

Mafalda: The Ironic Bemusement



Argentina is a fertile ground for the editorial cartoon that comments either obliquely or directly on national events and concerns. Indeed, perhaps only Mexico and Brazil can approach the creative activity of Argentine cartoonists in this regard. The contributions and the sheer humorous originality of Quino (the pseudonym of Joaquín Salvador Lavado, born in 1932) have served now for almost two decades as a Latin American standard, both in the unique drawing or strip and in the continuous narrative creation *Mafalda*. There are ten *Mafalda* books, or collections of strips, in the original Argentine edition, and they have sold extensively in the original Spanish in both the Argentine edition (1967–1974) and in the Mexican reprint (1977). The numerous translations into other languages are complemented by the commemorative Spanish sampling of the ten years of the strip, which carries an introduction by the Italian semiologist Eco (1974). It would be no exaggeration to say that the continental and international diffusion of *Mafalda* parallels that of the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar as paragons of Argentine cultural talent.

Unfortunately, like the works of Julio Cortázar, *Mafalda* was a victim of the intense, implacable sociocultural repression that dominated Argentina from the mid-1960s until late 1984, with only a brief respite in the early 1970s (Clinton 1978). Although not

proscribed, *Mafalda* paid the price of critical, liberal-style questioning. Nationalist sectors that dominated the Left in the early 1970s felt that its overt and implied demythifying commentaries on national foibles and pretensions were too "cutesy" and timid, while conservative segments tended to see the strip's perspective on everyday middle-class Argentine life as "smart-aleck" and symptomatic of the carping attitude toward national values that weakened the country as much as did radical guerrilla activity (see, for example, Hernández 1975; Steinberg 1971; "Mafalda Hopes . . ." 1976; "Quino" [1972]; Moix 1973; Rivera 1976b; Cañizal 1975; Meson 1981; Koch 1981; Horn 1976).

The result was Quino's decision in 1973 to cease drawing *Mafalda* and his subsequent departure from Argentina; he now resides in Italy. The issue in Quino's decision to silence *Mafalda* and to cut himself off from the national source of inspiration was, therefore, not the material threat of censorship (i.e., *Mafalda* remains a remarkable commercial success for both artist and publisher), but rather the chilling effect on creativity of a society where repression is not only overt but also a constant and ominous rumbling of warning directed against even the most modest manifestations of social nonconformity. It is a war of nerves that has destroyed many aspects of cultural continuity in Argentina, and Quino is undoubtedly one of the country's most notable artists to have been affected.

Mafalda is a little girl, about eight or nine years old, who lives with her solidly middle-class family in an unspecified section of Buenos Aires. She is surrounded by neighbors, forms of life, cultural artifacts that are also solidly middle class. Her playmates—five or six recurring figures in the strips—represent various types and concerns of society, all indicative of a conjunction of contemporary phenomena to be seen in the Argentine capital. Mafalda's distinguishing characteristic, the feature that makes her the projection of Quino's critical understanding of that conjunction, is her acute sensitivity, which is not shared by either playmates (who often kid her about it) or her elders (parents, teachers, other adults on the block who are frequently astonished and perplexed by her comments). In fact, a significant aspect of the strip is that the other characters rarely understand fully the meaning of what Mafalda says. Lest the reader believe that *Mafalda* is self-righteous social criticism that takes itself too seriously, it must be stressed that Quino's work is characterized by an extremely fine sense of the ridiculous. By virtue of this fundamentally humorous perspective, *Mafalda* never

engages in angry attack but rather only in ironic bemusement, a factor that enhances markedly its entertainment value and hence its broad appeal.

The cleverness of *Mafalda* is based on unquestionable "rhetorical" or "literary" stratagems of judicious inverisimilitude. To be sure, there is a documentary patina about *Mafalda*: the remarkably accurate representation of metonymic details of Argentine bourgeois daily life, Quino's superb ear for that special combination of pretentious verbosity and gritty urban turns of speech that characterize the dominant Buenos Aires sociodialect as represented in a mainline of twentieth-century narrative and theater, and the zeroing in on patterns of behavior that reveal significant underlying social and ethic values. Concomitantly, Quino is astute enough to couch these aspects in ironic terms that alleviate the painful shock of recognition they inevitably propose to induce.

Yet, *Mafalda* is singularly inverisimilar—rhetorically artificial, if you will—in its handling of a stereotypic range of sociological types, the description of which reads like headings from a social historian's treatise on Buenos Aires (e.g., Mafud 1973; Moffatt 1967). The character of Mafalda is strategically foregrounded in the sense that her perceptiveness is exaggeratedly greater than that of not only the children around her, but of the limited (if loving and considerate) adults in her world. Moreover, both her verbalizations and her interior monologs evince levels of irony that go beyond intellectual precocity and social maturity. Indeed, Mafalda has often been criticized as being simply the mouthpiece of the nonchild Quino, though it is reasonable to counter that the object of the strip is not documentary child psychology but artful verbal and visual representation. Such a representation may be "rhetorical," but only in the positive sense, in which all significant cultural artifacts are strategic foregroundings and effective distortions of a putatively neutral "reality" (a point we shall return to in Chapter 8).

The following discussions of individual strips begin by directing attention to immediately suggested meaning. Nevertheless, to the extent that Quino's works are pervaded by complex ironies (whose complexity is only compounded for the reader who is not a member of Mafalda's own Buenos Aires middle class), and to the extent that much of the strip's humor derives from playing off Mafalda's unique perceptions and the stereotypic behavior of both the adults and the other children of her environment, a discussion based on some rather loosely deployed organizational principles of text production is useful for the purpose of more precisely gauging the texture of

Quino's works (see Masotta 1968).

The first example concerns specifically Mafalda's acute self-awareness, which is not simply the recognition of the shortcomings of her society, but a self-identification that, as with the existentialists, is a fundamental article of faith of a Latin American "raised consciousness." The lack of such a self-awareness is correspondingly a personal and social shortcoming (see Plate 5.1). Mafalda's friend Susanita is reading in a newspaper about typical world crises. To Mafalda's consternation, Susanita's reaction is "typically" Argentine: First, her discarding the paper is a flight from what is believed to be an escapable reality, and, second, her words of relief reflect the self-delusion that somehow Argentina, by virtue of its location at the "end of the world," is free from the tensions and failures that beleaguer the rest of the world. Susanita's sentiments are an Argentine version of the "I'm all right, Jack" syndrome, undoubtedly the holdover of nineteenth-century idealist New World myths about the corrupt Old World. Susana or Susanita, the epitome of tragicomic bourgeois commonplaces, is Mafalda's natural foil. So diametrically opposed are their perceptions of the national reality and their respective styles for verbalizing those perceptions—Susana is all cliché-ridden bombast, Mafalda is studiously ironic—that the shock of self-recognition for many a reader must inevitably derive from Quino's mercilessly documentary representations of a spectrum of prevailing attitudes and expressive registers in Susana, and the unrelenting deflation to which Mafalda often subjects them. As a consequence, Mafalda is berated throughout the strips for concerning herself with world issues that somehow are thought to be of no concern to her compatriots.

In another strip (see Plate 5.2), Mafalda senses the contrast between her comfortable, untroubled middle-class existence and a surrounding reality to which dissenters in Argentine society have been only partially successful in calling attention (see, for example, Verbitsky 1957). In addition to the ingeniousness of juxtaposing television programs and the national reality, the strip (which graphically is the framing of a frame of reference, the frames of the strip encompassing the train-window-TV-screen picture of national reality) depends on the recognition of how bad national reality is if, by comparison with it, television is good (since Argentines with discerning taste pride themselves on recognizing how bad national television is, with its dubbed versions of U.S. programs and its poor local imitations; see Muraro 1974).

Argentina, tied to the international market of more imposing

capitalist countries, has, like many a smaller and less economically successful Third World society, had a difficult time maintaining its national mystique of identity. This is evident in changing life styles and the effect of foreign products on an extensive consumer society. Of course, *Mafalda* is unusually sensitive to this circumstance. It should be noted that Quino's perspective is not simply a boorish anti-Americanism; in one strip the humor is based on Mafalda's exclamation of relief when she discovers that, unlike numerous objects around her, her navel does not bear the inscription, "Made in Japan."

A preoccupation with the relationship between national or "autochthonous" values and foreign models in all areas of high and low culture is an abiding concern in Latin America. Argentina is no exception, and, indeed, it is arguable that some of the most vociferous debates on the subject have occurred in the press of that country. Unlike Mexico, Argentina has yet to define, if only on the level of sociopolitical and sociocultural myth, an all-embracing mystique of national identity. The result has been a justifiably proud Argentine tradition, but little broad-based consensus as to what, exactly, Argentine culture includes, or should include, beyond its intense brilliance and enormous vitality.

Nowhere is this issue more concentrated than in controversies concerning language. Argentine Spanish is sociolinguistically unique, and varieties of Buenos Aires Spanish bear unmistakable, aggressive stamps of identity. Buenos Aires Spanish manifests an array of foreign elements that run the gamut from fully assimilated items from the immigrant languages (basically Italian dialects and Yiddish) to the most recent imports from the language of TV (mostly English) and the newest commercial and technological products (English, French, and some Italian), with a traditional stock of English and French words and phrases relating to elite social rituals and phenomena (e.g., the worlds of afternoon tea, racing, country clubs, sports clothes, high fashion, and so on). Since all language belongs to clearly definable sociolinguistic contexts, it serves as a particularly prominent metonym for social values and patterns of cultural behavior. The pressure of foreign elements is tremendous, as it is on any urban setting, particularly when the language is not an internationally prestigious one.

The Spanish of Argentina has always been subject to "outside" influences, as is any language by the very nature of linguistic systems. This is the source of humor in the exchange concerning interjections uttered in the throes of violent, lawless death (Plate

5.3). The humor of this strip does not arise only from the interplay between "la pucha," which is not just Spanish but typically Argentine, and "aaauugh," which only seems translanguistically onomatopoeic to a native speaker of English because it is a convention of his own language. It also derives from the clash between Felipe's naive anger (he is the ingenue, the "noble innocent," of the strip's cast of sociocultural stereotypes) and Mafalda's precocious figure of speech, "foreignizing deaths," which involves a hypallage or rhetorically misplaced modifier.

There are also several episodes that deal with ad language. Not only are advertisements seen, with the typical countercultural indignation of our age, as hypocritical, but their condescending exploitativeness is compounded by the use of foreign words; another aspect of this sociolinguistic issue is that such words are often incorrectly used, much as land developers in the U.S. Southwest rarely use correctly the Spanish words and phrases with which they attempt to glamorize their subdivisions and streets. The clash between Spanish and English is again highlighted by the foregrounded cleverness of Mafalda's rhetorical question (Plate 5.4). In yet another strip, Felipe meets Mafalda on the street and confesses that he has been unable to complete his homework, a theme on national independence. He says he decided to go for a walk in the hope of being inspired, but it did not work. Mafalda's only reply is to gaze goggle-eyed at the jungle of billboards touting foreign products in foreign languages that dwarf the streets. The implied rhetorical question is clear: In a foreign-dominated consumer society, "national independence" is a sham.

The core of Quino's strips, however, does not concern particularized barbs directed against social inequities, commercial and sociolinguistic foreign exploitation, or national loss of identity. Indeed, were the *Mafalda* strips based on heavy-handed social criticism, they would have as specialized a range of audiences as does, say, *Doomesbury*. In fact, *Mafalda's* enormous popularity in Argentina, Latin America, and internationally derives not from self-righteous exposés of the enormous problems that beset Argentina as one reasonable microcosm of Latin America, but from a typical, universal middle-class attitude that is especially prevalent in Argentina: We may be a screwed-up country, but it's the best, and all, we've got. This form of benevolent jingoistic exasperation with national foibles and weaknesses results in a blend of somewhat condescending irony (the artist and his audience are, because they see the problems, not afflicted by them) and Menippean satire (the

shock of self-recognition induced by the artistic statement is therapeutically valid).

To the extent that the concern with national idiosyncrasies is central to Quino's strip, the issues dealt with constitute a broad spectrum of potentially humorous materials. Since the Argentines are seen as essentially idiosyncratic by most other Latin Americans, this emphasis on Quino's part has only contributed to, rather than hampered, his wide popularity. A random sampling of these issues reveals an emphasis on class consciousness, national self-images, patterns of social intercourse, social myths and hypocrisies, the relationship between cherished myths and perceived realities, socioeconomic aspirations, and aspects of family life that reveal the duplicity and hypocrisy of society at large. Because of its generally high standard of living for Latin America and an upper-class European influence, Argentina is notably "professionalized," and, as elsewhere in Latin America, the professions are held in exceptionally high esteem; so high, in fact, as to become a national shortcoming, as Plate 5.5 sardonically points out. The middle-class respectability of Mafalda's father's routine office job is overshadowed by the pompous superiority of the professional.

On the other hand, the next strip deals with more a tic of social intercourse than a serious sociopolitical defect (Plate 5.6). Any supposed national problem of buck-passing is reduced here to a tribal ritual to be learned by the uninitiated from the elders: Mafalda, who "suckles" as though at her mother's breast, versus the mother and the harried shoemaker. Sex roles under military tyranny have not been a particularly urgent topic of sociological and humanistic studies in Argentina. Although there have been many novels on the issue (see, e.g., Puig 1967, 1976; Medina 1976, 1977; Roffé 1976), the greater integration of women in the professions perhaps has made what is essentially an upper-middle- and middle-class preoccupation less a burning issue in Argentina than in the United States. Relative to standards of a raised consciousness, machismo and sexist male dominance are to be found in abundance in Argentina. There is no more dramatic Argentine cultural artifact to reflect this than the tango, both in the lyrics, in which the voice of the wronged Adam prevails, and in the dance, which is a ballet of male sexual assertion. Sex roles have yet to become, outside high cultural forms like novels that decry the *basurear*—the "trashing"—of women, a prominent issue of current social affairs. Nevertheless, several *Mafalda* strips suggest serious perspectives on the matter of sex roles. Once again, the fundamental exaggeration

of Mafalda's foregrounded awareness and her ironic stance toward the sociocultural stereotypes of the children and adults of her world are the vehicles of commentary. In one strip (Plate 5.7), it is obvious that Susanita has assimilated uncritically a wide variety of commonplaces that are self-contradictory in the sense that they represent irreconcilable social goals for women. At issue is Susanita's opportunistic feminism (the full implications of which we can assume she does not grasp) and the bourgeois values that underlie it, versus Mafalda's distinction between legitimate women's rights and much sought-after class and social advantages that are used to identify a woman's relative position in a consumer-oriented society.

But in the final analysis, one of Quino's most ingenious contributions lies in the meticulous identification of the extensive array of small-beer social myths by which a complex urban society such as Buenos Aires defines and copes with its daily existence. In one of the few strips in which Mafalda's rhetorically heightened irony and perceptiveness are not the vehicles of commentary, her father has a shock of recognition as to both the falseness of the images of life created by exploitative advertising and the threatening world that it undertakes to conceal from us in directing our attention toward unattainable commercial ideals (Plate 5.8). Just as European immigrants dreamed of getting ahead in Argentina (the magic phrase was *hacer América*, "to make it in America"), many Argentines have dreamed of making it in the United States. Manolo, the son of Spanish immigrants who dreams of using his father's humble corner grocery store as the base for a new Rockefeller empire, brags about his brother's easy conquest of the United States (Plate 5.9).

Finally (Plate 5.10), Mafalda and Felipe engage in a typical Argentine social discourse: the problem of making ends meet. What is ironic is that these are no "hard times" down-and-outers worrying about a roof over their heads, or the impoverished widow washerwoman frantic about her inability to buy medicines for her sickly child. They are children of solid, comfortable bureaucrats and office workers who own an apartment, a car, a TV, and who go to the movies every week and the beach every summer. Yet they sound like desperate victims of a deep economic depression. Of course, they are, and the Argentine economic situation was seen by many as a grim national joke in the 1960s and the 1970s. The humor arises, of course, not only from the children's parroting of their parents' daily litany of complaints, but from the contradictions of a society no longer able to maintain with ease a very enviable

standard of living.

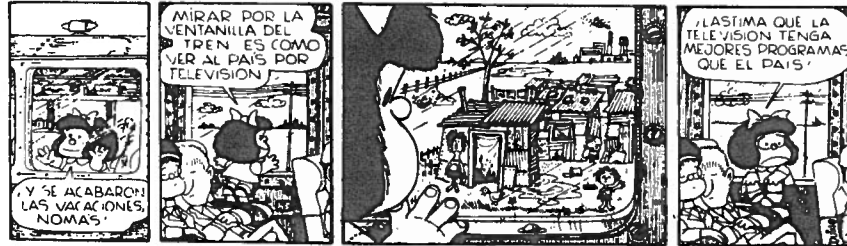
In a certain sense, Mafalda's exasperation with Felipe's "survey of the middle class" must have echoed the feelings of many Argentines who recognized themselves and their concerns and pretensions in all too many of Quino's strips. That is one reason why *Mafalda* is at present a cultural artifact of a past, more relaxed Argentine society than the one prevailing today: Urbane humor is risky in a country still recovering from almost two straight decades of violence and chaos with little prospect of maintaining an open society in the foreseeable future. Quino's work is now devoted almost exclusively to highly intellectual and more subtle one-time strips that, despite their critical acclaim, stand little chance of the mass audience *Mafalda* enjoyed. But if *Mafalda* is for the time being history, it is a body of cultural texts well worth preserving. As Mafalda herself said when she tossed aside the children's book *El maravilloso mundo que nos rodea* to go play outside in the real world: "Pero ¡sea! Vamos a enfrascarnos con la realidad."

PLATE 5.1



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PLATE 5.2



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PLATE 5.3



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