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SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE FILMS OF CANTINFLAS
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Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=65429254005
ABSTRACT
The now deceased Mexican actor and comedian, Mario Moreno Cantinflas, known to millions of Latinos, left a legacy of unprecedented expression of social and cultural accounts of everyday life.

Cantinflas was successful in leaving a long-lasting perception that the underdog is worthy of recognition and consideration and should not be ignored, discarded or ridiculed.

My objectives for this paper are: 1) to express and underscore how the downtrodden, including the poor, the unskilled and uneducated, were depicted by Cantinflas with courtesy and dignity; 2) to document how Cantinflas poked fun at politicians, bureaucrats, and others within the establishment, and yet maintained his popularity; and 3) to document a feature and quality of a prominent and unforgettable Mexican who, in my view, successfully elevated the psyche of his people.

Keywords: Cantinflas, Mexican movies.
Mario Moreno Cantinflas is known by millions of people, particularly within Spanish speaking nations. The legacy and popularity of Cantinflas spans over a forty-year period, from his early days as street-level entertainer, to the carpa theater, to Mexican films and international films. This article proposes to document how Cantinflas depicted the oppressed and exploited, including the poor, the unskilled and uneducated, with courtesy, dignity, admiration, and consideration.

Additionally, Cantinflas haphazardly, but with intent, poked fun at politicians, bureaucrats and other representatives within the establishment and nonetheless, maintained his popularity. Inherent in accomplishing these objectives, the underlying message of social justice permeates in the films of the Mexican actor/comedian, and philanthropist, Mario Moreno Cantinflas.

Mario Moreno Reyes was born in Mexico City on August 12, 1911 to Pedro Moreno Esquivel and Soledad Reyes Guizar. He was one of five children. His father was a postal worker said to be a strict disciplinarian and his mother was the exemplary mother who sacrificed much for the sake of her family (Morales, 1996). Cantinflas’ early schooling went as far as the elementary level with no record of his formal education beyond the sixth grade. He is said to have joined the military service, but under false pretense, since he lied about his age claiming he was twenty-one years old when he was only sixteen years old (Morales, 1996). After eight months of military service his father tracked him down and brought Cantinflas home.
Mario Moreno tried and failed at many occupations, including shoe shining, boxing, cab driver, carwash, gofer, and street sweeper (Diccionario, 1995). These mundane and modest job experiences served him well much later when he portrayed some of these manual laborers in his films. At age twenty-three, Cantinflas married Valentina Ivanoff, of Russian ancestry, on October 27, 1934. Valentina was the daughter of Gregorio Ivanoff, who owned and directed the mobile or traveling theater, where Cantinflas had his first stage experience. The couple had no children.

However, Cantinflas had a son, Mario Ficachi, with the actress Charito Grandados (Morales, 1996). His professional career spanned fifty-one years and included live theater and national and international films. Cantinflas’ last movie, El Barrendero, was filmed in 1981. He died in Mexico City on April 20, 1993, and received an unprecedented and extraordinary public expression of sympathy and respect when thousands of Mexicans took to the streets to participate in the nationally televised funeral procession.

Other than his artistic manifestations immortalized in film, Cantinflas was well known for his activism with the labor unions and his philanthropic works and numerous recognitions and awards which merit mention and attention but are not the thrust of this study.

Cantinflas was in my hometown of Laredo, Texas, more than once. During the spring of 1942, Cantinflas traveled to Laredo to participate in a bullfight in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Years later, in 1979, Cantinflas was recognized as “Señor Internacional” by the local chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), in conjunction with the annual Washington’s Birthday Celebration (Laredo Morning Times, 2005).

**METHODOLOGY**

A primary analysis was done to view all of the available films from a special collection, including about thirty-four black and white and color films. The objective in the methodology of this study is not to present a film-by-film synopsis, but rather to identify com-
mon themes and patterns throughout Cantinflas’ lifetime work in films, as they relate to the message of social justice.

Additionally, a secondary analysis was conducted to do a thorough search of the literature. This analysis included research at the library of the University of Guanajuato in Guanajuato, Mexico, recognized for its specialization in arts. This has been one of my most enjoyable and heartwarming research studies.

**FINDINGS**

**The Early Period**

The findings are presented in two sections, namely the early period and the modern era. There is no precise agreement as to what constitutes the early period of Cantinflas’ career. However, there is general agreement that there was a turning point after which his films lost some of the more original quality to be replaced by much more predictable and repetitious scenarios (Monsiváis, 1997). Carlos Monsiváis, prominent Mexican cultural critic, found social relevance in Cantinflas films of the 1930s and early 1940s, before the craft became what he refers to “a cultural industry”.

My own assessment of the early period is from the 1930s through about the mid-1950s based on the distinction of originality, spontaneity, and creativity versus an overbearing preachy disposition and predictability noted in the films of the later period and of the parodies of American films, such as his *Romeo y Julieta*, *Los Tres Mosqueteros*, and *Gran Hotel*.

There are many accounts that claim the genius of Cantinflas was particularly evident in the art of improvisation, while some film critics affirmed that it was his incomprehensible soliloquies that set Cantinflas in a category all of his own (Pilcher, 2001). Table 1 lists Cantinflas’ major films of the early period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Feature Film</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td><em>No te engañes, corazón</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td><em>Así es mi tierra</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1937 | Águila o Sol
1939 | El signo de la muerte
1939 | Siempre listo en tinieblas
1939 | Jengibre contra dinamita
1939 | Cantinflas boxeador
1940 | Ahi está el detalle
1940 | Cantinflas ruletero
1940 | Cantinflas y su prima
1941 | Ni sangre, ni arena
1941 | El gendarme desconocido
1942 | Los tres mosqueteros
1942 | El circo
1943 | Romeo y Julieta
1944 | Gran Hotel
1945 | Un día con el Diablo
1946 | Soy un prófugo
1947 | ¡A volar joven!
1948 | El supersabio
1948 | El mago
1949 | El portero (Puerta, joven)
1949 | Bonjour, Mexique (on stage), renamed Cantinflas in Paris
1950 | El bombero atómico
1950 | El siete machos
1951 | Si yo fuera diputado
1952 | El señor fotógrafo
1953 | Un caballero a la medida

**The Modern Era**

The modern era follows from the mid-1950s of the early period to the last of his films with El Barrendero in 1981. Table 2 inventories Cantinflas’ major films of the modern era.

The major roles in these films are of the working class, which gives these generally blue-collar occupations visibility and empathetic status.
There is consensus among the critics that the second half of his films became highly predictable series of sequels where the only change was the role Cantinflas portrayed whether it was a policeman, a delivery boy, or other blue-collar type occupation (Pilcher, 2001).

Cantinflas’s facial movements and body language became more controlled and scripted. According to Castelazo (1970), his plastic surgery deadened his capacity to make people laugh just by looking at his facial expressions.

Cantinflas, nevertheless, drew the crowds and the past and present generations enjoyed his comedy, regardless of the critics’ comparisons to his early or later periods of filmmaking.

My own observation of the later period was Cantinflas’ loss of spontaneity, replaced by a moralistic disposition that asserted to stress his subtle but clear point.

His message was often a criticism against politicians, the establishment, landowners, and bureaucrats, who abused their positions of power and created obstacles that prevented the populace from providing a better lifestyle for themselves and their families.

For example, his scripts addressed that wages were kept low, rents high, and people attempting to access government services faced delays, a maze of referrals, and illogical requests for documents.

In the film Su Excelencia, a man has aged after waiting thirty-five years to get a visa, but is asked to bring his death certificate or he must promise not to die before a certain date.

In El Ministro y yo, Cantinflas is asked whether he has ever had anything to do with bureaucracies, to which he replies, “No, siempre he trabajado” [No, I’ve always worked].

His message to the politicians is to create a Mexico that is a cleaner nation with clean streets, free of fraud and corruption, with water and air pollution under control, with freedom of speech, free to strike against injustice and to demand fair wages and benefits.
Cantinflas’ slogan to the politicians reads: *A la hora de votar, promesas; a la hora de cumplir, excusas* [When it is time to vote, promises; when it is time to perform (the promise), excuses.].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Feature Film</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td><em>Yo, Colón</em> (on stage)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td><em>Abajo el telón</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td><em>La vuelta al mundo en 80 días</em></td>
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<td>1956</td>
<td><em>El bolero de Raquel</em></td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td><em>Ama a tu prójimo</em></td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td><em>Sube y baja</em></td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td><em>El analfabeta</em></td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td><em>Pepe</em></td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td><em>El extra</em></td>
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<td>1963</td>
<td><em>Entrega inmediata</em></td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td><em>El padrecito</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td><em>El señor doctor</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td><em>Su Excelencia</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td><em>Por mis pistolas</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td><em>Un Quijote sin mancha</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>El profe</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Don Quijote cabalga de nuevo</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td><em>Conserje en condominio</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>El ministro y yo</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td><em>Patrullero 777</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>El barrendero</em></td>
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**COMMON THEMES**

Cantinflas’ comedy was wrapped in confusion and double-talk that became his trademark and came to be labeled as *cantinfladas* as in “*les falta ignorancia*” [they lack ignorance] (*El bolero de Raquel*, 1957) or “*no me entiendo, pero sí sé lo que digo*” [I don’t understand myself, but I do know what I am saying] (*El Padrecito*, 1964).

The message of social justice is more covert during the early period and became more pronounced during his later period of fil-
mmaking. Cantinflas became the voice of the invisible and marginal workers. His portrayals of the trivialized and imperceptible laborers bring these workers out of the shadows to the front seat of public consciousness.

A salient theme is his respect for women, children, the elderly, and the dignity of the common laborer. A maid is not a sirvienta, but a trabajadora doméstica liberada [liberated domestic worker]. In El Barrendero, the street sweeper is a whole man with feelings, thoughts, and ideas. No one can walk away from the film without realizing the value and worth which the street sweeper provides to society.

A common factor throughout his films is that Cantinflas is always the leading man, and the plot places him at the center of attention. His presence monopolizes every scene.

As such, the roles Cantinflas depicted received maximum attention and revealed insights into the characters that proved believable and asked for empathy from the audience. These roles portrayed the man-in-the-street, better yet, the working man-in-the-street, while his comical side liked to avoid work and ease his way through life, claiming that it is simpler to finish life in poverty to have more tranquility. When asked what he does for a living, in Ahí está el detalle, Cantinflas replies that he does essentially nothing and on Sundays he helps himself by doing less.

Among the many roles Cantinflas played were that of an adult illiterate student, a gofer, a ranch hand, a barber, a priest, a rural doctor, a street sweeper, a photographer, an actor, a stagehand, a taxi driver, a law apprentice, an elevator attendant, a handyman, and a street vendor, including selling tacos and newspapers.

With each role the viewer is afforded the opportunity to understand and to empathize with the leading man and to delve into his world with all of its challenges, struggles, joys, and surprises, not unlike those of most other men.

Another prevalent feature in his films is that Cantinflas is never a married man. He is a bachelor in cautious pursuit of the pretty
ladies. His single status affords him the pleasure of chasing and flirting amorousely with young and attractive ladies, but rarely with any serious intent to commit to marriage. To impress the ladies, Cantinflas sometimes says a few words in English, which he thinks makes him “sexy”.

By today’s standards, Cantinflas’ films would likely be rated “G” for general audiences, since there is no nudity, violence, nor adult language.

As a single man, Cantinflas struggles to make ends meet and takes whatever jobs come his way. It is not unusual for Cantinflas to boast about his jobs. His representations of these various manual labor roles include his delight in accepting a free meal any time it is offered, and most especially one of simple and typical Mexican dishes, like rice and beans or tacos. Cantinflas would remark that one never knew when the next meal would come, so it is not wise to let a tasty treat go to waste.

In instances when children are present, they are usually Cantinflas’ godchildren or children he is temporarily supervising for a sick neighbor, a friend, or a relative. Cantinflas treats children with great warmth and affection, which the children reciprocate. Cantinflas champions education for all children as the best way to prevent the powerful from exploiting the ignorant. Cantinflas belabors the point that our rights are where our obligations start.

As Cantinflas has praises for children, another theme is his respect towards the poor. Cantinflas refers to the poor as honorable people who have been dealt a bad deal, especially if the poor are not getting fair wages to live a dignified life. Cantinflas asserts that the sun is the warm blanket of the poor and winning the lottery is their dream.

In the film Su Excelencia, Cantinflas gives a lengthy discourse where he expresses specific views, such as that the State should help the proletariat class because it is through their hard labor that the wealth of the State and of private corporations accumulates. The villains in Cantinflas films are usually bureaucrats, pawnbrokers, and
wealthy landowners who exploit workers and the like, whose wealth is concentrated in the few elites, while the populace suffers under their control.

Historians and social scientists have referenced caricatures of Cantinflas to make a point of the civil rights struggle. For example, historian Thomas Guglielmo (2006) documents the account of cartoonist Ernesto García Cabral, who depicted Cantinflas in caricature facing restricted entry into a Texas restaurant where no Mexicans were allowed. Cantinflas responds by painting a sign outside a Mexican restaurant where he writes: “Aquí come cualquiera, hasta Tejanos” or “Anyone may eat here, even Texans”.

Orchard and Padilla (2005) place Cantinflas as an icon of Mexican cinematography and the best-known pelado whose position below the urban proletariat facilitated entertainment for the masses of the population. Koegel (2005) recognizes Cantinflas as a master strategist on the use of parody to simultaneously expound humor and dissidence.

The business sector has also observed of the influence of the message in the films of Cantinflas. Moreno (2004), for example, relates that in the film, El gendarme desconocido, Cantinflas arrests a storeowner for diluting milk with water. The incident was in response to the importation of powdered milk from the U.S. Kraft Company.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Cantinflas left his mark in areas beyond the Mexican film industry. Charlie Chaplin described him as “the world’s greatest comedian”.

Cantinflas died in Mexico City on April 20, 1993 (Smith, 1992). His funeral procession was unparalleled for an actor or other heroes of his time. Cantinflas received many forms of recognitions and awards throughout his lifetime and from various parts of the hemisphere. The Inter-American Music Council (CIDEM) of the Organization of American States (OAS) awarded Cantinflas its Diploma of Honor (Casciero, 1994).
Ambassador João C. Baena Soares and Secretary General of the OAS said that Cantinflas was “not only a great comic, but a great interpreter of the hopes and misadventures of Latin America”, adding that he was “indissolubly linked to the desires of the people of this hemisphere for a better future” (Américas, 1993).

New York paid him homage in 1983, and Diego Rivera, one of Mexico’s greatest artists and muralist, immortalized Cantinflas in his mural at the Teatro Insurgentes in Mexico City (Diccionario, 1995).

The wide array and wealth of a lifetime of filmmaking, place Cantinflas as one of the most unforgettable characters, whose charm brings a smile to the faces of those of us, fortunate to know about him and to feel as if we personally knew him.

When his films are taken in their entirety, the roles Cantinflas deliberately chose to portray demand attention, respect, and reflection to an otherwise marginalized, invisible, taken-for-granted set of characters, whose unappreciated occupations serve the needs of society in meaningful ways.

A fitting cantinflada for a closing comment from El analfabeto is: “Justicia tarda porque es ciega y no sabe por dónde anda, pero llega” [Justice comes late because Justice is blind and doesn’t know where it’s going, but Justice will come.]

REFERENCES


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