

Mafalda and Women's Rights: A Canvass of the Sixties

Mariana De Maio
Lehigh University
mariana.demaio@lehigh.edu

Nathian Shae Rodríguez
San Diego State University
nsrodriguez@sdsu.edu

Comic strips have often been avenues of cultural, social, and political expression. A strip born in Argentina during the 1960s, *Mafalda*, became a worldwide phenomenon emblematic of the struggling urban middle classes and the challenges faced by women. Employing incongruity theory with a feminist lens, this paper analyzes *Mafalda* within its sociopolitical and cultural context. The analysis suggests the comic strip contained the following four prominent themes: women's rights; patriarchy and education; mundane domesticity; and Argentine class system and the bourgeoisie. The study has theoretical implications for media scholars who study the use of humor as a persuasive strategy and the role of satire in political communication. It also has practical implications for feminists and social justice activists who seek new ways to engage potential sympathizers to their causes.

Keywords: comic strips, feminism, women's rights, *Mafalda*, Argentina, incongruity theory

Las tiras cómicas a menudo han sido vías de expresión cultural, social y política. Una tira nacida en Argentina en la década del sesenta, *Mafalda*, se convirtió en un emblema mundial de las disminuidas clases medias urbanas y de los retos enfrentados por las mujeres. Con base en la teoría de la incongruencia considerada desde una perspectiva feminista, este estudio examina *Mafalda* dentro de su contexto sociopolítico y cultural. El planteamiento sugiere que la tira cómica destaca cuatro temas: los derechos de la mujer, el patriarcado y la educación, la domesticidad mundana y, por último, el sistema argentino de clase y la burguesía. Este artículo tiene reflexiones teóricas para los investigadores de los medios que analizan el uso del humor como estrategia persuasiva y el papel de la sátira en la comunicación política. También tiene interés práctico para los feministas y activistas que buscan nuevas maneras de ganar simpatizantes.

Palabras clave: tiras cómicas, feminismo, derechos de mujeres, *Mafalda*, Argentina, teoría de la incongruencia del humor

Mafalda and Women's Rights: A Canvass of the Sixties

Humor is a social phenomenon. It connects people and fosters relationships (Fine 1983). Through humor, and the messages and meanings embedded within it, we can enhance our understanding of social history and cultural institutions (Walker 1998). Because laughter is often seen as a “strategy whose goal is to dismantle power structures through writing” (Amir 2015, 87), this study attempts to interpret the illustrations and dialogue created by Joaquín Salvador Lavado (best known as Quino) in the comic strip *Mafalda*. The Spanish-language comic strip *Mafalda* originally ran in the Argentine publications *Primera Plana*, *El Mundo*, and *Siete Días Ilustrados* from 1964 through 1973 (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001). This paper's innovative approach considers the comic strip's temporal and cultural influences in Argentina, specifically, its channeling of second-wave feminism blossoming in the US and much of the rest of the Western world at about the same time. The goal of the study is to understand why certain elements of Argentine culture and sociopolitical climate were considered humorous and how the comic strip used humor to promote a socially progressive agenda.

Other studies investigating *Mafalda* have focused on Quino's literary strategies to represent society (Foster 1980), the use of humor for social criticism (Lindstrom 1980), and a catering to the middle-class audience (Flora 1984; Cosse 2014). This study takes a more feminist approach and examines *Mafalda*'s portrayal of issues related to women's rights, women's oppression, and patriarchy. Using the framework of incongruity theory and applying a feminist lens, the study uses textual analysis to examine a sample of the *Mafalda* comic strips found in the collections *Todo Mafalda* (Lavado 1981), *Toda Mafalda* (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001), and *Mafalda Inédita* (Lavado, Walgner, Colombo, and Colombo 1988). These were originally published in Argentina from September 29, 1964, to June 25, 1973. The broad question guiding the study was how the humor of the comic strip operated in the context of serious and controversial issues such as women's rights and women's oppression, and ultimately how *Mafalda*'s humor may be understood outside of Argentina.

Literature Review

Comic strips do not capture the imagination of every reader in the same way. *Mafalda* has been very successful in Europe but has not been able to attract US readers (Lottman 1990). In part, this is because of the many languages into which *Mafalda* was translated, English was conspicuously absent until 2004, when Ediciones de la Flor printed the first English edition under the series title *Mafalda and Friends*. It is fundamentally important to characterize the social framework during the time when *Mafalda* was being published to understand its humor. The following subsection traces how North American sociocultural forces shaped *Mafalda*'s content and underlying message.

Historical and Cultural Context

Many historians and academics agree that 1964 marked the beginning of the era known as “the 60s” in the US (Mangano 1994). The 1960s were characterized by the civil rights movements and the shift of focus from the elite to the minority (Bader and Warketien 2016). Before 1964, cultural, racial, gender, and economic roles were relatively rigid (Mangano 1994); in the US, specifically, during the 1960s many marginalized groups, such as blacks, the poor, women, gays, and other minorities began to empower themselves with a sense of self-efficacy and mobilization by developing group consciousness and advocacy. The civil rights movement that captured the imagination and support of college youth seemed to challenge the traditions and values of their society (Chalmers 1996).

The social movements spread from colleges and universities across the US and the world, with broadcast and print media coverage playing an influential role in shaping how many people thought and acted during this time (Mangano 1994). This social revolution made its way from West to East and North to South, eventually reaching Argentina. Quino quickly adapted his writing to the temporal and cultural shift. He worked for *Primera Plana*, a weekly Argentine publication, which covered current, national, and international news, and used comic strips to illustrate contemporaneous realities. His comic strips referenced Vietnam, China, Africa, Latin America, and women’s oppression, and suggested that both less developed countries and women may eventually overcome their disenfranchisement.

The feminist movement in Argentina dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, when anarchist women began to debate chauvinism and clamor for more egalitarian rights. As the twentieth century progressed, the suffrage movement gained momentum. In 1947, a law backed by First Lady Eva Duarte de Perón gave women the right to vote. During the 1960s and 1970s the Argentine society was rattled not only by the news of the international feminist movement, but also by the drive at home. Women enrolled in higher education institutions in large numbers, mostly due to the greater opportunities created during the Perón administration for women to attend secondary education. Thousands of women, especially young ones, turned to political activism motivated by a period of local and global turmoil (Barrancos 2012; Trebisacce 2017; Vasallo 2005). Besides massive university enrollment and political activism, middle class women were able to enlist an ally to manage pregnancy: the pill (Barrancos 2012).

Democracy in Argentina was interrupted several times, and that was not different in the 1960s and 1970s. Arturo Frondizi, president since 1958, was forced to resign in 1962, and the provisional president of the Senate, José María Guido, took power until elections were held in 1963, and Arturo Illia became president. Both Frondizi and Illia were elected with Peronism barred from elections. Illia did not last long and was deposed by a military coup d’état led by Juan Carlos Onganía in June 1966; his dictatorship lasted until May 1973 (Romero 1996). Nonetheless, in 1970 the Argentine Feminist Union was founded, and in 1972 the Feminist Liberation Movement was created (Trebisacce 2017). Quino gives birth to Mafalda well within this transcendental time period. And despite the censorship that was present in other cultural expressions, cartoons such as this one were not targeted because they were considered inoffensive (Lindstrom 1980; Rommens 2005).

Quino is one of the cartoonists who combined a rich sense of humor with sharp social commentary. He especially paid close attention to the role of women in Argentine society during the 1960s. Of course, discussions about the role of women in society were not exclusive to Argentina. In the US, “the 60s” was a time when many feminist groups were creating and re-creating the fight for women’s rights and equality. Even among radically progressive social groups within the civil rights movement, women did not have the same opportunities as men to participate and make decisions. In fact, within these progressive movements, women continued experiencing oppression and were relegated to performing gender-specific tasks. Still, many were able to gain political and social skills, thereby deriving some sort of meaning and self-efficacy from their participation (Echols 1989).

Rather than being an isolated phenomenon, the 1960s plowed the ground where future generations would advance progressive causes. Historians link the emergence of second-wave feminism directly to the political and social conditions during that period (Berkeley 1999). One of the major objectives during this time was to advocate for public policy leading to the development of a social environment where women and minorities at large would have higher probabilities of realizing their full potential. One of the catalysts for feminism during the 1960s was Betty Friedan’s polemic book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in February 1963. In it, Friedan described the negative effects of forced domesticity and called for the rights of women to work outside the home and enjoy the same freedom and opportunities for self-fulfillment as men, thus contributing to the development of many feminist groups (O’Neill 1971).

Quino understood this social shift, and his comics began to reify the social realities experienced around the globe. As a cartoonist, he knew that humor contributes to the development of public opinion and that it supports and promotes the need to resist power (Berger 1993). In and through *Mafalda*, he aimed to condense all the ideas of “the 60s” in ways that were relevant to Argentine audiences (Rivera 1990).

Mafalda and Quino’s World

The name Quino is well-known in Latin America and Europe. Quino’s first humor book, a compilation of humorous drawings without text, came out in 1963. That year, his friend Miguel Brascó introduced him to Agens Publicidad, an advertising agency looking for an artist to create a campaign to advertise a line of home appliances. Asked to create something similar to the comic strip *Peanuts*, Quino studied books written by Charles Schulz (Iglesias Kuntz 2000). Quino was inspired to create a cast of friends, like in *Peanuts*, and because Mansfield was the name of the line of appliances, several of the characters ended up having names that began with the letter M, which is why he came up with the name “Mafalda.” The agency did not run this campaign, but Quino kept the drawings and used them for *Mafalda*’s first appearance in the weekly *Primera Plana* on September 29, 1964.

On March 9, 1965, Quino moved from the weekly *Primera Plana* to publish his strips daily in the newspaper *El Mundo*. This allowed him to make real-time references to the latest news of the day

using his comic strips and characters. Therefore, many of the comic situations portrayed in *Mafalda* serve as metaphors for the domestic and political problems at the time of publication.

The comic strip led to the first *Mafalda* book, published in 1966, which presented the strips in the order they were originally published. Released around Christmas, it sold out in two days. The next year, the second *Mafalda* book appeared under the title *Así es la cosa Mafalda* (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001).

After *El Mundo* shut down on December 22, 1967, *Mafalda* began to be published in the weekly *Siete Días Ilustrados* after June 2, 1968. Each edition included a page of four comic strips and the title, usually drawn by Quino, with artistic letters and allegories. Since the author was required to turn in materials two weeks in advance, he lost some of his ability to incorporate current events into his stories. Several characters appeared next to the title, either alone or in pairs, reflecting, playing with words, giving a short speech, or engaging in a comic gag.

The Globalization of *Mafalda*

Mafalda's popularity around the globe reflects the particular time period when Quino wrote the comic strip, a time impregnated with dynamic social and political change and with the innocent and naïve hope of a more just world. *Mafalda* has been translated into almost 30 languages (“Mafalda sigue” 2017). It has been published in Argentina, Brazil, Spain, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Mexico, Taiwan, and China (Iglesias Kuntz 2000). *Mafalda* became a classic, a character that could be understood in countries other than Argentina because the themes in *Mafalda* were seen as timeless and universal. After the last strip was published, Quino drew *Mafalda* a few times to promote human rights, and in 1976 he illustrated with *Mafalda* a version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for UNICEF (Lavado, Walgner, Colombo, and Colombo 1988).

***Mafalda*: The Characters**

The characters developed by Quino became popular referents because they evolved along with the culture they embodied. In every culture, specific behaviors tend to elicit humorous interpretations (Fine 1983), and Argentina is no exception. Quino's characters in *Mafalda* were used to develop a dynamic juxtaposition of deep, permanent desires in the immediate framework of the 1960s-circumstantial portrait of Argentina's bourgeoisie society. Funny, yet unsettling, Quino's characters allowed readers to identify with them and, possibly, form parasocial relationships (Rubin and McHugh 1987).

The comic strip's protagonist, *Mafalda*, is intelligent and always concerned about peace, humanity, and human rights. She is anxious about the health of the planet, and she loves The Beatles. *Mafalda's* family consists of her father, mother, and little brother, representing a traditional, patriarchal

family. Guille is Mafalda's little brother, and may be the only real kid of the comic, as he is the personification of childish innocence. Mom (Raquel) is a housewife who dropped out of college when she got married and is ambivalent about her choice when confronted about it by her daughter. Mafalda's dad (his name is never revealed) does administrative work for an insurance company. His hobby is taking care of his plants, and he spends a lot of time reading the paper, listening to the radio, and smoking, while Mafalda's mom is working around the house.

Mafalda is surrounded by a group of friends who evolve throughout the run of the comic strip. Mafalda meets Felipe on January 19, 1965. Felipe feels guilty as soon as he starts having fun. He hates school and homework and fantasizes about his school being destroyed. He imagines his teacher as a Nazi general who scolds him in German when he is late and argues that the raw chicken in his refrigerator is a chicken corpse. He likes comics and is a fan of the *Lone Ranger*. Miguelito is another of Mafalda's friends whom she met at the beach one summer. His family is from Italy, and his grandfather was a fascist.

Over time, Mafalda met new friends, each one representing a salient cultural value: greediness, snobbism, and sarcasm. When Quino, along with the comic strip, left *Primera Plana* in 1965 for *El Mundo*, Mafalda met Manolito, Susanita, and Libertad. Manolito is the son of the neighborhood's small grocery store owner, who dreams about owning a chain of supermarkets. He works at his father's store and doesn't like The Beatles. He is characterized as a *gallego*, which is a name for people from Galicia, Spain; it is a derogatory term in Argentina with similar connotations to "pollock" in certain parts of the US. He does badly at school because he is not very smart. Susanita is a snob, who thinks only about becoming a mother when she grows up and often plays the devil's advocate or conversational foil throughout Mafalda's history. A tiny, simple character bears the name of Libertad ("freedom"), common in Argentina, where anarchists used to name their daughters that way. She is the most sarcastic character who always speaks her mind. According to Quino, she is small because freedom is always in short supply (qtd. in Iglesias Kuntz 2000).

Aside from the main characters, the comic strip also included secondary characters who were adult neighbors, teachers, police officers, and store owners, among others, thus helping to frame Mafalda's social reference environment. Mafalda often compared her mother Raquel to these other individuals, which not only provided humor, but also made poignant points about gender equality and the validity of progressive attitudes.

Theoretical Framework: Incongruity Theory

Three fundamental ways in which humor manifests in human thought include: perceptions of relief, superiority, and incongruity (Berger 1993, 2016; Jackson 2012; Meyer 2000). This study will focus on the latter, which has become the most widely accepted theory of humor (Morreall 2014). Incongruity theory positions laughter as a response to surprises—something that is unexpected, odd, or a break from a pattern—however nonthreatening (Meyer 2000). Incongruities are not always

funny (such as the bizarre, the grotesque, and the macabre, etc.), so the foundation of humor is a playful attitude (Morreall 2014, 126). At its most basic, “laughter is created when there is a difference between what we expect and what we get” (Berger 2016, 489).

According to Meyer (2000), a main tenet of incongruity is a focus on the cognitive rather than the physiological or emotional. Individuals must be able to understand rationally the normative patterns of their social reality before they can notice any relative differences. It is this perception of differences—incongruities—that gives rise to humor. The prerequisite of rational understanding of one’s social world suggests that humor is a social construct, therefore much of humor “stems from violations of what is socially or culturally agreed to be normal” (314). Quino’s situations in *Mafalda* reflected social, cultural, domestic, and political problems at the time of publication—therefore incongruity theory is most suitable for the study’s inquiry.

Although incongruity theory is referred to as the most widely accepted theory of humor (Morreall 2014), little research has been published that utilizes it to analyze comic strips directly. Abdel-raheem (2018) combined incongruity theory with relevance theory to analyze political cartoons about Western culture in Egyptian newspapers. The analysis revealed that a combination of theories was necessary for an individual’s cognitive and linguistic systems to interact and interpret humor in those cartoons.

Sosa-Abella and Reyes (2014) employed a hierarchical theoretical approach to compare and contrast the use of humor to emphasize politics in comic strips from two cartoonists from different cultures. Data was analyzed by first applying incongruity theory and then release theory, superiority theory, and a sociocultural approach. This analysis revealed that humor is used to convey disagreements, criticisms, and nonconformities in their respective sociopolitical atmospheres. The comic strips were used for both liberation and power and suggest social change through education of social consciousness.

Both of the aforementioned studies combined incongruity theory with other theories of humor. There is little if any research combining incongruity theory with a feminist approach to examine comic strips. Therefore, this paper will apply a feminist lens to incongruity theory to interrogate the use of humor as a means to highlight feminist perspectives in *Mafalda*.

Some previous research has investigated humor through a feminist lens, arguing that comedy helps to emphasize and satirize patriarchy and resist the gendered status quo (Amir 2015; Ciasullo 2014; Jackson 2012; Leggott, Lockyer, and White 2015; Weaver, Mora, and Morgan 2016). This was especially relevant in the 1960s and 1970s, when patriarchal and racist hegemony was directly contested by marginalized populations, including women. Humor can maintain, as well as disrupt, gender through “processes of performative discourse, hegemony, and resistance” (Weaver, Mora, and Morgan 2016, 227).

Employing Connell’s (1990) view of gender hegemony as contextual, specific, temporal, and always in flux, this study explores how gender hegemony was constructed in the 1960s in Argentina and contextualizes it within the milieu of progressive social movements on a global scale. To

understand *Mafalda*, one must also consider culture—her culture. This gives rise to the following research questions:

RQ₁: How was humor used to convey social commentary in the comic strip *Mafalda*?

RQ₂: How was the comic strip *Mafalda* used to portray women's oppression and promote women's rights and equality?

Method

A textual analysis, which allows for a close exploration of media texts and reveals nuances and meanings by examining implicit, connotative, and social meanings (Jensen and Jankowski 1991), was performed on 2,138 *Mafalda* comic strips. The goal was to identify latent meanings (Bronstein 2005), specifically by employing deeper examinations and considering metaphors that give rise to nuanced meanings (Jensen and Jankowski 1991). Following Berger's (1993) approach, the textual analysis looked for themes and issues on social and historical context along with subtleties of language, style, and structure of the narrative.

A purposive sample ($n = 197$ strips or 9.2%) of *Mafalda* comic strips found in the collections *Todo Mafalda* (Lavado 1981), *Toda Mafalda* (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001), and *Mafalda Inédita* (Lavado, Walgner, Colombo, and Colombo 1988), published in Argentina between September 1964 and June 1973, were analyzed for the present study. Strips that included interactions between Mafalda and her mother, referenced Mafalda's mother or other women, and/or dealt with women's issues in general were selected as the units of analysis. Following Barthes's methodology of using of *lexias*, or small units of text, this analysis was conducted through close reading of the short comic strips, while keeping in mind several cultural and social assumptions that could influence their interpretation (Barthes 1985).

Analysis and Discussion

The textual analysis revealed the following themes: the incongruity of humor and the women's rights movement (54 strips); patriarchy and the choice of marriage over education (44 strips); the mundane routine of domesticity (45 strips); and class and the bourgeois woman in Argentina (55 strips).

The Incongruity of Humor and the Women's Rights Movement

Mafalda's sharp political views often hid behind subtleties that left it up to readers to complete her thoughts and enhanced her character above others in the strip. Humor is situational and intrinsic

to the social environment (Fine 1983). Mafalda's humor makes people laugh because it challenges the social context and because cultural climate tends to be reflected in the content of cartoon characters. As a hero who lives in one of the more developed urban areas of Latin America, she represents Latin American experiences in a middle-class context.

Gender issues play a central role in the way social systems evolve, which was particularly true during the 1960s (Bergmann et al. 1990). Mixing satire, political commentary, and irony, Quino addressed complex and intersectional issues of gender (in)equality that were, at the time of the comic's publication, current and salient to readers. For example, in the strip in Figure 1, Quino references the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s through Mafalda's character, who often asks questions about current events. Mafalda usually shares her concerns with her parents, whom she never stops harassing with impertinent questions (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 497). For Mafalda, there was nothing normal in the assumption that a woman's place was the kitchen and the home. She expressed that accepting those imposed norms demonstrated that some women were subdued in an oppressive social system.

Through Mafalda, Quino challenged the social mores of the time through humor. The best type of satire is the one that addresses reality (Feinberg 1967). Quino did that by exaggerating and distorting facts. Most women in the Argentina of the 1960s were housewives, but it was a time in which economic realities, much more than feminism, were beginning to make the traditional housewife a subject of the past in Buenos Aires (Barrancos 2012). According to Feinberg (1967), "distortion implies disorder," and the way Quino introduces distortion is with incongruity, introducing examples that violate expected behaviors (Meyer 2000). In two strips published in *Mafalda Inédita*, which has not been translated into English, Mafalda's rhetoric is far more advanced, and to some inappropriate, for a child her age (Mafalda is around five). In one of the strips, Mafalda is having a conversation with her mother and tells her how wonderful it would be if, instead of getting married, her mom had finished college and earned a degree. Her mom tells her that if she had done that, Mafalda wouldn't exist, to which the little one responds that this means she is the reason for her mom's lack of culture. In the other one of those two strips, Mafalda is at home reflecting about how different her mom's life could have been if she had not dropped out of college to get married. She says she strongly believes someone was responsible for convincing her mother to make such a poor decision (from Mafalda's point of view) and decides to call her dad at work to scream at him: "Obscurantist!" (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 542). This incongruity makes people laugh, but also offers social commentary on expected gender roles for women.

The element of surprise, the last words Mafalda says in the strips mentioned above, is also a key ingredient in humor. The audience is not expecting a child to provide such complex social commentary about a woman's pursuit of education instead of domesticity. The humor lies in the reader's understanding that a child of her age is unable to articulate such a level of complexity. The social impact comes from the implied meaning that a woman, specifically her mother, can earn a degree, but is persuaded by society and individuals within it not to get an education. The reader, then, is taken by a feeling of identification, resignation, or indignation depending on his or her social views.

Mafalda's comments and complaints are not only funny and poignant because she is a child, but also because her readers understand that she is confronting the norms. She violates our mental patterns and expectations, making us laugh in the process. For a situation to be perceived as humorous, the reader should be able to distinguish between what is culturally normative and what is not (Meyer 2000). Another example of incongruity in the context of gender equality is found in another strip also published in *Mafalda Inédita*. In this case, Mafalda is happy because she got nice presents from the Three Wise Men who come on January 6 every year to bring presents to children instead of Santa Claus at Christmas (that tradition was more common in the 1960s than today). The first frame shows Mafalda opening the toys she got (a toy kitchen, a doll, a sewing machine) and saying the Wise Men were very nice. But again, Quino introduces incongruity with a surprise element. In the second and third frames, Quino shows Mafalda's mom pleased to hear her daughter wants to be like her, until the fourth frame when Mafalda states that domesticity leads to mediocrity: "I will be able to play as if I were a mediocre" (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 546).

Quino's theme of mediocrity continues in the example in Figure 2. Mafalda's dream of her mom's self-motivation to gain a degree is short-lived. Mafalda awakes to find her mom has a hair curler on her head rather than a diploma in her hand (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 98). The metaphor here is a reversal of roles between parent and child. Instead of the mother worrying about her daughter's future, it is the child who is worried. This is emblematic of the temporal shift of the 1960s and the increased focus on women's education. Mafalda represents young women who recognize they want to be more than what their mothers could be.

Mafalda's concern about women getting a degree and working outside the home as professionals moves from the confines of her house to the circle of her friends. In another strip published in *Mafalda Inédita*, she talks with her friend Felipe about this issue. After the initial exchange, a third frame shows a deeper and longer conversation between them. The final frame depicts Felipe confronting his mother with a look of disapproval (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 547). Here, Quino demonstrates how one individual can influence and motivate others about social issues. Quino distorts, playfully, the familiar pattern of the parent as the judge of character and approval (Feinberg 1965). The strip reflects the temporal emphasis on the exchange of ideas among youth. Mafalda questioned the acceptance of dominant gender roles for women and posited that other alternatives were possible: a woman could be president (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 554).

Patriarchy: Marriage over Education

Gender equality in Argentina was nothing but a distant goal for 1960s and 1970s feminists. For Mafalda, the lack of a college degree and professional career amounted to a dismal future and a mediocre life. Her views contributed to shape the expectations of young women who gradually began to earn university degrees and embark on professional careers. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* identified the problem that affected many suburban women who had exchanged their diplomas for

marriage certificates (Berkeley 1999). This is shown throughout the strip with Mafalda's mother and her friends' mothers. Women were often given a pro forma "choice" between pursuing an education and fulfilling the patriarchal duty of marriage. For example, in one strip published in the first *Mafalda* compilation, Mafalda's exchange with Susanita demonstrates how, even at an early age, girls are socialized with specific gendered expectations. Mafalda tells Susanita of a dream about her mother going to college. Susanita gets excited because she sees college as an opportunity for finding a boyfriend and gets discouraged when Mafalda tells her that was not the case. Quino shows here that even college is seen by some as a place to find a mate, rather than a place of learning and self-realization (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 98).

Mafalda often confronted her mother's choices, thus questioning an entire generation of women through her. In Quino's classic narrative structure, an initial equilibrium is interrupted and followed by a conflict, which builds up to a climax that in turn introduces a new and different equilibrium (Fernández L'Hoeste 1998). This approach is illustrated in another two strips published in *Mafalda Inédita*. The conflict in this situation is Mafalda's mom's "fake career." Mom is content, the equilibrium of the strip static, until Mafalda speaks to introduce the conflict of an unfinished degree interrupted by marriage. This conflict escalates in a second strip where mom breaks down into tears, realizing Mafalda may be right (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 542). Thus, a new equilibrium is introduced, setting the stage for future strips.

Another technique Quino uses to make his readers laugh is to portray one character as superior to another (Meyer 2000), which is shown in Figure 3. Mafalda arrives home after a visit to her friend Libertad's home, where she discovered that her friend's mom is different from her own and the other moms in the story. Though married, Libertad's mom never gave up her studies and now has a full career. It is of interest to point out that Libertad's mom is the only woman in the comic strip who has a career, showing that education and work can set a woman free from the patriarchal confines of marriage and domesticity, at the same time highlighting the violation of the era's social norms (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 383). By comparing her mom to Libertad's, Mafalda employs superiority theory to extract humor from an otherwise uncomfortable conversation, as described by Hobbes (1946).

In these strips, Quino surprises readers—perhaps even shocks them—by satirizing patriarchy through marriage, as explained by Hightet (1962). However, the drawback is that Mafalda is critical of her mother but never offers an alternative (Fernández L'Hoeste 1998). Although one should not expect satire to provide solutions to the problems exposed by it (Feinberg 1967), Quino's social commentary suggests that education is key to women's liberation from patriarchy. The importance of acquiring a university degree was a recurrent theme in the strip. Mafalda knew women could play a different role in society.

The Mundane Routine of Domesticity

The theme of domesticity as mundane, mediocre, and routine manifests itself throughout the comic strip. This is shown in a strip published in *Mafalda* 4, where Mafalda not only acknowledges her mom's domestic routine, but strongly criticizes it. The humor lies in the comparison between the daily routines of Mafalda and of her mom (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 249). Mafalda, arriving home from school, speaks about new things she has learned as she walks around the house noticing the domestic tasks her mom has completed. She quickly points out that her mom has done nothing outside her routine. This reifies Quino's position that housewives are stuck in a daily drudge, and only education can introduce new experiences—an important message geared toward women in the 1960s.

Quino's appraisal of the mediocre housewife continues in another strip published in *Mafalda* 2 (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001). Here, Quino uses a hair roller to represent a telescope, which not only circumscribes the view of housewives, but also focuses on patriarchy and normative gender roles. In three different frames Mafalda holds a hair roller as a telescope and speaks aloud: "I see many soap opera magazines... and I see a dance at a local club and later a wedding... and after that I see scrub and scrub at home until becoming an old lady" (159). Her friend Felipe looks at her puzzled and then she concludes: "this is all that women who view their life through a hair roller see!" (159). Mafalda provides commentary about how some women see the world—a world where happiness, meaning, and fulfillment stem from conforming to the social norms and values being handed down by social institutions and mass media (O'Neill 1971).

Throughout the comic strip's life span, Raquel, Mafalda's mom, is depicted as a domestic serf. Although chained to the drudgery of domesticity, Raquel is often shown as content with her life. That contentment, however, is always disrupted by Mafalda's commentary. Raquel spends all day cleaning the house or cooking for her family. She leaves the house only to visit "Almacén Don Manolo" (Manolito's grocery store) and other places where she can purchase household goods. In Figure 4, Quino's main point is that the mundane routine of the housewife is similar to that of a zombie. She is not living; she is only going through the daily motions. In the words of Mafalda: "Mom, what would you like to be if you had a life?" (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 311).

Class and the Bourgeoisie

Quino also uses Mafalda to criticize the Argentine bourgeoisie. Mafalda's friend Susanita epitomizes the middle-class white woman who seeks fulfillment solely as a wife and a mother (Berkeley 1999), upholding materialistic values and conventional attitudes. Mafalda tries many times to identify with her, as in several strips published in *Mafalda* 5 (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001), but Susanita's points of view about society and a woman's place within it always emerge as an obstacle to such identification. The two girls play dress-up and pretend to be grown women, like their mothers. Susanita tries to model the bourgeois woman, but Mafalda sticks to her feminist ideals and criticizes

the adult women of the time. Susanita storms off in a huff, implying that Mafalda does not know how to properly play a grown woman (295). This incongruity captures Quino's criticism of many women's willful participation in their own oppression, made palatable with the bait of middle-class prosperity and consumption. Mafalda denigrates Susanita's perceptions of women's role in society, an imperfection that should be corrected. Implicitly, Mafalda considers Susanita inferior.

Quino also uses Susanita and Raquel to highlight the incongruences inherent within the gender and social class norms of the time. How women should act and behave is satirized by the portrayal of Susanita in one strip published in the first compilation. In that example, Mafalda tries to explain why women should occupy a more important place in society, but Susanita gets distracted by an overweight woman passing by. Susanita's response is that she will immediately start a diet against importance (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 97). Here, Quino demonstrates a social commentary targeting women who are bourgeois—focused solely on the material and the conventional, in this case the aesthetic and fashionable associated with body image, with little concern for equality or social justice.

Quino's use of Susanita as a representative for the Argentine bourgeoisie is best depicted in Figure 5, where Susanita spells out a series of societal mores that, as Mafalda points out, are self-contradictory (Foster 1989). The strip points out the hypocrisy inherent in the conception of social class, as well as the patriarchal view that men are superior to women (Lavado, Davis, Gociol, and Samper Pizano 2001, 299). Throughout the comic strip, Quino uses the juxtaposition between Susanita's opportunistic feminism and Mafalda's distinction between women's rights and social class advantages to both elicit laughter and offer poignant social commentary.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand why certain cultural traits and issues were considered humorous while simultaneous social commentary was being made on women's rights in the comic strip *Mafalda*. The results of the analysis revealed that *Mafalda* used incongruity, specifically by allowing Mafalda to voice social commentary countering gender hegemony, something unexpected from a young child. The analysis also revealed opinions that directly challenged patriarchy by placing value and emphasis on education rather than marriage and by criticizing domesticity as mediocre and routine. Finally, *Mafalda* directly challenged Argentine middle-class and bourgeois women. Thus, the study adds to the field of critical humor studies (see Lockyer and Pickering 2008), gender studies, feminism studies, and communication through pop culture.

Comics are an important form of expression for humor, and humor is a central theme to understanding pop culture (Mintz 1983). In a similar fashion, Quino engages in deep social criticism by making fun of traditional mores. The strip is popular because many people see themselves in the characters of *Mafalda* and their interactions with one another. In his comic strip, Quino meticulously

zeroes in on power relations and social inequalities, seemingly opposing not just gendered hegemony but the social structure that promotes it.

Comics highlight our social values and make us question our own attitudes and actions (Inge 1990). Throughout the comic strips, Mafalda questions whether she is in the “wrong era” when attempting to communicate with her mom. She makes social commentary to herself and to her friends. She is ironic, and at times almost cynical, about what she observes in her social world. She was a beacon of liberation and hope for women everywhere and used as a proxy for civil rights. Feminism and gendered politics, along with civil rights movements, transformed the cultural and political landscape, leaving an imprint on everyday life (Echols 1989). Quino acknowledged this and integrated it into his strip, inserting politics into popular culture. Quino's strips were, and still are, universal, funny and relatable in many countries, and his humor achieves its objectives because it highlights the contradictions and ironies in our social systems (Fine 1983). Quino did this through incongruity and humor.

Humor should be anchored in a social system; it must refer to it (Fine 1983). Quino endowed Mafalda with the ability to say what others could not—perhaps because as a child she was outside the social system ensuing from an outdated power structure and could thus see it more clearly, perhaps because adults did not care, or perhaps because they supported the system (Foster 1998). In any event, with Mafalda and her friends Quino represents the complex processes of incongruity and humor by which a progressive worldview could make inroads in Argentina in the 1960s. It is ironic that he uses children as messengers of this social ideology; that in itself is the epitome of incongruence. Children are not supposed to question their parents; however, Mafalda consistently questions her mother. This can be viewed as a metaphor for challenging the status quo and instigating social change. Quino's humor and social commentary were often considered universal and were specifically relevant in Spain during Franco's regime, in Cuba under Fidel, and in other civilian-military dictatorships around the world (Iglesias Kuntz 2000).

The findings from the current study also add to previous research on *Mafalda* by positioning humor, specifically incongruity, as another way in which Quino constructed meaning. Previous studies have found the use of argumentative operators (Neves and Neves 2016), transparency, irony (Maliska and Souza 2014), gender stereotypes (Yubero et al. 2005), politics, and nationality (Cosse 2014) in *Mafalda* to shape and reshape meaning. The current study's specific contribution to incongruity theory is the addition of women's rights and domesticity to the aforementioned list. Humor is a social construct and much of it stems from the deviation of what is socially or culturally normalized (Meyer 2000). *Mafalda*'s deviation from sociocultural gender norms through the eyes of a child is a critique of Argentina's patriarchal ethos of the sixties.

It is also important to note other possible adverse implications of such comic strips. Quino might have contributed to raising awareness and promoting the salience of women's equality and other progressive social issues. But, perhaps, some women who identified with the character of Raquel (Mafalda's mother) may internalize their implied mediocrity and lower social status. This could lead to lower self-esteem, among other issues (Amir 2015). Furthermore, through the humor brought about

at the mother's expense, the comic strips may also devalue housework and childcare, which are vital to the economy. This devaluation, according to Cosse (2014), may be read as a direct critique of capitalism and women's roles within it. Finally, as a man, Quino has a privilege that he may have not recognized fully. Why is it that a male cartoonist has the legitimacy to bring up these issues? Future research should focus on this query. Future research should focus on the role of the comic strip as a critique of capitalism (in regard to both Mafalda's mother and father) and Quino's male privilege.

Additionally, a natural extension of this paper could explore, following a similar methodology, the content of comic strips in other countries around the world during specific periods of time in an effort to determine to what extent humor has been used to combat various forms of hegemony. An alternative path would be to find records of underground comics during periods of time when societies suffered major disruptions, such as the World War II, or prolonged conflicts in Southeast Asia or Latin America, for example. Comparative studies may highlight cultural similarities across societies and time, thereby contributing to deepen our understanding of the common grounds shared by seemingly diverse social systems.

Figures

Figure 1. Published in *Mafalda* 10, 1974

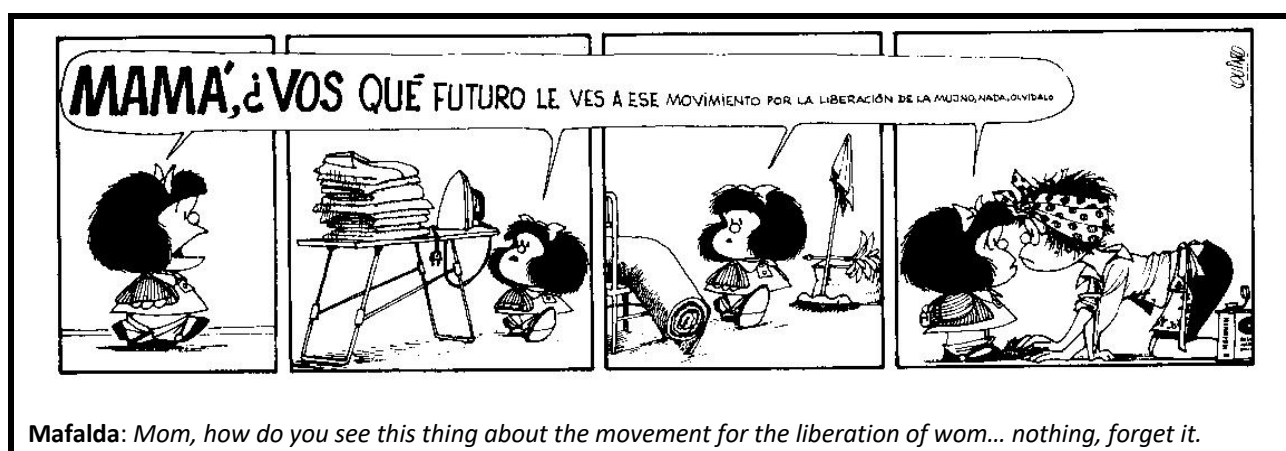


Figure 2. Published in *Mafalda* 1, 1966



Figure 3. Published in *Mafalda* 7, 1972

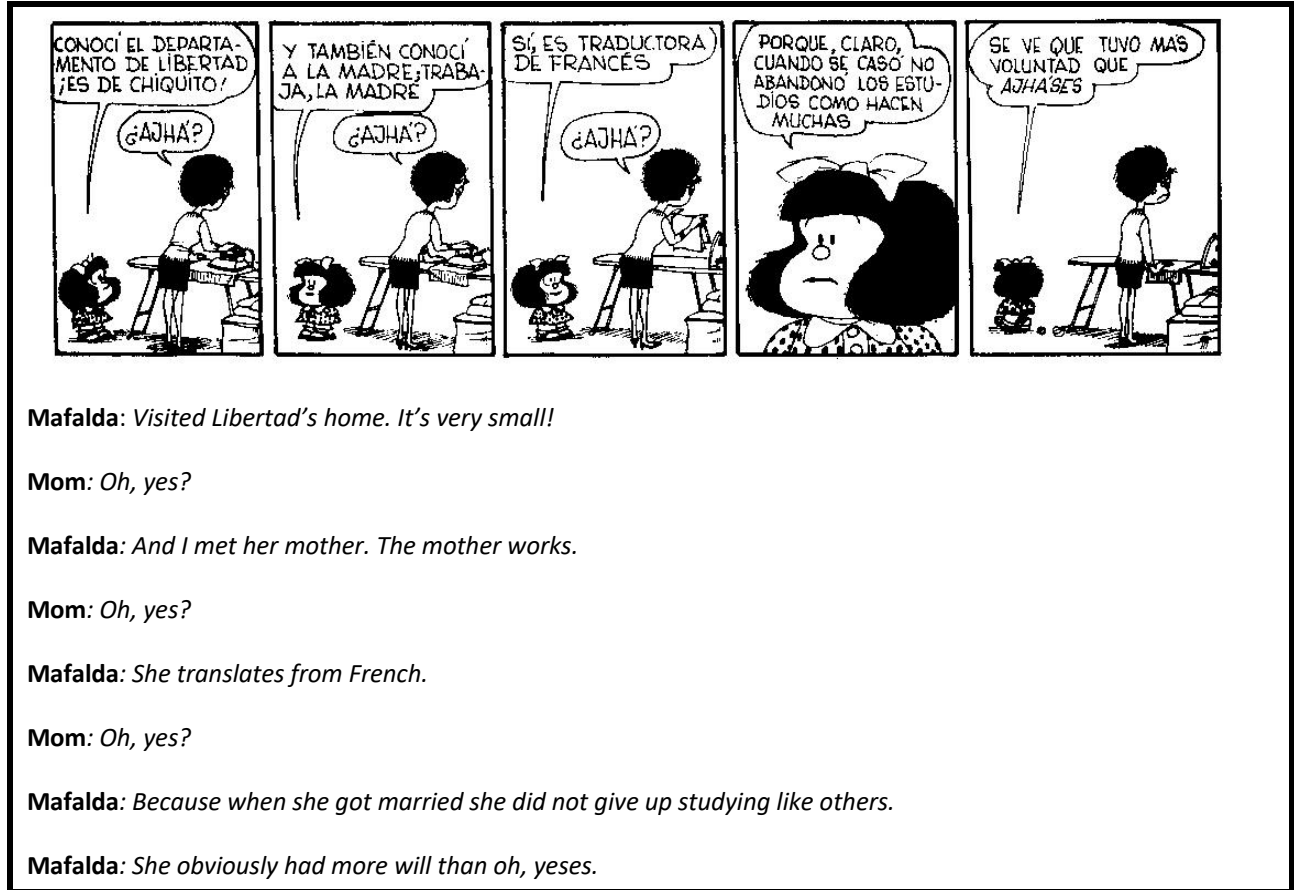


Figure 4. Published in *Mafalda* 5, 1969

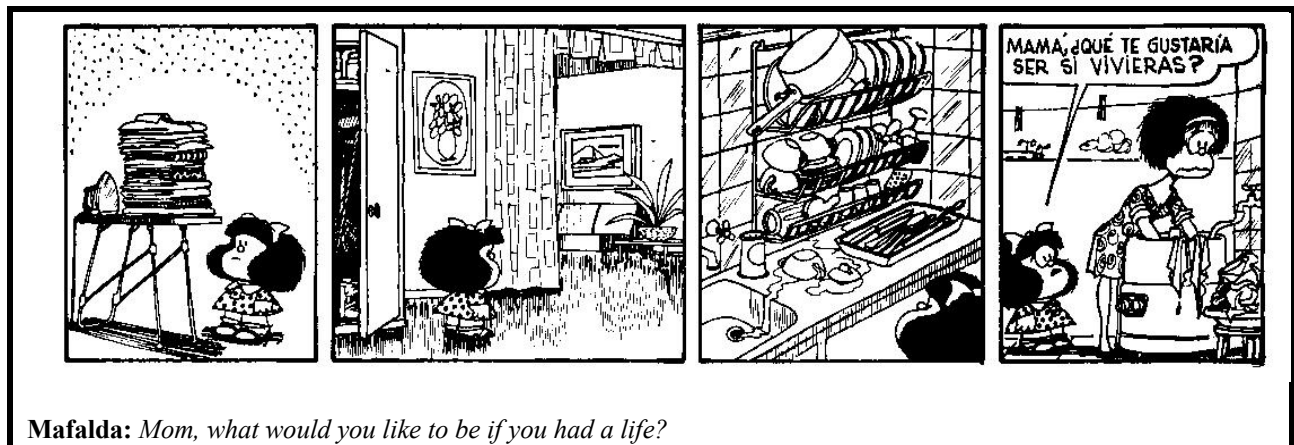
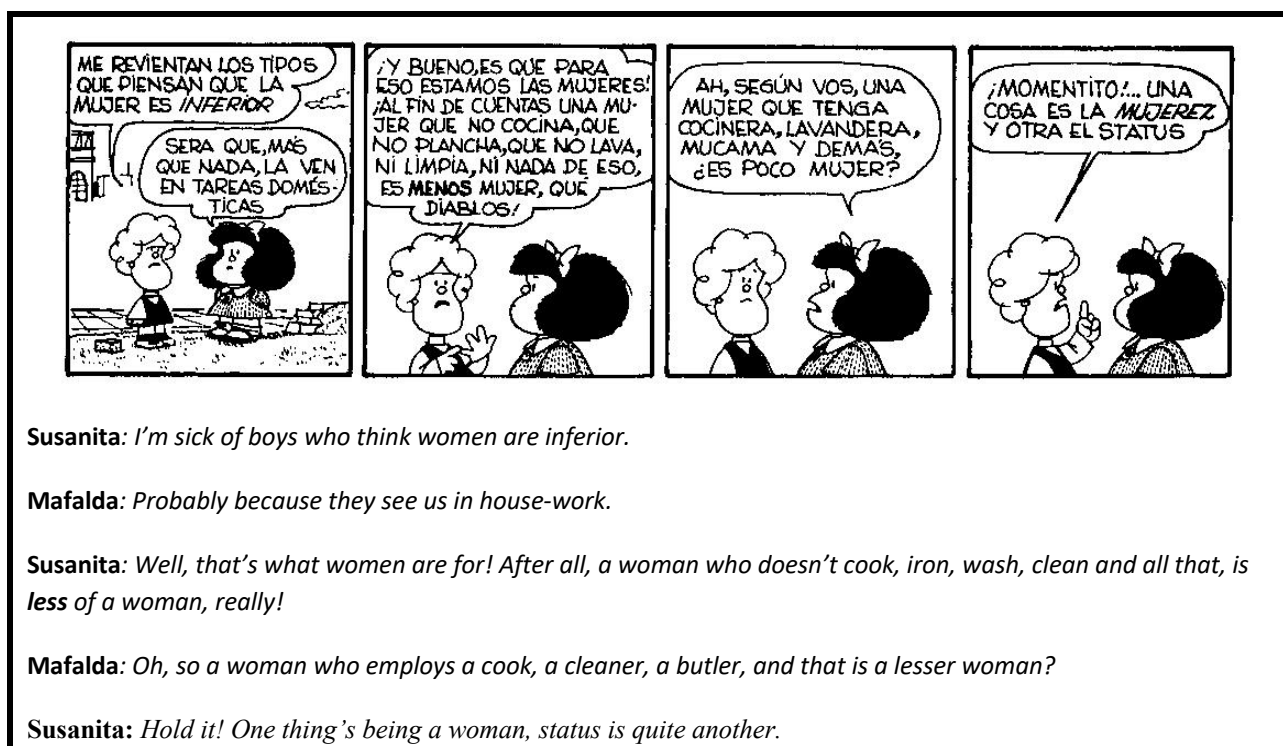


Figure 5. Published in *Mafalda* 5, 1969



Dr. Mariana De Maio is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Lehigh University. She is a political communication and journalism studies scholar. Her teaching and research interests lie in media influence on political attitudes and behavior, influences in journalistic practices, and portrayals of women and other minority groups in media. Originally from Argentina, Dr. De Maio is a former journalist who has been in the United States for several years and has worked as a reporter and editor in radio, television, print, and online news outlets.

Dr. Nathian Shae Rodriguez is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media in the School of Journalism & Media Studies at San Diego State University and core faculty in the Area of Excellence: Digital Humanities and Global Diversity. He specializes in critical-cultural and digital media studies. His research focuses on minority representation in media, specifically LGBTQ and Latinx portrayals and identity negotiation, as well as pop culture, identity, radio broadcasting, and issues of masculinity/masculine. Dr. Rodriguez also has 10 years of professional radio experience in on-air talent, sales, promotions, and social media marketing.

References

Abdel-raheem, Ahmed

- 2018 "Multimodal humour: Integrating blending model, relevance theory, and incongruity theory." *Multimodal Communication* 7 (1): 1–19. [doi:10.1515/mc-2017-0013](https://doi.org/10.1515/mc-2017-0013).

Amir, Lydia

- 2015 "Philosophic humor for women – (and men): Fighting shame and disgust." In *Women in Philosophical Counseling: The Anima of Thought in Action*, edited by Luisa de Paula and Peter Raabe, 83–98). New York: Lexington Books.

Bader, Michael D. M., and Siri Warkentien

- 2016 "The fragmented evolution of racial integration since the Civil Rights Movement." *Sociological Science* 3: 135–166.

Barrancos, Dora

- 2012 *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina. Una historia de cinco siglos*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.

Barthes, Roland

- 1985 "Textual Analysis of a Tale of Poe." In *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonksy, 84–97. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Berger, Arthur Asa

- 1993 *An Anatomy of Humor*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
2016 "Three holy men get haircuts: The semiotic analysis of a joke." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12 (3): 489–497. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v12i3.1042>

Bergmann, Emilie, Janet Greenberg, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Francine Masiello, Francesca Miller, Marta Morello-Frosch, Kathleen Newman, and Mary Louise Pratt

- 1990 *Women Culture and Politics in Latin America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Berkeley, Kathleen C.

- 1999 *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Bronstein, Carolyn

- 2005 "Representing the third wave: mainstream print media framing of a new feminist movement." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82 (40): 783–903.

Chalmers, David

- 1996 *And the Crooked Places Made Straight. The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960's*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ciasullo, Ann M.

- 2014 "The Lighter—and Weightier—Side of Mad, Or: Everything I Needed to Know About Gender and Sexuality I Learned from Dave Berg." *Studies in American Humor* 30: 77–94.

Connell, Raewyn

- 1990 "An iron man: The body and some contradictions of hegemonic masculinity." In *Sport, Men and the Gender Order*, edited by Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo, 83–95. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Books.

Cosse, Isabella

- 2014 "Mafalda: Middle Class, Everyday Life, and Politics in Argentina (1964–1973)." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 94 (1): 35–75.

Echols, Alice

- 1989 *Daring to be Bad. Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Feinberg, Leonard

- 1965 *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence*. New York: Citadel Press.
1967 *Introduction to Satire*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.

Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor D.

- 1998 "From Mafalda to Boogie: The City and Argentina Humor." In *Imagination beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture*, edited by Terry Caesar and Eva Paulino Bueno, 81–106. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Fine, Gary Alan

- 1983 "Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor." In *Handbook of Humor Research*, edited by Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey H., 159–181. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Flora, Cornelia Butler

- 1984 "Roasting Donald Duck: Alternative Comics and Photonovels in Latin America." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 18 (1): 163–183.

Foster, David W.

- 1980 "Mafalda: An Argentina comic strip." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 14 (3): 497–508.
1989 "Mafalda: The Ironic Bemusement." In *From Mafalda to Los Supermachos*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
1998 "Mafalda from Hearth to Plaza." In *Buenos Aires: Perspectives on the City and Cultural Production*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Highet, Gilbert

- 1962 *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hobbes, Thomas

- 1946 *Leviathan*, edited by Michael Oakshott. Oxford: Blackwell.

Iglesias Kuntz, Lucía

- 2000 "Quino, on the funny side of freedom." *UNESCO Courier* 53 (7/8): 69.

Inge, M. Thomas

- 1990 *Comics as Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Jackson, Melissa A.

2012 *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jensen, K. B., and N. W. Jankowski

1991 *Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*. London: Routledge.

Lavado, Joaquín Salvador (Quino)

1981 *Todo Mafalda: colección del 1 al 12*. Ciudad de México: Editorial Nueva Imagen.

Lavado, Joaquín Salvador (Quino), J. Davis, Judith Gociol, and Daniel Samper Pizano

2001 *Toda Mafalda*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.

Lavado, Joaquín Salvador (Quino), Sylvina Walchner, Alicia Colombo, and Julieta Colombo

1988 *Mafalda Inédita*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.

Leggott, James, Sharon Lockyer, and Rosie White

2015 "Acting up: Gender and television comedy." *Critical Studies in Television Comedy. The International Journal of Television Studies* 10 (2): 1–3.

Lindstrom, Naomi

1980 "Social Commentary in Argentine Cartooning: From Description to Questioning." *Journal of Popular Culture* 14 (3): 509–523.

Lockyer, Sharon, and Michael Pickering

2008 "You Must Be Joking: The Sociological Critique of Humour and Comic Media." *Sociology Compass* 2 (3): 808–820.

Lottman, H. R.

1990 "Argentina: Climbing back." *Publishers Weekly* 37 (7): 33-43.

"Mafalda sigue cruzando fronteras: ahora será traducida al armenio"

2017 Infobae, December 5.

<https://www.infobae.com/america/culturaamerica/2017/12/05/mafalda-sigue-cruzando-fronteras-ahora-sera-traducida-al-armenio/>.

Maliska, Mauricio Eugenio, and Silvina Colares Lúcio de Souza

2014 "Os efeitos de sentido da ironia e do humor: Uma análise das histórias em quadrinhos da Mafalda." *Revista Recorte* 11 (1).

Mangano, Joseph J.

1994 *Living Legacy: How 1964 Changed America*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Meyer, John C.

2000 "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." *Communication Theory* 10 (3): 310–331. [doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x)

Mintz, Lawrence E.

1983 "Humor and Popular Culture." In *Handbook of Humor Research 2*, edited by Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey H. Goldstein, 129–142. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Morreall, John

2014 "Humor, philosophy and education." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46 (2): 120-131.

Neves, Miranilde Oliveira and Mairan Oliveira Neves

2016 "A Reflection on the Use of Argumentative Operators in the Mafalda's Comic Strips Character." *International Journal of Language & Linguistics* 3 (6): 29–34.

O'Neill, William L.

1971 *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's*. New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co.

Rivera, Jorge

1990 "Historia del humor gráfico argentino." In *Medios de comunicación y cultura popular*, edited by Anibal Ford, Jorge B. Rivera, and Eduardo Romano, 106–140: Buenos Aires: Legasa.

Romero, Luis Alberto

1996 *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Rommens, Aarnoud

2005 "Memory in Camouflage: Alberto Breccia and Guillermo Saccomanno's 'William Wilson' as Catalyst for Memory." *Poetics Today* 26 (2): 305–347.

Rubin, Rebecca B., and Michael P. McHugh

1987 "Development of parasocial interaction relationships." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 31 (3): 279–292.

Sosa-Abella, Mireya, and Ricardo M. Reyes

2014 "Political humor in comic strips: A comparative analysis between Oriental and Occidental approaches." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18 (2): 243–259. doi: 10.1177/1367877914520894.

Trebisacce, Catalina

2017 "Aporte desde una reflexividad antropológica para una epistemología de la (co)construcción de los testimonios históricos. El caso de las historias del feminismo argentino de la década del setenta." *Cuadernos de Antropología Social* 46: 7–27.
<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=180953733001>

Vassallo, Alejandra

2005 "Las mujeres dicen basta: movilización, política y orígenes del feminismo argentino en los 70." *Historia, género y política en los '70*, edited by Andrea Andújar et al., 62–88. Buenos Aires: Seminaria.

Walker, Nancy A.

1998 *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources.

Weaver, Simon, Raúl Alberto Mora, and Karen Morgan

2016 “Gender and humour: examining discourses of hegemony and resistance.” *Social Semiotics* 26 (3): 227–233.

Yubero, Santiago, Raíl Navarro Olivas, María Elisa Larrañaga Rubio, and Sandra Sánchez García

2005 “Woman and Gender in the Comic Books.” In *Studies in Teacher Education: Language, Literature, and Culture*, edited by Mariusz Misztal and Mariusz Trawiński, 214–222. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej.