

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE ILLITERATE / EL ANALFABETO (1961)

Miguel Delgado

OVERVIEW

El Analfabeto marks the first film in the Cantinflas franchise to be filmed in color. It also marks a transformation from the “trickster” persona to an “underdog,” and one that celebrates traditional Mexican culture, as opposed to one that relied on broad physical comedy and pointed barbs to satirize Mexican society. The critique of a highly stratified society with rampant social inequality continues, this time as a melodrama rather than a satire on a popular movie genre. Cantinflas plays Inocencio Prieto y Calvo (a comical name in itself – literally “Dark, Bald Innocence”), one of Mexico’s many poor adults unable to read or write. He lives in a poor barrio with his “madrina” (godmother), Doña Epifanita. One morning, Inocencio receives a registered letter, the contents of which he cannot read, but he is too ashamed to ask anyone else to read it, and he distrustful because they could easily trick him. So, he decides to learn to read. The notion that upward mobility is only possible through literacy propels this melodrama and morality tale forward. The messages are very didactic, and yet the film was popular, largely because of the celebration of traditional Mexican culture and the ultimate victory of the underdog against the villainous and treacherous privileged class.

CHARACTERS

Inocencio Prieto y Calvo the protagonist, played by Cantinflas. Inocencio is illiterate, but a hard worker. His name means, literally, Innocence: Dark and Bald

Blanca Morales Inocencio's love interest, who works as a maid

Don Rómulo González The owner of the bank, who gives Inocencio a job and a chance at advancement

Doña Epifanita: Inocencio’s “madrina” (godmother) who has been a mother figure for Inocencio

Don Fermín bank employee who resents Inocencio and wants to do what he can to harm him

Licenciado Aníbal Guzmán Fermin’s cousin, a corrupt attorney who works in concert with Don Fermín to rob Inocencio. He is also the philandering fiancé of Don Rómulo’s daughter

El Poca Luz one of Inocencio’s sidekicks, and part of the “barrio army” that supports Inocencio

Profesor The school teacher who works with Inocencio to help him learn to read and write

Ofelia González Don Rómulo’s daughter who, with her cat-eye spectacles, is depicted as unattractive, both in appearance and personality, but, given the fact that her father owns a bank, is quickly affianced to the unethical attorney, Licenciado Aníbal

THE STORY

Inocencio Prieto y Calvo receives a letter telling him that he is the heir to his uncle's fortune of two million pesos. His uncle went to the U.S. as a "bracero" and worked to save enough for two million pesos.

Inocencio can claim it if he presents his baptismal certificate as proof of identity. However, because he cannot read nor write, Inocencio has no idea of the contents of the letter. While waiting for the local druggist to wait on him so he can have the letter read to him, Inocencio is embarrassed to see that a customer's young daughter- a child - is already able to read while he, a grown man, cannot.

He leaves without telling the druggist his problem. He is determined to go to school so he can read the letter himself. He does not want to have to share private matters simply because he cannot read.

Inocencio enrolls in "kinder" and then stops by a nearby bank so he will have work that is close to the school. As he leaves the bank, he meets Blanca, an attractive young woman new to town, and shows her the way to her new place of employment, partly to avoid admitting he cannot read the written address. The daughter of Blanca's employer is entertaining her fiancé, Aníbal, who who immediately starts making untoward advances. Blanca spurns him, which enrages Aníbal. He promises her she will come to regret her behavior.

Inocencio gradually learns to read, courts Blanca, and makes both friends and enemies at the bank. He foils a robbery and then a plot to make him look guilty; the bank manager is so pleased with his honesty that he gives Inocencio a 1000-peso reward, which he spends for a new dress for his godmother, a traditional regional dress for Blanca to wear in a beauty contest, a new plaid suit and new shoes for himself.

While going about his cleaning work in the bank, Inocencio unwittingly drops the lawyer's letter — which he still has yet to read — and Fermín, a fellow employee with a grudge against him finds the item on the floor. On the day of the contest, Aníbal and Fermín, who are revealed to be cousins, conspire to make it appear that Blanca has stolen her employer's jewels and passed them to Inocencio. Though both are arrested, the trial is cut short when Fermín discovers Aníbal has betrayed him and gone alone to claim the inheritance, leading him to reveal the whole plot.

Inocencio and his friends rush to Mexico City to thwart the attempt and denounce Aníbal, who is arrested at the lawyer's office after he arrives to claim the funds. The film concludes with Inocencio's and Blanca's wedding.

THEMES

Society's Underdog Is the Hero: In *El Analfabeto*, Cantinflas plays a naïve, generous underdog from the barrios. As "Inocencio," there's precious little of the trickster, the picaresque, street-smart moocher and loafer from the 1940s. This incarnation of Cantinflas is in full color, and he's humble, dedicated, loyal, honest, and naïve. Even his appearance has changed. Instead of the vaguely scandalous sagging baggy pants, the scruffy long-sleeved "Henley" knit shirt, the filthy neckerchief, the tiny "rebozo" strip of cloth hanging over his shoulder, and a ridiculously tiny hat, the brims curled tight, in *El Analfabeto*, Cantinflas wears a neat pink long-sleeve "Henley" shirt, a modest neckerchief, regular (albeit a bit baggy), and a tiny hat. His trademark pseudo moustache seems to have been painted on. Here the underdog is unjustly victimized, and to see the good harmed by the bad elicits a desire to right the wrongs.

The "Pelado" Has Matured: What are we to make of this transformation? For one, Cantinflas is no longer engaged in a biting satire of all of Mexican society. He is no longer the "pelado" – nor is he the trickster who toys with everyone's ideas of what a person in the working

class should do. The Cantinflas of the 40s mocked the military, the intelligence community, politicians who came in for shaves and haircuts, the mad scientists, and above all, the elites. The Cantinflas of the 1940s would wholeheartedly grab any opportunity to make a few pesos – it did not matter that he did not really possess the requisite skills – he plunged in, reveling in the chaos that ensued. As he sewed destruction, Cantinflas flitted away, later to be found gambling on dominoes or cards. By 1961, Cantinflas is no longer the picaresque trickster. Perhaps that role was a bit too subversive for an audience that wanted to believe that middle class values would serve them well, and that the bracero remittances streaming in from seasonal work on “the other side” (the farms of Arizona, California, Texas, and even Florida), could be invested in the youth and in family infrastructure (a house for the extended family), resulting in upward social mobility.

Quirkiness Is Sympathetic: Cantinflas has transitioned from subversion to sympathy. He is the quintessential lovable victim: passive, polite, extremely trusting and naïve, and he embraces (rather than undermines) middle class mores such as “decency,” hard work, and early bird hours. In terms of his sartorial preferences, the 1961 Cantinflas is a quirky rather than totally outrageous stylist. Cantinflas chooses a loud plaid suit with short, tight pants, pointy (and too small) Italian dress shoes, and a natty neck tie. Whereas in films such as *Yo Soy un Prófujo*, where Cantinflas would tailor-make a suit to have baggy, saggy pants, a ridiculous tight vest, a blazoning pocket handkerchief, and an oversized shirt, completely subverting the dress clothes of the elite, in *El Analfabeto*, Cantinflas appears neat and tailored; albeit a too “loud” to be truly a part of the professional class. His clothing announces his outsider status, but because it is neat and clearly new, he appears to be aspiring to reach a higher level.

The Elites Steal from the Poor: How are the elites depicted in *El Analfabeto* in comparison with the 1940s Delgado-Cantinflas franchise films? In the 1940s, the elites were bankers and industrialists. They were simultaneously mobsters and gangsters. In *El Analfabeto*, the worst criminals are attorneys and accountants who swindle, falsify, and fabricate in order to steal from the poor, especially those on the verge of upward mobility due to the remittances of the self-sacrificing relatives who worked in the Bracero program in the North. In the 1940s, the villains were also designing seductresses. In 1961, the villainesses are jealous fiancées and wives who see their husbands consorting with the maids.

From Genre Satire to Melodrama: There are significant generic differences between the Cantinflas films of the 1940s and *El Analfabeto* (1961). The 1940s films spoofed popular genres and thus subverted the spy movie, the gangster film, film noir, the “confessional” or “I-movie,” and also the screwball comedy. *El Analfabeto* is a melodrama, and as such it is also a morality tale that has a core of virtue ethics.

From Subversive to Normative: Rather than being subversive, *El Analfabeto* is normative. This is not a negative development; in essence, it demonstrates the maturation of his audience from embracing a rather nihilistic existentialism masquerading as farce (almost all of the 1940s Cantinflas films have him coming full circle, from nothing to nothing), to embracing the notion that the primary barrier to upward mobility is the ability to read and write (not structural inequality). Instead of being an unthinkably lofty goal, or unattainable past a certain age, Cantinflas demonstrates that literacy can be universal, and everyone can learn, no matter what their age or circumstances. In fact, Cantinflas so believes in the efficacy of literacy as a transformative social and community force that when he finally receives his inheritance of two million pesos, he dedicates a large part of it to establishing schools for poor children. In real life, Cantinflas did just this, and he made sure that the schools also offered a healthy breakfast and lunch.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Inocencio

Champion of the Poor: There is a strong critique social inequality and the privileging of European-centric values over indigenous Mexican traditions. The elites who follow European

traditions are often criminals, or snobbishly criminally minded, as they accuse the “Other” (the “Mexican”) of theft. And yet, wealthy European fashion-garbed women are parasites and live lives of indolence as they harangue their Mexican maids. In contrast, Doña Efanita, the “madrina” is hard-working, kind, self-sacrificing, and genuinely emotionally engaged. Blanca, Inocencio’s love interest, is an impassioned devotee of traditional Mexican dress. The best European suits are worn both the thieves, who are accountants and attorneys. In fact, European products literally cause pain, as in the case of Inocencio’s new Italian dress shoes.

Defender of Feminine Virtue: Systemic sexual harassment is portrayed in a surprisingly realistic manner. Blanca is harassed by her employer’s fiancé, which demonstrates the creepy sense of ownership that the elites had over those they considered beneath them – generally the mestizos and always the indigenous and the blacks. The girlfriend’s jealousy is realistic and the audience would have felt a sense of identification as well as a real desire for the perpetrator’s come-uppance.

Exposes the Elites’ Cultural and Ethical Deracination: The elites have lost (if they ever possessed) their mestizo / Mexican cultural roots and traditions. They do not celebrate the Patron Saint Day for their towns, and they do not dress in traditional garb. Further, the elites are willing to betray their own brothers.

Bullied: Bullying from mocking bank employees made the film painfully realistic. In earlier incarnations of his character, Cantinflas would have found a way for the bullies to slip, fall, or otherwise humiliate themselves with broad physical comedy. Here, however, Inocencio falls into the traps. He endures it, largely because he knows he is powerless, and because he has not actual weapons of his own, just the power of the top boss, the owner of the bank.

Hard-working: Each day, after working from 6 am to 3 pm, Inocencio goes to the “kinder” to start to learn how to read. He is mocked by the children until the Professor directs them to be kind and patient with their rather large and mature classmate.

Values Tradition: There is a certain sentimentalism in the embracing of Mexican culture. The fiesta for the Santo Patron for the local village is a place where romance and love have a chance to blossom. It is a chaste, pure love (as opposed to the demeaning sexual harassment at the workplace). The contest for the traditional Mexican dress representing the different regions and cultures of Mexico is also seen through sentimental eyes that treasure the culture for the personal connections and family heritage. It has not yet been transformed into a tourist spectacle. Even the ineluctable presence of corruption is sentimentalized: Inocencio joyously exclaims that if Madrina sews the costume for Blanca, they are sure to win, since his school teacher “Professor” will be the judge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cantinflas lives in a poor neighborhood (barrio) in Mexico City, in which it is unusual to possess sufficient resources to go to school to learn to read and write. Describe the types of people in the barrio where Cantinflas lives and the types of work that they have. Describe the children as well. Do they read or write?
2. Director Miguel Delgado includes a number of items that one would see in traditional Mexican homes or communities. Incorporating them is a way of celebrating traditional Mexican culture, particularly in light of the fact that the elites tend to favor European traditions. Please identify elements of Mexican culture and describe their occurrence and function in the film.
3. When Inocencio enters the world of the bank, he is essentially entering a different world. That world is one of wealth, privilege and access. How does Inocencio fare in their world? Describe the individuals, their roles, their ethics (or lack of), and the power dynamics.

4. One can argue in his films in the 1940s, Cantinflas has agency and the ability to influence or subvert the privileged people (usually by bringing them to justice, since the elites and the gangsters were often one and the same), even though he is poor. His wits and street savvy are the great leveler. However, in *El Analfabeto*, he has no ability to alter his destiny without certain basic elements. One is literacy, and the other is money. Describe how the two are portrayed in the film and how they are tied together.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



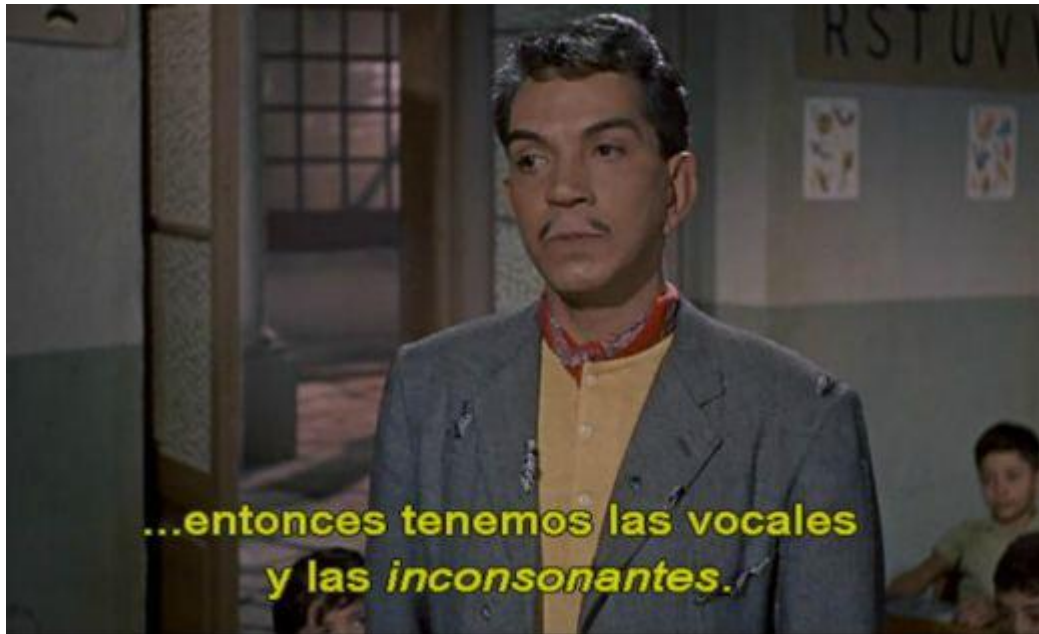
Movie poster for the film, released in 1961. In the film, his pants are not actually so saggy.



Cantinflas received a registered letter. He cannot even sign for it, and has to make up an excuse for not being able to sign his name. To compensate, he makes a X with a grand flourish. Notice his much reformed attire from his earlier "peladito" persona from the 1940s.



Inocencio (Cantinflas) enrolls in kindergarten. He is ashamed that he cannot read or write, but he is determined. Notice the Mexican flag in the background. Literacy is viewed with great probity, and it is considered a patriotic act to develop individual human capital as well as society at large.



"So we have our vowels and our *inconsonants*" – this is an example of Cantinflas's subversive word play, in which he reduces words and language to meaninglessness. In most of his films, it is cause for hilarity because he is usually out-talking someone who usually issues a torrent of technical or tedious words (an attorney, a judge, an officer of the law). In this case, however, since literacy is treated with so much reverence in the film, the act of subverting traditional literacy and meaning-making linguistic structure is not funny.



Inocencio is at home with Madrina, who serves him dinner. She also sews and cleans house in a traditional matriarchal role. The first thing that Inocencio does when he receives his reward for foiling bank robbers is to purchase her a new dress.



Two would-be bank robbers attempt to rob the bank where Inocencio works cleaning and running errands. The bank robbers would not be in the bank if Inocencio had not been duped by them and let them in. Nevertheless, he does find a way to stave them off and save the bank from the loss of the contents of its safe.



Inocencio (Cantinflas) in his new plaid suit, natty pocket handkerchief and tie. Blanca, who has just won the competition for the most authentic and loveliest traditional Mexican dress, stands at his side.



Blanca listens to Inocencio's proposal of marriage.



Vindication: Cantinflas is cleared of the theft of the jewelry, and it is also revealed that he is the legal heir of an uncle who left him two million pesos in his will.