

The use of *Stand Up* techniques as production structures: Mexican humor between jokes, mass culture, and social criticism.

La utilización de técnicas en el *Stand Up* como estructuras de producción: El humor mexicano entre chistes, cultura de masas y crítica social.



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Abstract.

This article offers a sociological perspective that analyzes Stand Up techniques not only as structures to produce jokes, but also as structuring mechanisms of relationships and dynamics in which this humorous expression is inserted in Mexico. The objective is to outline some of the socioeconomic implications of Stand Up within the national humor context, while at the same time outlining a panorama of its presence in the country.

Key words: Stand Up. Humor. Comedy. Culture. Social criticism.

Resumen.

El presente artículo ofrece una perspectiva sociológica que analiza las técnicas del Stand Up no sólo como estructuras para producir chistes, sino como mecanismos estructurantes de relaciones y dinámicas en las que se inserta esta expresión humorística en México. El objetivo es esbozar algunas de las implicaciones socioeconómicas del Stand Up dentro del contexto humorístico nacional, al mismo tiempo que se traza un panorama de su presencia en el país.

Palabras clave: Stand Up. Humor. Comedia. Cultura. Crítica social.

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Introduction

The use of satire during the early twentieth century, in the context of the Mexican Revolution, consolidated a link that remains valid in the collective imagination: the profound relationship between humor and Mexican culture.¹ With the passing of time, this relationship adopted diverse forms, manifesting itself in literary expressions, linguistic games such as the "albur", as well as in television programs and national films. Today, humor in Mexico continues to address socio-political issues, remaining faithful to its critical tradition. However, in the last twelve years or so, a format of American origin has gained ground: the *Stand Up*, characterized by the direct intervention of a comedian who addresses the audience with the purpose of provoking laughter through personal stories, observations of the world and diverse reflections, structured as jokes of his or her own authorship organized in routines.

The distinctive feature of this format is that it is based on a set of specific techniques, such as *delivery* (the way in which the joke is presented), the *running gag* (comic repetition throughout the routine), or the *callback* (retaking a previous joke in a new context), among others. In this sense, for the first time in the history of Mexican humor, these techniques have been systematized and disseminated in an accessible way, allowing anyone to learn and apply them. Therefore, offers a sociological perspective that analyzes Stand Up techniques not only as structures to produce jokes, but also as structuring mechanisms of relationships and dynamics in which this humorous expression is inserted in Mexico. The objective is to outline some of the socioeconomic implications of Stand Up within the national humor context, while at the same time outlining its presence in the country.

¹ Within the semantic field of this topic there are many words that are used as equivalents or synonyms, especially in a colloquial way. In this case we have chosen to use the word "humor" and not "comedy" in order to establish broader and more enriching theoretical and conceptual differences, although the latter is more common. That said, it is understood that humor is a way of contemplating a situation through various expressions that seek to disrupt the subjective position of those involved, reflecting on their state of mind, while comedy is a genre that deals with a plot in which pleasant aspects predominate, whose formulation can be literary, theatrical or cinematographic.

Stand Up techniques as devices for structuring meaning.

In general terms, a technique can be understood as a set of procedures aimed at achieving a specific objective. Since the 15th century, with the rise of productive work and scientific development, techniques began to be linked to rational efficiency within the framework of modernity, which implied an instrumental use of reason oriented to immediate results (Echeverría, 2009, pp. 8-9).² Although today many techniques require specific tools or materials, others -as occurs in Stand Up- are based on previously established models and steps that do not require more than their structured execution.

For a long time, various forms of humor required stage props: musical instruments, costumes or scenery. Unlike these expressions, Stand Up dispenses with complements: its core lies in the correct application of specific techniques. This does not imply downplaying the importance of the comedians' expressive content, but underlining that such techniques guide and channel experiences, observations and perceptions from a rational logic. To clarify this, only three of the most commonly used techniques are described, not in order to exhaust them or show them in detail (since that is not the purpose of the paper), but to establish an analytical basis for understanding their socioeconomic consequences beyond their immediate comic effects.

The fundamental techniques of Stand Up are the premise and the punch line, which constitute the skeleton of almost any joke within the format. The first introduces a situation or theme from which a characteristic or feature is derived; the second proposes a rupture of meaning by means of a linguistic incongruity or ambiguity. Classic example: "The other day I sold my vacuum cleaner (premise). All it did was accumulate garbage (punch line)". The fun emerges from the inversion of the expected meaning: what would be contradictory about having a vacuum cleaner that accumulates garbage?

The other technique is the rule of three, which introduces a sequence of two coherent elements followed by a third that breaks the pattern in a humorous way, but

² Although Bolívar Echeverría emphasizes the application of mathematical knowledge in techniques, here we highlight only this feature because what is relevant here is that from that moment in history, techniques are framed in a logic where what matters is productivity.

maintaining a thematic connection. For example, "I'm going to give you three tips for speaking exceptional English: don't be embarrassed to speak it, pay attention to pronunciation, and have grown up in England." This technique differs from the previous ones in its internal structure, although they share the goal of generating laughter.

While there is no official classification, the techniques can be grouped into two categories: writing techniques-premise, punchline, rule of three, rule of four (construction of a joke from a theme, feelings, punchlines, and remat), *onliner* (one-sentence joke), *running gag* (reference to a comic situation that is repeated throughout the routine)-and storytelling or performance techniques-delivery, callback, planteamiento (introduction of a theme or story that will become a joke), *acting* (the way a comedian uses his or her voice, body language and facial expressions), exaggeration (intensifying a characteristic, action or situation). This taxonomy shows that Stand Up is the only humorous format whose identity is based on a clearly codified technique: style, rhythm and essence originate in its application.

At this point the question arises: where does the comedian's creativity lie? What role do its contents play and how are they articulated with the techniques?³ Are the techniques superior in hierarchy? In terms of invention, creativity is subordinated to the technical structure; in terms of imagination, individual ideas can be integrated with techniques and enrich the product. This happens because every modern technique is born from a creative idea aimed at maximizing efficiency, and its appropriation potentiates the expected effects. This explains the particular style of figures such as Carlos Ballarta, Macario Brujo, Alex Fernández or Franco Escamilla, who manage to distinguish themselves by the singular handling of the same shared techniques.

As for the content, the techniques do not modify it, but open it to multiple meanings, generating interpretative ambiguity. This multiplicity allows the audience to make different readings of the same joke. That is why, in the face of criticism directed at politically incorrect or black humor jokes, many comedians distance themselves by arguing that they do not

³ We talk about content and not about message because each one of the comedians has a particular interest in doing Stand Up, besides the objective of making people laugh.

intend to promote prejudices or harmful behaviors. For their defenders, the emphasis is usually on the effect or intention of the joke, not on the technical structure that makes it possible (Palomino, 2019; German, 2019; Chávez, 2020). Thus, rather than imputing moral responsibility, it is convenient to understand that the techniques propitiate an interpretative overdetermination, so there is no single or true reading of the joke. This shift of interest from laughter to its potential symbolic effect explains why the debate on symbolic violence in jokes has gained momentum instead of the classical analysis of the joke as structure (Hutcheson, 1750; Schopenhauer, 1819; Bergson, 1900).

What has been exposed so far allows us to recognize the immediate effects of the technical use that takes place in Stand Up, as well as the constitutive role that these techniques have on the comedians. They are configured as *stand-up comedians* as they learn and master these techniques. However, their effectiveness is not automatic, but requires practice, reiteration and adjustment. That is why there are dynamics such as the *Open Mic* in comedy bars, where new or experienced comedians test their routines in front of the audience to adjust or discard jokes.

From this perspective, the comedian occupies an intermediate place: between the techniques and their purpose (to make people laugh). It is in the staging that this technical assembly is revealed, when the comedian -alone under the spotlight- executes the result of his work. This execution is not trivial: knowing how to technically deliver the joke is an integral part of this humorous format. As Ricardo O'Farrill puts it:

'The comedian is nothing more than that, I stand under a spotlight to make you laugh and that's it. That subject where 'there is a poetry' and 'the speech', that's meeh [...]. Are you funny or not? Do people laugh or not? (2022 [video archive]).

In other words, do you handle humorous techniques skillfully or not?

The technification of the joke as the driving force behind the rise of Stand Up in Mexico.

To understand the role played by techniques in the expansion of Stand Up in Mexico, it is necessary to consider the relationship between the intrinsic qualities of jokes and the tools

that make them possible in this format, since it was precisely the possibility of constructing jokes through codified techniques that encouraged many people to get started in this humorous format.

Strictly speaking, the elaboration of a joke is based on a fact of reality that is comically transformed through linguistic resources such as paradox, simile, irony, personification, among others. This use of language was approached, for example, by Sigmund Freud (1905), who relates the "pleasure" produced by the joke with the "psychic expenditure saved" (p. 114), by analyzing not only the economy of words, but also the intentions hidden behind them.

This approach allows us to situate the joke within a highly specific communicational register, based on symbolic operations of language. In the case of Stand Up, such resources are not simply ornamental, but enhance the techniques, multiplying the aesthetic effectiveness of the joke. An example of this is the following fragment: "Relationships are like cell phones. At first, everything is exciting and new. Then, after a while, you just want to throw them out the window every time they ring" (Premise and Remark + Simile). Moreover, there is a social structure that emerges from the humorous act: who enunciates, who is alluded to, and who experiences pleasure. That is why we should speak of joke fabrication rather than spontaneous creation: the stand-up comedian relies on specific techniques that shape the language and, with it, the social perception.

What role do jokes play then in the consolidation of Stand Up and how is this linked to its popularity in Mexico? One key lies in the transition from a tradition of anonymous jokes - centered on the enunciation - to a practice in which the value lies with the enunciator. Stand Up put the comedian's authorship at the center, which transformed the way of producing and consuming humor in the country. From their experiences and points of view, comedians address everyday issues that allow a more direct identification of the audience with the realities presented on stage. While traditional jokes used to develop in fictitious scenarios,⁴ Stand Up produces a social portrait closer to shared experience, functioning as a

mirror and a collective construction of the context through a series of jokes (Fernández, 2012).⁴

Although this does not fully explain the rise of Stand Up, it does identify the catalyst: technical accessibility and its use. Since 2016, workshops and manuals for learning Stand Up proliferated, such as the *Stand Up Manual: How to Write, Act, Improv, Present and Produce Stand Up!* by Kristof Micholt (2022), which brings together tips and techniques in a practical guide. In this sense, the ease of access to technical knowledge was key to the exponential growth of the format.

Added to this phenomenon are three other fundamental factors: 1) the viralization of humorous content thanks to social networks and digital platforms, which diversified the spaces for dissemination as opposed to the rigidity of traditional media; 2) the multiplication of places to perform Stand Up, such as bars, restaurants, cultural forums and even public spaces, as in the case of the show performed in September 2022 by Lalo Elizarrarás in the streets of Xalpa, Iztapalapa, in the CDMX; and 3) the impulse derived from the pandemic by COVID-19, which forced comedians to explore new formats such as podcasts, expanding their audience on digital platforms.

Although some comedians were already producing digital content prior to the pandemic, this situation accelerated the popularization of the medium. During the confinement, the most listened podcasts on Spotify were *La Cotorrisa* (comedy) and *Leyendas Legendarias* (horror comedy), which demonstrates the impact of the global context on the consolidation of the format in Mexico (Cerezo, 2020; Saint, 2021; Santiago, 2022).

Finally, it is also necessary to consider the historical background that delineated a cultural disposition favorable to Stand Up. Comedians such as Jesús Martínez "Palillo", Leopoldo Roberto García "Polo Polo" and Adal Ramones already practiced styles that contained similar elements, from political criticism to humorous first-person narration. This

⁴ For example: "Once upon a time, five Japanese created a machine that caught thieves. They premiered the machine in Japan and in less than 30 minutes it caught 25 thieves. They took it to France and in less than 20 minutes it caught 17 thieves. They took it to Italy and in less than 15 minutes it caught 20 thieves. Then they took it to Mexico and in less than 5 minutes they stole the machine."

suggests that the Mexican humorous imaginary already contained elements conducive to the reception of Stand Up, added to its socioeconomic dimension.

This aspect is also key: Stand Up was born in American nightclubs in the 1950s, addressing social and political issues, and later arrived on television with programs such as *Saturday Night Live* or *The Tonight Show*. In Mexico, its arrival came from the north of the country at the end of the 90s and was consolidated a decade later in Mexico City, Querétaro, State of Mexico, Puebla and Jalisco. Today, there are Stand Up centers in almost every state, especially in bars, which shows that its popularity lies in conceiving humor as a mode of production based on techniques available to anyone who wants to learn them.⁵

Stand Up as a technical expression of cultural neoliberalism.

What material conditions propitiated the entry of Stand Up in Mexico? How is this format inserted within the entertainment industry? And what are its socioeconomic implications in the present? To answer this question, it is necessary to go back to the neoliberal context of the 1980s and the globalization process that intensified during the 1990s. These phenomena not only transformed Mexico's economy and national politics, but also the forms of cultural consumption, giving rise to local adaptations of international products.

A paradigmatic example was the bars in the north of the country, such as "El Unicornio Azul" in Monterrey, where since the early nineties Mexican entertainment began to mix with American influences. It is precisely there where the historical origin of Stand Up in Mexico is located. In the center of the country, its consolidation came later, in 2006, with the opening of the "Beer Hall" bar in Mexico City. This spatio-temporal location reveals two fundamental aspects: on the one hand, that Stand Up needed specific economic conditions

⁵ Before Stand Up, Mexican comedians opted for other types of formats or humorous styles such as telling jokes, doing sketches, parodies, series, movies, etc. Some historical analysis about this, as well as its cultural and political implications over the years, can be found in three different ways: 1) as a review in *El humor mexicano no ha sido estudiado; "lo damos como natural"* by Juan José Olivares (2016), 2) as an investigation in the episode *Los cómicos en México - Breve historia de la comedia mexicana* of the podcasts Radio Pirata (2022) and 3) as a comedy show in the miniseries *Lo que no sabías del humor mexicano* del comediante by Alex Fernández (2022).

to flourish as a capitalizable cultural product; on the other hand, that it shares with other modes of urban production the technical logic of contemporary capitalism.

From this perspective, Stand Up can be understood as a guild that has been integrated into the predominant entertainment industries. Its multimodal nature -oral and visual at the same time (Aliaga, 2021)- makes it compatible with the audiovisual formats that dominate the mass media. Thus, its circulation takes place through television, the internet and streaming platforms. An example of its institutionalization is *Comedy Central*, which in 2015 recorded 53 half-hour programs and in 2016 aired a new season with 50 programs. That same year, it launched a mobile application to access its content on multiple platforms, now at cost (Alvarez, 2016, para. 19).

Although it may seem that these industries buy Stand Up shows as just another product, the truth is that the humor guild operates under the logic of the market: comedians must sell their work as merchandise within the entertainment system. This implies that, in order to obtain income and improve their living conditions, they need to position themselves in the market as individual "brands". In the words of Ricardo Elizondo, director of *Ideas & Capital*, a fund that invested 35 million dollars between 2016 and 2019: "the value is generated by the person who stands in front of you and makes you laugh, it is not generated by the business strategy, nor the brand. The brand is the comedian" (Alvarez, 2016, para. 13).

Humorous techniques play a central role in this system: being accessible to anyone, the competition to stand out is fierce. While some manage to consolidate an audience through more open platforms such as YouTube, most must face a saturated market, which makes stable professionalization difficult.⁶

This situation raises the question: can Stand Up be considered mass culture simply because it circulates in the large cultural industries? If we take up the criticism of the Frankfurt School - according to which the cultural industry exploits the experiential poverty

⁶ Each industry and platform that reproduces Stand Up deserves its own analysis to account for its particularities, differences and discover if there is any trend in all of them in addition to those described here.

of the world through standardized illusions - Stand Up would seem to escape this logic, since it exhibits reality with a humorous approach, without pretending to educate it.⁷

However, if it is accepted that even critical expressions can be absorbed and standardized by the industry, then Stand Up could be considered mass culture. In its attempt to show reality, it runs the risk of becoming a codified representation of it. Moreover, it contributes to reinforce national identities by thematizing differences and stereotypes. This is evidenced by shows such as *Furia Negra* (2018) by Carlos Ballarta, *Maleducado* (2019) by Daniel Sosa, *Cuidado Mexicano* (2020) by Ricardo O'Farrill, *Un Mal Moreno* (2022) by Iván Mendoza and *Stand Up Con Certificado De Humildad* (2022) by Lalo Elizarrarás, all of them with strong Mexican identity content (Anderson, 1983).

Finally, if we consider that techniques are not only means to produce jokes, but structures that model meanings and social relations, the conclusion is conclusive: Stand Up is indeed mass culture in Mexico. By inserting itself in the cultural industry, its techniques function as devices that organize free time, orienting its consumption towards forms compatible with the capitalist system. As Horkheimer and Adorno (1994) warn, this is not a neutral development of the technique, but its integration into the economy: those who seek to enjoy their time watching Stand Up, in reality reproduce labor logics disguised as entertainment (pp. 166, 181).

Nevertheless, there are still sociopolitical dimensions of Stand Up that can be highlighted: 1) it makes subjective positions visibilized in the face of reality; 2) it gives space to minorities and historically marginalized groups; 3) it questions stereotypes through semantic ruptures; 4) it denounces contemporary problems; and 5) it serves, on occasion, to campaigns or non-profit social causes. Although these functions are marginal compared to the commercial reach of the format, they could be preserved over time, even if Stand Up becomes a formalized industry. This is because humor - as a form of expression - retains the ability to open up alternative meanings and produce unexpected meanings.

⁷ "A good comic drawing or a good joke many times can better reveal a given social reality than all the social-scientific works. It is therefore often possible to consider the comic as a kind of popular sociology" (Berger, 1999, p. 128).

A key to preserving this potential lies in exploring the links between humor and art, instead of reducing humor to technified entertainment, that is, in going beyond the jokes of Stand Up routines. "Science and technique have wanted to install themselves in a power, and from that power they speak", writes González (2003), while art does not seek power: "it is power itself", by being accessible to all without a unique method (p. 65). In this sense, it is not a matter of defending a supposed "authenticity" of humor, but of recognizing its political foundation (Benjamin, 2003). Another key is to employ the techniques from a horizon of truth -as Heidegger (1997) proposed-, but not to find its essence, but to illuminate social intersections from a transversal perspective. Thus, the technical humor of Stand Up does not lose its primary objective -to make people laugh-, but expands it as a way of understanding and transforming reality, even with the application of techniques and all that they entail.

Conclusion: Stand Up as a technical and cultural synthesis of humorous modernity.

The technical aspects of Stand Up are reflected in three interrelated levels. First, in the elaboration of technically structured jokes based on the perception, observation and personal experience of comedians, both new and consolidated. Second, in the accessibility and popularity of the format, which has grown in recent years thanks to the availability of contents, workshops, manuals and spaces for its execution due to its outstanding technical quality. And third, in its integration within the entertainment industry market, which has made it one of the most consumed mass cultural products in Mexico.

The key to this transformation lies, above all, in the viability and dissemination of its techniques. As Barbero (1991) explains, "the masses, with the help of the techniques, even the most distant and most sacred things feel them close. And that 'feeling', that experience, has a content of egalitarian demands that are the energy present in the mass" (p. 58). Under this perspective, Stand Up is not only a way to provoke laughter through direct contact with the audience, but a technical device with multiple possibilities of application, ranging from individual motivations to broader economic and symbolic dynamics.

Ultimately, Stand Up reflects one of the most visible characteristics of the modern era: the predominance of the technical as mediation and capitalization of meaning. Therefore, this phenomenon is not limited to humor, but it finds a significant expression in it. In this sense, Stand Up techniques should not be understood as neutral structures. On the contrary, as Heidegger (1997) warns, "the harder we are given to technique when we consider it as something neutral" (p. 113). Understanding this dimension allows us to situate Stand Up not only as a humorous format, but also as a cultural practice that embodies relations, tensions and possibilities of the present.

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