

Seriously (Un)funny: Humor in Selected Political Illustrations During the 2022 Philippine National Elections as Portrait of Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how political humor in Filipino illustrations served as a tool for dissent during the 2022 Philippine National Elections. It examines 25 works by artists Tarantadong Kalbo, Cartoonist Zach, Political Idiot, and Isang Tasang Kape, analyzing how techniques such as juxtaposition, irony, parody, and symbolism critique systemic inequalities, disinformation, and the resurgence of authoritarian narratives. Using multimodal social semiotics, the study reveals how these illustrations recontextualize political rhetoric and historical symbols by transforming familiar statements and cultural references into satirical critiques exposing societal contradictions. For example, political slogans paired with ironic imagery highlight hypocrisy, while historical allusions, such as references to the Marcos dictatorship, warn against political amnesia and authoritarian resurgence. Situated within the digital landscape, where these illustrations circulated widely on social media, the analysis highlights how humor fostered participatory engagement and mobilized younger voters to reflect on power and justice. The findings demonstrate humor's pivotal role in reshaping democratic discourse and challenging entrenched power structures in the Philippines.

Keywords: Filipino humor, political illustrations, multimodality, social semiotics, 2022 Philippine elections

Introduction

When Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines's 16th president, was still on the campaign trail in 2016, political analysts initially thought his career would be over when he joked about raping an Australian missionary. "I was angry because she was raped, that's one thing. But she was so beautiful, the mayor should have been first," Duterte said (Ranada). This was only one of the many jokes and quips of Duterte before and during his office—both in informal and formal settings—such as media conferences, speeches, and the annual nation's address. His defense, after drawing flak for his rather controversial jokes from various activists, politicians, and international organizations, was, "If it is too ridiculous, it must be a joke" (Placido).

Pertierra, Curato, and Ong posited that Duterte, through his use of humor and performance of "authenticity," was built upon the long line of actors-turned-politicians who co-opted elements of melodrama in their public spectacle and posturings (8). Hedman and McEnteer argue that elections in the Philippines possess a carnivalesque character in which political aspirants are expected to take the stage, woo the audience through song, dance, and a couple of jokes in a speech, a dynamic that renders humor a vehicle for getting closer to the public, even if—in jest—you curse the Pope, call God stupid, and make rape jokes, among others (qtd. in Curato and Ong 5).

For the late Miriam Defensor-Santiago, a former Philippine Senator and a presidential aspirant in the 2016 elections along with Duterte, a joke was "much better than a punch line because it illumines the situation, gives you a worldview of the situation taking place in our country" (Burgonio, par. 20). Defensor-Santiago, dubbed the Iron Lady of Asia, was, aside from being a senior legislative politician, known for her witty pick-up lines, jokes, and comebacks, especially during public speeches. She published a book titled *Stupid is Forever*, a compilation of her pick-up lines and sold more than 110,000 copies since its launch in December 2014. During the press conference at her book launch, Defensor-Santiago said, "[S]a halip na mag-lecture nang mag-lecture o mag-orate sa taumbayan, kung minsan mas madali pa kung idaan na lang natin sa pagbiro dahil diyan nagkakaintindihan tayo, lalo na tayong mga Pilipino" ("Instead of lecturing or orating to the public,

sometimes it is easier if we use humor because it makes it easier to understand, especially for us Filipinos”; our trans.; par. 20).

Humor and Comic Strategies

Humor is often defined as a “performative pragmatic accomplishment” (Beeman 103) that involves a range of communication skills, such as language, verbal and non-verbal expressions, the presentation of visual imagery, and the management of situations. Beeman argues that humor is a setup of surprise or a series of surprises for the audience, emphasizing that it is a communicative act requiring the equal cooperation and participation of both the audience and the actor (103). This collaborative aspect makes humor a distinct and interactive form of communication.

In early philosophical thought, Plato critiqued humor in his writings, contending that laughter, as an emotion, often overrides rational self-control and should therefore be carefully regulated by the state (Morreall par. 3). Plato’s skepticism about humor reflected broader concerns about its potential to disrupt societal order, such as the way ridicule could foster arrogance among those laughing and shame among those being mocked, thereby destabilizing civic harmony and undermining moral education.

On the other hand, modern theorists such as Beeman and Lewis have offered more positive views. Lewis, for instance, asserts that comedy is inherently subjective, and it is the responsibility of the audience to understand why material may or may not be effective (par. 5). However, he also identifies certain literary devices that enhance the comic impact of content, such as timing, misdirection, and the strategic buildup of tension before a punchline. According to Lewis, laughter often arises from a comic element of surprise, where the punchline takes an unexpected twist that has no serious consequences (par. 7). This surprise, he argues, relies on a structured technique that includes conciseness, misdirection, and delaying the punchline until the last possible moment.

Humor has long been recognized as an effective device for conveying messages, particularly those addressing controversial, sensitive, or taboo topics. It breaks down communication barriers by making difficult subjects more palatable while also encouraging laughter (Tabares, par. 2). As Reese argues, humor provides

a constructive way to cope with stressors, even helping individuals confront existential concerns such as the thought of their own mortality (34).

Defining Filipino Humor

There have been numerous studies when it comes to humor in the Philippines—from the history of the language of humor and its role in nation-building to its implications and defining features as well as the Filipino’s employment and consumption of more recent humorous devices, like memes on the internet.

Maria Rhodora Ancheta examined classic cultural texts to define the nation of the Philippines via its humor—the national virtues, beliefs, traditions, and values embedded in its comic strategies and themes, among others (320). In particular, Ancheta examined Juan Matapang Cruz’s “Hindi Aco Patay,” Severino Reyes’s “Walang Sugat,” and Aurelio Tolentino’s “Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas”—zarzuelas that are considered propagandistic, nationalist plays heavily anchored in Filipino sensibilities and comedic strategies to become successful. To wit:

The nationalist agenda that underpinned the perspective of these plays as “seditious” in early twentieth-century colonial Philippines and that lies in the ideals of freedom from American rule, is enflashed in these plays by strategies that rely on the comic and the acknowledgment of humorous tactics. More than just being comic relief, or being relied upon as dramaturgic strategies, these comic openings and instances re-present the quirks, traditions, eccentricities of Philippine society, re-situate and consciously utilize carnivalesque aspects of humor in order to reconfigure a unique Filipino cultural psyche. (Ancheta 321)

In support, Balce used the term “postcolonial satire” in describing the way the short fictions of Meera Nair’s *Video* and Gina Apostol’s *Cunanan’s Wake* negotiate and re-evaluate their respective stories’ narratives in a postcolonial setting (49). Balce’s reading of the humorous narratives relating to the diasporic experiences of Asians is not through tragedy or the language of grievance but through satirical humor. Moreover, Balce posits that postcolonial satire serves as a method to confront and reinterpret historical trauma not through the portrayal of suffering alone but through the lens of humor embedded in everyday experiences. This approach allows for a re-examination of colonial impacts within common narratives (Balce 53).

Aside from the role of humor in the nationalist agenda and the postcolonial historicization of literature, various emerging and contemporary devices have now become available and widespread among the public, such as short-form video comedy sketches and viral memes. In a study by De Leon and Ballesteros-Lintao on the rise of meme culture and the use of memes as political tools, the researchers found that the user-generated content echo messages that tap into a sense of belongingness and solidarity among the people (2). Moreover, these memes, though largely perceived as harmless and entertaining pieces of popular culture, are quite effective passageways of societal discontent that, in turn, engage other people in political discourse, particularly on issues of governance, corruption, and democratic participation (12).

This is consistent with the findings of Alma Cita Calimbo, whose works examined, via semiotic analysis, selected political internet memes. Calimbo found that these media artifacts have been effective in “unmasking” the political-ideological constructs that are otherwise deemed normal or part of everyday life (18). In the context of Mindanao, the study revealed that while the island and its people are geographically separated from the rest of the Philippines, the humorous device of memes was able not only to convey and reflect specific socio-political concerns (e.g., such as perceptions of marginalization, local governance issues, and interregional identity) but also articulate shared values, religious beliefs, and linguistic particularities (17).

Other multidisciplinary areas that covered the role of media and communication and humor studies include student learning experiences in classrooms and gender studies, among others. John Paul Luaña and Lizamarie Campoamor-Olegario asserted in their study that appropriate types of humor aid in the overall positive learning processes and experiences of Filipino students (94). Their research also created a typology of humor used in Philippine classrooms; these are categorized into appropriate, inappropriate, and context-dependent humor. There is also Jaze De la Cruz, who probed the ways in which Vice Ganda and *It's Showtime* and *Gandang Gabi Vice*, her television shows, champion the Filipino bakla—raising their causes, struggles, and issue such as discrimination, visibility, and acceptance in mainstream media—using varied humorous techniques that operate in reconstituting, re-evaluating, and re-considering beliefs. Ancheta also analyzed the title of “King of

Philippine Comedy” given to Dolphy by tracing his filmography and his relationship with the function of cinematic humor (3).

Filipino humor, as the reviewed studies above establish, is as complex, deeply nuanced, and simultaneously mundane and ordinary as humor typically is. The irony is that there seems to be a dearth of local empirical scholarship on the language of humor as well as its comedic techniques and devices that could help provide a deeper understanding of the Filipino psyche, its relationship to the Philippine socio-political landscape, and its manifestations in digital media. . Thus, it can be said that “Filipinos take humor seriously and take serious matters humorously.”

Filipino Humor and/in Philippine Politics

The historical trajectory of Filipino political humor can be traced back to the Spanish colonial period where, for instance, Philippine revolutionaries and intellectuals, such as Jose Rizal and Marcelo del Pilar, employed various comedic techniques and humorous antics through their literary works that became a “weapon against those who exploit and oppress,” according to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (qtd. in Arao 149). This was when the traditions of *Comedia* and *Moro-moro* also served as early instances of satirical commentary on social issues. These theatrical forms provided a platform for the expression of political dissent through humor, laying the groundwork for the integration of comedic elements into the discourse of resistance against oppressive regimes. Subsequently, the Martial Law era witnessed the emergence of political jokes as a form of opposition. Crispin Maslog’s seminal work, *Never Again! To Martial Law: A Sequel to Martial Law Jokes atbp* (2019), elucidates the critical role played by humor (i.e., jokes), particularly emanating from the middle class, in challenging the authoritarian rule of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Sr.

The culmination of the 2nd EDSA People Power Revolution marked the popularity of “Anti-Erap Jokes” during Joseph “Erap” Estrada’s presidency. Disseminated predominantly through Short Message Service (SMS), these jokes evolved into a collective expression of discontent, constituting a potent form of public commentary on the administration (Carpio 10). For instance, many jokes ridiculed Estrada’s perceived lack of intelligence; there were quips about his mispronouncing English words or confusing basic facts, while others highlighted alleged corruption by

comparing him to thieves or tricksters. Notably sharp and critical, the humor embedded in these jokes became instrumental in mobilizing public sentiment against the perceived inadequacies and controversies surrounding the Estrada government.

Filipino political humor also finds pronounced expression in protests and mobilizations (Esteron 85). State of the Nation Addresses (SONAs) served as a platform for left-wing groups, exemplified by Ugat-Lahi, to craft larger-than-life caricatures or effigies portraying Philippine presidents. The ceremonial burning of these effigies during protests articulated dissent against prevailing government policies. Additionally, the Grand Mañanita protest celebration underscored the subversive nature of Filipino humor, as activist groups ingeniously staged protests during health lockdowns, strategically responding to perceived violations by figures such as then-Philippine National Police Chief Debold Sinas (Sales 145).

Within the context of protests, Filipino humor manifests through witticism displayed on placards and chanted slogans. Protesters adeptly employ references from popular culture, historical events, and current affairs to create a nuanced blend of satire and dissent. This dynamic interplay of humor in rallies reflects the strategic use of wit as a powerful tool for conveying political messages while maintaining the engagement of the audience.

The contemporary landscape of Filipino politics witnesses the persistent use of humor as a political tool, notably evidenced in the 2022 Philippine national elections. Candidates such as Leni Robredo, Isko Moreno, and Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. strategically incorporated humor into their campaign strategies, thereby shaping the narrative surrounding their respective candidacies. Particularly noteworthy is Isko Moreno’s utilization of the “two joints” sign, a humorous yet impactful element in his political communication that resonates with the younger demographic. Understanding the nuanced role of humor in these electoral contexts is imperative for comprehending the evolving dynamics of contemporary Philippine politics.

Against this rich historical and contemporary backdrop of Filipino political humor, the present study assumes paramount significance. By focusing on the political illustrations disseminated during the 2022 Philippine national elections, this

research aims to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the evolving role of humor in shaping contemporary political narratives. By analyzing the works of prominent Filipino political graphic artists, the study seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of humor as a multifaceted and dynamic force in the socio-political fabric of the Philippines. This examination is integral to deciphering how humor influences public discourse on governance, electoral accountability, and civic participation, challenges established power structures, and contributes to the ongoing narrative of political engagement in the country. In doing so, the study endeavors to make a substantial contribution to discussions on political humor in the Philippine context.

In particular, this study will address the main question: how do political illustrations become an operating textual or visual and cultural device that reconstitute or resist accepted beliefs or the status quo in Philippine society?

In light of the recognized gaps in existing scholarship on humor in the Philippines and the evolving landscape of humor's interaction with politics, the following questions will likewise be addressed to highlight specific challenges and inquiries that drive this research:

1. What themes in Filipino humor emerge in political illustrations that reflect cultural values and socio-political concerns in the Philippines?
2. What specific comic strategies (e.g., irony, parody, caricature) are employed, and how do these resonate with Filipino audiences' perceptions of humor and political critique?
3. How do political illustrations use humor to challenge or reinforce socio-political norms and power structures in the context of the 2022 Philippine elections?

Multimodal Social Semiotics as Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Multimodal social semiotics is a theoretical framework that focuses on the ways in which people use language, gestures, facial expressions, and other semiotic

resources to communicate meaning (Simpson and Archer 5). This theory, developed by Gunther Kress, is based on the idea that meaning is made through the interaction of different modes of communication. Tracing its history and origins to Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) wherein language in and of itself is formed and shaped by social processes primarily based on people's needs and functions. Using this lens, Carey Jewitt and Berit Henriksen provided a framework with which Kress's social semiotics multimodality can be used in analyzing contemporary social communication tools, such as political illustrations. It includes (1) the semiotic resource, (2) provenance, (3) modal affordance, (4) motivated sign, (5) the sign maker's interest, and (6) design (Jewitt and Henriksen 2). These constitute a social semiotic analysis with a multimodal scope.

The *semiotic resource* is any material or action that can be used to create meaning. This includes elements such as words, images, sounds, gestures, and even bodily movements. Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, which is the range of meanings that they can be used to make and communicate within a particular cultural or social context. For example, a caricature of a well-known politician such as Bongbong Marcos could be shown with an exaggerated, gleaming crown and imperial robes reminiscent of royalty. This visual exaggeration uses the politician's historical association with wealth and power to highlight his privileged status. This meaning potential is based on the resource's past use in a given society. Moreover, *provenance* refers to the origin or history of a semiotic resource which includes the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the resource has been used. Provenance is important because it can help explain how a resource comes to have a particular meaning potential.

Modal affordance refers to the range of possible meanings that can be made with a particular semiotic resource. This is influenced by the resource's material properties as well as its social and cultural context. To quote Jewitt and Henriksen: "affordance of a mode is shaped by what it offers materially, how it has been repeatedly used to mean, in part by its provenance, and the social conventions that inform its use in context" (148). For example, the modal affordance of an image of a heart is different from the modal affordance of a word like "love."

A *motivated sign*, to continue the components of a social semiotics multimodality theory, is a sign in which the relationship between the form (signifier) and the

meaning (signified) is not arbitrary. This means there is some kind of natural or logical connection between the two. For example, the sound of the word “splash” is motivated by the meaning of the word, as it is similar to the sound of water splashing.

Meanwhile, the *sign-maker's interest* is the motivation behind the creation of a sign. This can be anything from a desire to communicate a message to a desire to express oneself creatively. The sign-maker's interest is important because it can help to explain the choices that are made in the design of a sign.

Finally, *design* refers to the way in which semiotic resources are arranged and combined to create meaning. This includes the use of visual elements, such as layout, color, and typography, as well as the use of audio elements, such as music and sound effects. Design is important because it can influence how a sign is interpreted. Essentially, for Kress (2010), design “focuses on an individual's realization of their interest in their own world” (6).

These concepts are all interconnected and are used to analyze a wide range of multimodal texts, such as advertisements, websites, and social media posts. By understanding the way in which people use semiotic resources, we can gain deeper insight into how meaning is created and communicated in our society. This study deploying a social semiotics multimodality reading, analyzes political illustrations—both their textual and visual content—and situates them in the Filipino sociopolitical context in which they are made.

It is necessary to anchor multimodality in social semiotics, which foregrounds representations to be “produced by and contribute to cultural settings, that is, to get at their social function and meaning potential in the communicative landscape” (Jewitt and Henriksen 146). In applying this, we can draw meaning from power, social relations, and significations, among others.

With the multimodal nature of the subject of this study, social semiotics multimodality is a powerful method for analyzing the ways in which meaning is made in a variety of contexts, including advertising, education, and the media. This can then be used to accomplish the following: identify the different modes that are used to communicate meaning, as well as the ways in which these modes are

combined to create a particular effect; explore patterns and themes present in illustrations by considering the combination and interplay of different modes; and go beyond purely textual analysis and consider the visual and gestural elements that contribute to the comedic and satirical effects. By applying this framework, one can identify the specific modes employed in the illustrations and examine how they are combined to create a particular humorous or satirical effect, especially within Filipino sensibilities.

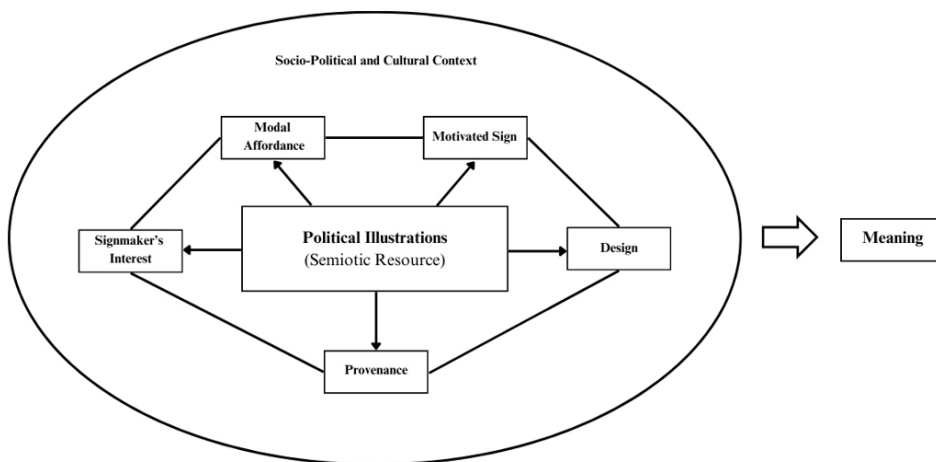


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for political illustrations during the election period, as depicted in Figure 1, proposes a social semiotic multimodality framework for comprehending how these illustrations function as a means of communication. This framework is anchored in the concept that meaning is constructed through the interaction of six key elements: namely, the political illustrations being examined (or the semiotic resource); the design; the provenance; the sign maker's interest or intention in making the illustration; the modal affordance; and the motivated sign. All of these are interconnected with each other and effectuate a significance in meaning-making. What is significant as well in this conceptual framework is that it is situated within a socio-political and cultural context from which these illustrations were produced, created, and distributed. Only then one can proceed with meaning-making.

The framework further considers the intervening structural factors that can influence the meaning-making process, encompassing the use of humor in everyday life and political discourse. Moreover, the actions and interactional strategies employed by the illustrators—utilizing various techniques such as, but not limited to, caricature, symbolism, and exaggeration to bring their illustrations to life—play a pivotal role in mediating political communication between illustrators and the public. Thus, how these illustrations serve as a communication medium, potentially influencing political perspectives, will be better understood.

Methodology

Research Approach and Paradigm

The study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. The rationale for selecting a qualitative approach is grounded in a recognition of the need for an organic, natural relationship with the data. This approach allows for the exploration of subjective experiences, fostering a profound understanding of the nuances embedded in the satirical content. To do this, there must be space for and precedence to subjectivity and reflexivity in the study's method. The approach, not being tied to a specific theoretical framework; emphasizes flexibility in accommodating various epistemological and ontological perspectives. This aligns with the objectives of the study, providing the necessary methodological latitude to engage with the nuanced, multifaceted nature of humor in political illustrations.

The interpretivist paradigm, rather than approaching the illustrations as mere artifacts or visual representations, recognizes that they are complex forms of communication shaped by the intentions of the artists, the perceptions of the viewers, and the socio-political environment. Furthermore, this acknowledges the researchers' role in the research process and recognizes that their subjectivity and possible biases may influence the findings. This self-awareness helps to enhance the rigor and transparency of the study.

Sketching the Method of Humor in Internet Memes and Illustrations

The study focuses on the twenty-five (25) illustrative works of four (4) Filipino graphic artists and political cartoonists, namely, Kevin Kalbo, more commonly known as Tarantadong Kalbo, Cartoonist Zach, Political Idiot, and Isang Tasang

Kape. To make the study more focused, the researchers narrowed down the criteria for choosing cartoonists to personalities who have created notable media content based on high social media performance and engagement (i.e., public shares, likes, and comments).

The graphic illustrations were selected from the works of the above-mentioned artists during the 2022 Philippine national elections period, which lasted from October 2021 to May 2022. While this study includes the artists' captions in the analysis, comments and shared posts made by the audience regarding the illustrations are not covered.

Digital platforms, especially social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, play a critical role in amplifying and shaping the humor in political cartoons. These platforms offer artists a direct way to reach wide and diverse audiences, bypassing traditional media outlets. Through social media, political cartoons and memes are not only quickly disseminated but also subject to immediate public response, including likes, shares, and comments. This interactive environment allows humor to spread rapidly, creating a space for collective engagement and discussion around political issues.

Moreover, social media encourages participatory humor by enabling audiences to create, adapt, and share derivative content based on the original cartoons. This digital virality and remix culture foster a sense of community, where users collectively interpret and extend the humor's critique. In the context of the 2022 elections, social media amplified the power of political humor as a tool of resistance, making it accessible to younger, digitally savvy voters and enhancing its role in shaping public opinion and discourse.

Filipino Humor as a Discursive Practice

The scrutiny of internet illustrations as a discursive practice exposed a deliberate incorporation of two primary subversive discourses—satire and political parody—strategically employed to validate boycott actions while simultaneously dialectically undermining the legitimacy of the targeted political figures and the broader hegemonic political narratives to which their influence is tied. This subversive use of humor drew profound inspiration from the rich tradition of Filipino humor, an

integral facet of popular culture and politics characterized by humor’s adaptability and capacity for nuanced critique.

In the context of political figures Leni Robredo and Bongbong Marcos, Jr., Internet memes and illustrations operated as potent vehicles for the expression of subversion in Filipino discursive practices of humor. These political illustrations and memes weaved a narrative of political satire. For instance, consider a meme featuring Bongbong Marcos (see Fig. 2) which recontextualized the political rhetoric of “moving on” from the legacy of the Marcos dictatorship—a discourse often used to silence critical memory and evade accountability. The text-illustration, as shown in Figure 2, employs humor to parody Bongbong Marcos, Jr.’s call to “move one,” transforming it into a satirical commentary that challenges the prevailing narrative of historical revisionism and political impunity. Such illustration is even made stronger with the caption, quoting Luis V. Teodoro: “When crooked politicians say they want the country to ‘move on,’ what they mean is they want everyone to forget their crime.”



Fig. 2. Isang Tasang Kape illustration 1. Posted on October 15, 2021.

This reframing of political discourse in the illustrations show the nuanced and context-specific nature of Filipino humor, deeply rooted in the country's political landscape. In Filipino popular culture, humor often serves as a vehicle for dissent and critique, enabling citizens to navigate and question power dynamics. The strategic use of political figures in these illustrations not only highlights the adaptability of Filipino humor but also underscores its role as a potent tool for engaging with and challenging prevailing political ideologies.

Filipino Humor as a Subversive Genre

The examination of the memes within the framework of discourse practice, referring to the ways discourse both reflects and constructs social realities, reveals a shared subversive characteristic operating on the genre level, particularly drawing upon the genre of political humor. Humor, as a multifaceted cognitive and social phenomenon, resists simple definitions but is commonly acknowledged to be marked by incongruity. Jeroen Vandaele posited incongruity as conceivably “the only or the main generalizable feature of humor” (223). Additionally, Anjali Bal et al. delineated humor manifestations as being either manifest, latent, or plausible, with its impact contingent on the existence of opposition between contrasting “scripts”—worldviews, representations, and ideas about the object of humor that contravene expectations and norms (229). Furthermore, the effectiveness of humor is contingent upon the presence of a social environment wherein both the humorist and the audience perceive safety (Tsakona and Popa 4).

In its collective manifestation, humor serves a robust social function, functioning as a “social corrective” that endeavors to unveil inconsistencies and combat breaches of norms agreed upon by in-group members. More broadly, humor can function as a form of social control, shaping the dynamic between in-groups and out-groups. By exposing or mocking behaviors and ideologies that deviate from shared norms, humor simultaneously strengthens group cohesion and draws symbolic boundaries that exclude outsiders (Tsakona and Popa 4). This description reflects humor's general social role as documented in humor studies, while in the Philippine context, this social corrective function is often tied to political dissent and everyday resistance.

In the scrutinized illustrations, the instantiation of (political) humor and the inherent incongruity often found expression through the mechanism of “recontextualization” (Milner 33). The process of recontextualization involves the strategic relocation of elements within a new context, thereby imbuing them with altered meanings or implications. This analytical lens shed light on the nuanced ways in which political humor operates in political illustrations, offering insight into the deliberate employment of incongruity and recontextualization as pivotal elements in the subversive discourse of the memes during the 2022 Philippine national elections.

The construction of meaning in Internet memes does not rely merely on visual or verbal components; rather, it hinges upon the intricate interplay among multiple modes or semiotic elements inherent in meme production (Johann & Bülow 1720). In the Philippines, this interplay is further enriched by a vibrant visual culture informed by political cartooning, street murals, protest art, and local komiks traditions. For example, many political memes visually echo the graphic satire of protest placards and editorial cartoons, using familiar tropes such as caricature, bold lettering, and visual exaggeration to enhance satirical impact. Leveraging Kress and van Leeuwen’s “visual grammar” units—specifically, information value, salience, and framing—alongside McLoud’s taxonomy, the examination of this interplay between visual and verbal facets in memes serves as a crucial lens through which to analyze the manifestation of incongruity and humor. This consideration of the Philippines’s rich graphic illustration culture underscores the unique and culturally embedded dimensions of meaning-making in the selected political illustrations during the election period, illuminating the diverse ways in which these multimodal elements contribute to the nuanced discourse surrounding political humor and incongruity.

The visual mode is dominant in the majority of the examples as indicated by the size of illustration and the centrality of their positions in the frames. However, salience of visuals does not mean that they are necessarily the most important. Information value analysis reveals that verbal components frequently carry the core incongruity, especially in memes and cartoons where text delivers the satirical punch line, frames the reinterpretation of political slogans, or explicitly names the target of critique. In some examples, verbal and visual modes function synergistically, forming a montage where neither is dispensable to the humor. Only in a few of them does

the image alone bear the primary responsibility for conveying incongruity, typically through exaggerated caricature or symbolic parody.

Juxtaposition and Irony

The first comedic strategies –or techniques–employed in the illustration are juxtaposition and irony. In one of Isang Tasang Kape’s illustrations, he juxtaposes contrasting images and ideas to create ironic and thought-provoking ideas. In Figure 3, he depicts a politician living a free, lavish life despite the plunder of millions while an ordinary Filipino serves jail time for stealing a canned good. This juxtaposition exposes the stark inequality in Philippine society. It highlights a systemic hypocrisy where the powerful are immune to the consequences of their actions.



Fig. 3. Isang Tasang Kape illustration 2. Posted on November 7, 2021.

Historical References and Parodies

Filipino graphic artists and political cartoonists often employ historical references and parodies to enhance the relevance and impact of their satirical messages. For instance, in Figure 4, Cartoonist ZACH portrays the return of the Marcoses, with Bongbong Marcos occupying the seat of power, accompanied by the caption, “The full circle comeback we should never allow to happen, #NeverForget #NeverAgain.” The cartoon invokes the memory of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and the propaganda machinery that sustained it. Rather than glorifying this return, the illustration parodies triumphalist narratives, reframing the event as a regression to an authoritarian past. This inversion of celebratory discourse foregrounds the dangers of political amnesia and the normalization of historical abuses.



Fig. 4. Cartoonist ZACH illustration 3. Posted on October 5, 2021.

Exaggeration and Caricature

Cartoonist Zach's use of exaggeration and caricature extends beyond visual humor to subtly critique the arrogance and perceived entitlement of political figures. In Figure 5, Bongbong Marcos is rendered with an exaggerated smug facial expression, which highlights not just personal arrogance but perceived traits of entitlement and moral detachment associated with political elites. This use of smug exaggeration and caricature pokes fun at politicians and their often-inflated egos, undermining their authority and challenging their carefully constructed public personas. The presence of three frames in the illustration creates a narrative sequence that builds comedic tension and sharpens the critique. By visually enlarging and overemphasizing key features, caricature destabilizes the gravitas of political

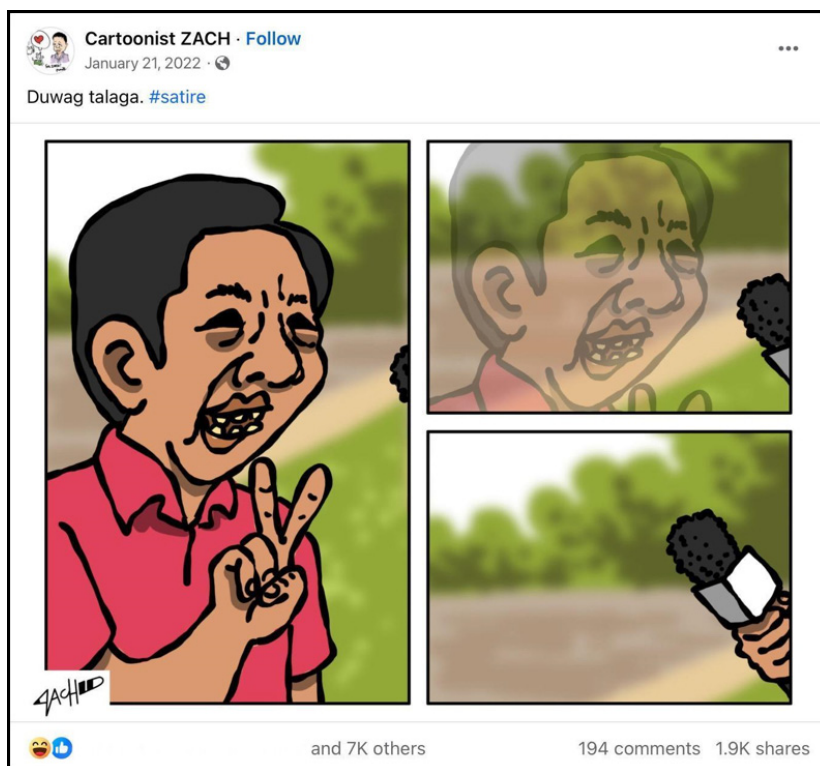


Fig. 5. Cartoonist ZACH illustration 4. Posted on January 21, 2022.

figures, undercutting their public image and inviting the viewer to laugh at, rather than revere, authority.

Labeling and Direct Address

The artists also frequently employed labeling and direct addresses to make their satirical messages unambiguous. This technique is particularly evident in illustrations that feature politicians making absurd or hypocritical statements. In Figure 6, Cartoonist ZACH depicts such hypocrisy in a politician's statement, "Kahit sinong mahalal na pangulo, hindi ka uunlad kung tamad ka" ("No matter who's elected president, you will not prosper if you're lazy"; our trans.), which is juxtaposed with the workers' rebuttal, highlighting the disconnect between the



Fig. 6. Cartoonist ZACH illustration 5. Posted on March 26, 2022.

political rhetoric and the lived experiences of the working class. By directly labeling the politician and his words, the artists left no doubt about the intended target of their satire and the message conveyed.

Symbolism and Metaphor

Another rhetorical strategy evident in the corpus is the use of symbolism and metaphor. The Political Idiot effectively uses symbolism and metaphor to convey a satirical message. In one of the illustrations, a podium finish is shown to represent

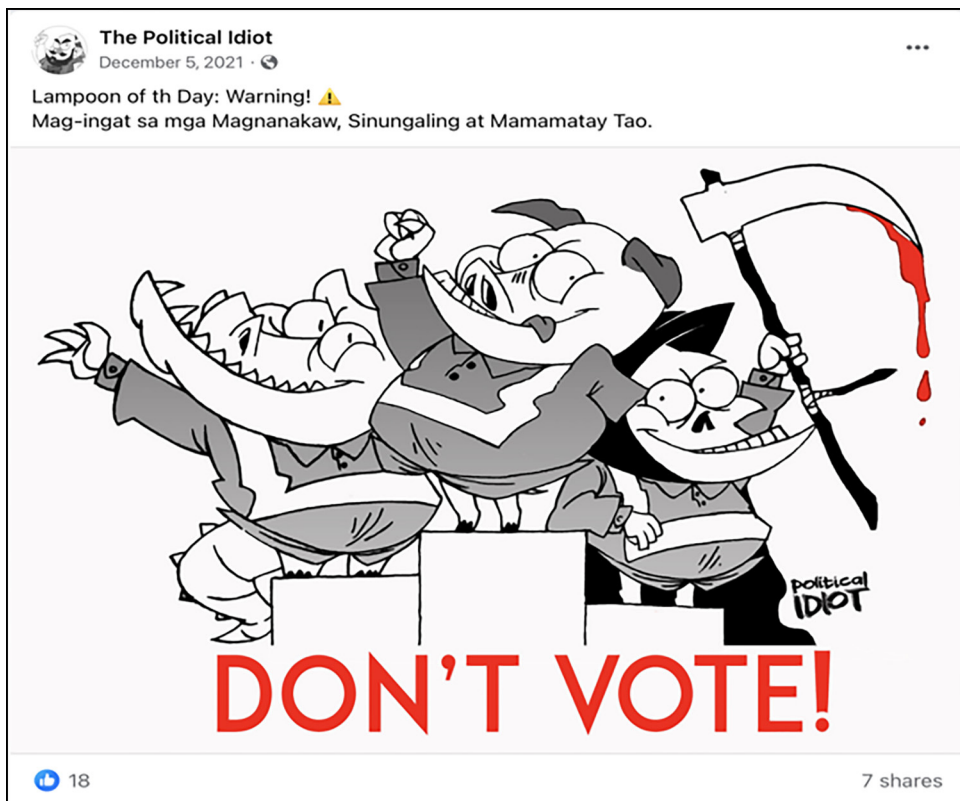


Fig. 7. The Political Idiot illustration 6. Posted on December 5, 2021.

the Philippine political system that rewards the most corrupt and self-interested politicians. The crocodile, pig, and the character of death symbolize greed, corruption, self-indulgence, and the consequences of such vices.



Fig. 8. The Political Idiot illustration 7. Posted on April 17, 2022.

In another illustration (Figure 8), the Political Idiot depicts how corrupt politicians manipulate unsuspecting voters through false claims to secure their votes, as in the story of Adam and Eve with the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Satirical Illustrations and Memes

Figure	Semiotic Resource	Provenance	Modal Affordance	Motivated Sign	Design	Interpretation
Figure 3	Political illustration	Social media	Emphasizes visual satire to highlight societal inequality	Critique of social and economic disparities	Juxta-poses images of wealthy politicians and poor citizens	Demonstrates the stark contrast between the powerful and the marginalized, showcasing societal hypocrisy
Figure 4	Satirical cartoon	Political Commentary	References historical political figures and periods	Warns against the return of authoritarian rule	Uses historical symbolism and parody	Highlights the potential consequences of political amnesia, urging viewers to remain vigilant
Figure 5	Caricature	Online satire	Exaggerates features to portray arrogance	Exposes flaws in political personas	Exaggeration and focused details	Reinforces critical views of public figures' egos and perceived entitlement
Figure 6	Satirical artwork	Social platforms	Juxtaposes text with visual content to convey contradictions	Critiques disconnection between political rhetoric and reality	Labels statements and reactions directly	Underscores how political messages often contrast with public experiences
Figure 7	Political satire	Social Platforms	Employs strong visual symbolism, irony, and text to deliver a warning	Critique of corrupt political figures and their manipulation of the electorate	Uses caricatured villains, a scythe (symbol of death), and bold red "DON'T VOTE!" text to provoke reaction and emphasize the stakes of political choices	Highlights how abstaining from critical voting empowers corrupt and dangerous actors, urging viewers to recognize the consequences of political disengagement.
Figure 8	Political satire	Digital media	Highlights direct communication to reinforce messages	Connects with viewers by exposing politician's true intentions	Labels and concise text placement	Clarifies political inconsistencies and criticizes misleading claims

The semiotic analysis presented in Table 1 illustrates how political illustrations and satirical memes function as multimodal texts that both reflect and contest dominant political discourses. Drawing from *Introducing Multimodality* (Jewitt and Henriksen), each figure was analyzed through its semiotic resources, provenance, modal affordances, motivated signs, design, and interpretation. These elements

work together to foreground how visual satire operates as a communicative strategy: its semiotic resources (e.g., caricature, cartoons, memes) encode critique; its provenance in digital platforms facilitates rapid circulation and collective meaning-making; and its modal affordances—irony, juxtaposition, and labeling—amplify its persuasive potential. The motivated signs reveal how illustrators embed ideological stances that destabilize hegemonic narratives, while the design choices orchestrate textual and visual elements to maximize symbolic resonance. Finally, the interpretive dimension reflects how audiences negotiate meaning, often aligning with or resisting dominant power structures. In this sense, these illustrations are not merely humorous commentaries but also semiotic interventions—sites where power, ideology, and resistance are articulated, contested, and reimaged.

Political Illustrations as Status Quo and Disruptor of Hegemonic Narratives

The political illustrations mirror and, at times, challenge prevailing cultural narratives and political propaganda in the Philippines. A meticulous analysis of the visual and textual content of these illustrations, coupled with an understanding of their socio-political landscape, reveals that these artworks acted as potent vehicles for societal commentary and dissent.

Firstly, the illustrations often embody and amplify entrenched cultural narratives by drawing on symbols and references that are immediately recognizable to their intended audience. These include narratives of morality, faith, and national identity, which have deep roots in Filipino cultural and religious life. For example, in Figure 8, the cartoon cautions against the ordinary Filipino voter by referencing the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, using the serpent as a symbol of deception. Because the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, this biblical allusion functions as a culturally resonant warning: politicians who spread disinformation and false promises are likened to the serpent which tempted humanity.

These illustrations also interrogate and challenge prevailing political propaganda. Through satire, irony, and humor, they deconstruct and critique dominant discourses propagated by political elites and mainstream media. They expose contradictions between political narratives and lived realities, especially in how elites frame themselves as benevolent leaders while benefiting from systems of inequality.

For instance, the illustrations critique the hegemonic narrative of political redemption and historical revisionism, often advanced by political dynasties and amplified through mainstream and social media. By revealing the hypocrisy embedded in such narratives—e.g., calls to “move on” from historical atrocities or to unquestioningly “trust” political leaders—these illustrations disrupt the veneer of legitimacy constructed around power holders and invite audiences to critically reassess political claims.

Although the extent of their direct impact on civic mobilization cannot be empirically confirmed within this study, the illustrations clearly function as discursive sites of



Fig. 8. Cartoonist ZACH illustration. Posted on October 11, 2021.

contestation. By amplifying marginalized voices, articulating dissent, and fostering critical consciousness, these artworks contributed to the democratization of public discourse and the promotion of social justice.

An example of this is in Figure 8, where the motivated sign, a signifier whose form is closely related to its meaning, and sign maker's interest persuade the audience on the "proper" way of educating a supporter from another camp, which is summed up by its accompanying caption (text): "how to talk with people who believe in lies and disinformation." Here, the illustration does not just mirror discourse but intervenes in it, shaping how audiences might position themselves in relation to competing political camps.

In essence, the political illustrations serve as sites of contestation, negotiation, and resistance within the Philippine socio-political landscape. They provide accessible critiques of typical political problems, such as corruption, historical revisionism, and systemic inequality, framing these issues in ways that resonate with everyday citizens. Through their visual and textual elements, these illustrations offer various ways of examining and critiquing prevailing cultural narratives and political propaganda in the Philippines.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of political humor in selected Filipino illustrations during the 2022 Philippine National Elections, revealing how cartoons operated as both reflections of societal realities and disruptors of entrenched power structures. Through the works of Tarantadong Kalbo, Cartoonist Zach, Political Idiot, and Isang Tasang Kape, humor emerged as a strategic tool for resistance, offering incisive critiques of systemic inequalities, historical revisionism, and disinformation. Techniques such as juxtaposition, irony, parody, and symbolism allowed these artists to engage with the polarized electoral landscape, exposing contradictions between justice and privilege, and highlighting the persistence of political propaganda and collective memory erasure.

The illustrations did more than entertain; they fostered critical discourse by connecting with deeply rooted cultural and historical sensibilities. For example, depictions of societal disparities juxtaposed the immunity of political elites with

the plight of ordinary citizens, while references to historical and religious narratives, such as the Marcos era and the Genesis story, warned against political amnesia and manipulation. These multimodal works leveraged visual and textual elements to resonate with audiences, transforming humor into a potent force for reflection and resistance during a pivotal moment in Philippine democracy.

The digital landscape amplified the influence of these illustrations, with social media platforms enabling their rapid dissemination and fostering participatory humor. Audiences not only consumed these works but actively engaged in reinterpreting and extending their messages, underscoring the participatory and dynamic nature of political humor in the digital age. This environment proved particularly impactful for younger, digitally literate voters, who navigated the complexities of disinformation and propaganda through humor-laden content that blended critique with cultural familiarity.

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring how different demographic groups interpret and engage with political humor, incorporating perspectives from both creators and audiences. Investigating the intersectionality of humor with variables such as class, gender, and ethnicity could reveal how humor operates across diverse social contexts. Comparative studies across cultural and electoral settings could also shed light on whether or not humor serves as a universal medium of resistance.

Interdisciplinary approaches that integrate sociology, psychology, and anthropology could provide deeper insights into the social and institutional factors shaping the creation and reception of political humor. Further exploration of humor's evolving role in an increasingly digital media ecosystem could uncover its broader implications for democratic participation and resistance. Ultimately, this study highlights the enduring relevance of humor as a transformative tool for critique, engagement with dominant political narratives and state-sponsored propaganda, and subversion of entrenched power structures and hegemonic discourses, thus affirming its humor's pivotal role in shaping public discourse and fostering democratic resilience.

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