

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **I AM A FUGITIVE / SOY UN PROFUGO (1946)**

Miguel M. Delgado

### **OVERVIEW**

Like the other films in the Cantinflas / Miguel Delgado franchise of Cantinflas films, *Yo Soy un Prófugo* takes a popular genre (in this case *film noir*) and satirizes both the genre and social conventions to amuse the audience, while leveling serious critiques of society. *Yo Soy un Prófugo* takes the “trading places” and “fish out of water” comedy of errors premises to show how society’s elite, who obtained their wealth by cheating and exploiting the poor, were the true criminals in a Mexico still trying to determine the extent to which the promises of the Revolution’s dramatic land and institutional reform were kept. This film is part of the extraordinarily successful Cantinflas / Miguel M. Delgado franchise that championed the lovable, quick-witted, and often rascally underdog, Cantinflas. In *Soy un Prófugo*, Cantinflas, along with his best friend, Carmelo, work as janitors in a bank. When the bank is robbed, they are accused of the heist. The journey to exoneration is hilarious.

### **CHARACTERS**

Cantinflas	Works as a janitor with his best friend
Raquel	Mobster boss’s girlfriend
Carmelo	Cantinflas’s sidekick and roommate; works with him at the bank
Emilio Blanco	Inspector de la policía
El Jefe	Mobster boss
Rosita	Cantinflas’s fiancée (if he can somehow save enough money to marry)
El Pimpón	Terrifying cellmate

### **THE STORY**

Cantinflas works in the cleaning of buildings; in this case, a bank. A gang of thieves robs the bank, but the “credit” of the crime comes to Cantinflas and his co-worker. Although Cantinflas and his partner refuse to be involved, the police put them in jail. There, when they meet their cellmate, Pimpon (Ping Pong) who is called Gargantúa (a reference to Rabelais – Gargantua and Pantagruel), they annoy the giant so much that he helps them have their own cell. Later, as Carmelo is lamenting on the night before their scheduled hanging that he does not want to die, he grapples with the bars to the window and finds, much to his surprised, they have rusted and he was able to pull them in.

But, their escape doesn’t do much good, because Cantinflas and his friend are seduced and kidnapped almost immediately by a blonde in a car with a driver (at first, the two can’t believe that such an elegant blonde is paying attention to them).

She takes them to a gambling parlor that forms the headquarters of a gang of thieves/mobsters / con artists. It is noticeable that thieves dress meticulously and with sharpness and neatness, in a fashion identical to bankers and the privileged, which constitutes a subversive commentary per se; that is to say that thieves and the rich look alike in every respect.

The gangsters are angry because they want the world to know that they are responsible for the crime, for the crime was done with elegance and good technique.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Cantinflas is given the power to hypnotize by manipulating his eyes and eyebrows; and not surprisingly, he uses (let's say "abuses") his new power quite often.

Cantinflas manages to hand the gangsters over to the police, who appreciate the opportunity to arrest the real criminals. Police explain to the head banker that Cantinflas and his partner are innocent, and in fact, deserve a reward.

The banker writes a check for \$5,000 pesos, but under the hypnotic influence of Cantinflas, he changes it to \$20,000. Cantinflas is now sufficiently financially solvent to commit to an engagement, so he heads to the corner store to propose to the young lady who makes his heart sing. When Cantinflas enters, the pretty girl is talking to her new boyfriend, but Cantinflas uses his powers to hypnotize her and to convince her that the rival suitor is already married, with 8 children and a mother-in-law who need more resources. In the end, Cantinflas and his pretty girlfriend are happy, and everything works quite well (with the help of his new ability to hypnotize).

## THEMES

**The subversion of language itself:** When Cantinflas speaks in his particular way and when he enters into an extensive conversation, he talks a lot but says nothing. In fact, it is a subversion of language, or at least in the idea that words represent reality. If it is true, then reality has no absolute form, and that its preferred form is that of chaos and disorder. This perspective is absolutely postmodern, and that in a single shot Cantinflas subverts and erodes the power of the authorities and the power of language to produce meaning. It reminds one of Wittgenstein's famous saying: "About which we cannot speak, we must consign to silence."

**Juxtapositions: High and low culture** Cantinflas is a genius of physical comedy, which includes his way of dancing. It contrasts the formal dance, with good classical technique, and juxtaposition causes the way of its way to be to stand out, and it is a kind of liberation from bourgeois values. Of course, the juxtaposition of the absurd with "high culture" constitutes precisely the absurd and the "carnavalesque" in the way described by the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin. Most important of all, it means a subversion of social norms, and thus frees the audience. By looking at a version, made with much joy, energy, and rascality, the audience feels authenticated -- that is, valued and legitimized. Other juxtapositions appear in Cantinflas's work: -- the upper class and the humblest class, with the result that the rich seem absurd -- the work of the privileged and the non-privileged -- it always turns out that people in the most humble positions demonstrate their gifts and abilities; and in a way that affirms the intelligence of those in the world in general.



**Subversion of masculinity and conventional couple** In his work as a janitor at the bank, Cantinflas attires himself on a level just above rags, but he maintains his own flair. As Cantinflas and Carmelo work, it is by no means obvious that they will earn enough to survive, although the bank looks very elegant, and bankers are evidently "comfortable" (i.e. rich). When the banker asks Cantinflas, how an employee survive on the pittance that they pay, he responds by explaining that they are living as a person, sharing everything (up to a single spoon, one single pillow, etc.).



Although he has a humble job, he doesn't behave as if he accepted his low rank on the social ladder. In fact, he plays with the privileged and with authority. In a scene at the beginning of the film, Cantinflas is placed on the bank president's desk, and speaks in a dictaphone. Their conversation is about buying shares and what a head of a financial institution usually does. When he asks his co-worker, he replies that I did it to show that he is prepared and able to be the president of the bank, but that his life as well as is best for him.

### **CHARACTER ANALYSIS:**

#### **Cantinflas:**

*Comic Speeches in Nonsensical Language:* Cantinflas reduces language to a kind of silence, and destroys the power of the authorities. Also, his way of speaking means that in the absence of a sure meaning, there is the possibility of interpreting. That is, in the presence of a language that lacks the ability to signify, there is the possibility of invention and re-invention -- of meaning, of identity, and of reality. For Cantinflas, destroying the ability to produce predictable meaning is a process of liberation. It is possible to create and recreate reality because by unleashing the language of all its rules and norms, it puts it in flux, and the world is suddenly a place of infinite possibilities.

*The postmodern dress: The quirky fashion of Cantinflas and the meaning* Possibly the first thing to notice in Cantinflas is his way of dressing, in a white shirt (or that was white, is now a more or less gray color), a cracked hat rolled to give a very suggestive look of something indecent, and pants fallen with many patches, which are falling to the point of being also indecent. A rope replaces with a belt, and on one shoulder it wears something that looks like a wipe and that is called its "raincoat.. "He wears shoes that are too big, also cracked. However, he is very proud of his own "uniform" -- and makes a striking juxtaposition when he talks about upper or middle-class people, who stand out for taking care of details in their appearance. Also, you notice a big difference when Cantinflas himself changes suits; change is very abrupt and the audience becomes aware of the impact of the visual, and the importance of appearances in the production of the sield. In his cleaning job, Cantinflas has a co-worker (an employee and colleague) and the two dress in rags, but with their own unique flair. Obviously, fashion and the

way of dressing is a powerful symbol, and even more so when the ranks of society are so well delineated, and they are impenetrable; i.e. social mobility is not possible, except in extraordinary cases. At the same time, it is noted that in *I am a fugitive*, Cantinflas is, more or less, a "pelado" – part of a raffish working poor. He likes his life, and has neither aspirations nor desire to rise from a social state. In fact, he expresses his point of view when he explains why he does not want to be a banker. Being a banker would take away his freedom.

*Trickster:* After being kidnapped by the "professional" gang of thieves," Cantinflas and his partner have the opportunity to get new costumes; the band leader directs the private tailor to dress the two. The fashion suggested by the tailor does not fall well -- and two points immediately arise, in my view, at least. First, Cantinflas rejects at all the norms of society, and its way of dressing. Second, a homosexual subtext rises to the surface; when the tailor mentions that Cantinflas possesses a "divine body" and touches him, suggested, Cantinflas winces and rejects it. Above, he insists on modifying the "tuxedo" and vest to fit his own style. The meeting with the tailor, which is possibly a parody of homosexual with feminine attributes, works to alleviate the audience, and assure them and affirm that although Cantinflas and his partner live as a couple, even in the same bed, and that they share the same spoon -- living "as one person" -- their subversion of male roles does not imply that it adheres to a stereotype of homosexuality, but Cantinflas expands the male role to incorporate more emotional possibilities. Thus, the character of Cantinflas opens up a panorama of possibilities, and, above all, removes social barriers; and instead, in his rather playful "trickster" role, he strengthens acceptance.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first scenes in the movie, Cantinflas and his buddy, Carmelo, are cleaning the bank. As Cantinflas cleans the bank president's office, he sits down in his chair and pretends to be dictating a message for his stockbroker. When Carmelo comments at how skillful and knowledgeable Cantinflas is, how does Cantinflas respond? What does he say about his own ambition, and what he thinks the life of a bank president would entail? How does this establish the values and contrasts for the rest of the film?
2. The jail scenes are comical, and yet in their comedy, there are very serious critiques of society and the social justice system. What do the following aspects of the jail suggest about the nature of crime, punishment, and social inequality in the legal system?
  - \* PimPon, the insane cellmate
  - \* Measuring Cantinflas and Carmelo for their nooses
  - \* The graffiti on the walls
  - \* The bars in the cell window
3. Analyze the mobsters and their retinue and describe the points that make them similar to the elites of society (and politicians) of the time. Please include the following:
  - \* dress
  - \* ways of speaking about money and accomplishments
  - \* dance
  - \* behaviors in their clubs and restaurants
  - \* entertainment (gambling, etc.)
  - \* girlfriends

## ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES

Please note that the following illustrative scenes follow the sequence of the film, and they illustrate not only aspects of the characters, but also the film techniques and mise-en-scene.



This is a medium long-shot that places Carmelo and Continflas in their context. The fact that they are good friends is emphasized by their position and Carmelo's worshipful and admiring gaze upon the pontificating Continflas. It is subversive and humorous because Continflas, the janitor, assumes the same posture and attitude that a top bank executive would assume, as he, also would pontificate to all those obliged to listen due to their place in the hierarchy.



This over-the-shoulder shot maximizes the contrast between the bank president and the janitor. Cantinflas, as the janitor, in no way feels inferior to the bank president, despite their disparities in social order. In fact, the lighting and arrangement reinforce the suggestion that Cantinflas is actually wiser and more sage than the bank president.



This medium long-shot profile two-shot allows Raquel and Cantinflas to lean into each other. The masterful cinematography places them in the center, and looking into each other's eyes. However, the real focus of this shot is the shiny clear bowl between them. The brilliant reflections give the shot a magical aura, and emphasize that they are talking about a dream.



Cantinflas waxes eloquent about the dreams he has with Raquel, and the home he'd like to establish with her. Carmelo listens, enraptured. In the meantime, they look all the world like an old married couple, although Cantinflas is held in thrall by his dreams of a storybook romance with Raquel.

This low-angle point of view shot is deeply humorous and deeply subversive at the same time. On the one hand, both Carmelo and Cantinflas both discuss the need to support each other and to be best of friends. On the other, it suggests that Cantinflas's dream of marrying Raquel is nothing of the sort, and is simply a screen or projection, while true love, affection, and loyalty lie in the friendship he has with Carmelo.





Cantinflas and Carmelo are in the local jail. They have been mistakenly arrested for the bank heist, that occurred where they are janitors. They are dismayed at the false arrest and are mulling over how to convince authorities of their innocence.

This medium long-shot "back to camera" shot gives the audience the feeling of having a privileged view into the behavior and possible inner thoughts of the two protagonists. The vertical bars of the cell door evoke a kind of film noir chiaroscuro, which allows one to realize that the film's humor derives from its subversion of film noir tropes.



Cantinflas and Carmelo are arrested. The police do not have to use extreme force — in fact the arrest itself is comical because it is a parody of the popular gangster genre. Cantinflas and Carmelo are arrested because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and also because the police are rather bumbling and inept.

This long shot that clumps Cantinflas and Carmelo together with the police is technique that de-individualizes the individuals and makes them simply instruments of a larger social reality: the poor are often railroaded by the police, and no matter how obviously innocent they are, they do not have a voice.



Cantinflas and Carmelo have a cell mate. The cell mate has clearly been imprisoned for a long time, and his first personal imperative is to make his new cell mates as afraid as possible of him. He deliberately assumed a “mad-dog” persona in order to intimidate any new cell mates.

This point of view shot of “Pim Pon” (Ping Pong) creates a humorous, even absurd view of the cell-mate’s behavior. It is worth noting that when Director Delgado depicts a person who is pretending to be mentally ill, it is quite comical. However, in the Cantinflas movies where there is true mental illness, it provokes fear and distrust.



Cantinflas and Carmelo in jail. This two-shot close-up includes the chiaroscuro one would expect in film noir and heightens the comic impact, which is essentially a parody of the genre.



The gangsters / bank thieves in their gambling den. They are discussing how to preserve their honor as the best gang (cartel), and to make sure that a rival gang does not show them up.



Cantinflas and Carmelo, in their satin pajamas, are surprised by room service and the elaborate breakfast they receive in the hotel where they are guests of gangsters who are disgusted that these two inept janitors are being given credit for their elegant heist. The gang wants everyone to know that they are the best.



Asi debe de ser mi chaleco ... Cantinflas explains to the tailor who is taking measurements for a "bespoke" suit that he has very specific requirements for his vest. It should be short, not long. Cantinflas gives him very exacting instructions, which completely subvert the prevailing notions of proper men's haberdashery.



Cantinflas, in his new suit, which features his ridiculously tiny vest, and sagging pants, is quite impressed with by Rosita, who is one of the key players in the criminal enterprise.



This medium close-up of Cantinflas in his evening dress glory, positions him in front of a line of elegantly dressed gangsters (who are indistinguishable from the elites of society). The variations he has made in his dress are immediately apparent (silly vest, handkerchief blooming out of his chest pocket like a flower) and are quite comical. Not only is the image hilarious, it also differentiates him—a member of the often scorned worker / pelado class— from high society and gang members (who are identical).



Under the influence of hypnotic suggestions (Cantinflas mesmerizes the gangsters with his eyes), they give money to the plainclothes detective.



He has a wife and 8 children! Cantinflas hypnotizes his rival to confess he has a wife and 8 children. His rival leaves, clearing the field for him, so he can propose to Rosita, now that he has his reward money.



Marital bliss is just around the corner!! Rosita accepts the proposal of marriage, and she and Cantinflas prepare for "happily ever after" ... with a bit of help from his hypnotic powers.