TRANSLATED ORIGINAL TEXTS WITH INTRODUCTIONS

The Realm of the Ridiculous: Those Who Go to the Movies
D. Juan el Bobo [Don Juan the Fool]
El Universal (Mexico City), June 6, 1920

Signed only with a pseudonym (we have been unable to identify the author), this lively account of film exhibition in Mexico City chronicles the wide range of activities that might take place in the space of the movie theater, from flirting to caring for children to consuming meals or loudly expressing displeasure with the film or projectionist. While a number of journalists in the period commented on the atmosphere of working-class movie theaters in varying tones of amusement or alarm, this journalist also takes upper- and middle-class venues as targets for satire.

The text’s illustrations, rendered by cartoonist Clemente Islas Allende, offer vivid vignettes of incidents inside the movie theater. Counterclockwise from top left, the captions read: “others go to movies to do anything at all, except watch the film”; “... and some to sleep ...”; “A baby gets angry, screams, stomps, the audience gets exasperated, the music stops, and Pearl White ...”; “The rest come to wait for their sweetheart [gata]”; “Oh! ... Look! ... They’re killing her! ... They’re murdering her ... [She] screams and screams, until the police intervene”; “[He] bothers everyone, sounding out words aloud, more than the scenes he’s interested in the intertitles”; “And in the climactic scene, a cowboy blocks everything [with his hat].”

Translation

No epidemic has been unleashed on the world with greater force than the epidemic of cinema. Neither the invasion of the Huns, under the command of Attila, nor the avalanche of “boches” led by [Kaiser] Wilhelm II, has had the overwhelming force of the cinema’s conquest, which has extended from one corner of the earth to the other. If one put together all of the meters of film that have been “taken” since the invention of this marvelous entertainment, and wrapped them around the world, at a distance, one would form around our planet more than one transparent ring, like those of Saturn.

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The cinema has classes. It has them in its technique, its artists, and its audience. A film directed by Chano Sierra is not equivalent to one from the Caesár studio; there’s a world of difference between an Alberto Collo and a Fernando Navarro; and the difference between the audience of the Cine Olimpia and the Salón Allende is staggering.

The cinema has only one aspect in which all classifications disappear: the ridiculous. Not the ridiculousness onscreen, which has rapidly diminished, in exact proportion to the perfecting of the silent art, but the ridiculousness of the audience.

For an observing mind witnessing the show, the screen always offers fewer amusing scenes than the audience. And to amuse oneself, to laugh—Charlie Chaplin has already said this—there’s nothing like watching the ridiculous.

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In aristocratic venues, where the darkness is not excessive and is perfumed; auditoriums where only films of the first order are exhibited, justifying, albeit with successive shocks, the six reales paid from one’s pocket, there are spicy scenes.

A classic lizard, one of those now inaccurately called fifís, enters the auditorium, where he has made a date with a she, who, if not in a completely horizontal position, is rather oblique. The lizard is myopic, an indispensable condition for being a lizard. His myopia, justified by two enormous horn-rimmed lenses, causes him to confuse his friend with a modest, elegant young lady, who sighs when she sees Tulio Carminatti and who had the misfortune to choose a nearby seat and a set place for her rendezvous. In the darkness, the scene of the confused lizard and the modest maiden has tragicomic moments. The girl’s blushing at the audacious words of this parasite gives a red tint to the shadows, like a danger sign.

In another spot, a fat lady, whose generous fatness corresponds to her noble ancestry, as she enters the narrow row of seats, loses her balance and falls, in a sitting position, on top of an anemic child who yelps sharply, forgetting in the pain caused by the fatty who squishes him, the manners of his caste.

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In middle-class venues, where the darkness is somewhat greater and smells of human flesh (not decomposing), ridiculous details are constant, as
the lustful creations of [Pina] Menichelli and the acrobatic episodes of Antonio Moreno parade by on the screen.

There, one who observes from the entrance, extending his gaze over the sea of heads, will note with astonishment that these, when the screen reflects a bright scene, are separated, but in the moment that the shadows return, come together. And in this manner, in accordance with the passing scenes of light and shadow, the heads of men and women separate and come together, in a back-and-forth that provokes desire.

Then, if one observes closer up, one sees mothers who, fascinated by the silent, painful drama of the film, fail to perceive the extremely vulgar drama unfolding next to them, between the eldest daughter and her daring boyfriend.

In one row of seats, a loving father, who takes advantage of Sunday to take his five children out for some fun, has made the altruistic gesture of giving each brat five cents. These coppers have been converted, in a flash, to five lollipops of the most famous brand, of all colors and all flavors. And the children, who have not a whit of manners or shame, suck desperately, creating a symphony of noises that provoke seizures in all the nearby spectators and place on the lips of a respectable lady this shameless phrase:

“`They're like pigs!`"

And the music, the indispensable music of bourgeois movie theaters, created by four instruments and a deafening drum, makes the young element, lovers of the fox-tango and its derivatives, dance in their seats!

Music is an instrument (after all, it comes from instruments) of the ridiculous. There are percussion sections that, while the actress dies onscreen in a series of horrific convulsions, play full speed ahead a danzón with palitos, güiro, and cockcrow. By contrast, when onscreen there are wild chase scenes and motives for joy, the musicians strike up a melancholic waltz or one of Chopin's nocturnes, in which the percussion is disconcerting.

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In movie theaters of the lowest category, there in the poor neighborhoods where our working democracy reigns over the box seats [lunetas] and the gallery-henhouse [galería-gallinero], monopolized by paperboys, shoe-shines and policemen in uniform, the shadows no longer merit the name. All light is blocked from entering, because the management understands that it’s not the film [vista], exactly, that attracts the “respectable.” Here there’s a little of everything [“la cosa ‘varea’”], as our plebs [peladitos] say.
In general, serials, in which robbery and murder abound, and evil in all its manifestations has a field day, are screened. Because in this manner, the attendees do not only enjoy themselves, but also learn and return.

In the darkness of the auditorium it smells of three centuries of national sweat. It’s an odor that could as easily kill as resuscitate.

There, families (almost always “shacked-up” couples with unregistered children, in the manner of Trigo) take advantage of the continuous showings [permanencia voluntaria] to relax from the beginning of the screenings until the end, seeing episodes two or three times. Peanuts are eaten, shells tossed every which way, without fear of offending anyone. Enchiladas are purchased outside and spicy salsa drips onto the floors, driving the legion of fleas mad.

On the screen, two lovers kiss in a “continuous showing” [permanencia voluntaria] and a prolonged and insolent hiss erupts from the audience, startling the projectionist and causing him to put the next scene in upside down, provoking boos.

In the climactic moment of the episode, when the heroine is about to be caught by the bandit chief, a tall, fat, half-drunk pulque vendor moves in front of the first row of seats and crosses in front of the screen. His shadow, enlarged by the distance, is projected like an enormous caricature onto the slender silhouette of the heroine.

From the balcony and the orchestra seats there erupts a deafening whistle. A paperboy shouts, at the top of his lungs:

“Out of the way, old mule!”

And there’s always someone who lets loose a stronger term that wounds like a knife to the stomach.

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But, since nothing is more ridiculous than human vanity, there is in the cinema a scene without equal, in which vulgarity is definitive: the attitudes adopted by people who have never known publicity, when they find themselves, by chance, in front of a film apparatus, in the middle of the street.

There, I have seen Frenchified women in their fifties adopt postures in imitation of Bertini and fellows with patched shirts and mended pants believe themselves, for a sweet moment, to be rivals to Max Linder in “chic.”

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It's because of all this, more than anything, that the cinema is king and in its wake humans follow, like a court of clowns, “working” in their ridiculous roles, for the pleasure of those of us who know how to laugh at the opportune moment.

Translated by Rielle Navitski

Notes

1. “Gata” is often used as an informal term for a domestic servant and can also refer to a tradeswoman. Here, it appears to indicate a working-class sweetheart. The term can also refer to a person with light skin, hair, and eyes, and might be a reference to White.

2. The term boche is a pejorative term for a German, usually used in reference to German soldiers during the First World War.

3. The author is likely referring to Santiago Sierra, director of *Maciste turista* (1917), a local take on Italian strongman films in which Enrique Ugartechea performed feats of daring in a number of recognizable Mexico City locations. (“Chano” is sometimes used as a nickname for Santiago). Alberto Collo was a well-known actor of Italian silent cinema, appearing in such films as *Assunta Spina* (1915), while Fernando Navarro acted in a number of early Mexican feature films, including the 1918 screen adaptation of the novel *Santa*. The Cine Olimpia is often considered Mexico City’s first movie palace, while the Salón Allende was a mixed-use venue in the city center offering both film screenings and variety theater.

4. Used through 1897, the real was a coin equivalent to one-eighth of a peso.

5. The term fifí refers to a modern dandy, often viewed as appearance obsessed and effeminate.

6. Originating in Cuba and widely popular in Mexico, danzón is a musical and dance style with roots in French and British contra dance, combined with African-derived syncopation. Palitos are a pair of sticks used for percussion, while the güiro is a grooved cylinder across which a stick is dragged to produce a distinctive sound. “Cockcrow” (canto de gallo) may refer to falsetto vocalizations.

7. “In the manner of Trigo” may be a reference to the work of Spanish erotic novelist Felipe Trigo (1864–1916). The term permanencia voluntaria indicates that once in the movie theater, patrons could stay as long as they wished.

8. Pulque is a low-alcohol beverage made from fermented agave sap.

9. Thanks are in order to Roberto Cruz Arzábal, Rafael Mondragón, Laura Isabel Serna, and Gabriel Wolfson for their insights on a number of points in this translation.