

# **Cantinfladas of the PRI: (Mis) Representations of Mexican Society in the Films of Mario Moreno**

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In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx wrote that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur twice, the first time as tragedy; the second as farce. Confronted by the tumultuousness of Mexico's extended revolution, he might have added a third occurrence in the form of carnival. The world that Lázaro Cárdenas turned upside down, between 1934 and 1940, became a tragedy during the presidential administration of Miguel Alemán, from 1946 to 1952. The populist Partido Revolucionario Mexicano (PRM), intended to consolidate the working-class gains of the Cárdenas era, was co-opted by Alemán to the service of trickle-down development policies under that oxymoron of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).<sup>1</sup> The farce of revolutionary legitimacy became unmistakable in the line of rulers following the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, most notoriously Jose López Portillo (1976-1982). This historical progression was mirrored by the films of Mexico's most enduring popular star, Mario Moreno "Cantinflas," who began his career in the 1930s as a symbol of revolutionary liberation, evolved over the 1940s into a representative of authoritarian capitalism, and ended in the 1970s as a grotesque caricature of Mexican society.

Known for his distinctive speech, *cantinfleando*, talking endlessly without saying anything, Cantinflas has inspired three basic interpretations, as vagabond, politician, and bourgeois. He assumed the first identity in the early 1930s while working in the improvised *carpa* theaters around Mexico City playing the stock character of the *pelado*.<sup>2</sup> Literally "peeled," the term conveyed images of a penniless, victimized, or raped migrant from the countryside, uprooted from his traditional agrarian community, but unable to fit into modern industrial society. Philosopher Samuel Ramos diagnosed a national inferiority complex beneath the *pelado's* explosive and sexually suggestive language, and such psychoanalytic descriptions came to dominate discussions of Cantinflas. Miguel Covarrubias wrote: "Cantinflas impersonates the class-conscious man of the city's lower classes who suffers from an inferiority complex hidden under a stubborn individualism and an affected and meaningless wordiness" (594). Film critic Xavier Villaurrutia explained: "From the gap between the desire to find the right words and the failure to do so gushes forth a fountain of humor that creates laughter." Beyond humor, the critic found pathos. "Tragic in his impotence, comic in his results, the personality that Cantinflas has created in our midst is more complex than he appears superficially, and observing closely, the result is a form of tragicomedy" (253).

A second interpretation situated Cantinflas in the tradition of rabble-rousing Mexican politicians, famous for their meaningless torrent of promises. Journalist Salvador Novo described the "dawning of a wordy era, confused, oratorical, promising without obligation, which prudent journalists would call, 'demagogic'. The sensitive antenna that received this new vibration; that gave the key of humor through which this new era released its repression, would be called Cantinflas" (41). The comedian represented in particular the Cardenista union leader and Mexico's foremost Marxist theorist, Vicente Lombardo Toledano. Indeed, Moreno gained national prominence thanks to a remark by Lombardo, who refused a public debate with a rival labor boss, Luis N. Morones, by suggesting that he speak with Cantinflas instead. The resulting interview was published in the illustrated magazine *Todo*, on August 12, 1937, under the title: "The Polemic of the Century: Cantinflas vs. Morones," and contained a spoof of Lombardo's rhetoric in the nonsense announcement: "Comrades, there are moments in life that are truly momentary."

The public images of Cantinflas as *pelado* and politician were juxtaposed against a parallel vision of Mario Moreno as a member of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Carlos Monsiváis has interpreted this capitalist Cantinflas as a crucial element of the cultural hegemony exercised by Mexico's post-revolutionary state, which sanitized the genuinely threatening urban proletariat into a harmless, even cute *peladito* (99-100). Roger Bartra elaborated this view, describing Cantinflas's humor as a palliative of the Mexican working class, entrapping them in a corrupt union bureaucracy. "The verbal confusion of Cantinflas, rather than serving to criticize the demagoguery of the politicians, actually legitimizes it. ...The *pelado* lives in a world that, in order to function, needs to be oiled regularly: thus, a shifting society is built in which, at any moment, everything can lose meaning, and civility becomes slick and lubricious. When things freeze up, it is necessary to smear them with what in Europe is called the 'Mexican ointment': a bribe" (129).

This essay attempts to place these interpretations within the trajectory of Mario Moreno's film career and finds all three to be valid simultaneously. Because of his phenomenal box office success, and despite the long-standing rejection of critics, Moreno retained elements of popular culture, derived from the improvisational acting style of the *carpa* theater, throughout his film career.

But at the same time, capitalist advertising was essential to his success, just as it is to such modern celebrities as Madonna or Michael Jordan. Indeed, from early in his career, journalists took pains to reassure middle-class readers that the *pelado* was quite respectable in real life (Larriva Urias, n.p., Keci, n.p.). Moreno in turn used the influence of his celebrity status to attempt to shape Mexico's political and social discourse. An examination of Cantinflas films from three crucial points in history therefore provides insights about the continuing struggles between the popular classes, the bourgeoisie, and the Mexican state.

#### THE CARNIVAL OF LÁZARO CÁRDENAS

The presidential administration of Lázaro Cárdenas finally realized the promise of Mexico's Revolution of 1910. Agrarian followers of Emiliano Zapata received nearly 50 million acres of land in the form of collective *ejido* grants, finally destroying the great haciendas that formerly dominated the countryside. Factory workers were encouraged to strike for better working conditions and higher wages, while large-scale public works projects such as road building provided further stimulus to consumer demand, helping to lift the country out of the Great Depression. The *indigenista* program of forging a cosmic race by incorporating Native Americans into the national economy also made great strides through educational and agrarian programs. The revolutionary changes culminated in the oil expropriation of 1938, when Cárdenas reasserted Mexican sovereignty over the national wealth. Mario Moreno, the foremost comedian of the Cárdenas era, provided satiric commentary on all these events from the stage of the Folies Bergère.

The one *carpa* scene actually captured on film, in *Águila o sol* (1937), avoids all political jokes, wisely since the movie still retains its humor long after the political issues of the day have been forgotten. Nevertheless, these early movies convey the revolutionary possibilities of subverting the social hierarchy through the weapons of the weak. In *Ahí está el detalle* (1940), the wily mestizo Cantinflas constantly outwits the pompous Creole don Cayetano, thus affirming the triumph of the cosmic race. In one scene, the industrialist catches Cantinflas in his house and assumes him to be his wife's lover. But when don Cayetano demands to know what the vagabond is doing there, Cantinflas turns the question back on him. The Creole replies angrily: "Don't you know that I'm the husband?" The *pelado* then continues innocently: "Whose husband?" Don Cayetano answers with a pronoun of indeterminate gender: "*Su marido,*" which Cantinflas misinterprets as: "My husband? *¡Ay chirrión!* Listen here. Don't say that, People might overhear. And my reputation!" On another occasion, when questioned about the value of work, Cantinflas replies: "If it were any good, the rich would have cornered the market in it."<sup>3</sup>

The film culminates in a courtroom scene that has been described by film historian Emilio García Riera as "one of the most entertaining in the entire history of Mexican cinema" (160). The humor arises from a mutual misunderstanding between the authorities putting Cantinflas on trial for murder and the defendant, who answers their questions assuming the victim to have been a rabid dog he killed in the opening scene. Cantinflas unsettles the courtroom proceedings by misinterpreting the language of authority ' just as he had confounded don Cayetano in an earlier scene. When the clerk tries to take his sworn testimony using the legal formula: "*¡Protesta, Ud ?!*" Cantinflas answers: "Certainly I protest. Why wouldn't I protest when you make such a fuss over my having killed a dog?" The prosecutor interprets this remark as a confession of cold-blooded murder, and the *pelado* further compounds the appearance of guilt by refuting the public defender's insanity plea as an insult to his dignity. But Cantinflas escapes in the end by turning the courtroom upside down with his nonsense language, babbling away until even the judge and lawyers begin to parrot his insane speech.

Cantinflas continues to subvert Mexican authorities in a subsequent film, *El gendarme desconocido* (1941), in which a series of accidents transforms the *pelado* into a policeman.<sup>4</sup> He becomes agent 777 and immediately personalizes the uniform to his unique sartorial standards by adding a scarf and letting the pants droop. When the inspecting sergeant asks him what happened to the regulation shirt and tie, the new police officer explains that they had been stolen. The sergeant then demands to see his service pistol and berates him for swapping his standard issue .45 automatic for a .38 revolver. Cantinflas shoves the pistol back inside his pants and jumps from the cold. "No holster?" the sergeant bellows. "No underwear," Cantinflas explains. Agent 777 next displays his marching technique, swinging his hips back and forth in an effeminate manner, making the police force out to be a collection of sissies. The sergeant calls out "right face," but he turns left instead, disrupting the entire column. When sent to the chief's office, he answers the phone and chats familiarly with the caller, to the point of cuddling up on the desk. The commandant looks bemused at the obvious affection and finally asks Agent 777 who is speaking. Cantinflas hands him the phone with the words: "Your wife."

But even in this carnivalesque early period, the inroads of commercialism had already become evident. Moreno founded his production company, Posa films, as a vehicle for filming shorts such as *Siempre listo en tinieblas* (1939), *Jengibre contra dinamita* (1939), and *Cantinflas ruletero* (1940) as advertisements for Eveready batteries, Canada Dry ginger ale, and General Motors automobiles. He also introduced advertisements into his movies decades before product placement became a common Hollywood technique. In *Ni sangre, ni arena* (1941), for example, a Mexico City brewing company reportedly paid \$10,000 for an extended shot of Cantinflas performing his

pelado act framed by an advertising poster (*Jueves de Excelsior*). Finally, Moreno understood the importance of establishing Cantinflas as a brand name in its own right, and this commercialism became a central element of his public image during the administration of Miguel Alemán.

#### THE TRAGEDY OF MIGUEL ALEMAN

The election of Miguel Alemán as president in 1946 brought a new generation of civilian politicians to power in Mexico, replacing the generals at the top of the revolutionary party and harnessing it to the single-minded pursuit of economic growth. For three decades beginning in the late 1930s, GNP grew at an average annual rate of 6 percent, earning Mexico an international reputation as an economic “miracle.” But these statistical measures concealed grave inequalities, for while the extended boom had begun under Cárdenas, the 1940s marked a shift away from demand-led development toward a supply-side program of capital accumulation. Alemán employed banks, taxes, and tariffs to direct income toward investment in the belief that by forgoing mass consumption for a generation, Mexico could build the economic base needed for a modern economy. The government maintained its legitimacy as heir to the revolution while showing such favoritism to big business by co-opting working-class leaders, offering them power and privilege within the official party in exchange for restraining wage demands from the union rank and file. Those who sought independence from the PRI were cast out into the political wilderness, losing access to government patronage and risking violent repression if they pursued their demands too forcefully. As a close personal friend of Alemán, Mario Moreno became a leading spokesman for the government during this period of transition.

Cantinflas's mythification of Mexican economic nationalism began with the film *El supersabio* (1948), depicting the malevolent multinational Petroleum Trust, which seeks to suppress the discovery of a synthetic gasoline by a Mexican scientist. Cantinflas plays a lab assistant more interested in using graduated cylinders to mix martinis than in rendering the oil industry obsolete. Nevertheless, when the old scientist dies of a heart attack, Cantinflas has to flee from assassins hired by the Petroleum Trust in the belief that he knows the secret formula. A reporter comes to his defense, publicizing the foreign company's machinations and inciting crowds to demand his safety. Rather than risk the public wrath, the trust president decides to pay off Cantinflas with a check for a million pesos not to reveal the secret formula, which of course he never had. As they appear together on a balcony, Cantinflas parodies Evita Perón, then at the height of her popularity in Argentina, by waving to the frenzied crowds and announcing: “Citizens of this city, I am not dead! I look pretty bad, but I'm not dead!” The film ends with the foreign capitalists looking ridiculous for having paid a million pesos to suppress a non-existent formula.

Such populist images of an enraged pueblo humiliating the representatives of foreign capital delighted Mexican filmgoers with nationalist memories of the triumphant oil expropriation of 1938, but they bore no relation to economic reality a decade later. In fact, United States corporations used their technical superiority to gain access to Mexican markets, abrogating legal restrictions in the process. They evaded the 51 percent national ownership requirement through the *prestanombres* of local politicians, who received fat salaries for sitting on boards of directors. Moreover, many of the factories that opened in the postwar era to build automobiles, appliance, and other consumer goods in Mexico merely assembled parts that had been manufactured elsewhere. Even genuinely national firms imported their technology and machinery from the United States and Europe, undermining both the nationalist quest for self-sufficiency and their ability to compete in international markets. After all, Mario Moreno bought the story for *El supersabio* in France, where it had originally been filmed in 1942 with the title *Ne le criez pas sur les toits* and starring the comedian Fernandel.

Moreno also worked to bolster the government's political legitimacy in the succession crisis of 1952, when rumors emerged that the president planned to repudiate the most basic revolutionary principle, “No Re-election,” by installing his own cousin, Fernando Casas Alemán, as the official party's presidential candidate. Disgusted by corruption and betrayal, prominent members of the PRI, including former cabinet ministers from the Cárdenas administration, broke away to form an independent party endorsing the candidacy of agrarian reformer and revolutionary veteran, General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán. The common cause between urban professionals hungry for democracy and rural workers demanding land reform, together with the political clout of the new party's leaders and the public sympathy of no less a figure than General Cárdenas seemed to herald genuinely free elections. Moreno, caught up in the excitement, considered it his civic duty to participate by making the movie *Si yo fuera diputado*. He rushed the film through production, canning an earlier effort, *El bombero atómico*, and shooting in September 1951 to allow a premier on January 30, 1952, less than six months before the balloting. The importance Moreno attached to this effort became even more clear in the opening credits, which attributed the screenplay to him personally, albeit with additional lines by his long-time collaborators, Jaime Salvador and Carlos León. This Mexican version of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* therefore presented perhaps his closest approach to the personal statement that auteur critics look for in a film.

Following a well-established pattern, Cantinflas appears as a barber in a working-class barrio of Mexico City, but this time he applies his street smarts to learning the law, rather than subverting it as in previous films. After proving his legal skills by saving a widow from eviction by a slumlord and flirtatiously defending a femme fatale on

trial for murder, he accepts the nomination as the people's candidate for the local congressional seat. The campaign against a corrupt political boss illustrated various aspects of Mexican political experience including a raucous debate, the ubiquitous campaign posters, an attempt to steal the ballot box, and finally the candidate's victory speech.

Moreno clearly believed that he was contributing to the growth of democracy by drawing on symbolism from some of the great historical moments in Mexican politics. The nefarious boss illegally posts campaign slogans on public walls in order to have Cantinflas arrested before the election, a clear reference to Francisco I. Madero, the Apostle of Mexican Democracy, jailed in his campaign against the dictator Porfirio Díaz. But in an outpouring of popular support, reminiscent of the oil expropriation of 1938, citizens of the barrio contribute their humble savings to pay the fine. And when the political boss sends his henchmen to steal the box with votes for Cantinflas, the people stand guard over the precinct house with guns and sticks to foil the attempt. Their vigilance recalls another revolutionary tradition, at least in theory, for the Electoral Law of 1918 had entrusted the polling booths to the first voters who arrived to take control of them. Intended to prevent the fraud so common under the late nineteenth-century dictator Porfirio Díaz, this system created irregularities of its own, not to mention considerable violence as rival parties fought for possession of the ballot boxes, before a 1945 reform centralized control of elections under a federal commission. Nevertheless, public control of the voting booth symbolized to many people the revolutionary ideal of effective suffrage (Medina 62-67).

But by presenting anachronistic images of citizenship, *Si yo fuera diputado* may actually have helped legitimize the Alemán project of modernizing an authoritarian political system. The new generation of civilian politicians made their primary concern the centralization of federal authority by weeding out regional strongmen, who wielded power through *pistoleros*, and replacing them with university-trained administrators. While this campaign promised to impose greater efficiency on government and to enhance Mexico's international image as a safe destination for tourism and investment, it did nothing to further the cause of Mexican democracy. In defeating such an old-time boss, Cantinflas bestowed his considerable prestige on a legislature still dominated by the PRI, and like so many other young lawyers of the Alemán generation, without really answering the question of what he would do if elected. As critic Hortensia Elizondo observed, "the political discourses that the public avidly awaited were lukewarm comic fare of a kind unlikely to shake up Congress" (58).

Moreno lent further credibility to the political system by serving as president of a local polling station on election day, July 6, 1952. The film character of Cantinflas blended with real life, or at least with newspaper reports, of an encounter between Moreno and an unnamed policeman. In a scene recalling *El gendarme desconocido*, a policeman asked for permission to vote without his registration card using the same excuse Cantinflas had given his sergeant, that it had been stolen. But this time Moreno spoke with the voice of authority, saying: "Well, I don't give you permission to vote, so that the crooks can vote, boy ." He then turned to Alemán's Secretary of Commerce and Industry, Antonio Martínez Báez, waiting in line to vote, and announced: "That'll teach him." Moreno thus publicly applied the Cantinflas seal of approval to the election, which journalists dutifully proclaimed to be the cleanest in Mexican history (*Hoy*).

Savvy observers recognized the 1952 election not as a turning point toward democracy, but rather as confirmation of the president's control over succession through a process known as the *dedazo*. By attempting to impose the wrong man, Alemán had threatened the smooth succession of the presidency through the PRI. Cárdenas openly voiced his sympathy for Henríquez as a way of pressuring the president to find a more suitable candidate. The hesitant finger finally pointed to Adolfo Ruíz Cortines, a career civil servant with a reputation for honesty, just what the government needed to restore the appearance of propriety tarnished by corruption within the Alemán administration. Henceforth, with a simple wave of the finger, future presidents revealed *el tapado*, the official party's candidate, and therefore the man destined to govern Mexico for the next six years. Elections became mere formalities as all attention focused on the unveiling of the hidden one. Politicians within the PRI inner circle had an enormous stake in guessing correctly, for the first ones to jump on the official candidate's bandwagon were rewarded with prominent positions in the forthcoming administration. Those outside the ruling party who protested electoral fraud, as did the followers of Henríquez, could expect only government repression (Cosío Villegas 139).

Moreno also demonstrated his bourgeois affiliations by advocating philanthropy as the solution to Mexico's social problems. In *Un caballero a la medida* (1953), for example, Cantinflas plays a tailor who befriends a millionaire and convinces him to support charity, while in *El bombero atómico* (1952), agent 777 saves an orphan. In this way Cantinflas became a Mexican version of another charismatic Latin American film star, Eva Perón. Snubbed by elite matrons upon becoming First Lady of Argentina, Evita took over the charitable Milk Fund and made it an extension of her husband's corporatist government. While organized labor and the military formed the institutional foundations of the Perón regime, the lottery-like dream of receiving charity from Evita's foundation bought support and loyalty from those at the very bottom of Argentine society (Taylor 105). Cantinflas's philanthropic activities contributed in a similar fashion to spread the myth of the revolution among marginalized sectors of Mexican society .



Foto 1: The young Cantinflas as *peladito* in court, *Aquí está el detalle* (1940). Filmoteca de la UNAM.



Foto 2: The old Cantinflas as diplomat, *Su excelencia* (1966). Filmoteca de la UNAM.

#### THE FARCE OF JOSÉ LÓPEZ PORTILLO

While Cantinflas was firmly established within the official nationalist mythology, in the 1960s and 1970s he began to lose relevance in the lives of common people. Middle-class students found the popular culture icons of the 1930s sold-fashioned by comparison with the youth protest movement sweeping Europe and the United States. This new Mexican counterculture attempted to subvert PRI domination by fashioning an alternative authenticity in the guise of the *jipiteca*, an indigenous version of the hippie (Zolov). Meanwhile, hybrid cultures emerged within Mexico as mass media and improved infrastructure linked growing urban shantytowns with rural villages. Migrants to the city could now preserve elements of their indigenous identities even while accepting modernity in other ways, rendering the rootless *pelado* obsolete as a symbol of Mexico's urban poor (García Canclini). But both Mario Moreno

and the PRI had become too fossilized by this point to adapt to these changes. Rather than co-opting the challengers, the government resorted to repression, with open endorsement from the movies of Cantinflas.

As the "miracle" entered its third decade, in the 1960s, with continued annual economic growth in excess of 6 percent, and rising real wages for the first time since the Cardenas administration, Mexico seemed finally to have emerged as a progressive industrial economy. But far from a triumph for Alemán's development program, this was merely a prelude to its utter collapse. The theory of trickle-down growth depended on private enterprise to create jobs for the lower classes, but the capital-intensive nature of Mexican industrialization functioned precisely in reverse, widening the gap between rich and poor. This disparity of incomes threatened a genuine social crisis as Mexico reached its demographic peak, with population rising at annual rates of up to 3.4 percent during the crucial transition from the countryside to the city. Rather than attempting to resolve the inequalities by taxing business, the government financed industrialization through a dangerous reliance on foreign loans.

With the PRI's revolutionary legitimacy threatened by the growing numbers of impoverished Mexicans, Mario Moreno intervened in the current social debate through his film, *El padrecito* (1964). In the reformist spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Moreno plays a young priest assigned to his first parish in the picturesque colonial town of San Miguel de Allende. The entire community rejects him at first, starting with the resident priest, who fears being displaced from his congregation. The corrupt municipal president, wanting no challenge to his control over the town, sends a gang of bandits on horseback to shoot up the bus in an attempt to scare off the *padrecito*. Ordinary people shun him in the streets, but he gradually gains their trust through humor and optimism. He kneels down with children to shoot marbles, and rocks the cathedral by playing a Chuck Berry tune on the organ. The townspeople finally embrace him without reservation when he saves their fiesta after the regular bullfighter fails to show up. Doffing the curial robes to reveal his signature drooping pants, the *padrecito* gives a comic bullfight, all cape work and dash, with none of the bloodshed of picadors or *banderilleros*. As shouts of "ole" echo through the arena, the town notables attempt to retrieve a letter they had sent to the Archbishop demanding his removal. The mail had already been picked up, so the boss sends his masked henchmen to hold up the bus and carry off the petition. The motion picture thus takes stereotypes of Mexico as a traditional country ruled by political bosses and conservative clerics, with bloody bullfights and dangerous bandits, and refashions them into the humorous folklore of a modern nation.

Moreno also uses the film as a vehicle for lecturing Mexicans about their duties in this progressive society. The sacraments, which bring people in contact with the church throughout their lives, allow him to comment on the lack of discipline he perceives in the modern world. When a young couple asks to be married, he quizzes the bride on her recipe for *chilaquiles*, a simple breakfast dish made of leftover tortillas and chile sauce. The nervous woman leaves out the onion, and he insists that she wait until she has mastered *chiles en nogada* (stuffed chile peppers in walnut sauce), one of the most difficult preparations of Mexican cuisine. The *padrecito* likewise refuses to baptize a child when the parents wanted to pass on the father's old-fashioned name, Nepumoceno, while confession provides the opportunity to berate a young Romeo for chasing the daughters of various local dignitaries.

The *padrecito* even immerses himself in politics, although he remains moderate in his calls for social reform. He finances school supplies for a catechism class by rolling dice with the local merchant, then teaches the children of hacienda workers that salaries should be proportional to work, prompting their parents to demand higher wages. When accused of spreading communism, he responds by quoting the Mexican constitution as well as the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which first advocated social Catholicism. He also uses the collection plate as a means of redistributing wealth by demanding more from the political boss and then refunding money to a poor widow. Nevertheless, his progressivism falls far short of the liberation theology that later evolved from the Second Vatican Council in other Latin American countries. The *padrecito's* sermon ostensibly attacks the municipal president, but at the same time warns the common people to stay out of politics, scarcely a call for democratic reform. Moreover, he gives his approval to closed-door political machinations, winning concessions from the boss by cutting a deck of cards, rather than by leading the people to liberate themselves.

The sermons of *El padrecito* became a regular feature of Cantinflas movies, as even the middle classes began questioning the ability of the PRI to deliver economic, social, and political benefits. For example, *El señor doctor* (1965) was produced as an object lesson in professional responsibility at a time when medical interns were on strike for better working conditions in Mexico City hospitals. Cantinflas plays a provincial doctor returning to the capital, ostensibly to update his medical training, but also to remind urban doctors of traditional values. Once again Moreno trumpets the benefits of the institutional revolution, this time in the form of Seguro Social, the national health insurance program, while overlooking the fact that the poorest segments of Mexican society had no coverage. The film is no more realistic in its portrayal of an innocent country doctor reuniting elderly mothers with wayward sons, preventing the divorce of a sick child's parents, and performing brain surgery without prior training. Moreno's condescending lectures on caring for patients must have seemed particularly galling to the interns working at the Veinte de Noviembre Hospital. They had gone on strike at the end of 1964 to protest the withholding of their traditional Christmas bonus and to demand better working conditions. In a gesture of reconciliation, the newly

inaugurated president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, granted some concessions to the strikers. Then, in April 1965, immediately after Moreno completed filming, a dissident faction of young doctors walked out again, and this time the government took a hard line, forcing them back to work. When they struck again in August, riot police took over the hospital, jailing a number of prominent sympathizers. The premier of *El señor doctor* in October doubtless came as bitter medicine to the more than 200 strikers who were fired in the aftermath (Smith 126).

In his next film, *Su excelencia* (1966), Moreno presumes to enter the arena of international politics and lecture world leaders. Cantinflas appears as a petty diplomat from the Central American republic of Los Cocos responsible for stamping tourist visas in the communist bloc country of Pepeslavia. The embassy clerk suddenly acquires global significance when, first a Cold War peace conference gathers in the capital of Pepeslavia, and then a succession of palace revolutions in Los Cocos elevates him to the rank of ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. With Cantinflas holding the deciding vote between Eastern and Western powers, Pepeslavia assigns a beautiful secret agent to seduce him, but the blond spy becomes drunk at an embassy party and goes to bed with the wrong diplomat.<sup>5</sup> Cantinflas refuses, in the end, to cast his vote for either side, and spends a full fifteen minutes haranguing the rival powers in the name of world peace; nevertheless, he loses the moral high ground of non-alignment through his blatant anti-communism.<sup>6</sup>

Moreno directed his most virulent diatribes against Mexico's hippies. He first denounces the local counterculture in *El señor doctor* by showing the provincial doctor and his nurse girlfriend entering a nightclub filled with drugged-out beats. Cantinflas joins in the revelries at first, performing a jazz dance with an attractive young woman, while his girlfriend looks on from the sidelines.<sup>7</sup> But the scene ends with a police raid arresting the embarrassed couple and revealing drug paraphernalia and concealed weapons among the beats. The struggle between middle-class youth and the political establishment escalated in the summer of 1968, when a series of demonstrations by students and workers calling for democracy threatened to disrupt the Olympic games. On October 2, just weeks before the opening ceremony, the Mexican army crushed the movement, slaughtering hundreds of peaceful protesters in the Plaza of Three Cultures at Tlatelolco.

Moreno had tied his personal image to the 1968 Olympic games through a series of television commercials for the local organizing committee, and the personal embarrassment caused by the student protests became palpable in his first film after the Tlatelolco massacre. In *Un Quijote sin mancha* (1969) Cantinflas plays a legal cavalier dedicated to defending the residents of a poor neighbourhood. The movie recycles the nightclub scene from *El señor doctor*, although three years after the summer of love, the hippie youth wear fringed jackets instead of beat turtlenecks and dance go-go instead of jazz.<sup>8</sup> After the obligatory police raid, conspicuously revealing the presence of drugs, switchblades, and brass knuckles, Cantinflas proceeds to lecture the jipitecas in jail. His opening line, “¿Pelados? ¿Peludos!” asserts a claim of nationalist authenticity in a generational struggle between the “hairless” lumpen proletariat of the 1930s and the shaggy middle-class protesters of the 1960s. But in berating the *jipitecas* for smoking dope instead of working, Moreno reverses the roles of his earlier movie, *Ahí está el detalle*, conceding to them the carefree youthful spirit of Cantinflas, while he becomes the stodgy establishment figure. After all, the *detalle* originally referred to a marijuana cigarette.

Moreno's career had reached a terminal decline when reduced to such a cartoon parody of his former self. In *Un Quijote sin mancha* he tries to relive the triumphant courtroom scene from *Ahí está el detalle*; but where in 1940 Cantinflas subverts the entire courtroom with his fast-talking nonsense, the best he can manage in 1969 is to accuse the prosecutor of vacationing in Acapulco with his secretary. Attempts to restore his youthful complexion through heavy makeup, particularly in *El señor doctor*, make him look more like a puppet than a person. Most pathetic of all is his desire to have his youthful cake and eat it too by disguising himself in a mop-top wig and wire-rimmed glasses to dance with a go-go girl before lecturing the *jipitecas*. He appears, in the end, like an ambivalent old parson, seduced by the sins of youth and simultaneously terrified for his immortal soul.

Moreno had not lost touch completely with the problems of impoverished residents of Mexico City, but his intimate connections to the political elite undermined efforts to identify with them. As the homeless *pelado* from an inner city slum, Cantinflas no longer accurately represented the urban poor by 1970 because of the explosive growth of shantytowns, such as Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl, on the fringes of the capital. For the millions of people living in self-help housing, the primary concerns were obtaining public services, sewage, water, and electricity, as well as legal title to their land. Moreno addresses these concerns in *El ministro y yo* (1974), playing a notary public who types letters for illiterate citizens. The story begins with a friend asking his assistance in obtaining a permit from the land census bureau, appropriately the destination of squatters hoping to regularize land titles. He goes through a series of frustrating encounters with city functionaries, which doubtless struck familiar chords with the audience. But the movie becomes sheer fantasy when his letter of protest obtains an audience with the cabinet minister, who even more unrealistically appoints him to reform the inefficient bureaucracy. Cantinflas then proceeds to demonstrate, using fast-motion photography and slow, tedious lectures, how he thinks public officials should function in a democracy. Finally, he resigns the official position and returns to the plaza to write letters for common people. The audience may have appreciated some of his barbs; for example, when a superior asks if he had ever held a position in the

bureaucracy, Cantinflas replies: "No, I've always worked...independently." Nevertheless, he loses all credibility by portraying the cabinet minister as a compassionate man willing to invite a humble notary home for dinner to ask about the concerns of common people. Having dined with many top PRI officials, the millionaire actor may have believed that they dedicated themselves to public service, but it seemed uncharitable, at best, to blame all of Mexico's troubles on underpaid and overworked functionaries.

Moreno also sells out his beloved old gendarme character to the power elite in *Patrullero 777* (1977). Having gone thick in the middle at the age of sixty- six, he fits poorly in a police uniform, and drooping pants have become completely unthinkable. But advanced years do not stop him from carrying out his duties of beating up drug pushers, rescuing fallen women, and lecturing hippies. The combination seemed all the more absurd as corruption reached new heights within the Mexico City police department under Arturo "El Negro" Durazo. Appointed chief of police in 1976 by his childhood friend, President José López Portillo, Durazo was already under indictment in the United States for narcotics trafficking. His determination to extend his control over the cocaine trade became apparent when rival Colombian dealers turned up dead in the Tula River. Not even law-abiding citizens of Mexico City could escape his grasp, for patrolmen regularly cruised the crowded expressways during rush hour, collecting bribes for imaginary infractions in order to feed his relentless demands (LaFrance 238-41 ). But Cantinflas did his best to prop up the force's already strained legitimacy .

Age had meanwhile withered Mario Moreno alongside the institutional revolution that he symbolized. As a young comedian he had impressed critics with his range of facial expression; indeed, he could scarcely have become a national symbol, the synecdoche for a diverse society , without such adaptability. Public expectations for Cantinflas had always weighed heavily on Moreno, but they became unbearable with the realization that while the character was eternally young, the actor was growing old. In 1960 he underwent plastic surgery , which delayed the sagging, but accelerated the loss of elasticity in his skin. After the facelift he could no longer make the subtle gestures that had previously elevated his inane puns to the level of sublime humor. By the end of his career, facial paralysis had reduced him to a parody of Cantinflas, tragically confirming Plato's warning to actors, made nearly 2,400 years earlier, that "the mask they wear may become their face" (Quoted in Kohansky 179).

#### WHOSE CANTINFLADA?

When viewed critically, the films of Mario Moreno represented the course of Mexican history over four decades, from the promise of Cardenismo in the 1930s, through the mid-century economic "miracle", and finally the disillusionment following 1968. As a product of the popular theater of the 1930s, Cantinflas destabilized the Mexican social hierarchy in his first films, by showing the triumph of the mestizo "underdog" over Creole "fat cats." A decade later, after Moreno had become a millionaire businessman and an intimate friend of the president, he dedicated his films to supporting the authoritarian state and its program of economic growth. The actor had become tied so closely to the ruling party by the 1970s that his final films were crude propaganda works intended to prop up an increasingly unresponsive political system.

The tension between these multiple images of Cantinflas, representing the popular classes, the bourgeoisie, and the state, draws particular significance to the problem of audience reception. From virtually the moment Moreno achieved stardom, in the early 1940s, critics spoke with amazement about the constant laughter of filmgoers despite the low quality of his scripts. The Cuban critic Walfredo Piñero speculated that he chose "horrendous scripts" intentionally in order to achieve " the miracle of converting a shoddy ( chapucera) movie into a spectacle that brings a single expression from the public at the cinema exit: Formidable!" (quoted in Pérez Díaz 8).

The simple-minded and disjointed humor that critics found appalling may actually have been the secret to Cantinflas's great success in that it provided such wide latitude for interpretation by individual viewers. Each member of the audience could find-or invent-different jokes within his rambling discourses. Even the name " Cantinflas," a meaningless phrase slurred by some drunk in the car park a theater, allowed fans endless opportunities to decipher the secret meaning from some combination of "cantina" with " te inflas," a slang term for getting drunk (literally "inflate yourself"). Of course, one cannot overlook a certain coercive element to his double-entendres, the fear that a person who did not understand the joke was, by definition, its object. Much of the humor may have been no more real than the Emperor's new clothes. But this openness to audience reception applied to ideological content as well as humor, and so Moreno's endorsement of the PRI may have sounded to common viewers like just another meaningless cantinflada.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) Here I follow Knight (82). More pessimistic observers (e.g., Córdova) would find tragedy in Cárdenas and farce ever since.



- (2) I explore the deep roots of Cantinflas in Mexican popular culture more fully in *Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, forthcoming).
- (3) Translations from Cisneros (55-56) and Bartra (126).
- (4) Although filmed after the end of the Cárdenas administration, it was based on an earlier revista theater script with no story, just a succession of gags. The author, Alfredo Robledo, had sold Moreno the stage play for \$500, but sued to retain the movie rights.
- (5) This is a curious plot twist for a film made less than a year after the death of Moreno's Russian wife, Valentina.
- (6) A decade later, in a curious example of reality imitating art-or at least cinema- Mexican president Luis Echeverría presented himself as an unsuccessful candidate for head of the UN, perhaps with the hope of benefiting from Cantinflas's global presence.
- (7) The dance scene was filmed entirely in a long shot, making it impossible to tell if Mario Moreno actually performed the dance.
- (8) The juxtaposition of women in shifts and go-go boots (1963-66) and men in hippie fringe and wire-rimmed glasses (1966-69) reveals an interesting Mexican confluence of styles that were quite distinct in Britain and the United States.

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