

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

YOU ARE MISSING THE POINT / Ahi Esta El Detalle (1940)

Juan Bustillo Oro

OVERVIEW

Ahí Está el Detalle was Cantinflas's (Mario Moreno's) breakthrough film, although it was his twelfth one, and he had already tried out a bit of his "peladito" character. In this film, however, the "peladito" flowered with all the elements that would become his trademark: slouchy pants, tiny brimmed hat, long-sleeved long-underwear Henley-type shirt, tiny towel / rebocito on his shoulder, a long, thin cigar, and a quick-witted, alert look on his face. Thanks to this, and the franchise that would follow, *Ahí Está el Detalle* is now considered a classic, and perhaps the best of Cantinflas's oeuvre, although one can argue that the Cantinflas franchise, with the collaboration of screenwriter and director Miguel Delgado with the highly improvisatory genius of Cantinflas, is what actually propelled Cantinflas into commercial success. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the fact that *Ahí Está el Detalle* established the "peladito" as an unexpected hero, just at a time in Mexico when, for the first time, the working class would have had a chance to go to the cinema and to identify with the subversive humor of the film. Cantinflas not only rehumanized and lionized a significant sector of the population that had been reviled for being poor, he, and his films also promoted the view that the criminal classes and the elite (who held high social and governmental positions), were essentially the same. Far from a moralistic diatribe, however, *Ahí Está el Detalle* is a joyous comedy of errors and a celebration of the "picaresque" anti-hero whose antics delight audiences who recognize and identify with the freedom-loving subversions of the protagonist, Cantinflas.

CHARACTERS

Cantinflas --	protagonist
Cayetano Lastre --	wealthy owner
Dolores del Paso --	wife of Cayetano
Leonardo del Paso --	long-lost brother of Dolores (Dolores pretends Cantinflas is Leonardo) who is, supposedly about to come into a sizeable inheritance
Cayetano Regalado-	con artist and associate of the real Leonardo
Clotilde Regalado --	girlfriend of Leonardo del Paso, who generated the letters used for blackmail
Paz --	Girlfriend and cook for Cayetano
Bobby,	the fox terrier (now rabid)
Bobby Lechuga --	con artist who is trying to blackmail Dolores del Paso

SYNOPSIS

Cantinflas is a ne'er-do-well scamp who likes to visit his girlfriend, Paz, at dinnertime at the palatial estate where she works as a cook and is always willing to give Cantinflas leftovers from the family meals. One night, Bobby, the family's terrier, appears to have been infected with rabies, so a terrified Paz implores Cantinflas to shoot the rabid dog dead. In the meantime, another creature named Bobby -- in this case, a notorious con artist, Bobby Lechuga, shows up to blackmail Dolores, with knowledge of Dolores's affair. Cayetano, Dolores's gangster husband, unexpectedly arrives on the scene, and catches Bobby. Bobby runs off and drops his wallet, which is conveniently scooped up by the quick-witted Cantinflas. Cantinflas then shoots Bobby, the rabid dog, just as the police show up, looking for Bobby Lechuga. Dolores does not want Cayetano to know that she has been having an affair, so she pretends that Cantinflas is Leonardo del Paso, her long estranged brother. The police do not find Bobby Lechuga, but they do find Cantinflas, who calmly explains that he shot Bobby because he had to, and his girlfriend insisted

on it. The police search Cantinflas and find Bobby's wallet. Cayetano is quick to defend Cantinflas because he wants the world to believe that Cantinflas is Leonardo del Paso, Dolores's brother, and also a part of the estate that must be present at the reading of the will. So, Cantinflas goes along with the ruse, until the moment in which it is not convenient; namely, when he is on trial for the murder of Bobby, whom he calmly explains he had to kill, due to the fact that he was rabid. Cantinflas still thinks the police are speaking of Bobby, the terrier, and not Bobby, the con artist. At that moment, the real wife of the real Leonardo bursts into the courtroom with her many children in tow. She demands back child support for their 13 children, since she has read in the newspaper that Dolores and Leonardo Del Paso will inherit a great deal of money. After a comical interchange with the judge, it becomes clear that Cantinflas shot a dog, not a con man, and that he is not really Leonardo, the con artist and irresponsible father. At the end, Cantinflas is cleared, and he's back Paz's kitsch, enjoying a free dinner.

THE STORY

The scene opens – Cantinflas is skulking about the mansion where his girlfriend, Paz, is working as a maid. Cantinflas appears conveniently at dinnertime. Paz whistles an “all clear” signal and Cantinflas. The “all clear” whistle is important because “Bobby,” the fox terrier, is a total menace, and will frenetically bark and alert the household to the presence of a stranger. In this case, it's Cantinflas, the useless moocher.

Bobby Lechuga, the Con Artist: On this particular night, another man is skulking about. His name is Bobby Lechuga, and he's there to connect with Dolores del Paso, the wife of the owner of the house. Bobby has seduced Dolores. He does not really love her. He's a con artist and his sole intention is to gather evidence of her unfaithfulness and then to extort money from her.

Bobby, the rabid terrier: In the meantime, Bobby, the fox terrier, has come down with rabies. Paz (the girlfriend), is afraid of being bitten a rabid dog, and so she asks Cantinflas to shoot it dead.

A dropped wallet: Just as Cantinflas is getting ready to pull out his pistol and shoot poor, rabid Bobby the fox terrier, Bobby, the con man, arrives. He pulls out a cigarette, and drops his wallet in the process. Cantinflas, the street smart peladito, is not about to walk by a wallet lying in the road, so he picks it up as he goes into the house.

Dinner or the dog? Cantinflas is hungry and ready to eat his free meal at his girlfriend's place of employment. However, Paz is afraid of the rabid Bobby, and she tells Cantinflas in no uncertain terms “Kill that rabid dog or I'll never even look at you again!”

Cantinflas, a long lost brother? Bobby, the con man, is supposedly caught visiting Dolores red-handed. Hearing his arrival, Paz hides Cantinflas and later does the same with Bobby. Cayetano finds and catches Cantinflas, assuming he is his wife's lover, but Dolores pretends that Cantinflas is her long-estranged brother, Leonardo del Paso. Being that his father-in-law (Dolores and Leonardo's father) needed the presence of all heirs to read and distribute their inheritance, Cayetano (whose business have been slow lately) begins treating Cantinflas like a king in order to gain his trust. Naturally, Cantinflas takes advantage of the situation.

Will the real Leonardo please stand up? Things get complicated when Clotilde Regalado, Leonardo's long-term girlfriend, with many children, reads a newspaper clip mentioning Leonardo and the reading of the will, and makes her presence in the company of all of the couple's sons (and then some). Cantinflas tries to tell the truth about his identity to Cayetano, but as Dolores needs “Leonardo” to conceal the blackmail and Clotilde needs him to recognize and support her children, he continues to play along with the charade.

Cantinflas, the “convenient” Leonardo: Fully aware that Cantinflas is not the real Leonardo, she still moves over to Cayetano's house with the rest of her family, who are as much freeloaders as

Cantinflas is. Intending for "Leonardo" to settle down, as well as to prevent him running away from "his" family and, by extension, further delay the reading of the will, Cayetano arranges for "Leonardo" to marry Clotilde.

The wrong Bobby: Cantinflas hesitates and tries as much as he can to avoid being married, and when he is about to be forced to do so by using his fingerprints, policemen arrive at the house, looking for Leonardo. Confusion arises, as Bobby Lechuga has been killed and Cantinflas admits to killing "Bobby" (the dog, not the gangster), a confusion exacerbated by the fact that Bobby's wallet (which he picked up at the beginning) is found among his clothes, so he is arrested and put on trial.

A convoluted confession: In a long courtroom sequence, Cantinflas again confesses to killing "Bobby" the rabid dog, but as almost everyone in court thinks he is Leonardo confessing to the murder of Bobby the con-artist, he is inevitably found guilty.

Everything is back to "normal:" Fortunately for him, the real Leonardo appears and explains about Bobby's blackmailing and the fact that he killed the extorter in self-defense. Cantinflas is fully acquitted and returns to his old antics, waiting outside Cayetano's mansion for Paz's whistle at dinnertime and then entering the kitchen to eat.

THEMES

Mistaken Identity: What makes this film have a screwball comedy feel is the fact that there is so much mistaken identity, and also that the mistakes both reveal certain realities about social order and class, as well as human traits such as greed and self-interested plotting. It is hard to find even one single character (except perhaps for the doomed dog, Bobby) who is not misrepresenting himself or herself in some way, and manipulating others to further their own designs. It is funny enough that Cantinflas is mistaken for Leonardo, but even funnier that Bobby the dog is confused for Bobby Lechuga, the blackmailer.

Language, used in a satire of sophistication: Cantinflas is in fine form in the courtroom when he must explain his situation, who he is, and why he killed Bobby. He does so in a rapid-fire cascade of semi-nonsensical statements that attempt to explain why he killed the dog in a legal framework (except Cantinflas knows nothing of the law, and even less of legal terms, so he invents them along the way). His linguistic embroideries are not helpful at all, and in fact, get him convicted all the more rapidly.

Society's elites are criminals: One of the most consistent themes in the early Cantinflas films is the notion that behind their glossy exteriors and despite their magnificent, aristocratic bearing and settings, the rich are nothing more than common criminals. In fact, they're worse than "common" criminals because they tend to be less intelligent than the quick-witted Cantinflas. In 1940, this message was a powerful one because Mexico had just completed land reform that, in theory, eliminated social inequality. But, in the world of Cantinflas, the elites are more firmly entrenched than ever, thanks to their deep-seated criminal nature.

Romantic Love and a Full Stomach are one and the same: Although there is a lot of talk of "love" in *Ahí Está El Detalle*, there is not a single case of actual romantic love. Instead, people have relationships with each other (boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, husband, mistress, con artist, blackmailer, when there is something in it for them. For Cantinflas, romantic love with his girlfriend coincides with her job, and the fact that he can freeload a free dinner when the coast is clear at the location where she works. Here romantic love and a full stomach are basically one and the same.

The rehumanization of the "Peladito": Cantinflas started out his career playing the part of a "pelado" – a term that was invented to describe a the kind of shiftless urban vagrant that was common in Mexico City in the 1920s. This character evolved from the so-called léperos, who

were shiftless, worked only the most casual job and sometimes became involved in petty crime. In Mexico City, the “léperos” and then later, the “pelados,” were looked down upon for being of a lower order, and inferior both morally and racially. The pelado was utterly shameless about being a bum; and in fact, a pelado often fancied himself a lady’s man. The term, “pelado” means “peeled,” and refers to the shaved head of the individual – shaved in jail to avoid head lice. They were without a doubt on society’s bottom rung. Cantinflas created a character that he called a “peladito” –definitely a bum and on society’s lowest rung, but instead of coming from the jails, he came from the “carpas” – carnival tents. So, Cantinflas, the “peladito” wore a tiny battered hat, long-sleeved shirt that looks like long underwear, ruffled underwear (part of a kind of clown costume), saggy pants, a tiny twist of cloth over his shoulder, and not much more. No handkerchief, no jacket, no tie. Like the regular pelado, Cantinflas, the *peladito*, is a complete bum who likes to spend his time with his buddies gambling at dominoes (where he has no compunction about cheating), sponging off a girlfriend and her mother (who has an eye out for a husband for her daughter), petty larceny, and being generally lazy and useless. In the case of Cantinflas, he’s entertaining because he’s so quick and also so shameless. He may have a job, but he usually manages to do as little as possible. He’s quick-witted and really quite funny because he makes the stuffy, snobbish people around him look ridiculous.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Cantinflas: *Aquí Está el Detalle* (1940) is the significant breakthrough that Cantinflas had with his peladito character. He has a girlfriend who is a cook at a wealthy person’s house, and Cantinflas likes to show up for dinner. He strolls in as though he owns the place, and then makes himself quite at home. The quirky comedy of errors (and mistaken identity) happens when the dog, Bobby, seems to have rabies, and Cantinflas is pressured into shooting and killing the dog. As luck would have it, thieves come in and rob the place; plus the owner is, himself, a criminal (although he seems to be part of the elites). In fact, it’s a feature of early Cantinflas films that the elites are actually criminals. There are a number of mistaken identities – the criminal named Bobby turns up dead, which not helpful for Cantinflas, who confesses that he did kill Bobby, not knowing that they are referring to a person and not a dog. The film is a tour de force for Cantinflas as he does all the things he later becomes famous for – a rapid, flimflam double-speak when asked a complex or uncomfortable question, a complete and total aversion to real work, a weakness for games of chance and frittering away time in low places.

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. Here, Cantinflas is the catalyst who makes the duplicity of Dolores very obvious, while he also makes Bobby Lechuga’s blackmailing designs come to light. He also reveals the selfish motives of the family, and he exposes them for their greed, and also their willingness to stoop to literally any level to get ahead.

Wittgensteinian language play: The place where Cantinflas practices his renowned word play is in a court of law, which is essentially a construct of words, both written and spoken. Cantinflas defends himself in a court of law, but, knowing nothing of the law or legal terminology, Cantinflas must make it up as he goes. Rather than being formative, however, Cantinflas reduces all language to a kind of noise or nothingness. It is subversive and humorous, but it’s also rather sad because it illustrates the ultimate emptiness of language as a form of communication to advance society.

Aversion to real work: Cantinflas, the classic “peladito” is by nature a bum, a scapegrace, and a shameless moocher. His girlfriend works for a very wealthy man, and so, by virtue of her position, is able to open the gate at a certain time, and allow Cantinflas to come in have a free dinner. In the fact that Cantinflas would prefer to not have a normal, 8 – 5, petit bourgeois life makes him a symbol of total freedom in a number of different areas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are several confusions of identity in *Ahí Está el Detalle*, all of which lead to a humorous encounter, and also a “stripping bare” of the true nature of the individuals. Please identify two or three confusions of identity and explain 1) what they were confused about; 2) the personality of each of the individuals were confused for another; 3) Why it matters – what the film ultimately tells us about our human condition, etc.
2. Cantinflas has often been considered a trickster figure whose very presence in the work of literature or film makes it clear that there will be extraordinary things that can / should happen. Please find a scene that illustrates how his antics set off a chain of precipitative occurrences that result in scenes that satirize or reveal something about society, or that lead to the ultimate denouement or outcomes of the story.
3. Some of the humor of *Ahí Está el Detalle* occurs because of the use of stereotypes and the situations that they are put in that makes them absurd and satirical. Please identify an example of the use of a cultural or gender stereotype and explain how and why it is satirizing society. A few examples could be the role of the “peladito” (bum) who simply refuses to conform to middle class mores, the young, hard-working woman who falls inexplicably in love with said peladito, the gangsters who are indistinguishable from society’s elites, and the abandoned worn-out mother of eight young children, looking for justice.

ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



Movie poster for the film, released in 1940.



Cantinflas caresses his girlfriend, Paz, who works in the home of a wealthy industrialist (who resembles a gangster). We can see Cantinflas in his “peladito” regalia: rolled brimmed hat, cheap cigar, ragged necktie, ragged scrap of cloth on the shoulder, and pseudo-moustache. He is a particular kind of bum – a quick-witted street urchin who resists all the trappings of middle class morality. That said, one can argue that the “peladito” character can only survive when there is a rising middle class, because otherwise there is not enough surplus in the economy for survival.



In a scene that evokes that of monster films or horror, Paz gives Cantinflas a pistol and begs him to go out and shoot Bobby, the fox terrier that has become rabid. This event sets off a series of wild coincidences and mistaken identities resulting in the exposure of blackmailing and criminal behavior in high places.



Dolores tells her husband that Cantinflas is her long-lost brother, Leonardo. He is intrigued because having Leonardo would enable an inheritance to be distributed.



Cantinflas looks on in horror as Clothilde, the real Leonardo's long-term girlfriend, shows off her baby. She needs him to go along with the charade in order to have a big payday. Clothilde is the absolute archetype of the kind "ball and chain" Cantinflas holds in horror. Not only does she have 8 hungry children, she is not young, nor is she pretty.



Cantinflas in court, surrounded by police. He is talking to his attorney, who is a bit mystified. Cantinflas appears in court still garbed in his peladito attire.



Cantinflas tries, quite hilariously, to explain why and how he killed Bobby (the dog), without knowing that the attorney is referring to Bobby Lechuga, the gangster. This shot is styled like many of those found in courtroom dramas, which were popular in the 1930s and 1940s in Mexico.



A frustrated judge asks the attorney why there was an identity mix-up in the first place; Bobby Lechuga, the gangster, and Bobby, the fox terrier, were not at all the same. The case is dismissed as the real Leonardo shows up (showing that Cantinflas is not Leonardo), and he is guilty of killing Bobby Lechuga, the gangster.