



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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# Hopscotch!

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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Latin American Literature in Translation

*Captain Pantoja and the  
Special Service: Mario  
Vargas Llosa's Comic Anarchy*

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Latin American Literature in Translation

*Captain Pantoja and the  
Special Service: Mario  
Vargas Llosa's Comic Anarchy*

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Mario Vargas Llosa can surely bid for  
the title of most industrious writer in  
Latin American literature.

Vargas Llosa's fictional output is notable for its variety of settings, themes, styles, and tones.

“At what precise moment had Peru fucked  
itself up?” (*Conversation in the Cathedral*)



In Vargas Llosa's world, something is almost always fucked up—a death, a massacre, a marriage, a disappearance—and it is up to him or his characters to find out why and how.

The cure is worse than the so-called disease: demand for these special services is inexhaustible, and becomes a matter of public scandal.

The book's comedy comes from an incongruity of tone and theme: matters that are usually seen as playful or spontaneous are treated with great formality and subject to rigorous regulation. Bureaucratic rationality is obsessed with imposing order on wayward concupiscence.

This obsession becomes ludicrous: order gives rise to a chaos of its own, as the “special service” threatens to soak up all the army’s resources, literalizing the slogan “Make love, not war.”

In the early 1970s, elsewhere in Latin America, other clandestine military units were generating a rather less comic anarchy, always in the name of order and progress.



**MAKING FUN OF  
SERIOUSNESS**

It is not easy to write, or even talk, about humour. Just as a joke that requires explanation is not much of a joke, so explanations in general tend to annul what makes jokes funny. Similarly, it is hard to convince someone else that something is amusing.

What techniques does Vargas Llosa employ to make us laugh? Do they work for you, or not? What kind of humour is this?



A golden beer can is the central focus, positioned on a white surface. The can features a red label with the word 'CUSQUENA' in white, serif capital letters. Below this, a circular emblem contains the text '100% Pura Cebada' in a cursive font, surrounded by a decorative wreath. At the bottom of the can, the text '355ml NETO' is printed. To the left, a clear glass filled with beer is partially visible. The background is dark and out of focus, showing what appears to be a blue fabric or curtain. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the metallic sheen of the can and the condensation on the glass.

What techniques does Vargas Llosa employ to make us laugh? Do they work for you, or not? What kind of humour is this?

Sometimes the pleasure of a joke comes from the fact that we are able to express something that is otherwise taboo.

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Jokes provide cover for saying what otherwise should not be said, and our laughter comes from the shock of saying the unsayable.

“The hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychical energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off.” (Sigmund Freud)

In jokes we can briefly evade the censorship or repression (psychic but also perhaps political) that normally regulates what can and cannot be expressed.

“Play with words and thoughts, motivated by certain pleasurable effects of economy, would thus be the first stage of jokes.

This play is brought to an end by the strengthening of a factor that deserves to be described as the critical faculty or reasonableness” (Sigmund Freud)

Humour reactivates that sense of play  
that we have otherwise lost—or, rather,  
repressed through reason or  
“reasonableness.”

*Captain Pantoja*, however, does not quite follow this model. It makes fun of seriousness *through seriousness*, by taking formality to an extreme.



*Captain Pantoja*, however, does not quite follow this model. It makes fun of seriousness *through seriousness*, by taking formality to an extreme.

It redoubles repression via a bureaucratic use of euphemism that strains language to its limit.

In Pantoja's hands, the language of bureaucratic order, or rational calculation, becomes delirious, feverish.

The forces intended to contain libido are contaminated with the same mania that they set out to combat.

We laugh because we sense the pointlessness of repression, when it has to go to such lengths and only draws attention to its artificiality.

We laugh because we sense the pointlessness of repression, when it has to go to such lengths and only draws attention to its artificiality.

Something will always escape.



**TAKING FUN  
SERIOUSLY**

“We laugh at Pantaleón because he does not know how to behave like a true macho, and he accepts being lowered to feminine status. We laugh from a machista perspective.” (Sara Castro-Klarén)

*“Pantaleón y las visitadoras* satirizes the mental patterns of one social class (cholos) from the point of view of another (central power). The view is indeed from above. [. . .] The ‘cosmopolitan’ reader amuses himself with the uncritical melodrama and with the myopia of the huachafitos who aspire to tame a ‘wild’ country.”

(Sara Castro-Klarén)



“The satire from above presupposes an observer who sits one notch up from Lima in the class and power hierarchy, and whose ‘natural’ response, in view of the blunders of the *huachafo* ‘modernizing’ military, is amused laughter.”  
(Sara Castro-Klarén).

We laugh *at* the over-serious Pantoja, *at* his anxious and scandalized family, *at* the prostitutes he recruits, *at* the alternately outraged and envious civilians looking on, *at* the military officers who have cooked up this entire plan, and so on and so forth, all from the privileged space of some elsewhere that is certainly not Iquitos, and perhaps not even Peru

Pantaleón's mania parallels that of an author himself famous for "his organization, his extraordinary diligence, perseverance, discipline, his legendary dedication" (Wolfgang Iser). Hence "Pantaleón Pantoja is one of the manifestations of Vargas Llosa himself, just as Madame Bovary 'is' Gustave Flaubert."

“No author can achieve [a total novel],  
because their book would never end,  
unless it is stopped short at some given  
point, arbitrarily.” (Wolfgang Iser)

There is a megalomania in authorship  
and in bureaucracy alike.

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and in bureaucracy alike.

After a decade of high seriousness,  
Vargas Llosa is also laughing at himself!

By 1973 Peru had been governed for half a decade by a military dictatorship under the command of General Juan Velasco Alvarado.

This Peruvian dictatorship's leaders were modernizers and progressives who sought to side with the poor and bring a measure of justice to rural Indigenous communities.



“The revolutionary rhetoric of the military regime presupposed no less a contradiction than that which destroyed Pantaleón: the libertarian and humanistic socialism which these military men aspired to develop in Peru would be possible only if they, as a class or professional caste, disappeared.”

(José Miguel Oviedo)

At exactly the same time, elsewhere in Latin America country after country was taken over by military regimes that shared few of these ideals of redistributive justice, though they did promise to bring “order” and progress, by violence if they felt the need.

“Ever since I was born I’ve only wanted to be a soldier, but a soldier-administrator, which is every bit as important as an artilleryman or infantryman. [. . .] You laugh. [. . .] I guarantee you that someday you’ll be surprised. We’ll function throughout the country with a flotilla of boats, buses and hundreds of specialists.” (174-75)


Beyond Peru, however, such clandestine units of special forces were indeed fanning through the countryside, as well as patrolling cities such as Buenos Aires and San Salvador, Santiago de Chile and Guatemala City.

What does it mean to depict clandestine military operations as a matter of fun, rather than fear? To feature a comic hero whose defence for the chaos he has caused is the fact that he was only following orders (“I organized this at the orders of my superiors. [. . .] I need to have bosses. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t know what to do” [231])?

It is not clear that his humour offers resources for thinking about, let alone confronting, the violence waiting in the wings as he wrote his novel.

It is not clear that his humour offers resources for thinking about, let alone confronting, the violence waiting in the wings as he wrote his novel.

Perhaps the real issue is not what went wrong in the past, but the dangers that still lie ahead.



# MUSIC

Fósforo,  
“Cochabamba”






# PRODUCTION

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# HISPANIC STUDIES





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*¡Don't leave it to mañana!*

