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HUMOR AS A MECHANISM OF SOCIAL CONTROL IN COLOMBIAN POLITICAL CARTOONS: THE CASE OF JULIO CÉSAR GONZÁLEZ QUICENO "MATADOR"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes humor as a mechanism of social control in Colombian political cartoons, specifically focusing on the work of cartoonist Julio César González Quiceno "Matador" during the period 2021-2025, marked by significant political transformations such as the 2021 National Strike, the 2022 presidential elections, and the transition to the first left-wing government in the country's modern history. Through a qualitative interpretive and socio-critical approach, a non-experimental, cross-sectional, single-case study design was implemented, combining semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis techniques applied to a sample of 25 intentionally selected cartoons. The findings reveal that Matador's cartoons employ a consistent repertoire of humorous strategies, highlighting irony (84%), visual metaphors (72%), graphic hyperbole (60%), and intertextual parody (44%), primarily directed toward political leaders such as Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Iván Duque Márquez, and Gustavo Petro, addressing themes of political corruption (68%), abuse of power and state violence (52%), populism and media manipulation (40%), and structural social problems (36%). The research confirms that Matador's graphic humor operates effectively as an informal social control mechanism, fulfilling functions of denunciation, awareness-raising, and public opinion mobilization, contributing to shaping social representations of political leaders, symbolically eroding their legitimacy, and providing interpretive frameworks that citizens adopt to understand political reality, constituting a form of citizen surveillance that transgresses official power narratives and strengthens democratic debate in Colombia.

KEYWORDS: *Political cartoon, social control, graphic humor, visual semiotics, political communication, Matador, citizen oversight, Colombian democracy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The political cartoon has established itself as a communicative genre that transcends entertainment to become a mechanism for the oversight of Colombian public power. During the period 2021-2025, marked by significant political transformations such as the 2021 National Strike, the 2022 presidential elections, and the transition to the first left-wing government in the country's contemporary history, the work of cartoonist Julio César González "Matador" has acquired particular relevance for its ability to mobilize public opinion through graphic humor. since his political caricatures, by combining visual and textual elements, operate as complex

semiotic devices that not only provoke laughter, but also expose incongruities, denounce abuses of power, and configure social representations of the various political actors (Da Silva, 2019).

Despite the notoriety of the phenomenon and its evident impact on public debate, there is still a significant academic gap on how specifically the semiotic elements of political humor operate as a mechanism of informal social control in contemporary Colombian democracy. Although there is previous research on political cartooning in Latin America (Sánchez Guevara, 2011; Umaña, 2013), these do not comprehensively analyze the specific humorous strategies, the rhetorical resources used, or their impact on the citizens' perception of political power in the country's recent context. In addition, no analytical frameworks have been developed that systematically articulate the semiotic dimension with the function of social control exercised by these humorous manifestations in the current digital media ecosystem. Therefore, the need arises to systematically examine Matador's caricatures during this conjunctural period to understand how graphic humor contributes to the citizen's oversight of power, identifying the specific mechanisms through which verbal and non-verbal elements construct critical discourses and shape public perception. In this way, this research will fill the existing research gap in political communication by providing a model of analysis that articulates visual semiotics with theories of social control, thus contributing to the strengthening of democratic debate and the understanding of the role of humor as a counter-power in Colombian society.

From this problem arises the central question: how do Matador's political cartoons operate as a mechanism of social control in the face of political power in Colombia, and in what way do the semiotic elements and humorous strategies employed influence the public perception of political leaders? In response to this question, it is hypothetical that Matador's political caricatures, through the strategic use of semiotic elements such as irony, visual metaphor and hyperbole, together with the construction of satirical representations of the different political actors, effectively expose the incongruities of Colombian political power and mobilize the critical consciousness of citizens. acting as a mechanism of informal social control that symbolically erodes the legitimacy of political leaders in the eyes of public opinion, thus contributing to a socio-critical process of citizen surveillance that transgresses and subverts the official narratives of power.

This assumption is based on the idea that political graphic humor intensifies the confrontation against the official discourse and questions the legitimacy of power from the perspective of citizens. In addition, it is conjectured that Matador recurrently uses specific rhetorical strategies (such as the visual metaphor of the pig to represent corruption; the hyperbolic caricature of physical features to criticize personal vices, or the parody of patriotic symbols) and that these strategies manage to fix in the collective imagination certain social representations of political leaders (Gutiérrez and Martínez, 2018).

In academic and social terms, this research is justified by the need to understand the function and impact of political humor in the democratic and cultural dynamics of the country. On the one hand, from a theoretical perspective, the study will enrich the field of political communication and visual studies by articulating semiotic and critical discourse analysis approaches applied to a relevant contemporary case; since although there is previous research on political cartooning in Latin America (Sánchez Guevara, 2011; Umaña, 2013), they need to be updated and focused on the recent Colombian context, especially given the changing Colombian political landscape 2021-2025.

Theoretical framework

From the theoretical point of view, this research is inscribed in the critical socio-constructivist paradigm, which postulates that social reality is constructed discursively and that knowledge is generated in a dialogic way with the actors and critically interpreting the structures of power (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Fals Borda, 1987). This approach allows us to renounce hegemonic visions of reality and instead assume that phenomena such as political humor must be understood by considering the cultural contexts and underlying power relations. In accordance with this, a qualitative and interpretative approach is privileged, where the researcher assumes a reflexive stance in front of the object of study (the caricature) and in front of his own preconceptions.

On the other hand, it is based on theories of political communication and satire. In this regard, various authors agree that political cartooning fulfills a critical and cathartic function in society: "Political cartooning has a critical function towards social problems, and tends to make readers laugh in order to reduce to a certain

extent the suffering of the national drama" (Sánchez, 2011, p. 3). The laughter provoked by political humour is not frivolous, but arises from what is outrageous or incomprehensible, channelling popular frustration into a shared reflection (Monsiváis, 1995, cited in Sánchez Guevara, 2011). According to this perspective, humor operates simultaneously on two levels: it entertains ("moves to laughter") while inviting critical reflection. Consequently, the impact of the caricature transcends immediate mockery and can be considered a discourse of resistance to power.

Likewise, the theory of the social functions of political humor is relevant. Previous studies have pointed out that humor in the political sphere can serve as a tool for opinion, social cohesion and control. For example, Umaña (2013), when analyzing cartoons in Costa Rica, concluded that the cartoonist has the power to "select and manipulate the image based on certain interests to generate and disseminate a specific message", influencing his audience, while the public provides feedback that validates that power. This observation suggests that the cartoonist guides the perception of the receiver through his creative choices, evidencing the capacity of graphic humor to shape public opinion. In the same vein, Teun A. van Dijk and other theorists of critical discourse analysis argue that opinion texts in the media (including cartoons) participate in the reproduction or challenge of dominant ideologies (Van Dijk, 2015). Thus, a political cartoon can be considered a hybrid discursive genre that mixes visual and verbal codes to convey ideological positions and exert symbolic power in public debate.

Another central theoretical contribution comes from visual semiotics, where the semiotic analysis of caricatures is based on concepts by Charles S. Peirce and Roland Barthes, among others. According to Peirce, any image can be broken down into icons, indexes and symbols; this trichotomy allows us to examine how Matador's drawings represent politicians (as recognizable icons, cultural symbols, or visual metaphors?). For example, the repeated representation of a politician as an animal (pig, rat, etc.) constitutes a symbol that condenses a moral or political critique, understandable to the public thanks to shared cultural conventions (Sánchez Guevara, 2011; Gantús, 2007). Barthes (1964), on the other hand, provides the notion of the concepts of denotation and connotation in the image: a caricature denotes a humorous scene, but connotes (suggests) a deeper political meaning, often through simplified but powerful visual codes (for example, a banknote in the hands of a politician with a smiling gesture connotes corruption). These semiotic approaches are the basis for the identification of the key visual elements in Matador's vignettes and their interpretative decoding.

From the perspective of the rhetoric of humour, the categories of the rhetorical figures used in the humorous discourse are taken up. Research such as that of Sánchez Guevara (2011) indicates that the political cartoon is a pluricoding, polyphonic and polysemic text, in which multiple voices and meanings converge. In these caricatures, rhetorical figures emerge such as hyperbole (exaggeration of features or situations), verbo-visual metaphor (implicit comparison using images, e.g. a politician drawn as Pinocchio = liar) and irony (saying something to the contrary, often supported by written text). All these resources seek to intensify the discursive confrontation against official policy and disqualify, through ingenuity, the official versions of reality. As Agelvis (2010, cited by Sánchez Guevara, 2011) puts it, political caricature is a form of polemical discourse that takes criticism of the established to the extreme, constituting a "catharsis [...] of justice" that calls into question the official discourses (p. 45-46). In short, theoretically the political caricature is conceived as an exercise of symbolic power against institutional power: through laughter, the aura of authority of the leaders is eroded and the public is empowered with a demystifying vision of reality.

Finally, the notion of social control is integrated from communication. Although the term "social control" classically refers to the mechanisms (formal and informal) with which a society regulates behaviors, here it is adopted in a broad sense to indicate how the media and messages can influence collective behavior or public opinion. In democratic systems, the media act as a kind of counter-power or fourth estate, monitoring public authorities and institutions. In this sense, graphic humor is proposed as a modality of informal social control, a space where leaders are symbolically judged. In this regard, Da Silva (2019) argues that political caricature, by promoting public reflection and confronting reality with ingenuity, "turns it into a political weapon against any power that tries to control society" (p. 101) – that is, it functions as a containment dam against abusive power by satirizing and unmasking it. This critical capacity inherent in political humor has been highlighted by many authors who see laughter as a form of social resistance (Eco, 1984; Zavala, 2015). In Matador's own

words, "*what the caricature should do is a counterposition to power*" (Estrella, 2018, interview), stressing that the mission of his profession is to make the powerful uncomfortable and supervise.

Historically, political cartooning in Colombia has a long history as a vehicle for criticism and popular expression. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, satirical publications such as *El Mochuelo* or *El Zigzag* already used humorous illustrations to comment on the political events of the time, often circumventing the censorship of conservative governments. During the National Front (mid-twentieth century), cartoonists such as Santiago "Calibán" García and Pepón, ingeniously portrayed the realities of bipartisan violence and corruption, consolidating caricature as a genre of opinion. In recent decades, names such as Vladdo, Osuna, Bacteria and Matador have continued that tradition, adapting to new media (magazines, digital press and even social networks) and expanding the audience of political cartooning.

In particular, Julio César González "Matador", emerged in this panorama at the beginning of the 2000s. His first works appeared in regional newspapers in Pereira, and by 2003 he joined *El Tiempo* (the main national newspaper), which catapulted his visibility. Matador published several books compiling his cartoons and won journalism awards, consolidating himself as one of "the three most influential political cartoonists in Colombia" (Estrella, 2018). He is known for his obsessive representation of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, whom he has drawn recurrently, which generated public controversies with the former president. He also caricatured all recent presidents (Santos, Duque, Petro) and key figures in Colombian and world political life.

Between 2021 and 2023, the country experienced an intense news cycle: the 2021 National Strike (mass protests against the Duque government), the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 presidential elections (which brought Gustavo Petro, the first leftist president in Colombia's modern history, to power), and the 2023 local elections, among other events. Matador addressed all these issues in his daily cartoons, portraying for example police repression with crude but ironic images, or comparing presidential candidates with cartoons from movies to point out their traits (on his networks, some viral cartoons showed the 2022 candidates as Disney characters, etc., for parodic purposes). After Petro's election, Matador – who identifies as a moderate center-left – continued with a critical stance, also drawing the new government when he considered it pertinent (for example, caricatures about the mistakes of ministers, or Petro's relationship with opponents). In short, Colombian political caricature, and especially Matador's work, has developed as a satirical chronicle of national life, contributing for decades to shaping collective imaginaries about leaders and events (Gantús, 2007). Each cartoon is a miniature historical document that captures the essence of a controversy or public debate at any given time. Acknowledging this tradition lends depth to the current analysis: Matador is heir to a social function of caricature that has persisted in Colombia – that of being an irreverent voice of popular consciousness in the face of the powerful.

In the legal sphere, freedom of expression and of the press in Colombia constitutes the foundation that protects the work of political cartoonists. Article 20 of the Political Constitution of Colombia of 1991 enshrines the right to "express and disseminate one's thoughts and opinions", as well as the right to freedom of the press, without censorship. Political cartooning is therefore protected as a form of artistic and journalistic expression. This legal framework is reaffirmed by international human rights treaties signed by Colombia, such as the Pact of San José (American Convention on Human Rights, Art. 13), which establishes freedom of thought and expression. However, the legal system also provides for subsequent limits and responsibilities: expressions that constitute libel or slander can lead to sanctions (Penal Code, arts. 220-221), and any person who feels that his or her honour has been affected may take legal action (such as guardianship) to request rectifications. In practice, these legal figures have been invoked by public figures who are offended by cartoons. In addition, Colombian jurisprudence, including rulings of the Constitutional Court, has been clear that humor, satire, and caricature are specially protected forms of speech, since they contribute to plural public debate and social control of power (Const. T-260/2017, among others). The Court has pointed out that political satire enjoys a kind of license of exaggeration: it is understood that by its very nature it resorts to distortion and mockery, and that society must tolerate these excesses in favor of a vigorous democratic dialogue. Of course, the caveat has been made that expressions that directly incite violence or discrimination (hate speech) would not be protected, but that is not usually the case with political cartoons that target powerful people rather than vulnerable groups.

On the other hand, from the international legal perspective, it is worth remembering episodes such as the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 (France) that led to global reflection on the safety of cartoonists and the thin line between religious/political offense and freedom of expression. Although this context is different, it has had an impact on Latin American cartoonists, including *Matador*, in reinforcing the importance of protecting the integrity of those who exercise this trade. In Colombia, entities such as the Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP) follow up on threats against journalists and cartoonists, advocating for state guarantees for the exercise of political satire without fear. In conclusion, the Colombian legal framework favors the existence of political cartooning as a free expression, considering it an essential part of the system of checks and balances of democracy (the press as a watchdog of power). Legal restrictions are the exception and are strictly applied when there is evidence of an abuse of expression that infringes the fundamental rights of third parties, which in practice has not prospered in cases of genuine political satire.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

To address the research problem, a qualitative, interpretative and socio-critical approach is adopted. This means that the study does not seek to quantify variables or statistically test a hypothesis, but rather to understand in depth the meanings, contexts, and implications of *Matador*'s political cartoons. The socio-critical perspective implies that the analysis will be attentive to the dimensions of power, ideology and social criticism present in the material, consistent with the critical constructivism mentioned in the theoretical framework.

The research design is non-experimental, cross-sectional, and a single case study. It is non-experimental because variables are not intentionally manipulated; cross-sectional because it is limited to a specific period (2021-2025) for data collection; and a unique case, because it focuses exclusively on the caricatures of a single author (*Matador*) as an exemplification of the broader problem of humor as social control. Within the qualitative typologies, an instrumental case study can be considered (Stake, 1995), in which the *Matador* case is studied not only for its own interest but also for what it illuminates with respect to the general phenomenon of political caricature in society. Likewise, the collection and analysis method combines semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) techniques. This methodological triangulation allows the object of study to be approached from multiple angles: semiotics provides tools to break down visual and symbolic signs in caricatures, while CDA provides a framework to interpret how these signs construct ideological or power meanings in a social context. In correspondence with this approach, the role of the researcher was that of an interpretive analyst, immersed in the hermeneutical process of extracting latent and explicit meanings from each caricature, relating them to the Colombian political reality.

It should be noted that, in order to guarantee methodological rigor, qualitative research criteria were followed, such as reflexivity, theoretical saturation in categorization (reviewing caricatures until the main categories of analysis clearly emerged) and the credibility of the interpretations (for example, contrasting the reading of the caricatures with news from the context to verify the correspondence of meaning). Although subjectivity is recognized (and even valued) in the interpretive paradigm, an attempt was made to maintain theoretical coherence and transparency in the procedure to support the conclusions reached.

Population and sample

The study population comprises the universe of political cartoons published by Julio César González "*Matador*" between January 2021 and July 2025, specifically those disseminated in digital media (social networks, particularly *Matador*'s official Instagram account, and on the *El Tiempo* portal until March 2023, when the cartoonist stopped publishing in that newspaper). It is estimated that this population includes hundreds of cartoons, given the almost daily rhythm of publication of *Matador*. Since it is not feasible to analyze each of them in an article of this length, we proceeded to select an intentional sample or sample of typical cases. The selection criteria were: (a) that the cartoon addressed a political or social issue of high relevance (e.g., elections, government corruption, citizen protests, controversial public policies), (b) that it was representative of *Matador*'s recurring humorous style and strategies, and (c) temporal balance, that is, it approximately covered the years of the study period in an approximately equal manner. Following these

criteria, the sample was made up of 25 cartoons in total, distributed approximately in five (5) cartoons per year 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and the first half of 2025.

The specific selection included, for example: cartoons from 2021 alluding to the National Strike and corruption scandals during the pandemic; of 2022, several on the presidential campaign (including satirical representations of the most prominent candidates, such as Petro, Rodolfo Hernández and Fico Gutiérrez) as well as the post-election cartoon; of 2023, cartoons about the reforms proposed by the Petro government and the political opposition; and from 2024-2025, cartoons on the situation of the government in office and preamble to regional elections. These selected cartoons are, for the most part, those that generated high impact or virality on networks, under the assumption that they reflect in an accentuated way the interaction between humor and social control (since the most viral are usually the most sharp in criticism).

It is important to note that, although the sample is relatively small in number, in qualitative research this is acceptable, since the depth of the analysis prevails over the numerical extension. Each cartoon was analyzed in detail, as described in the next section. Saturation was considered reached when the emerging categories of analysis began to repeat themselves and the new caricatures added few new ideas, confirming previous findings (Hernández et al., 2014). Therefore, it is considered that the sample of 25 vignettes is sufficient and adequate for the interpretative purposes of this study.

Analysis techniques and instruments

Two techniques of qualitative analysis were essentially used in a complementary way:

1. Qualitative semiotic analysis: Inspired by Peirce's semiotics and cultural semiotics methodologies (Lotman) applied to graphic humor (Sánchez Guevara, 2011), an analysis matrix was developed for each cartoon, identifying its visual signs, verbal signs, and global meaning. This instrument included columns to describe: the characters drawn (who they are and how they are represented graphically), the iconic or symbolic elements (objects, animals, scenarios and their possible connotation), the written text (dialogues, titles, signs) and the tone it imprints on it (ironic, direct, euphemistic, etc.), as well as an integrated semiotic interpretation. For example, in a cartoon where a politician appears with Pinocchio's nose and holding money, it was noted that: Character = "Politician X", Icon = "Pinocchio's nose" (symbol of lies), Symbol = "money in hand" (indication of corruption), Text = "*I will lie again*" (verbal irony), Global sense = criticism of the lack of honesty in the political class. This technique made it possible to break down each panel into its meaningful units and then recompose the critical message it communicates.
2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): The CDA approach of authors such as Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk was followed, adapted to the multimodal genre of caricature. In practice, this implied placing each cartoon in its context of production (date, triggering event, political actor alluded to) and analyzing the relations of power, ideology and positioning that the humorous discourse reflects. Analytical questions were asked such as: What is the enunciative position of the caricature? (e.g.: Matador speaks from the voice of the ordinary citizen to ridicule the powerful); What *practices of power* or politics are you questioning? What shared knowledge is assumed to make the joke work? (e.g., the public must know about the "N" scandal to understand the reference); Is there any stereotype or social representation being reproduced or deconstructed? How might the target group vs. the general public interpret the message? These questions guided a written analytical commentary for each caricature, complementing the semiotic file. In essence, CDA made it possible to move from the analysis of signs to the analysis of social meanings: what the caricature is laughing at and what this tells us about the political-social reality.

In addition, a categorical coding technique typical of qualitative content analysis was incorporated. After analyzing the cartoons individually, recurrent patterns were identified that were translated into categories of analysis. For example, thematic categories emerged (e.g., "corruption," "state violence," "electoral campaigning," "unpopular public policies") and categories of humorous strategies (e.g., "animalization of the politician," "comparison with popular fiction," "direct vs. indirect criticism"). These categories served to group

the findings and facilitate the presentation of results in a structured way. To manage the coding, qualitative support software (Atlas.ti 9) was used, where the images with their descriptions were uploaded and codes were assigned to relevant segments. This helped to organize the information and to carry out transversal queries (for example, to see all the cartoons where the code "irony + Uribe" or "corruption + money" appears).

In terms of instruments, in addition to the aforementioned analytical matrices, a research diary was kept where the researcher recorded reflections, possible alternative interpretations and decisions made during the analytical process, to ensure audit and reflexivity. For example, it was noted when an interpretation could be influenced by the personal position vis-à-vis the politician portrayed, inviting it to be objectively reevaluated or contrasted with other sources (news, public reactions) to avoid excessive biases.

No surveys or structured interviews were applied in this phase, since the emphasis was on the analysis of the communicative artifact itself. However, the understanding was complemented with secondary sources: news, opinion columns and comments on social networks referring to certain controversial cartoons were consulted, in order to contextualize their impact (for example, knowing that the cartoon "X" generated a trend on Twitter or was shared by certain opinion leaders, etc.). This does not constitute strict quantitative evidence, but it served as a qualitative context for interpretation.

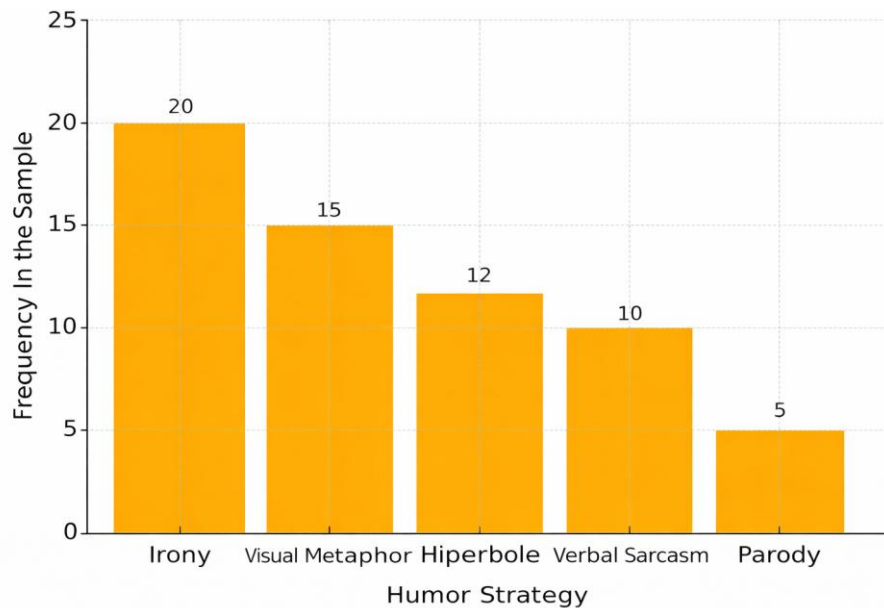
Ethical considerations

Although the research deals with publicly available material (caricatures already published), ethical considerations were taken into account: Matador's authorship was respected at all times, making legitimate use of his images only for academic purposes (protected by the right of quotation and critical analysis); The reproductions or illustrations in this article include the due attributions. Likewise, respect was taken towards the figures alluded to in the cartoons: although the satire of specific politicians is analyzed, it is done in analytical terms without incurring personal attacks from the researcher. Spreading messages of hate or misinformation is avoided; on the contrary, the analysis seeks to clarify the meaning of messages already disseminated. Critical impartiality was sought by maintaining an analytical approach focused on discourse, not on validating or refuting underlying policy positions.

Findings and results

The triangulation in this research was carried out in two main dimensions: (1) methodological triangulation (use of several complementary methods of analysis: semiotic, discursive, contextual) and (2) triangulation of information sources (contrasting the interpretations of the cartoons with contextual news information. This *triangular approach* sought to increase the internal validity of the findings, ensuring that they were not based on a single perspective. An important aspect was the triangulation of different caricatures with each other. By categorizing and grouping the cartoons in the sample, consistent patterns could be identified: for example, it was noted that certain characters appeared more frequently and with similar treatments. When triangulating this information, it was found that Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Iván Duque and Gustavo Petro were, in that order, the most caricatured characters in the period studied. Below is a graph that summarizes the frequency of use of the main humorous strategies identified in the cartoons analyzed:

Figure 1. Frequency of the main humorous strategies identified in the cartoons analyzed (N=25).



Own authorship.

The above graph in Figure 1 allows us to appreciate that Matador especially favors irony and visual metaphors as vehicles of his critical humor. Triangulating this finding with concrete examples: irony often arose from the discrepancy between the text and the image (e.g., a politician saying "I am honest" while the image reveals the opposite), while visual metaphors include notorious cases such as drawing former President Iván Duque as a pig, traditional politicians as vampires sucking the blood of the people, or to justice like a blindfolded lady with her hands tied. These metaphors were understood by the audience due to shared cultural knowledge: that of the pig associated with dirt/corruption, that of the vampire with exploitation, etc. The triangulation between graphic evidence, qualitative analysis and public reception (reactions on networks) suggests that these strategies effectively achieve their objective of denunciation: comments from users on networks often reaffirm the critical reading ("Excellent, politicians *are* bloodsuckers", "As it is, *x* is like a pig in corruption!"), which indicates that the message has clearly arrived.

Another example of triangulation is the comparison between what Matador said in interviews and what is evidenced in his cartoons. In the interview with *Bocas* (Estrella, 2018), Matador states that his caricatures are "50 and 50" humor and criticism, since "he does not believe in caricatures without humor or in caricatures that only make you think," emphasizing that "they must be a mockery of power, of oneself, of society." Triangulating this statement with the analysis of the caricatures, his position is corroborated: all the caricatures in the exhibition do indeed have a humorous element (be it a comic drawing or a verbal joke) but at the same time *they all communicate a recognizable criticism of something specific* (an act of government, a character). There was no "empty" caricature of political content in the exhibition; even those that seemed lighter had an implicit social commentary. This reinforces the idea that the balance between humor and criticism is deliberate in Matador's work, as he himself proclaims, which consolidates the interpretative validity of the results. In summary, the triangulation of the information in this study allowed to validate and enrich the interpretations from different angles, reducing the probability of biased or weak conclusions. The convergence of evidence – between methods, sources and theories – provides solidity to the findings presented in the following section of results and analysis.

Analysis of results and discussion

The main findings of the analysis are presented below, organized around three thematic axes that respond to the objectives: (1) Semiotic elements and humorous strategies identified, (2) Main targets of criticism and recurring themes, and (3) Role of caricature as social control and impact on public perception. Each sub-section integrates illustrative examples of the cartoons analyzed, accompanied by the corresponding interpretation and supported by theory and/or contextual evidence.

Semiotic Elements and Humorous Strategies in Matador Cartoons

The semiotic-discursive analysis of the 25 caricatures revealed a consistent repertoire of expressive resources used by Matador to generate humor and criticism. On the verbal level, a constant was the use of brief ironic phrases in dialogues or supporting texts. Matador usually prefers textual minimalism: a single lapidary sentence, sometimes put in the mouth of the caricatured character and sometimes as a separate commentary. These phrases often contain puns, sarcasm, or ironic contrasts. For example, in a 2022 cartoon about inflation, he drew an official holding the peso symbol "\$" split in half, with the caption: "Our pockets broke." The irony lies in the fact that the person who says it is part of the government responsible for the situation, evidencing its hypocrisy. In this case, the phrase plays with colloquial language ("breaking the pocket" = running out of money) and incriminates the character at the same time. Another example: after the elections, he caricatured several politicians jumping from a sinking ship (a visual metaphor for the sinking of their parties) and a text: "Political reengineering: let's change ships". Here the humor arises from sarcasm: he calls opportunism "reengineering." In general, the dominant verbal tone is scathing and satirical, avoiding explicit offensive terms, but using euphemisms and double entendres to outwit its targets.

In terms of visual elements, Matador's style is synthetic and symbolic. His drawings are of simple strokes, schematic human figures (with large heads and small bodies, a classic caricature feature), but they incorporate very significant visual details. One finding is the tendency to animalize certain politicians as a metaphorical resource: indeed, in the sample analyzed, Iván Duque is drawn as a pig in several vignettes (representing dirt/corruption or gluttony of power), Álvaro Uribe is frequently represented as a ventriloquist or puppeteer manipulating others (a metaphor for his control behind the scenes), and in some caricatures, Gustavo Petro was drawn as a tired cat (possibly alluding to the phrase that a cat has 7 lives, in reference to his political persistence). Each animal or object attributed has a semiotic charge: they are symbols that the public quickly decodes supported by collective imaginaries (e.g., pig = corrupt "pig", puppet = manipulation, resistant cat, etc.). This is in line with what has been pointed out by rhetorical studies: "political caricature is a humorous text that condenses cultural, situational and ideological pre-constructions", where rhetorical figures are used to magnify or minimize aspects. Matador condenses complex ideas (systemic corruption, political dependence, resilience) into a single allegorical image, which is a hallmark of its communicative effectiveness.

Figure 2. Humorous Strategies Used in Matador Cartoons





Note: caricatures taken from <https://www.instagram.com/matador000/>

Another visual strategy detected is intertextuality with popular references. Matador sometimes parodies famous pop culture imagery to make a political commentary. For example, a 2021 cartoon showed a politician dressed as the *Joker* (Batman's villain), dancing on a staircase, alluding to an iconic scene from a recent film; the subtitle adapted the phrase to "*Joker-ruistas on the campaign trail*" (parodying "Uibistas", supposedly). This intertextuality creates complicity with young audiences or cinephiles, and provides an additional layer of humour: the politician is ridiculed by comparing him to a psychopathic fictional character, implying scathing criticism of his ethics. Other parodies have included tweaked corporate logos (e.g., the Instagram logo modified to satirize narcissism in politics) or altered song titles for ironic purposes. These references demonstrate a dialogue between the caricature and the wider culture, enriching it semiotically. In addition, in the visual dimension, it is worth highlighting the facial and body expressiveness of the caricatured characters. Matador often draws politicians with exaggerated expressions: bulging eyes when they are in scandal, cynical smiles when they lie, tiny frowns when they are criticized, etc. These expressions convey intentionality (a politician with a fake smile and beads of sweat suggests guilty nervousness). Likewise, body posture: kneeling to indicate submission, inflated to indicate arrogance, etc. They are apparently simple details, but with a great communicative charge in a minimalist drawing. Color is also used symbolically on occasions: in black and white almost always, Matador sometimes highlights blood red (when it alludes to violence) or gold/money with yellow (when it alludes to economic corruption), guiding the reader to the spotlight of criticism.

Adding the verbal and the visual, each caricature operates as a brief but profound multimodal text. For example, a caricature in the exhibition depicted "Justice" (goddess Themis) with a blindfold, but this time tied with adhesive tape put around by politicians, and on one side a politician says: "*Here justice is blind... and gagged.*" Semiotically, the usual blindfold symbolizes impartiality, but when shown reinforced as a gag, the image communicates a lack of justice; The text ironically reinforces this idea. This cartoon combined visual metaphor (gag = control of justice) with verbal irony (a phrase that begins as a well-known saying and ends by revealing the hidden truth). This type of multiple combinations of strategies was the rule rather than the exception in Matador's work. His mastery of dual language (image + word) allows him to achieve what Agelvis (2010) called significant intensification: in a single panel there is a cognitive and emotional blow to the reader, who laughs, but at the same time recognizes a severe criticism after the laughter.

In conclusion, in this section, the semiotic elements and humorous strategies identified in Matador's caricatures include irony, sarcasm, metaphor (particularly the animalization of politicians), graphic hyperbole, and intertextual parody, all coherently integrated to generate a powerful satirical message. These findings respond to the first specific objective by showing *how* Matador constructs its humorous discourse, through which social control is exercised.

Targets of criticism and recurring themes: humorous x-ray of power

The second axis of results refers to whom and what Matador's satire is aimed at in the period studied, and what this indicates about the social function of his caricatures. From the analysis of the 25 cartoons, certain preferential targets and dominant themes clearly emerge: First, the most satirized political figures in the 2021-2025 period were the leaders Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Iván Duque Márquez and Gustavo Petro. This is consistent with his leading roles in recent politics: Uribe as former president and figure behind power during the Duque government, Duque as president 2018-2022, and Petro as opposition leader who ascends to the presidency in 2022. Matador approached each one with different nuances (See Figure 4).

- **Álvaro Uribe Vélez:** He appears in multiple cartoons generally associated with the idea of *power in the shadows* or *negative influence*. For example, in several cartoons Uribe is drawn small, whispering in Duque's ear or pulling him with strings, representing the perception that Duque was a "puppet" of Uribe (which was part of the opposition discourse at the time). The insistence on Uribe suggests that Matador considers his figure as a symbol of a certain type of hegemonic power (the traditional right, Uribism) against which his humorous social control is aimed. By ridiculing Uribe, the cartoon seeks to detract from his moral authority in the eyes of the public.
- **Iván Duque Márquez:** During his presidency he was targeted almost daily. Matador used to represent him as an immature character, unaware of reality or disconnected from the people, drawing him with pig-like features; but also as a child with toys (for example, playing with warplanes while the country burns, a clear allusion to wrong priorities). The humor directed at Duque exploited the idea of his lack of self-leadership, symbolizing disconnection. It is evident that the humorous social control of Duque consisted of exposing him as incompetent and servile, undermining his prestige.
- **Gustavo Petro Urrego:** Since Petro won the presidency halfway through the period studied, the caricatures of him change tone over time. Before 2022, Matador – although inclined to some leftist causes – also made humor at Petro's expense, for example, presenting him as "Messiah" surrounded by uncritical followers, criticizing his personalistic style. After his victory, some analyzed cartoons from 2023 show him overwhelmed by problems (e.g., carrying a heavy rock labeled "Social Expectations"), which is a criticism of the difficulty of keeping promises. This suggests that humorous social control is not partisanly selective; his main loyalty seems to be to the common citizen, not to a side, fulfilling the role of "Jiminy Cricket" who whispers uncomfortable truths to anyone in power.

Figure 4. Most Satirized Political Figures in the 2021-2025 Period by Matador





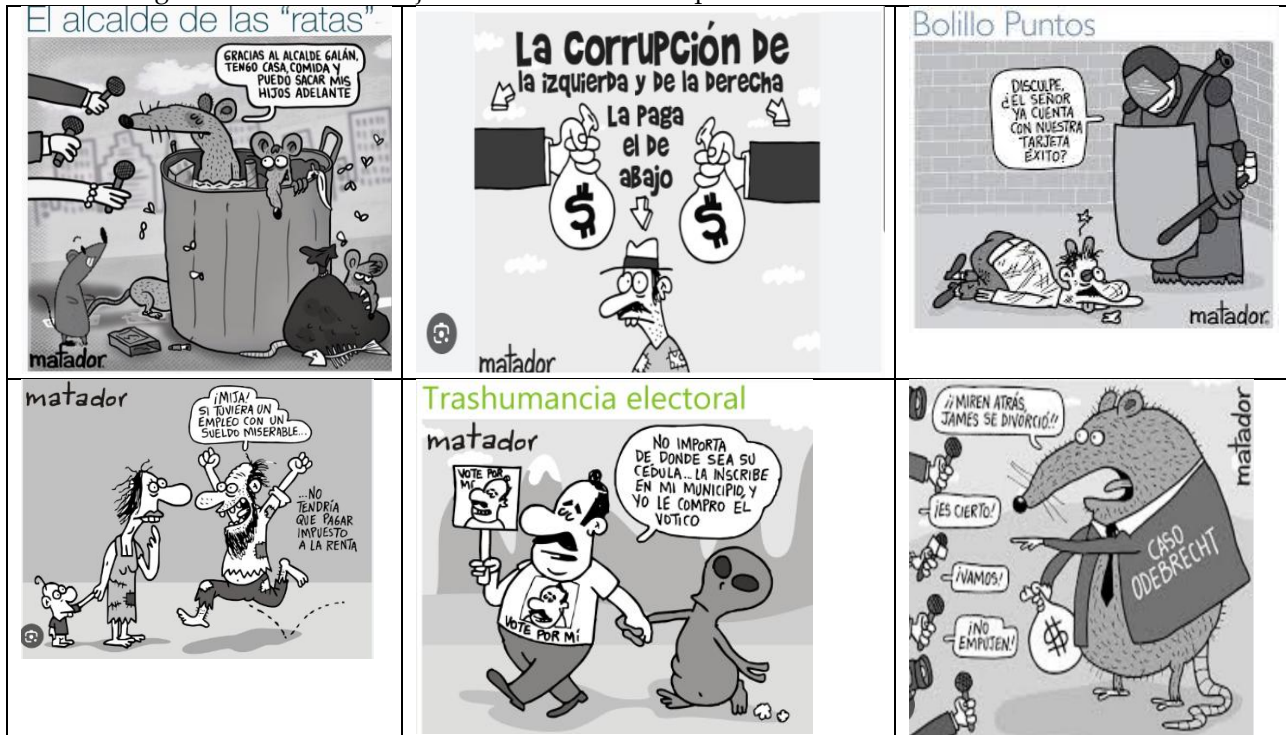
Source: cartoons taken from <https://www.instagram.com/matador000/>

In addition to individuals, there are institutions and collectivities that are the object of criticism in Matador's cartoons. Among them: Congress (typically depicted as an Ali Baba's cave full of thieves, or as pigs in suits passing laws for themselves), the police and the ESMAD (drawn as rhinos or aggressive bulldogs during protests, to denounce brutality), the Church and economic power groups to a lesser extent (e.g. a cartoon showed a bishop and a banker toasting, with the phrase "*partners in your problems*", after a controversy over the economic concordat). In doing so, the cartoon fulfills a function of raising awareness: it puts complex concepts such as inequality into easily understandable images (drawing of a skinny citizen carrying three obese politicians smoking cigars on his shoulders, with the label "taxes"). Regarding the dominant conjunctural themes in the period 2021-2025 reflected in the cartoons, the following were identified: (See Figure 5)

- **Political corruption and clientelism:** A pervasive theme. Cartoons about scandals of embezzlement, rigged contracts or "jam" (bribes) abound. Matador resorts to universal symbols of corruption (bags of money, long noses, long hands stealing) and specific (citing cases known by acronyms or indirect references). The insistence on this issue suggests attempting to exert social control by repeatedly exposing corruption to public ridicule, reinforcing citizen outrage rather than apathy.
- **Abuse of power and state violence:** Especially in the wake of the 2021 protests, several cartoons denounced the repression. For example, Matador drew silhouettes of giant police officers trampling tiny demonstrators in the form of ants, with the phrase "*restora-blead order*" (parodying "re-established order," but hinting at "subtraction" of lives). He also compared censorship to turning off the light while committing abuses (cartoon of a general turning off a lighthouse). These images seek to generate rejection of abuse, functioning as a social control by making it visible and not letting it go unnoticed.
- **Populism and media manipulation:** Matador often criticizes demagoguery. Caricatures with politicians handing out crumbs to the people or hypnotizing the masses with screens show their stance against manipulation. He even mocks fake *news*: he drew certain caricatured candidates pulling rabbits out of hats (a cheap trick) called "post-truths". By ridiculing these practices, the cartoon immunizes the public in a way, making it more skeptical of empty promises.
- **Social problems: poverty, health, education:** Although the focus is political, Matador has also touched on issues such as the lack of opportunities or failures in public services, always channeling them towards the responsibility of leaders. An example from 2021: a boy asks his father "*what is dinner?*", and the father replies "*what they do in Congress at our expense.*" Here he combines the denunciation of child hunger with criticism of the privileges of politicians. This two-way street creates solidarity with the vulnerable and repudiation of the abusive – a clear purpose of social control from empathy.
- **Elections and democracy:** The electoral process itself was a topic treated with critical humor. Cartoons about vote buying (visual metaphors of voters chained by bills), about failed polls (drawing crazy thermometers), and about the blank vote (he represented it as an ignored ghost)

show satirical reflections on the democratic system. This can make citizens aware of problems in democracy and motivate more critical attitudes (e.g., distrust of clientelistic politics).

Figure 5. Dominant conjunctural themes in the period 2021-2025 in Matador's cartoons.



Source: cartoons taken from <https://www.instagram.com/matador000/>

Through these themes, Matador's caricature acts as a distorting mirror that highlights what is wrong. In terms of social control, it fulfills several functions identified by humor theorists: a function of *moral denunciation* (ridiculing the corrupt), a function of *cohesion* (uniting the audience in the shared laughter of "these politicians are a joke"), and even an escape valve function (allowing people to laugh instead of falling into despair in the face of so many problems). As Monsiváis says, caricature leads to simultaneous laughter and reflection, generating catharsis, but not necessarily revolution.

Summarizing this section, the results indicate that Matador shoots his satire mainly towards the political elite in power (regardless of the party), emphasizing corruption, injustice and abuse as vices to be corrected. His caricatures fulfill a task of "*naming and shaming*" through humor: all those who are portrayed are, in a certain way, "marked" in the eyes of public opinion as deserving of mockery or reproach. Therefore, it is verified that the political caricature, in line with Sánchez Guevara (2011) and Da Silva (2019), acts as a critical weapon and piece of the framework of citizen social control against leaders.

Caricature as a mechanism of social control and influence on public perception

The last axis integrates the findings to discuss the extent to which the Matador cartoon influences public perception and effectively acts as a mechanism of social control.

First, the cartoon reinforces and disseminates social representations about leaders and situations. By repeatedly representing Uribe as a puppeteer, Duque as a docile pig, Congress as a den of thieves, etc., Matador is feeding collective imaginations with images that are easy for public opinion to remember. These images become cognitive shortcuts for people: for example, when faced with a new news of parliamentary corruption, it is possible that the public mentally conjures up a similar cartoon that they have already seen, consolidating the idea that "everyone in Congress steals". From the theory of social representations (Moscovici), we know that representations are formed and circulated in social interaction – here the caricature provides powerful visual material for those conversations.

Consequently, the caricature acts as a mechanism of symbolic social control by fixing reputations. A politician who is constantly and publicly ridiculed is likely to suffer erosion in his serious image. People may not remember details of his administration, but they will remember "that they made fun of him for such a thing." This public ridicule is a form of informal social sanction: it does not prevent the politician from exercising his office, but it diminishes his aura of respect or credibility.

Another aspect of influence is the ability of caricature to mobilize collective emotions. In critical moments, a cartoon can serve as a catalyst for popular sentiment. For example, during the 2021 National Strike, a Matador cartoon showing "Mother Colombia" weeping in front of the graves of dead young people resonated widely. That image, without being comical but rather emotional, circulated on networks as a symbol of mourning and indignation. This reminds us that not all cartoons provoke laughter; some provoke serious reflection and even sadness, and even so, they are within the genre (black humor, tragic irony). The social function here was to consolidate empathy and social solidarity, controlling the official narratives that branded the protests as vandalism by focusing on civilian victims. Indeed, the caricature can frame an event in a counter-hegemonic way: while power tries to impose its version, the caricaturist presents another, often with a lot of success because it is simple and emotional. In this way, the caricature influences how society perceives an event, providing a critical lens that can prevail.

In terms of citizen participation, although the cartoon itself does not call for action, it can stimulate public debate. It could be seen that several cartoons went viral, generating thousands of comments, debates in forums, and even responses from those alluded to. For example, the controversy of "Duque reflects" generated not only tutelage but countless discussions in the media about freedom of expression, political susceptibility and corruption in the campaign. To that extent, the cartoon established an issue on the public agenda for days, fulfilling the function of an oversight press. The mobilization was not in the street but in the discursive sphere, but it is also part of social control: it forced society to talk about it, to position itself. However, it is pertinent to point out the limits of this influence. The caricature mainly convinces those who are already convinced or related to the critical position. This implies that political humor can polarize as much as it can unite. The social control effect is then most effective within the group that shares the underlying humorous code and values. However, even among the detractors, caricature forces them to react, and that reaction (even if it is anger or counterargument) is part of the democratic game. It is preferable to have that explicit tension than for there to be no criticism at all. In a way, caricature forces power to give explanations or to try to justify itself. This need to respond shows that the humorous message penetrated enough to require *image management*.

Conclusions

In summary, the research managed to demonstrate how humor in Matador's political cartoons effectively operates as a mechanism of social control, fulfilling several key functions: denunciation, awareness, mobilization of opinion and public scrutiny. Through a semiotic and critical analysis of the discourse applied to a sample of cartoons from the period 2021-2025, the following main conclusions were reached:

1. Matador's caricatures combine verbal and visual semiotic elements in a masterful way to critique power. A consistent repertoire of humorous strategies was identified, highlighting irony, sarcasm, visual metaphor (especially the representation of politicians as animals or symbolic objects) and hyperbole. These rhetorical resources are integrated into vignettes of apparent simplicity, but high symbolic complexity, allowing messages of political confrontation to be condensed into a brief humorous format. This ability *to say a lot with little* is the basis of their communicative effectiveness.
2. The main targets of satire are the leaders and entities associated with the recent hegemonic power, and the recurring themes reflect the country's greatest socio-political problems. Matador directs his critical humor preferentially towards figures such as Álvaro Uribe, Iván Duque and, to a lesser extent, Gustavo Petro (once in government), as well as towards institutions such as Congress, the public force and phenomena such as systemic corruption. Themes such as clientelism, police brutality, social inequality and political manipulation emerge again and again in his cartoons. By ridiculing these targets, the cartoons strip them of legitimacy and respectability in the eyes of the public, thus fulfilling a symbolic punitive role.
3. Matador's graphic humour contributes to mobilising and raising awareness among citizens, although its effect is mainly on the level of public opinion. The cartoons analyzed have influenced social and media conversations, providing interpretive frameworks and metaphors easily adopted by the population to

describe political reality (for example, associating the image of the "pig" with political corruption became part of everyday speech after the controversial cartoon of 2018). Although the direct impact on citizen behavior is difficult to measure, there is evidence of an impact on the public perception of leaders and events: many politicians have been "labeled" by humorous representations.

4. Political caricature, framed by freedom of expression, is confirmed as a legitimate and necessary form of social control in a democratic society. The study of the Matador case ratifies theoretical postulates: "*laughter is that of those who pretend to be taken seriously*" (Monsiváis, 1995, cited in Sánchez Guevara, 2011), that is, those who hold power. Colombia has a legal framework that has protected this type of expression, and the response of society indicates that its function is valued. Thus, cartoons are not mere entertainments: they are citizen instruments of opinion and control, a kind of daily "popular tribune" in the press where the powerful are called to account before the court of public ridicule. In conclusion, the hypothesis put forward is confirmed: the humor and irony in Matador's cartoons effectively expose incongruities and abuses of power, raise public awareness of political and social problems, and act as a mechanism of social control by influencing public opinion and "taking leaders down from their pedestal" before their governed.

In short, the research carried out confirms the famous premise that "*humour is a serious thing*" in society. Matador's political caricature is a clear example that a simple drawing can have a profound effect on social conversation and on the symbolic oversight of the powerful. That is why continuing to study and promote this type of critical expression contributes to more aware, participatory, and resilient societies in the face of the temptation of abuse of power.

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