language to express 'serious' concerns. According to Umberto Eco, humour is an umbrella term, having a variety of meanings and understandings, which vary according to the discipline. After considering various theoretical approaches, I presented an interdisciplinary and eclectic theoretical framework in order to help us understand what humour tells us about a specific time and place, and how and why it was used to express social concerns.

Summarising these theories, we are inside the language of humour once we recognise the incongruity inserted into a text. Different clues inform us that we are witnessing an act of humour, the most common being exaggeration. Exaggeration is an incongruity. But humour was not pure laughter and silly pleasure. We express certain things through humour because they bring beneficial outcomes. Through humour we can rise above those who oppress us. Humour makes us superior. We can humiliate those who oppress us. We are also allowed to do what in the 'real world' is forbidden: we can break rules or witness, and vicariously enjoy, the comic character doing it. Moreover, by expressing our fears and concerns in this way, we bolster our ego. This helps us to overcome our personal misfortunes and find a way to change the situations we find ourselves in. This is the relief outcome of humour. This combination of theories which we discussed in chapter one not only helps us understand the Mexico of the 1970s, but can be used to approach visual comedy from other cultures and other historical moments. The important point here is to situate the sources we are analysing, in this case films and comics, within their specific context, in this case, Mexico in the 1970s, and to recognise what the given society understands as 'humorous'.

We also saw how films and comics could be understood as creators of a *partial reality*, or as *possible worlds* whose messages amounted to allegories of our own world. In spite of the caricatured images and the absurdity of the stories, films and comics created their own universe. They made their own narrative plausible. We compared them with our own reality. Through these analyses we found that the idea of studying a society through its expressions of humour made sense. We noticed how humour went beyond the idea of amusement and denial of reality and in fact brought us face to face with very serious issues. We laughed even while we noticed that the absurd world being portrayed was in fact our reality. At first glance, humour and visual media seem like simple entertainment. But their social content has a social good: seeing such content expressed openly can be very comforting.

In a time in which the government spoke of tolerance and opening, it should not be surprising to find criticism in the media. But the government's words were empty rhetoric; they continued hunting, punishing, torturing and even killing their opponents. In a period in which there was low tolerance to criticism, the channels of expression were reduced. To express dissent was dangerous, and humour became the ideal language to express disagreement; it was a way to 'disguise' our real judgments, improving the chances of the message being received and punishment being avoided.

Thus, society found a way to complain. They saw their daily concerns and fears played out in humorous films and comics. Echeverría *did* allow some criticism, and although not all criticism expressed through these media was well-received or went without penalty, the odds of escaping unscathed were greater. The proof is that these films and comics were released and their content was made available for public consumption. Nevertheless, their thoughts were diluted by being embedded into wider stories, narratives that were not political. *Tívoli* and *Calzonzin Inspector* were the only

texts analysed whose main aim was to portray the abuse and misconduct of authorities. Humour allowed certain flaws to be pointed out which might not have been tolerated if they had been addressed specifically without the language of humour. *Calzonzin Inspector* was an exaggerated slapstick comedy, and in *Tívoli* the audience could miss the political content among the naked women and puns. This may be why they were permitted to be shot and screened. It was also a way to justify the so-called *apertura democrática* and garner favour among intellectuals, which Echeverría was keen to do.

Three comics and four films were considered. In all of them, social dissent was expressed through humour. It is important to mention that both genres addressed the same political and social topics in their criticism, and where there were differences they were small. The most common social issues were social corruption, abuse of fellow citizens; poverty, despite the promises of the Mexican Revolution; the rich and idle and their social uselessness; the neglect of indigenous groups; abusive foreigners; an emerging middle class and its integration into the national *status quo*; youth as a lost generation; and the machismo as a social characteristic despite the sexual revolution.

Topics such as disabled people were discussed through the language of humour only in film. The political concerns reflected in the texts analysed were the corruption and idleness of the police; co-optation of the mass media, mainly the press; official abuse and corruption extending from the top of the pyramid down to those with less power; unlawful practices such as *acarreo* and pressure tactics for electoral favours; bureaucracy as a barrier preventing society from satisfying certain needs; figures of authority, including the president, as incompetent and limited to empty rhetorical promises; and violence against opponents of the regime. The lack of democracy and social participation was a more prevalent feature of the comics, while the unspoken rule of not criticising the army appeared in both genres, although more constantly and

negatively depicted in films. The existence of guerrilla groups appeared only in the comics.

Reflecting on these topics helps us create a portrait of the political and social reality of Mexico. Despite more than fifty years passing since the Revolution, there were still major inequalities. Some basic necessities such as social security, equal opportunities, employment, services, and others had not been satisfied. We can see how the political class was understood as abusive and authoritarian, and how a contagious corruption ran right through Mexican society. Although the *apertura democrática* allowed these issues to emerge, the very *apertura* itself was questioned and criticised by some intellectuals and artists, such as Rius. However, all is not lost. To poke fun at the faults was a way to notice them, invite a reflection on them, and try to correct them. At least one sector of society, as the filmmakers and cartoonists, were concerned about the destiny of Mexico and through their own language they expressed their discomfort. Films and comics became not only entertainment but also a social awakening. Thus, the prevalence of critical content revealed its salience. The authors and directors clearly wanted to discuss these issues, and the readers and audiences recognised the realities, understanding the media as a microcosm, and some of the situations as allegories of Mexican reality.

Except for *Los Agachados*, President Echeverría was not directly criticised in the media, but other governmental authorities, such as governors and *diputados*, became the butt of jokes. It was possible to understand that these officials embodied the presidential figure. As we know, abuse of power and exploitation were widespread. People suffered oppression and poverty, and were excluded from political participation. Politicians were perceived as abusive and idle. Mexican citizens suffered day by day from the decisions of their leaders. But both media were careful to avoid the president.

Even so, flaws were ‘sugar-coated’ with humour, increasing the likelihood they would avoid censorship. In fact, to communicate these points of view through the language of comedy provided great benefits. The combination of a mass media and humour seemed perfect for expressing those thoughts.

Both films and comics used the mechanisms of humour in similar fashion, and the benefits to the audiences/readers were also similar. The nature of humour did not change according to the genres through which it was expressed, but rather it changed the manner in which it was perceived: Regino Burrón was funnier than Eufemio from *Mecánica Nacional* because Regino was an absurd caricature, while Eufemio was ‘more realistic’. But the way in which they expressed social concerns and the social good they brought to viewers did not vary. The language of humour brought the message, and the two genres were the channel through which we received it.

Despite the similarities in topics, there were some interesting differences. Guerrilla activity was only discussed in comics. None of the four films included topics or characters representing *guerrilleros*. The very discussion of it is important because it was a time in which the authorities denied the existence of these groups. Even the language of the guerrillas was used (such as ‘*expropiaciones*’ in *La Familia Burrón*), showing that the wider population was very aware not only of their existence, but also who they were. The exaggerated caricatures and loose slapstick of *La Familia Burrón* were an invitation to dismiss such discussion as unserious. But that would be a mistake – the political context, the wide readership (*La Familia Burrón* was a weekly), and the nature of the message, raised serious implications. Likewise with the army in the films *Calzonzin Inspector* and *Mecánica Nacional*. As we mentioned, there was an unwritten code in which the army, the president, and religion were not discussed by the mass media, much less criticised. Nevertheless, both films contain characters who represent

the army in an unfavourable light. Censorship in *Mecánica Nacional* was avoided by dressing the army official in civilian clothes, although the criticism of the army was indeed sharp, understanding the character as the representation of the Mexican army,. Alfonso Arau was less refined with his army characters in *Calzonzin Inspector*, but since the film was a slapstick and the characters and situations were very exaggerated, the criticism appeared diluted. The style was an invitation not to take the film seriously. At the beginning of the film a caption advised us that any similarity between the film and real life would be a coincidence, and although this was an obvious irony, it could be used as an alibi.

Another difference between the films and comics was the discussion of disabilities. *Mecánica Nacional*, *Calzonzin Inspector* and *Tívoli* showed how society made fun of the people with disability. Eufemio in *Mecánica Nacional* refers to the man who limped as ‘a *rumbero*’, and the journalist in *Calzonzin Inspector* told the man with one leg that he had to leave the parade because he could not ‘follow the step’. Despite being politically incorrect, we pointed out how these comments are part of the universe of humour. It suggests that humour can address any topic, although that does not mean that audiences will find it funny. Discussing disabilities through jokes is a signal of how society found the disabled different. It opened a discussion in a less formal environment about disabilities, and was an invitation to consider how to change the public mentality toward them. In *Tívoli*, the dwarf magician who is insulted and humiliated by the audience gains revenge by insulting them publicly. This helps us confront and deal with his plight, strengthens our criticism, and reflects on the society we belong to. In comics, disabilities were not addressed. Only *La Familia Burrón* had a regular character with a disability, Robertino, a child with poliomyelitis who had to spend his life in a cart. But

the approach to this character is dramatic. Although in some issues he makes jokes or quips, his disability is always portrayed with sadness and as a conflict for his family.

But there was a strong convergence in the way films and comics addressed through humour poverty, corruption, abuse of authority, dishonesty, authoritarianism, and issues which were denied or hidden such as torture, state violence and forced disappearance. To point to these topics was a signal that society noticed the misconduct of the authorities, and to show their disagreement. It was 'sugar-coated criticism' – a way to point to faults in a manner that is 'easier to digest'. Films and comics indicated the flaw, but humour helped to recognise its existence and condemn it. Even when the reality was unbearable, humour helped us to deal with it – not by accepting it, but by giving us the opportunity to take revenge. We watched the comic characters ridicule those who were the butts of jokes, those ones who harmed or oppressed us. And we took credit as though we were ridiculing them ourselves. But perhaps, through the catharsis of laughter, we lost our anger and our sense that something needed to be done about it.

We also were able to identify the 'social antithesis' because jokes were a way to target those who oppress us. In an authoritarian regime it might seem obvious that the government was a target. Thus, reality is like the carnival, in which there is an inversion of roles. Authority figures, instead of caring for ordinary people, harm them, abuse their authority, exploit them through bribes, and exert violence. It was also interesting that in spite of social movements throughout the country, and the ambition for social change promoted and fought for by young people, youth was also criticised. It was represented as alien to the rest of society. The young were stereotyped as hippies, slaves to US values, whose social movements were selfish and without social purpose. After

Tlatelolco in 1968, and the *Halconazo* in 1971, much of Mexican society still did not understand the rebelliousness of youth and its desire for political and social change.

Social ills were also addressed, such as abuse by fellow citizens. In one of the dialogues from *Mecánica Nacional* we saw how society justified its misconduct. Any ordinary person who had a chance seemed ready to take advantage of someone else. Many characters in the films are grotesque and it is hard to sympathise with them. But they show the flaws of society, and though it is uncomfortable, we have to admit that the caricatured images are in fact very similar to ourselves. In the comics, the characters were more Manichean but they were as critical as the film characters.

So, how did humour help to address these topics and what was the purpose in doing so? The use of humour was a way to unfold some difficult issues – social and political. The same topics could have been addressed without humour. But humour made it more palatable. It helped overcome censorship. Mass media and humour were a safety valve; they helped set a mood of rebellion without organising one. Through comic characters, we took revenge, we insulted those in positions of power, whether in government or simply the man next door. The media became the voice of all of us.

The media is part of the public record in the sense that few other avenues existed to confront the authorities publicly with the truth. Every week readers recognised themselves and their concerns in the pages of the comics, and on the screens of cinemas. In every laugh, chuckle, and smile, people both enjoyed and condemned the attitude of the pernicious. That generated awareness. And knowledge and awareness form the beginning of an understanding of reality and perhaps the beginning of a desire to change it. So, although humour will not mobilise people, it awakens consciousness. Every laugh brings hope for a better future, a world in which each of us can be a comic hero, can stand up to power. Seriously.

## Appendix 1

### Methodology of analysis

The purpose of this appendix is to present the methodology used to analyse the films and comics in this research. As discussed in the introduction, comics and cinema are similar enough to analyse them using the same tools. However, as might seem obvious, we should be aware of the differences and consider them at the moment of the analysis.

Films and comics were considered as 'text', understanding them as 'a network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification'.<sup>1</sup> Referring specifically to comics, the text is 'a collection of units-sentences or panels. This means that, between one unit and the next, there is an interruption, a white space, in which something is left out'.<sup>2</sup>

If films and comics are texts, then according to Umberto Eco, they were created in order to be interpreted by someone else (the reader, the audience).<sup>3</sup> The criteria for interpretation starts by knowing what the target is, otherwise it would not be possible to know what to look for or how to find it.<sup>4</sup> When examining the films and comics, the idea was to find acts of humour which were social and politically critical. With the ability to recognise an act of humour, and by knowing the context in which they were created, so the approach was to look for specific acts of humour which addressed social and political concerns.

An interpretive analysis with a semiotic perspective seems ideal to combine the theory of humour, the historical context in which the films were created, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Saraceni, *The Language of Comics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 51

<sup>3</sup> Eco, *The Role of the...* p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Casetti and Federico di Chio, *Cómo analizar un film*, trad. by. Carlos Losilla (Barcelona: Paidós Comunicación, 2007), p. 25.

message. This kind of analysis, according to Lauro Zavala, ‘centra su atención en el enunciado y sus condiciones de enunciación [...]. Las herramientas centrales del análisis son la descripción y la microdescripción’.<sup>5</sup>

In order to undertake an analysis of comics and films, the methodology was based on that by Francesco Casetti and Federico Di Chio in *Cómo analizar un film*. Specifically for comics I used part of the methodology suggested by Román Gubern in *El lenguaje de los comics*, and some of the ideas of Miguel Ángel Muro Munilla in his work *Análisis e interpretación del cómic*. These scholars present semiotics and narrative tools which help to segment, describe and analyse the sources, drawing out important information about the use of humour and the expression of social dissent.

My analysis started by recognizing the segments of the text and reducing them to smaller units. The segmentation was made according to the images and dialogues which created and animated the scenes, starting with longer fragments and later smaller ones. This work facilitated the analysis since it allowed me to observe a wider segment, including series of sequences, by choosing a topic (such as corruption, abuse of authority, etc.) to identify and thus analyse it. An example of how this was done is the sequence in *Tívoli* in which the lawyer Licenciado Pantoja is describing in the present a meeting that he attended weeks ago where the Mayor decided to demolish the cabaret. If the scene was analysed by shots or scenes I would get plenty of information but not all of it relevant for my aim. By opening the semantic unit it was possible to discover how humour was used to break moments of stress, even when the joke appeared not to be related to the topic. I can also support this segmentation with the idea of macro-punctuation proposed by Christian Metz in which the segmentation ‘intervenes not

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<sup>5</sup> Lauro Zavala, ‘El análisis cinematográfico y su diversidad metodológica’, *Casa del Tiempo*, 30, 3 (2010), (pp. 65-69).

<[http://www.uam.mx/difusion/casadeltiempo/30\\_iv\\_abr\\_2010/casa\\_del\\_tiempo\\_eIV\\_num30\\_65\\_69.pdf](http://www.uam.mx/difusion/casadeltiempo/30_iv_abr_2010/casa_del_tiempo_eIV_num30_65_69.pdf)> [accessed 7 October 2010]

between shots, which might be seen as the minimal units of the syntagmatic change of the editing code, but rather between whole syntagmas'.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, if I considered the frames in comics as units of meaning, I would obtain plenty of information but not all relevant for my purpose.

I looked for *informantes*: 'los elementos que definen en su literalidad todo cuanto se pone en escena'.<sup>7</sup> Later for *indicios*, which give us information about a place or a person but without stating it directly.<sup>8</sup> In *Calzonzin Inspector*, for example, the journalist always carries his notepad and wears a stereotypical hat, the soldier wears a uniform, the indigenous are dressed in their traditional clothes or in raw cotton clothing, for example. Moreover, according to the way the characters speak and dress, the activities they develop, the content of their dialogues, and their function in the plot, we associate them (or not) to people from the 'real world', recognising in them their function as an archetype.<sup>9</sup> The same is true about the *mise-en-scène*. These help to relate the scenes to places that we know and can label, such as a farm, an urban house, a spaceship, Mexico, and so forth. According to Umberto Eco, the viewer/reader performs this action by comparing 'the world such as is presented by the text with his own "real" world, that is, the world of his (presumed) concrete experience'.<sup>10</sup> In *La Familia Burrón* there are constant references to Mexico City which allow me infer that in fact, the stories take place there. Some are obvious, like a reference to *la lagunilla*,<sup>11</sup> a well-known area in Mexico City for buying cheap things, or signs on the buses indicating that they are going to popular sites in the city.<sup>12</sup>

I paid attention to elements with a deeper content and with more relevance to the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics. Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.57.

<sup>7</sup> Casetti and di Chio, *Cómo analizar...* p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 160.

<sup>10</sup> Eco, *The Role of...* p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón*, 17165, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> For example Vargas, *La Familia Burrón*, 17160, p. 19.

story. They were identified by highlighting the place they occupy in the frame, their regularity and size, among others, according to the focalisation criteria.<sup>13</sup> In the comics these criteria are more obvious, owing to the fact that there are not as many elements composing the frame as in the films. In *Hermelinda Linda* many of the objects that appear in her house show her to be a witch, such as hanging skeletons, skulls, various bottles, and the archetypical cauldron. In *La Familia Burrón* the elements which suggest that someone is wealthy are exaggerated and constant, such as giant diamond rings, fur stoles, giant bottles of champagne, among others.

These elements were then examined using the theory of humour, in order to pinpoint the historical references. In some cases it was relevant just to focus on the focalisation criteria, as when I described the policemen's gestures and activities in *La Familia Burrón*, or in the *indicios*, such as the references to president Luis Echeverría sometimes embodied in the Mayor Licenciado Trastupijes in *Los Agachados*. Moreover, by observing and assembling these elements, I identified cultural topics such as *machismo* and *acarreo*.<sup>14</sup>

### **Specifications for comics<sup>15</sup>**

Miguel Angel Muro states: 'El comic da más facilidades al analista para delimitar unidades que el cine o el teatro, por su condición estática y porque –entre otras cosas– ya da realizado un corte en cada viñeta'.<sup>16</sup> But comics are less static than they may seem at first glance. The reader needs to fill the gaps missing in the images and narrative. The

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<sup>13</sup> Casetti and di Chio, *Cómo analizar...* p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> The identification of these topics (machismo, acarreo, abuso de autoridad, etc.) were made using Eco's idea of isotopies, in which facts which are related in meaning are put together to reveal a correlation that allow us to 'label' these facts. *Lector in Fabula. La cooperación interpretativa en el texto narrativo* (Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 2000), pp. 131-144.

<sup>15</sup> The illustrations for this section were made specifically for it by Professor Will Fowler. I am fully thankful that he permitted me to make them part of this work.

<sup>16</sup> Miguel Ángel Muro Munilla, *Análisis e interpretación del cómic. Ensayo de metodología semiótica* (Logroño: Universidad de la Rioja, 2004), p. 71.

audience in the cinema does the same, but the gaps are not usually that evident in time and space. Also, if we compare comics with films, every comic frame can be considered a scene that the reader needs to put together in order to organise a sequence. The role of the reader is very active because comics ‘cannot truly show the world of the story, but can only suggest it by employing the device of the synecdoche, using a part of something to represent the whole of the thing’.<sup>17</sup> The reader will perform all these activities and give sense to the story inside the comic and to the references that it makes by using previous knowledge of similar situations from his own reality. According to Umberto Eco, ‘los parámetros que hacen aceptable o no una intriga no radican en la propia intriga, sino en el sistema de opiniones que regulan la vida social’.<sup>18</sup> The plausibility of comics does not come from the image, the characters or the actions, but from the concordance in the narrative according to the construction of the characters and the reader’s cooperation during the process of reading.

Román Gubern asserts that there are three elements which belong specifically to comics and that were considered through the analyses.<sup>19</sup> One of them is the *balloon* which is a ‘convención específica de los comics destinada a integrar gráficamente el texto de los diálogos o el pensamiento de los personajes en la estructura icónica de la viñeta’.<sup>20</sup> The balloon has appeared since the earliest comics as a way for the characters to express themselves phonetically, although it has changed with the passage of time. Balloons always point to the person who is speaking, so the reader can identify that person. The balloon by itself can be studied according to its shape: a regular one to express a normal conversation, a chainsaw to show agitation, a cloud when refers to a

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<sup>17</sup> Randy Duncan, Matthew Smith, *The Power of Comics. History, Form & Culture* (New York, London: Continuum, 2009), p. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Umberto Eco, *El Superhombre de masas* (México: De Bolsillo, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> These three categories are also recognised by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith but grouped into two categories: sensory diegetic images and non-sensory diegetic images. Duncan, Smith, *The Power of Comics...*, pp. 155-158.

<sup>20</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje de...*, p. 140

deep thought, etc.<sup>21</sup> ‘Even the shape of the balloon in which the text appears can communicate something about the nature of the sound’.<sup>22</sup> It can also be studied according to its content, which can simply be dialogues or even images. The type and shapes of letters are relevant. ‘Lettering [...] treated “graphically” and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge and the implication of sound’.<sup>23</sup> The use of bold fonts denotes excitement, small ones mean that someone is whispering, and sometimes images appear inside the balloons, such as strange signs when a character is swearing, or a light bulb when someone has an idea.<sup>24</sup>



Image 6.1.  
'Balloon'

Related with balloons are the *inarticulate sounds* which are the words that refer to sounds. They are similar to onomatopoeia. They express sound but might also describe a fact, a situation. Words such as *ñam*, *sigh*, *brrrrr*, *clink*, *ejem*, *rrruunn*, bring meaning to the comic, and they are chosen because of the noises that we/something often make in real life.<sup>25</sup> These noises have been transformed into words and are exclusive to comics. They can be defined as exclamations which correspond to a stereotypical situation that is already a convention, agreed and known by the readers and the creators.<sup>26</sup> Thanks to them, we recognise that a character in a comic is feeling cold when he says '*brrrrrr*'; it is an expression that comes from the noise we make when we are cold, our jaw shivers, and we make a vocal sound.



Image 6.2.  
'Inarticulate sounds'

Gubern adds that there is a social convention about balloons and *inarticulate sounds* because they were popularised by US comics and repeated by comic artists

<sup>21</sup> A complete revision of different styles of balloons is found in Luis Gasca and Roman Gubern, *El discurso del cómic* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2001), pp. 422-479.

<sup>22</sup> Gene Kannenberg, Jr., quoted by Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics...* p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art. Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), pp. 2,4.

<sup>24</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje de...*, pp. 145-150, and Muro, *Análisis e interpretación...* p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje de...*, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup> However, a neophyte in the language of comics will be able to relate the 'sound-word' to its reference (helped by the image). Moreover, when we read the word 'squeak' we know the sound it recalls from our own experience.

throughout the world.<sup>27</sup> Mexican comics are no exception.<sup>28</sup> Hence, when I look at the examples and argue that a character was expressing that he/she was upset, yelling, whispering, or that something was about to collapse, I was following these graphic conventions.<sup>29</sup> Constant examples of *inarticulate sounds* appear in *La Familia Burrón*. When Borola physically fights with someone, we read words such as *cuas*, *chin*, *pon*, *crash*, and we understand that she is fighting even if the frame does not show the confrontation itself.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it was important to see the style, particularities and recurrences in each comic. Rius uses bold fonts when someone is yelling, but also when he wants us to pay careful attention to a fact, and (like other artists) he writes in brackets a character's whisper.

The second element is images which give information about someone's feelings or way of thinking, or provide details about the mood of a place. They are visual metaphors,<sup>31</sup> images which are included in the frame and can be inside or outside the balloons. Their function is to express something related with the state of mind or the feelings of the characters. They can be also understood as symbols which represent the invisible.<sup>32</sup> Some classic visual metaphors include smoke coming from the ears when a character eats something hot or spicy, or a broken heart when they suffer in love. An example can be found in the issue in which Ruperto Tacuche is tortured and I asserted that he was electrocuted because of the broken lines around his body. I also

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<sup>27</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje de...* p. 154.

<sup>28</sup> According to Armando Bartra, it was in the late 1920s when the Mexican comics adopted the format of the US comics and in the late 1930s and early 1940s when they also assumed the US conventions in the *language* of comics. Armando Bartra, 'Debut, beneficio y despedida de una narrativa tumultuaria. Piel de papel. Los *pepines* en la educación sentimental del mexicano', *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre la Historieta*, 1.2 (2001). < [http://www.rlesh.110mb.com/02/02\\_bartra.html](http://www.rlesh.110mb.com/02/02_bartra.html) > [accessed 11 October 2010]

<sup>29</sup> Many of these conventions can be found in Gasca, Román Gubern, *El discurso del comic*.

<sup>30</sup> That is the case in Gabriel Vargas, *La Familia Burrón*, 2 December 1973, 17167, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Scott McCloud groups the visual metaphors and *inarticulate sounds* under the concept of pictorial icons (*Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (USA: Harper Perennial, 1993), pp. 26-27, and Mario Saraceni considers them as symbols and icons, (*The Language of...*, p. 15-27). Gubern is more specific by naming the concept *inarticulate sounds*.

<sup>32</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (USA: Harper Perennial, 1993), p.129.

distinguished the concern of his girlfriend Bella Bellota, thanks to the knowledge of these conventions.

Another function of these metaphors is to create an environment or to set a mood, such as when musical signs are added to the image of a band in order to represent the fact that the band is playing music. The cartoonist can play with the images, and if the musical signs are distorted, that means that the band is playing out of tune. If they appear well shaped, they are playing in harmony. But is it possible that readers from around the world understand these visualised metaphors? Since comics are a mass product which are exported, there are many set conventions found all over the world. Besides, 'aunque las posibilidades de metáforas visualizadas son casi infinitas, la rutina ha hecho que los dibujantes hayan limitado su repertorio a un código relativamente modesto y fijado desde hace ya bastantes años'.<sup>33</sup> That is why, when a character receives a thump and the image includes birds flying around his head, we know that this represents confusion, not that birds suddenly decided to fly around him. To understand these metaphors, and to give sense to the story, the reader needs to do a deeper interpretation. 'We make that process work by bringing the full power of our own experiences to bear on the world our eyes report'.<sup>34</sup> Even a neophyte could be puzzled the first time they deal with these figures. However, after interpretation, and according to the context, they will be able to learn the convention.



Image 6.3.  
'Visual metaphors'



Image 6.4.  
'Visual metaphors'

The third element is the kinetic figures which indicate movement and have no counterpart in reality. They indicate the space that something or someone has moved along, and it is generally expressed as lines marking the direction the body has followed. When someone is running, the lines will be straight; a swing will be a curved



Image 6.5.  
'Kinetic figures'

<sup>33</sup> Gubern, *El lenguaje...* p.151

<sup>34</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 137.

line; a repetition of a movement, such as waving a hand, can be represented with the repetition of one element several times, one over the other, which would look as though the character had many hands. Although there are conventions, they are different according to the artist and their background.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, that does not prevent the reader from learning and understanding them during the reading.

## **Result**

This methodology was combined with the theory of humour in order to determine how social and political satire was expressed through acts of humour. The context was also considered, because passages or scenes in the comics and films needed to be linked to actual historical facts. A list of topics illustrates the most frequently recurring issues, understanding that they must have been of greatest concern to society at the time.

It is important to mention that there were more comics than films, and the repetition of topics was more evident in the comics. Therefore it is easier to determine from the analysis which issues were of greatest concern.

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<sup>35</sup> McCloud makes a graphical description about kinetic figures but he calls them *motion line*. He illustrates different kinds according to the publishing company – such as Marvel – or the place where the comic is published, such as the US, Europe or Japan. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 109-114.

## Appendix 2

### Tables

The following charts are organised by media and they show the recurrences of topics and the mechanisms of humour used to discuss issues. Since it was impossible to analyse each example in the thesis, the following charts will help the reader gain an idea of the most common topics discussed through humour.

As we saw, acts of humour typically use more than one mechanism. Thus, the reader should be aware that although the charts are divided according to the mechanism, a given topic in a given act of humour could be portrayed through more than one mechanism. The frequency that a mechanism of humour appeared is included at the end of each chart. The most recurrent topics were those analysed in this research. These charts should be considered as a sample which may help, in addition to the analysis, enrich the knowledge about concerns and interests of Mexican society. They are organised by media and alphabetically, first comics, then films. The charts do not include those issues which do not appear in that media. A list of abbreviations is included. The column that refers to 'LEA / Political Leaders' also includes information related to good/bad government. 'Torture / Violence' refers to that inflicted by the authorities. In the column entitled 'Police / Paramilitary groups', the *Policía Judicial* and similar groups were also considered.

Abbreviations: **INC** – Incongruity ; **BTR** – Breaking of the rule ; **SUP** – Superiority;  
**EXG** – Exaggeration ; **RLF** – Relief ; **LEA** – Luis Echeverría Álvarez

## Comics

### Hermelinda Linda

Mechanisms of humour	INC	BTR	SUP	EXG	RLF
Topics					
Abuse of authority	2	0	1	4	5
Civil Servants	0	1	0	3	3
Corruption of authorities	2	1	2	2	6
Foreigners	3	1	1	4	1
Guerrilla	1	0	0	1	0
LEA / Political Leaders	5	0	0	2	5
<i>Machismo</i>	4	5	6	8	2
Police / Paramilitary groups	5	5	3	5	14
Poverty	3	1	6	6	0
Rich People	0	0	1	9	1
Social Corruption	2	5	3	8	7
Torture / Violence	0	3	2	0	4
Youth	6		4	14	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>53</b>

Chart 1, *Hermelinda Linda* by Óscar González, forty five issues. Years 1969, 1970, 1972, 1973.

## Los Agachados

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>					
	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Topics</b>					
<b>Abuse of authority</b>	16	8	7	13	9
<i>Acarreados</i>	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Army</b>	2	0	0	2	3
<b>Civil Servants</b>	3	2	1	5	6
<b>Communism</b>	2	1	1	5	2
<b>Corruption</b>	7	8	3	16	20
<b>Democracy</b>	9	9	3	11	20
<b>Foreigners</b>	6	3	8	8	7
<b>Guerrilla</b>	2	1	0	1	1
<b>Indigenous people</b>	0	1	1	0	0
<b>LEA / Political Leaders</b>	33	19	6	40	58
<i>Machismo</i>	8	2	11	14	4
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	15	13	6	26	30
<b>Political Parties</b>	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Poverty</b>	11	2	7	13	9
<b>Press / Means of communication</b>	2	1	0	2	3
<b>Rich People</b>	3	2	3	7	4
<b>School Teachers</b>	0	1	1	1	1
<b>Social Corruption</b>	2	3	0	6	6
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	10	8	3	19	25
<b>Unions</b>	5	6	0	8	11
<b>Youth</b>	2	0	5	10	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>223</b>

Chart 2, *Los Agachados* by Rius, thirty seven issues.  
Years 1970-1974, 1976.

### La Familia Burrón

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>					
	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Topics</b>					
<i>Acarreados</i>	0	1	0	1	1
<b>Army</b>	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Communism</b>	2	0	0	0	0
<b>Corruption</b>	2	5	0	4	8
<b>Countryside</b>	2	0	1	6	0
<b>Guerrilla</b>	3	0	0	3	3
<b>LEA / Political Leaders</b>	5	6	3	4	12
<i>Machismo</i>	6	10	19	20	14
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	13	35	3	19	19
<b>Poverty</b>	30	15	38	67	28
<b>Rich People</b>	35	6	10	57	8
<b>School Teachers</b>	2	0	2	2	2
<b>Social Corruption</b>	1	8	0	4	0
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	8	16	2	10	11
<b>Youth</b>	3	8	2	17	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>118</b>

Chart 3, *La Familia Burrón* by Gabriel Vargas, seventy eight issues. Years 1973, 1974.

## Films

### Calzonzin Inspector

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>					
<b>Topics</b>	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Abuse of authority</b>	5	8	3	8	12
<i>Acarreados</i>	3	2	0	7	7
<b>Army</b>	3	0	1	3	0
<b>Civil Servants</b>	0	1	0	1	2
<b>Communism</b>	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Corruption</b>	2	1	4	4	10
<b>Foreigners</b>	2	0	5	5	6
<b>Indigenous people</b>	1	0	1	3	4
<b>LEA / Political Leaders</b>	12	21	16	29	44
<i>Machismo</i>	3	0	2	8	4
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	5	5	3	10	8
<b>Poverty</b>	4	0	3	3	3
<b>Press / Means of communication</b>	2	0	0	5	5
<b>Rich People</b>	1	2	2	4	7
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	4	0	1	4	3
<b>Youth</b>	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Democracy</b>	0	1	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>118</b>

Chart 4, *Calzonzin Inspector*, dir. by Alfonso Arau.  
Conacine,-Estudios Churubusco Azteca, 1973.

### El Águila Descalza

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>					
<b>Topics</b>	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Drugs</b>	2	0	0	3	0
<b>Foreigners</b>	4	1	3	7	1
<b>LEA / Political Leaders</b>	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Machismo</b>	3	0	3	4	2
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	2	0	1	1	1
<b>Poverty</b>	2	0	7	7	3
<b>Rich People</b>	1	0	1	2	0
<b>Social Corruption</b>	2	1	1	3	3
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	1	0	0	2	0
<b>Working class exploitation</b>	2	0	1	5	3
<b>Youth</b>	2	0	0	6	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>17</b>

Chart 5, *El Águila Descalza*, dir. by Alfonso Arau.  
Producciones Jaguar S.A. de C.V., 1969.

### Mecánica Nacional

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Topics</b>					
<b>Abuse of authority</b>	0	0	3	2	2
<b>Army</b>	2	2	7	7	8
<b>Foreigners</b>	11	3	11	14	8
<b>Indigenous people</b>	1	0	1	1	2
<b><i>Machismo</i></b>	24	14	31	35	32
<b>People with disabilities</b>	1	0	1	0	0
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	1	1	1	3	8
<b>Press / Means of communication</b>	1	2	2	3	1
<b>Religion</b>	6	2	2	8	3
<b>Social Corruption</b>	7	5	4	8	11
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	0	0	1	1	0
<b>Youth</b>	14	0	13	26	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>97</b>

Chart 6, *Mecánica Nacional*, dir. by Luis Alcoriza. Ramiro Meléndez-Producciones Escorpión, 1971.

## Tívoli

<b>Mechanisms of humour</b>					
	<b>INC</b>	<b>BTR</b>	<b>SUP</b>	<b>EXG</b>	<b>RLF</b>
<b>Topics</b>					
<b>Abuse of authority</b>	8	7	3	7	14
<b>Censorship</b>	2	5	0	1	7
<b>Civil Servants</b>	5	2	5	9	8
<b>Corruption of authorities</b>	3	12	3	9	13
<b>People with disabilities</b>	2	1	3	1	1
<b>Foreigners</b>	5	4	5	5	6
<b>Homosexuality</b>	0	1	0	0	1
<b>LEA / Political Leaders</b>	8	10	5	15	23
<i>Machismo</i>	5	10	10	13	12
<b>Police / Paramilitary groups</b>	5	4	0	4	10
<b>Poverty</b>	0	1	4	2	4
<b>Press / Means of communication</b>	0	1	1	1	2
<b>Social Corruption</b>	3	1	0	3	3
<b>Torture / Violence</b>	0	1	0	0	2
<b>Unions</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Youth</b>	1	0	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>108</b>

Chart 7, *Tívoli*, dir. by Albeto Isaac. Conacine-Dasa Films, 1974.

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