

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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EL GENDARME DESCONOCIDO (1941)

Miguel M. Delgado

OVERVIEW

El Gendarme Desconocido was the first film in what turned out to be a noteworthy collaboration between Cantinflas, the beloved comic genius, and Miguel M. Delgado, a brilliant screenwriter and director, whose comical plots and quick-paced directing perfectly suited the improvisatory artistry of Mario Moreno, universally known as his screen persona, Cantinflas. A parody of the highly popular gangster film, Delgado incorporates many of the film noir personae and film techniques to comic effect. With Director Delgado, Cantinflas further develops his inspired and unique comedic improvisations and signature personae, which provide a sharp social commentary of a Mexico in transformation, building on the promises of Revolution, but mired in the social hierarchies and elitism of its history.

CHARACTERS

Cantinflas Chato - Agent 777

Doña Joaquinita Mother of Amparo, owner and cook for the restaurant, El Sargento (the Sergeant), named after her deceased husband, who was a sergeant in the police force

Comandante Bravo Police commander

Amparo Cantinflas's fiancée, who is also the daughter of the owner of a restaurant

Police Chief Directly supervises the unsupervisable Cantinflas as he enters the police force, and then goes into his undercover assignment

La Criollita nightclub singer and temptress who tries to manipulate Cantinflas (in his undercover role)

Profesor Melo Instructor at the Police Academy, whom Cantinflas persistently addresses as Profesor "Malo" (Bad) instead of Melo

THE STORY

Cantinflas, the rascal. It's hard to translate the concept of the picaresque hero. The problem is that in English, a number of words are required to capture the idea of the picaresque, shameless, yet cheerful and rather innocent rascal, who lives by his wits. We meet Cantinflas in the restaurant owned by the mother of his fiancée. It's hard to imagine why any mother would put up with Cantinflas. He loafs around all day, and spends his time cheating at cards and dominoes with a clutch of equally useless buddies.

Café de La Sargento. The name of the restaurant, The Sergeant Café, is, in theory, named after the deceased husband of the owner and cook, Joaquinita. But, when looking at the name more closely, it's clear that the Sergeant is a woman because the word is feminine (not masculine). Immediately we see that Cantinflas's fiancée's mother is, without question, the boss. She's not a very tough boss, however, since she lets Cantinflas sit around all day playing (and

cheating) at dominoes. In one scene, we see him slip a domino “ficha” into a pie so that he can win.

Enter the bank robbers. A notorious band of bank robbers has been terrorizing the city. They come into the restaurant to eat, but also to plan the next heist.

Return of the bank robbers. It just so happens that the bank that the robbers hit is very close to Café La Sargento, the restaurant owned by Cantinflas’s fiancée’s mother. After they steal the money, and in hot pursuit by the local police, the robbers flee and go into the restaurant, hoping they could stay there until things cool down.

Unexpected Hero. Joaquinita, the owner of Café La Sargento, hits the main thief in the head with her pan. He falls unconscious just as the police burst in through the door. Cantinflas, who has been scurrying about, trying to get away, ends up with one of the gangsters at his feet. The police immediately assume that he was the person who incapacitated him, and they honor him with a press conference, and then ask him to join the police in a special task force to wipe out the gangsters.

Police Academy: The Schoolroom. Cantinflas is eager to learn all about being a policeman. However, he has only the most rudimentary understanding of the basic subject such as math. In one comical scene, Professor Melo (called “Malo” /Bad) by Cantinflas asks him to work a math problem on the blackboard. Cantinflas fails, but not without his characteristic bluff and bravado, as he starts to speak quickly and nonsensically, but all in an authoritative tone of voice. The words are nonsensical, and it is quite comical.

Police Academy: Marching in Formation. Cantinflas is eager to wear the policeman’s uniform and to march in formation. However, he marches totally in his own way, in a very comical stance, half slouching, half slinking.

Going Undercover: Cantinflas is given a secret assignment, and as Agent 777, he must go undercover and mix with individuals from high society and the government who are also running a corrupt racket. He knows little to nothing about high society, and his attempts to blend in are quite funny.

Ballroom Dancing Cantinflas Style: Cantinflas is seated at a table in an elegant supper club that serves dinner, drinks, and then has ballroom dancing. Cantinflas dances with la Criollita, a singer and also among the corrupt. She intends to seduce Cantinflas and find out where the stolen money is hidden (although he does not know). They dance, and Cantinflas radically modifies the dance steps and movements for great comic effect as he parodies the rather stuffy behavior of those around him.

Kidnapped: Mistakenly thinking that Cantinflas knows something about the location of the money stolen from the bank, the gangsters kidnap Cantinflas. Worried about Cantinflas, Joaquinita and her daughter, Amparo, decide to pay Cantinflas a visit. They arrive just in time to see Cantinflas be kidnapped. They follow them in their own car.

A Happy Ending: The resolution of the kidnapping is pretty preposterous, but at the same time quite satisfying, as would any fairy tale or trickster tale would be. Guns are pulled, Cantinflas is menaced, but just at the moment when things seem to be going really badly, Joaquinita and Amparo arrive and crash into the car carrying Cantinflas and the gangsters. At that very moment, the police arrive, concluding (incorrectly) that Cantinflas disabled the car and capture them. It turns out the stolen money was in the trunk of the car, and so Cantinflas is credited for having recovered the stolen loot as well.

Promoted to Sergeant: Much to Joaquinita’s delight, Cantinflas is promoted to Sergeant. At the ceremony, however, a small man holding a bottle labeled Nitroglycerine stops at the reception

desk and tells her to deliver it to Cantinflas. Not knowing what nitroglycerine is, Cantinflas accepts it, but then must toss it away as he is handed the award and must shake hands. The nitroglycerine blows up, and the entire police station is in ruins, the policemen in tatters. So, the movie goes full circle, starting with chaos, and then ending in the same condition – literally and existentially.

THEMES

The Trickster in Today's Films: Cantinflas is, above all, a trickster figure and as such, satisfies the deep-seated desire of audiences to flout society's conventions, live a life free of worry about conforming to rigid expectations, and play tricks to expose the narrow-mindedness, corruption, or self-importance of the people he encounters. Many trickster figures in 20th century film are actually in cartoons. Bugs Bunny and Wile. E. Coyote from Loony Toons are two notable examples.

Accidental Courage: Cantinflas is courageous, not because he intends to be, but because he's at the right place at the right time. For example, when Joaquinita hit the gangster in her restaurant, Cantinflas was standing in the perfect spot for the gangster to fall on him.

Picaresque: Cantinflas's character follows a long literary tradition of the picaresque, which are typified by quick-witted, street smart ne'er-do-wells, who entertain the reader with their cheerful disregard of society's strictures.

Trading Places: Cantinflas finds himself trading places with people in high places, often to comic effect, since he often has none of the requisite knowledge or background. For example, when Cantinflas goes undercover to expose the high-place criminal racket, he must mix with the so-called elite. He is staying in an elegant hotel, and has been told to be ready for a dinner / dance party and to wear evening clothes. Having no idea what "evening clothes" are, Cantinflas appears in pajamas. Needless to say, he changes clothes before entering the elegant event.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Cantinflas The protagonist of the film, Cantinflas, falls squarely in the line of literary antiheroes who are underdogs, free spirits, and quick-witted. Literary examples include Lazarillo de Tormes (the first picaresque novel), *Tom Sawyer* by American writer, Mark Twain, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens.

Free Spirited Sense of Style: When at the police academy, Cantinflas modifies his uniform to fit his own sense of sartorial taste as well, and so his pants are baggy and slipping down his hips, his shirt hangs out beneath the jacket, and he drapes a ragged scarf around his neck. When the group marches in one direction, Cantinflas marches completely in a different direction. The physical comedy is hilarious, but the deeper meaning is clear; the underdog hero is capable of heroics because of his free spirit and unwillingness to follow rules.

Shameless: True to his trickster nature, Cantinflas is quite shameless when he interacts with his friends, family, and complete strangers. In the beginning scene, we see him at his fiancée's mother's restaurant, blissfully unconcerned about the lack of gainful employment as he plays dominoes and then hides the piece that will keep him from winning.

Ambitious: He's not ambitious enough to make a plan for professional advancement, but Cantinflas is totally happy with the opportunity to become a part of the police force, particularly since it dropped into his lap and he did not actually have to do anything.

Compassionate: Albeit self-interested and not above cheating at dominoes, Cantinflas has a kind heart, and he is compassionate and warm to both his fiancée and his future mother-in-law.

Lacking formal education: Although not illiterate, Cantinflas is perilously close to it, and his level of formal education is very basic. He does not have the advantages of a good formal education, but he is quick-witted and mentally agile.

Unmasks the False: Cantinflas is something of a rascal, and most definitely a trickster figure who helps capture criminals, and in doing so he unmasks the gangsters, revealing them to be no better than the lowest street thug, even though they consider themselves to be “high society.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cantinflas demonstrates that he is a trickster figure in many different scenes in *El Gendarme Desconocido*. Please identify three different scenes, and describe what Cantinflas does to disrupt the social order, reverse expectations, or to mock hypocritical persons.
2. Analyze how *El Gendarme Desconocido* subverts the gangster genre, and in doing so, shows how the true gangsters in society are those who consider themselves a part of high society, or who occupy high positions in the government.
3. Analyze the camera angles, the use of deep shadows and light (chiaroscuro), and point of view shots and explain how they are similar to those used in such film noir classics as *Double Indemnity*, *Gilda*, and *Sunset Boulevard*. Explain how and why the use of film noir techniques in *El Gendarme Desconocido* both evokes and subverts film noir.

MOVIE POSTER FOR EL GENDARME DESCONOCIDO (THE UNKNOWN POLICEMAN, OR THE MYSTERY POLICEMAN)



ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES.



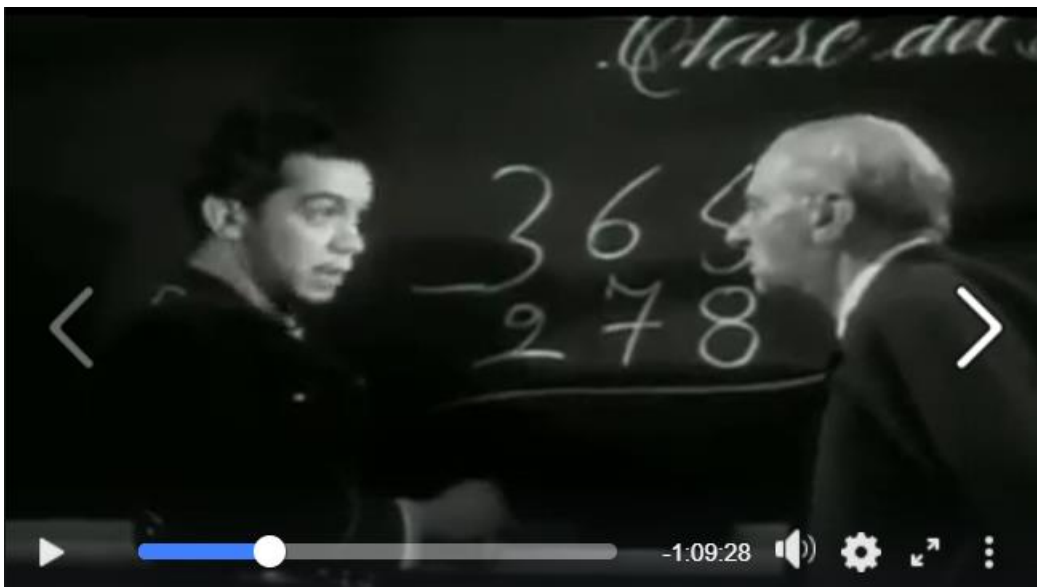
In the opening scene, we see the restaurant owned and operated by Joaquinita, the mother of Cantinflas's fiancée. The name, The Sergeant Café, refers to her late husband, who was a sergeant in the police force, but also could refer to a "Lady Sergeant" as it is in the feminine. This shot demonstrates Director Miguel Delgado's utilization of techniques typical to gangster movies of the time, which introduces another level of subversion of the genre and humor.



Cantinflas, garbed in his characteristic tiny hat, slouchy baggy pants, Henley-type long underwear long-sleeved shirt, and ratty scarf draped over a shoulder like a miniature serape, holds forth with his friends and his fiancée and her mother.



In the scuffle that occurred when the gangsters entered the restaurant with the idea of eliminating any possible witnesses, the owner of the restaurant, Joaquinita, hits the gangster on the head. He falls onto Cantinflas, giving the impression that Cantinflas had perhaps knocked him out.



Cantinflas explains in his wordy, nonsensical way, how to perform calculations. He expounds at depth to Professor "Malo" (mispronouncing "Melo"). In this passage, language itself becomes a tool in the hands of the trickster, in that it transforms sense into nonsense.



Cantinflas marches in formation in the same way that he dances: In his own way, and in his own direction. He has modified the uniform to align with his own sense of style: droopy pants, short jacket, exposed white shirt.



Cantinflas dances in his inimitable way, having modified his dress suit / evening clothes so that they conform to his sense of style: droopy pants, a short jacket, and a white shirt that is clearly visible between the sagging waistline and the chopped off jacket.



Cantinflas proudly stands during the recognition ceremony at the police station in which he is promoted to Sergeant.



Full circle. Unfortunately, Cantinflas's tenure as a police sergeant is short-lived. Here he is, emerging from the wreckage after a blast caused by the bottle of nitroglycerine delivered to Cantinflas from a random anarchist, has destroyed the police headquarters – just as Cantinflas was being promoted to Sergeant for his work rounding up the bank heist gangsters.