“On the Silent Art”
Francisco Zamora (as Jerónimo Coignard)
*El Universal Ilustrado* (Mexico City), July 28, 1921

Part of a group of intellectuals that clustered around the Mexico City magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* (1917–34), Nicaraguan journalist Francisco Zamora was known for his series of chronicles penned under the pseudonym Jerónimo Coignard. By contrast with fellow *El Universal Ilustrado* writers Carlos Noriega Hope and Marco-Aurelio Galindo, who were avid film enthusiasts, Zamora wrote about the medium with a combination of skepticism and bemusement, highlighting (but also skewering) anxieties surrounding its social effects. “On the Silent Art” charts cinema’s local horizon of reception, defined both by international modernist movements like Dadaism (chronicled in the magazine’s pages), and melodramatic cultural repertoires specific to Latin American contexts, in which serial literature and popular song were key points of reference.

Translation

An ardent youth of twenty, who by his own account is a “Dadaist,” wrote, in a letter full of adolescent pretension—a letter not, of course, addressed to me—“I have never in my life seen anything more idiotic than the unorthodox opinions of Jerónimo Coignard about the GREAT art of the cinematograph, which we love so.” This, by the way, has come to be the opinion of many youths who are not “Dadaists,” nor residents of steamy Tampico, nor pretentious, but who are in love with this world with celluloid borders that the small call a great art.

Yesterday, however, another youth who smokes a pipe, speaks English and uses horn-rimmed glasses, affirmed to me: “I can’t conceive that there are people, like the devotees of the cinematograph, who seek to reduce life to two dimensions, flattening it onto the screen.”

This, however, is exceptional. I believe that the cinematograph is not worth discussing as one of the fine arts. It seems to me very natural that youths who only recently stopped reading the stories of Green, and who even more recently abandoned their readings of Jules Verne, find great aesthetic values in the cinematograph, the vigorous son of North American ingenuousness and the artificial, feeble, and puerile son of European senescence. Why, then, make an effort when life and good taste will teach them in time? My God! I have great
MUNDO
DE
ARTEMA
MUDO

DANIEL
COIGNARD
ILUSTRACION
J.S. DUVARTE

LAURA ISABEL SERNA and RIELLE NAVITSKI | EPHEMERATA
respect for instruction, but goodness! I have never dreamed of dedicating myself
to such an honorable and useful profession.

In spite of the opinions of the young cinematophiles and “Dadaists” of the
four corners of the Republic, it’s not possible for me to take “that little art we love
so” [ese pequeño arte que tanto amamos] seriously.¹ I even suspect—God forgive
me!—that it is producing a stupefaction in what newspaper editorialists call
“collective consciousness,” a stupefaction similar to that produced in the world
by the literature of Georges Onhet [sic] and the novels of Mr. Pérez Escrich.²

Recently, for example, I heard roll out from on high in a theater balcony,
a voice that may have come—so strong and deep it seemed—from the throat of
a buyer of cattle for the slaughter:


The chanteuse at whom the petition was directed smiled, inclined her
slender body, and said yes. Do you know “The Fatal Tango”? It’s an item from
the police blotter set to maudlin music. A villain seduces a girl while dancing
the tango; he dishonors her, still dancing the tango; he abandons her after she
has a child, still “tangoing”; and forgets all about her, always to the strains of
the tango. It is, as you will have noted, a truly awful [fatal] tango. So this was
what was being requested, with great anticipation, by the strong deep voice of
the buyer of cattle for slaughter.

You will already have realized that “The Fatal Tango” could be—except for
the music—a film of American manufacture, if an ending was added in which
the seducer was arrested by the police and obliged to marry the girl or pay her
compensation in the amount of two thousand dollars.

I suspect that this inclination toward sentimental vulgarity is of cin-
ematographic origin, in a direct paternal line. Oh! the cinematograph has a
decisive influence on the childishness of the masses. It is not I—who cares little
about cinema—who says so, but Mr. Henry Olive, a North American painter who
has just finished a series of portraits of the leading screen artists. Note how he
expresses himself:

“The cinema is making the faces of Americans more mobile, more plastic.
Film artists have taught their faces to register emotions with the rapidity with
which the surface—note how Mr. Olive cinematizes—with which the surface of
a calm lake registers the passing of a summer breeze. And this is not only true
for actors, but also for millions of film fans. The admirers of Gloria Swanson,
for example, have acquired all the “mannerisms” that the artist manifests on
the screen; and Wallace Reid’s way of raising his eyebrows has been copied by
a great number of youths.”

Alas, we too know of such things. Pina Menichelli has taught a great num-
ber of our girls to twist, to undulate, to stretch, and to kiss with suction—when
previously they walked normally and kissed with their mouths open, like children. And it’s the fault of Antonio Moreno that many of our youths believe themselves Adonis-like horseback riders, during the dull, placid hours when they shout nonsense at passing women while glued to the walls of Sanborns or El Globo.³

But—dammit—how could it be any other way? If the cinematograph relies on celluloid [gelatina], how the hell wouldn’t it turn its devotees gelatinous? Tremble, my friends, because the shimmy—which also has something to do with gelatin—and the cinematograph will end up softening the busts of our women and the hearts of our dancing-cinematophile youths.

Translated by Rielle Navitski

Notes

1. This affectionate phrase was used by El Universal Ilustrado’s writers to refer to cinema.

2. Zamora refers to Georges Ohnet (1848–1918), French author of popular literature, and Enrique Pérez Escrich (1829–1897), a Spanish writer known for his serial novels and plays.

3. Respectively, a restaurant and café popular with upper middle-class Mexico City residents.