

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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EL SEÑOR FOTOGRAFO / Mr. Photographer (1953)

Miguel M. Delgado

OVERVIEW

El Señor Fotógrafo takes the “stumbled upon” narrative and combines it with a parody of the then quite popular Cold War spy novel / movie. Directed by Miguel Delgado and featuring Cantinflas, *El Señor Fotógrafo* is a very strong entry in the Cantinflas / Delgado catalog of works that averaged one per year. Like others in the series, Cantinflas is hilariously subversive as he learns his craft as a photographer’s assistant and along the way, he commits all kinds of gaffes which, while quite funny, also reveal underlying contemporary beliefs and attitudes. Similarly, the way that *El Señor Fotógrafo* takes elements of spy movies and parodies them also reveals much about the underlying social and cultural values and geopolitical conditions.

CHARACTERS

Cantinflas	the protagonist, the photographer’s assistant
Chelito	the girlfriend
Raúl Penagos	engineer, scientist and inventor of a new atom bomb
Diana Alvirez	daughter of the head of the Atomic Energy office, in love with Penagos
Roberto Alvirez	the head of the Atomic Energy office
Gangster boss	in charge of the gangsters who are trying to steal the formula for the bomb
Lepka	corrupt government official who plans to help sell the formula
Doctor Saldivar	head of the mental institution
Chelito’s mother	hopeful that Cantinflas will be a respectable husband and provider for her daughter

THE STORY

The movie opens as though it were a spy movie, with a scientist, Raul Penagos, who has developed a secret weapon working in a super-secret laboratory where he has developed plans for a new atomic bomb.

At the Atomic Energy Agency Diana Alvirez and her father, Roberto, are reading a telegram from the scientist, Raul Penagos, who is describing his success with his experiments.

The scientist is preparing to take his secret plans to the government’s Atomic Energy Agency, where Roberto Alvirez and his daughter work. The scientist board a plane, then once Penagos arrives at the airport, he is greeted by what seems to be a representative of the government and a driver. They are gangsters who plan to steal the plans to sell them to another government.

The head gangster pulls a gun on Penagos. Penagos struggles, and the gun goes off, shooting the driver in the head. In the resulting struggle, the car goes off a cliff. The two gangsters die, and Penagos is gravely injured with a head injury.

The organized crime boss is upset about the kidnapping gone awry and urges the gangsters to find Penagos and figure out where the plans have been hidden.

Because he has a head injury that has affected his memory and his personality, the scientist Penago is placed in a mental hospital (an asylum). Diana (who is in love with Penagos) and her father, ask the head doctor if they think that Penagos will recover. The doctor does not offer

much hope. He says that for now, the condition is serious, and he's clinically insane, potentially even criminally insane.

So, that sets the stage for a traditional spy novel narrative. The gangsters are trying to find Penago and his nuclear bomb plans. Penago, in the meanwhile, has turned into a deranged madman. Diana is in love with Penago and wants him to recover and marry her. Roberto, her father, needs the plans as a part of national security.

Across the city, the Photography Studio. Cantinflas is working as a photographer's assistant. The photographer leaves for the day, leaving Cantinflas in charge (a mistake).

Evening paper headlines: "Dangerous Madman Escapes from Insane Asylum." Cantinflas is reading the headlines when his first customer comes in. She is an elegant brunette wearing a form-fitting sheath dress. "Are the photographer?" she asks. "That, and much more," he responds. "I'm a Artist of the Lenses," he responds with an eloquence that is both comical and absurd.

Cantinflas in charge: A series of comical scenes ensue.

Elegant woman: Cantinflas exaggerates his abilities with flowery abandon, along with a series of double entendres.

Frumpy "Olive Oyl" woman comes in to take a photo for her husband. She announces that she wants to have a bathing beauty shot. Cantinflas responds: "Why? For revenge?" She stomps out.

The photographer returns and asks Cantinflas to go to the nearby cantina for change for a hundred peso bill. Cantinflas duly goes, but is distracted (after attempting a "change con" with the bartender) by a lively game of dominoes (played for wagers). Cantinflas plays – for hours – and then, after he has amassed enough ill-gotten winnings, he heads back to the photography studio.

Back at the studio, a bride and groom come in for their wedding photo. The bride is very tall and attractive, and the groom quite diminutive. Cantinflas is completely inappropriate as he flirts and touches the bride as he arranges the photo. It is quite comical.

Cantinflas and the love interest. Cantinflas is invited to dinner with Chelito, his girlfriend, and her mother. Cantinflas is quite flattering, as he enthusiastically helps himself to second and third helpings. Chelito and he are engaged, but cannot marry until he has sufficient funding for a home, etc.

The next day, Cantinflas finishes another series of very comical assignments, which use physical comedy to create physical comedy and parodies that illustrate human vanity and narcissism. In the meantime, he continues to tell Chelito they can be married as soon as he has his great breakthrough (not likely).

Later, Cantinflas strolls through a cemetery where he steals flowers to give to Chelito. As he leaves, he is kidnapped by the gangsters who confuse him with Penago, the engineer with a head injury, now a dangerous madman.

We see, in the meantime, how Penago has turned into a dangerous lunatic. He goes to a restaurant and pours a full container of sugar into he coffee, then pours the coffee into his pocket (taking it to-go!).

The gangsters are in search of the atomic bomb plans and they tie up Diana and Roberto Alviro. They bring in Cantinflas, who learns of what is going on, just in time to escape. He manages to

run into Penagos, and harnesses Penagos's deranged mind to help liberate Diana and Roberto from the gangsters.

Unfortunately Penagos is captured again. The gangsters have him, Diana, and her father, Roberto. No one can find the formula, and so the gangsters assume that Penagos has memorized it. Unfortunately, Penagos is still suffering from his head injury, which manifests as amnesia as well as bizarre behavior. The gangster threaten to torture all of them.

While the gangsters prepare to torture Diana, her father, and Penagos, Cantinflas cooks up a plan with his girlfriend Chelito. He alerts the police who are on their way, with the only problem that it will take about a half an hour.

Thinking that Cantinflas also knows the formula, the gangsters plan to torture him. So, Cantinflas makes up a totally absurd formula which sounds like a ridiculous recipe, which Cantinflas explains is actually a formula to keep from losing one's hair.

After buying time, the police arrive, and a melee breaks out. The gangsters are arrested, and Diana, Roberto, Penagos, Cantinflas, and Chelito are liberated.

The film ends with the photographer taking a wedding photo of Chelito and Cantinflas.

THEMES

Mistaken Identity: Cantinflas, the free-spirited photographer's assistant with only the most feeble tethering to middle class values of hard work, prudence, and responsibility, is mistaken for a brilliant scientist. Ironically, Cantinflas's quick wits and ability to churn out nonsensical babble are effective.

Language, the Great Leveler: Cantinflas has the gift of churning out a stream of nonsensical babble that, to the uninformed, may actually sound legitimate. He subverts the language of science by proffering an absurd stream of words when demanded the formula for the new atomic bomb.

The thin line between homicidal madness and scientific genius: It only takes a bump on the head to convert the brilliant scientist and engineer, Penagos, to a deranged potentially homicidal lunatic. The implication is that the inventor of the new atomic bomb was always deranged. It just took a bump on the head to make it obvious to everyone.

Romantic Love Is a Bit Ridiculous: Most of the people who come to the photographer's studio are desirous of capturing an image of romantic love. However, Cantinflas toys with all of them and shows the artifice and the vanity: the woman who wants to create an extremely elegant image for posterity; the skinny, cartoon-ish woman who wants to be instantly transformed into a bathing beauty; the awkward "Mutt & Jeff" couple who want to be photographed as the absolute paradigm of committed, eternal romantic love. The message is that the simulacrum of romantic love is only an empty image, and the reality simply does not exist in the exaggerated, idealized way capture at the study.

The post-Bomb world obsessed with bombs: The film opens in the government office of the Atomic Energy Commission, which immediately references the fact that the post-War world is a dangerous one, because it unleashed Fat Man and Little Boy, the code names for the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is also a time when nuclear tests were being conducted at Bikini Island and the skimpy, 2-piece bikini swimsuit was introduced by Louis Reard, in a move that shocked the world. A Freudian "Sex / Death" or "Eros / Thanatos" tension was generated. In *El Señor Fotógrafo*, the tension is created, but made absurd.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Cantinflas

Trickster: A trickster figure, Cantinflas is a shape-shifter – a figure that causes the truth to be revealed, the high to be brought low, and the dishonest to be revealed. In *The Photographer*, Cantinflas exposes human vanity at work as individuals come to the photographer's studio, wanting a photo not of themselves in their real-world selves, but in an aspirational, wish-fulfillment self.

Wittgensteinian language play: Cantinflas is best known for his ability to extemporaneously let flow a torrent of nonsensical words that, on the face of it, seem logical, but upon listening, actually say nothing at all. Invariably, the nonsense flows when the subject is serious. This is a very postmodern approach, and invokes the ideas of the philosopher and philologist, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who suggested that language could devolve into meaninglessness.

What is real? Cantinflas problematizes the idea that appearance corresponds with reality. He trips away the masks worn by the arrogant: Cantinflas exposes human vanity and ambition. Reality is a construct, and nowhere is that more obvious than in the photography studio, where the constructed reality of the happy couple or the seductive bathing beauty have little or no grounding in reality.

Subversion of gender stereotypes: Cantinflas lives in a world that values traditional male role models, who are strong, silent, honest, and hard-working. As a photographer's assistant, Cantinflas is a slacker, constantly speaks nonsense, gambles with his employer's money, attempts to pull off little con-artist games, and mooches off his girlfriend and her mother for free meals and recreation. But, despite all his flaws, Cantinflas is a likeable character – perhaps because he is so cheerfully subversive.

Questions underlying assumptions about social order: In *The Photography*, the people in the highest rungs of government are often the most criminal, as in the case of the corrupt government officials who were aligning themselves with the gangsters in order to steal the formula for a new atomic bomb, with the goal of selling it to other countries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When the scientist / engineer, Raul Penagos, is injured in the car accident, he loses his memory as well as any idea of proper social behavior. He is a deranged madman with eyes that bug out of his head and weird behaviors, such as pouring his coffee into his coat pocket, and pouring the contents of a sugar dispenser into his coffee. Please discuss how his behavior calls into question the sanity of scientists in general, and in particular, those who design atom bombs.
2. Choose three scenes when Cantinflas was getting ready to photograph the customers who wanted to have a portrait made. Describe how Cantinflas treats them and describe how it deviates from how they would ordinarily be treated. Then explain how and why the scenes are comical and why audiences might laugh.
3. *The Photographer* takes the spy novel genre and subverts it for humorous effect, but also to raise serious questions about some of the underlying values in society that give rise to the creation of atomic bombs, the existence of insane asylums, and the often concealed identities and motives of governmental officials and criminals. Not only does the film suggest that criminals and governmental officials are one and the same, there is also a sense that science in the hands of the rich and powerful is ultimately criminal as well. Please describe scenes and elements in the film that support those notions.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



An original poster from the movie, 1953. Notice how the photograph exaggerates the picaresque nature of Cantinflas, who is not actually so ragged in the movie. The poster is playing on the popularity of earlier Cantinflas films, where he was a ragged street-smart rascal.



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Cantinflas prepares to photograph the odd couple who come in for a wedding photo. The man is extremely short, the woman is tall and beautiful Cantinflas treats the man with absolutely no respect, and flirts outrageously with the beautiful bride, in a satirical view of wedding photography and the construction of social conformity.



Cantinflas, the photographer, with silly, exaggerated gestures and archaic, antiquated photography equipment. The gestures are comical because they are so free, so joyous, and so utterly exaggerated. Cantinflas takes himself quite seriously as an “artiste” – while totally toying with his subject’s sense of self and self-importance.



Cantinflas makes himself at home with Chelito and her mother. He thoroughly enjoys the delicious chilaquiles and other dinner items, as well as taking two helpings of postre (dessert). He is exaggeratedly polite, while taking advantage of the hospitality. He is mooching. The audience knows he does not actually intend to work hard enough to have enough money to marry.



Diana, her father, and the medical director, look on as Cantinflas interacts with Penagos, the scientist now lunatic. The long shot with a foreground two-shot emphasize the separation. The name, Penagos, evokes Voltaire's "Pangloss" – the absurd intellectual in Voltaire's satire, *Candide*.



Cantinflas is kidnapped by gangsters who comically confuse him with the scientists who designed an new atomic bomb. They plan to steal the formula and, with the help of a corrupt government official, sell it to a foreign nation. The chiaroscuro suggests film noir and the costume elements (fedoras, white handkerchiefs in their suitcoat chest pockets).