

THE ART OF CINEMA

Alfonso Reyes

Translator's Introduction

In 2010, in a column he wrote for *Letras Libres*, José de la Colina signals the importance of the columns Alfonso Reyes published (along with his collaborator Martín Luis Guzmán) under the pseudonym “Fósforo” in the Spanish periodicals *España*, *El Imparcial* and *Revista General* between 1915 and 1916.¹ As de la Colina notes, Reyes gave “pertinent details about how cinemas in Spain operated, about the good or poor judgment that was used when adapting theatrical or literary works to the screen, about the elegance of certain visual elements (even in mere documentaries)” as well as other vital details. Particularly of note for de la Colina are Reyes’s “best and most prophetic pages,” which highlight the “genius” of Charlie Chaplin and describe the “first indications of his cinematic iconization.” De la Colina’s assessment that these early conclusions on Chaplin are the most important of Reyes’s writings on cinema are echoed by José Luis Martínez and Dick Gerdes, who selected and translated, respectively, Reyes’s column on the mythification of Chaplin in the *Anthology* of English translations of Reyes’s writing they published with Fondo de Cultura Económica in 2009.² In what follows, I provide a translation of additional selections from those writings on cinema, which Reyes collected and published in his *Notations and Digressions: Third Series* (1922). Reyes later added introductory remarks providing background about the columns, and those remarks are also translated and included here in the section titled “The Art of Cinema.” Because that section serves as Reyes’s introduction to the whole of his Fósforo writings, I have also given that title to my translations of the whole of Reyes’s columns and thus also the selections from those translations I publish here.³

The translation of these columns into English will, no doubt, aid scholars who do not work with the Spanish language but have an interest in the international circulation of early cinema. More importantly, these translations make Reyes’s views on what was a nascent artform available to a broader scholarly audience. Reyes reflects at length on the relationship between the economics

of film production and its aesthetics. He makes the case for a kind of medium specificity that pushes critics and movie-goers to take cinema seriously as an artform, something that was certainly not a given in 1915 and 1916. While I have, with a few exceptions, excluded Reyes's reviews of specific films (though the hope is to publish these translations in the future), those observations as well as the more general comments on cinema at the center of most of the selected columns published here serve as occasions to reflect on the broader question of the formal possibilities of cinema. His reflections on aesthetic form in specific works of cinema in some of the earliest years of its emergence as an artform are relevant as scholars consider the formal problems presented by other kinds of emergent artforms, which, like cinema in its early years, should also be taken seriously.

One final item of note is the importance of recognizing the ways that the work of a pre-eminent Mexican writer and thinker can be understood as essential to making sense of the early art of cinema. Reyes was writing these columns from Spain while the Revolution was ongoing in Mexico. Many and perhaps most of the films he viewed were imports from Italy and the United States, or, in some cases, imports of French recuts of films from the United States. Reyes pairs this internationalist orientation of his cinema commentary with his dialogue with an international journalistic sphere. This is made evident in, for example, his citing columns by Rob Wagner in *The Saturday Evening Post*, a publication that was actively publishing about the ongoing Revolution in Mexico as well as the participation of Mexicans in the early film industry in Los Angeles. These topics are addressed both in Rob Wagner's columns on film but also in works by others writing for that publication at the same time Reyes was writing for the publications in Spain. Reyes's reference to Wagner offers expanded possibilities for making sense of the relationship between those Hollywood films and the Mexican workers who were essential to their being made. In addition to these lines of inquiry, Reyes reflects on the effects that World War I had on the European film industry and its journalists, focusing particularly on the waning of film production in France during the war and the roles newspaper caricaturists took on in the war effort. The international view Reyes provides (and the links and references he makes) may open up additional facets to explore in scholarship on film from this era.

Whether or not the issues mentioned above are fully realized in subsequent scholarly conversation on these topics, Reyes's columns are important and should be more widely read than they currently are by scholars across fields and disciplines, especially those with a focus that does not typically look to writers from Latin America or scholarship in Spanish. I can attribute my own awareness of them to an article written by Arturo Dávila: "Tesis sobre Alfonso Reyes: Fósforo y la fama parcial," published in *Alfonso Reyes y los estudios latinoamericanos*, edited by Adela Pineda-Franco and Ignacio M. Sánchez-Prado

(ILLI, 2004). Around this same period, the scholar of Mexican silent film and early reception of film in Mexico, Manuel González Casanova, published his book *El cine que vio Fósforo: Alfonso Reyes y Martín Luis Guzmán* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), and Héctor Perea provided a prologue to the collection *Fósforo, crónicas cinematográficas* (CONACULTA, 2000). Perea's *La caricia de las formas: Alfonso Reyes y el cine* (Dirección de Difusión Cultural, Departamento Editorial, 1988) is often cited as one of the most important works of scholarship on this topic, and there has been continued scholarly interest in Reyes's writing on cinema, stretching from Perea's work all the way through to recent contributions by scholars like Betina Keizman (2015), Rielle Navitski (2017), and Adela Pineda-Franco (2019).⁴

In an effort to contribute to these ongoing efforts to understand Reyes's arguments and make them available to scholars who cannot access them in Spanish, the following translation seeks to present his work as transparently and faithfully as possible. At times, I slightly modify the division of paragraphs and punctuation (e.g. replacing semicolons with periods and other similar kinds of modifications). Aside from these slight modifications of paragraph division and punctuation, the organization of the essays remains unaltered, and any modifications are an effort to maintain Reyes's meaning when expressed in English. By making these essays more widely available through this translation, the hope is that the scholarship on Reyes and on early cinema, as well as the theoretical and political implications of our evolving understanding of them, will continue to grow as it necessarily cuts across genres, forms, languages, disciplines and national contexts.

— Stephen Buttes

The Art of Cinema

A number of years ago, Martín Luis Guzmán and I—using the pseudonym “Fósforo,” which we both used interchangeably—had the pleasure of writing several short essays on films and filmmakers, which were published in the Spanish weekly magazine *España* and achieved a certain level of success that prompted the curiosity of our friends and fellow writers. Our predecessor in this endeavor was Federico de Onís, who had previously published a couple of anonymous articles on film.⁵

I believe that our humble weekly column (“Frente a la pantalla”) was the beginning of film criticism in the Spanish language, and perhaps it was one of the first essays in a vein of thought and practice that today is open to everyone, an opening that, of course, need not be attributed to us: many writers were able to discover film criticism on their own.

Martín Luis Guzmán collected all of his columns in the final section of his book, *On the Banks of the Hudson* [*A orillas del Hudson*, 1920]. When he left Madrid, he never again turned to the topic of cinema. I, however, remained moored to its shores for some time longer.

At the invitation of José Ortega y Gasset, on the first of June the following year, I began writing for the newspaper *El Imparcial*, a series of newspaper *crónicas* on film, which I always published under the name “Fósforo.” And, with that same pseudonym, I also published in the *Revista General* (a publication associated with the Editorial Calleja) the final series of columns that I include in the present collection.

It is my understanding that, in those early years, it was only “Fósforo” and a certain journalist in Minneapolis, whose name my lack of gratitude has caused me to forget, considered cinema an art, a matter worthy of the attention of the Muses. “Fósforo” maintained a regular correspondence with the critic from Minneapolis. The Minneapolis critic would write admirable expositions exploring whether or not a *denouement* was an aesthetic necessity for the narrative development of cinematic dramas. His doubts on this question are rooted in one particular visit to the cinema when our dear critic arrived at the film’s halfway point, which then required him to wait for the film to be shown again and thus obliged him to see the *denouement* before the initiation of the conflict.⁶

In those years, there were just two of us. What wonderful years! Now there are many of you (yes, you, oh Cocteau). But the cinema—by the Furies—continues unchanged.

I have sought an appropriate epitaph for “Fósforo.” It appears I will finally

opt for this one: “Here lies one who was desperate to see a new art reveal itself to the world.”

I

1. In Defense of Film Criticism

No being should be multiplied unnecessarily, or so goes the ancient philosophical proverb. But the demands of life, on occasion, call for certain kinds of multiplication. A new literature, a new criticism—those associated with the cinema—are now indispensable. Industry, which sometimes is a benefit to the arts (despite its claims to the contrary), has filled cinematic production with vitality, saving it from any danger of withering away and being forgotten as simply an antiquated hobby. Such was the fate of “shadow puppetry.” With the goal of one day being able to define an aesthetics of contemporary civilization (as expressed through the medium of mime), let us not delay our efforts to detail, one by one, today’s innovations in the cinema, formulating as we go those principles that present themselves as we believe we have discovered them.

In this vein, let us note that all artistic media produce objects of commerce, items that are set out for sale. Those who buy those items are the audience. In the interest of the paying audience, the new art of the cinema is best served by a close, serious analysis undertaken by critics.

Until recently, journalistic commentary about cinema has been reduced—with very few exceptions—to sentimental reflections, reactions that are often prompted by melodrama in cinema. This makes the melodrama a risky endeavor, one that must walk a fine line. Because, if every comedic short in cinema can be considered acceptable, the same is not true of the melodrama.

We must develop a new approach to interpreting cinema. Some will think that we are wasting our time on silly and trivial creations. But we are not interested in art that is supposedly “weighty” or conventionally “serious.” The day will come in which all will recognize and appreciate the seriousness of our critical endeavor. In the meantime, let us not judge too hastily the value of things, and let us remember that Oxford University, that solemn mother of scholarship, has not hesitated to publish two erudite volumes—a *Manual* and a *History*—dedicated to analyzing another of the “minor Muses:” chess.

October 28, 1915

2. The Future of Cinema

When discussing the literary antecedents of cinema, the famous “Sherlock Holmes” is always on the tip of everyone’s tongue. Novels featuring “Rocam-

bole," have, for some time now, been forgotten.⁷ It appears that the old-style crime novel is not the most commonly utilized mass genre. That honor goes to the detective novel. It is less bloody, and it gives the same pleasures one associates with the mysteriousness of life. We can consider these developments in mass literature as the triumph of the English spirit over the French.

But cinematic dramas have other, more illustrious predecessors, although, at times, for sure, it seems cinema is simply a corrupted derivation of them. An entire system of quality and innovative creations, a total atomization of literary material needed to be produced so that this humble pantomime of lights would even be possible.

Whether directly or indirectly, consciously or in complete unawareness, then, the lowly filmmaker is handed over to an empire created by the minds of others: alongside him walk shadows, whispering in his ear. He takes in their guidance in his own way, and he moves forward (that poor soul!) by creating film on his own terms. If those shadows had the power of the gods, from time to time they would pull him back by the hair, as Athena did to Achilles.

Because it needs to be said once and for all: we have more faith in the future than in the present. The cinema has, in our view, all of the imperfections and all of the virtues of a promise.

Meanwhile, new creations continue to pile up, producing a storm cloud. New motifs to depict the human experience continue to be discovered. Some of these will make their way into film through literary works, and others will be taken up directly through its artifice or techniques.

Every human act, every aspect comprising modern civilization, is destined to be a trembling image on the screen. We are creating the cinema at the same pace we live our lives.

December 2, 1915

6. *The Lights of London* (dir. Bert Haldane, 1914, Barker Films)⁸

There are three components that are necessary to make a good film: 1. a good photographer; 2. good actors; and 3. a good script [*literatura*].

The first component is essential. The second is absolutely necessary. And the third must be superb. This is the case because without a story or with minimal story, one can still make a good film. However, if the story is off, the film as a whole is lost. When this occurs, viewers struggle with a tension between the quality of the actors or the quality of photography, which attracts their attention, and the mediocre plot, which repels them. In the case of *The Lights of London*, a bland, mustard-tinged mediocrity, only its title can be saved from a total loss: the photography is mediocre; the acting deficient; and the story insufferable, a complete disaster. There are just a few memorable scenes, focused

on the Jarvis family, a traveling troupe of actors, and these give a legitimate, though fleeting, cinematic quality to film. The contrived and unfortunate development of the “bad guy”—the nephew—is regrettable as is the conception and performance of the “good guy:” the groundskeeper. As for the “bad guy with the heart of gold,” the prodigal son, Harold, he is hamstrung by the benevolent whims of the director. Harold’s escape from prison is most clumsily handled. What a disappointment after so much (oh so much!) promise in the film’s title and in the elegant opening sequence featuring English riding horses! On this final point: the pseudo-literary curse in the opening was deplorable. “Shoemaker, stick to your trade:” either lyric poetry or cinema.

November 4, 1915

II.

1. The Cinema and the Theater

These are two distinct phenomena. That there may emerge financial and market competition between them is irrelevant to the elements that distinguish them. Competition in the market always manifests effects that political economy can never predict: the increased manufacture of bicycles resulted in the plunging sales of pianos.

Stevenson divided the arts into categories: 1. arts defined by time (music, literature); 2. arts defined by space (painting, sculpture, dance, pantomime) and 3. mixed media (theater). Cinema can be placed in this third category as well, but it is distinguished from Theater in that its primary modality is as an “art of silence.” As with painting, [Cinema] lacks a third dimension, and this apparent disadvantage only creates a new aesthetic resource: one additional element of “irony” that, moving us away from what is of practical use, situates us in the space of art.

We as viewers are, then, from a practical point of view, more distant from Cinema than from Theater. That socio-emotional component that always accompanies stagings of theatrical works (the warmth produced by a human presence) disappears in Cinema, and the characters present themselves to us as merely visual entities. Theater is a more realist art, and for that reason it is also more deceptive: the idea that before us stands a man who is portraying characteristics distinct from those he possesses is more easily achieved in the Theater than in the Cinema, which therefore makes a bad film always more tolerable than the bad staging of a theatrical work. (For example, *The Light that Failed* (dir. Edward Jose, Pathé, 1916) works only because of the excellent photography).⁹ Another matter is that Cinema—the luminous representation of movement—always prompts a kind of physiological pleasure that would be

left, however, for a naturalist-psychologist to explain. That distance, that ritual separation that the Greeks sought for their own art, making use of the *cothurnus* to enlarge the actors and the mask to “dehumanize” them, can be achieved much more easily in Cinema than in the modern Theater.

From a separate, more exterior point of view, Cinema is closer to us than Theater: the performance, practically speaking, is the same distance from our eyes as it is from the camera, and the camera can produce a proximity to the object that, in Theater, is never achieved. Even in daily life—with our seldom-used capacity to view things analytically—we have few occasions to follow, as closely as we might in Cinema, a key’s movement in a lock or the movement of a hand in the process of writing. For that reason, it is mistaken to utilize certain conventions of movement that are proper to the Theater and are tolerable with physical distance but not so with the proximity of movement on the screen. For example, the practice of drawing straight lines in a performance where an actor must write a letter. It is perhaps the closeness of the object to the camera that can explain why a cinematic work is superior to a theatrical work when it comes to the “creation of the mask” and the establishing of a fixed relationship between a face, a specific facial movement and a determined mood or temperament: how impressive those masks that grow—like that of “Domingo” in Chesterton’s fantastic novel—that grow and fill the screen to overflowing, and that forever move us with the memory of a painful rictus or that of spasmodic laughter!

Finally, it is not at all advisable that practitioners of the theatrical arts be employed in the Cinema, though the results may not always be disastrous. An actor suitably acclimated to the Cinema would be the product of combining the bodily awareness of a masterful circus performer with the mind of a great theatrical performer.

3. The Education of the Emotions

It is already well established: there isn’t a single cinematic work in which the “folletinesque” roots of Cinema cannot be traced. Sometimes—not always with a good grasp on the matter—there are simple attempts to translate a literary work to the Cinema, a literary work that insists on its status as literature. Simply consider the utter failure of Cervantes’s *La Gitanilla* (dir. Adrià Gual, Barcinógrafo, 1914).¹⁰ It seems there were no cinematic solutions for these literary musings. Chapters of Edmondo de Amicis’s book *Heart* (1886) have been “filmed” with little success. In the adaptation of de Amicis’s *From the Apennines to the Andes* (dir. Umberto Paradisi, 1916), for example, the photographs are sequenced like mere illustrations of the literary work (bad illustrations at that); the characters do almost nothing and are content to simply appear on screen and then fade away. Fortunately, one gets the gist through the

intertitles that structure the telling of the story... The Intertitle is the enemy of Cinema. (Not to mention, in the case of the film under discussion here, that it would not have been too much to ask to have them carefully revise them for grammar and spelling). The image is dark, nocturnal, and the figures on the screen do not even achieve the quality of shadow puppets because instead of sharpening their profile against a lighter background, the figures are drowned out by the fogginess of their surroundings. The narrative itself, through the intertitles, stimulates the audience's interest. Indeed, how could one expect decent people not to be moved by those two or three basic emotions? The mother and her absence, the son (that poor child) who must endure his trials and tribulations in order to reunite with her... Decent people will read those intertitles out loud, and they are moved bit-by-bit by the story. But this does not constitute a cinematic success. Instead, this involves the creation of a new genre that, for lack of a better term, we could call the projected story. Film companies should test them out: during the intermissions, they could project a brief narrative of some fifty lines, an epigram of current events, with economic success assured. Contemporary poetry and its "calligrams" could, in this same way, easily gain popularity.

Returning to the adaptation of de Amicis's book, the child is the best character in the film. It is beginning to be the case that children, in the Cinema at least, frequently demonstrate more capability than adults. In my film viewing, I have never seen an eight-year-old fail as a comic actor.

Finally, we must say something about the topic; we must say something about that celebrated book that de Amicis wrote for children. Would anyone solely and exclusively read to their children only books with terrifying stories? Why, then, would anyone limit children to stories that express a dreadful sentimentalism? One of the worst harms one could inflict on a child is to teach them to read with the novel *Heart* by Edmondo de Amicis. Because of those lachrymose pages—where there is criminal pleasure meant to be had in the pain from children who suffer; indeed, where a child cannot throw a snowball without striking an elderly person and knocking off their eyeglasses, leaving them blind—we hold an almost bloody memory from childhood that remains with us for the rest of our lives. Less harm would be done by the stories of Peter Pan since our childhood imaginings would, at least, be filled with elegant images of fairies and spirits. The education of the emotions is already condemned to death, and today we desire to substitute in place of the aberrations presented by the old system (where everything was built on instilling fear) with the pleasant pedantries of kindergarten...

When Mark Twain imagines his mischievous child entering the pantry in the pitch-black darkness of night, the child is always able to find the jar of jam in its place next to a jar of poison. In de Amicis we, without fail, always attend to the poisoning of the child who attempted to steal a taste of jam.

I know that there are teachers for whom this book ends up being—how should we put it?—the only fount of knowledge that could nourish within young souls certain notions of an emotional education. But if these basic emotions are not to be acquired in the treatment, appropriate in kind and in measure, that young people give to their elders, to their parents and to their teachers, where, then?

18. Recent Developments in Cinema

Brander Matthews, professor of theater at Columbia University in New York, recently published a piece in *The North American Review* where he cited comments made by William Dean Howells, who, in Matthews's account, saw in Cinema a vital threat for the Theater, and Matthews proceeds to resolutely lament advances in filmed features.¹¹

"The picture-show," Howells asserts, "is of a truly miraculous power and scope; there seems nothing that it cannot do, —except convince the taste and console the spirit." Matthews assuages the anxieties Howells expresses by asserting that the Cinema could never be a true threat to the Theater. This is so, according to Matthews, because while the Cinema is an appeal to the eye of the viewer, to pictorial effect and to physical conflict, the Theater functions via the creation of psychological conflict and the creation of personalities, or, better said, via appeals to the intellect of the viewer. Seen this way, he adds, it is clear that the appearance of Cinema on the scene has had one consequence for Theater: it has purified the stage of the outlandish farce to free it to indulge its noble dedication to tragedy, and it has relegated from its repertoire the ultra-sensational melodrama, for these two—farce and melodrama—are the domain of Cinema.

Matthews's assertions are not exactly right, but there is a portion of what he says that is true. Whatever the case, his views are contrary to the conviction that the Cinema is an artform. He considers it as something that is inferior and insignificant, treating it as if it were a contagious disease rather than an incipient artform. This is not surprising: the playwright sees in the Cinema what the craftsman sees in the mechanical processes of industrial development, or what the barber sees in a "Gillette" or an "Auto-Strop" safety razor. And the staid university professor of yesteryear, though perhaps gifted with an ability to finesse certain journalistic skills, can only view with skepticism and doubt the arrival of any innovation that hasn't been sanctioned by tradition or been catalogued in its textbooks.

But what is important to note here is that the threat Cinema poses for Theater is one that is presented within Theater's own terms; that is, Cinema presents itself as capable of doing precisely that which Brander Matthews asserts is solely available to the Theater: the creation of characters and the use of

situations to reveal “conflicts in the soul.”

What he says is true of those disgraceful attempts to create ultra-sensational melodramas: exaggerated gestures, unnecessary events and actions that slow the development or logic of the plot, superfluous scenes that do nothing more than what unbearably outmoded “studio photographs” do, vistas of natural beauty more appropriate to postcards and other gratuitous elements. It is true that dreadfully bad melodramas had previously and in their own way (and what a way!) attempted to pass themselves off as serious cinematic dramas. But there is little point to insisting that viewers desist from viewing these deplorable examples of the genre.

It is worth recalling some of the northern studios (Nordisk comes to mind), which attempted to produce feature films that had ambitions of telling intimate stories: borrowing from the Italians their penchant for brightly lit landscapes and open spaces, and providing an innovative take, at least to our eyes, on techniques of pantomime, which were more restrained in their execution, they achieved results that were unquestionably successful. But the war seems to have cut short this path of cinematic art, just as it has slowed the development of French film.

The United States remained. And there, following the release of several genuine classics (*The Black Box*, *The Broken Coin*), their production has been overly reliant on detective and mystery films, films with fist fights and death-defying escapes, films featuring shipwrecks and fires, and films with speeding automobiles and hydroplanes.¹² But here is where Maurice Tourneur enters the scene. A great artist whose most recent work is *The Blue Bird* (*L'oiseau bleu*) (1918), his work heralds new developments in the art of cinema.¹³ Pantomime, he assures us, is like technology: it has seen significant advances with the physical demands of films that sought to produce shock, fear, wonder or awe. It is now prepared to confront the challenge of a character's interior drama.

An athlete begins a new routine lifting weights with a singular goal: to learn, bit by bit, how to lift weights with a quivering slowness that grabs an audience's attention. The proximity of the camera to the actor in Cinema enables the deployment of the resources of pantomime in ways never before imagined, including even the slightest blink of an eye, which is impossible in the Theater. And by rendering visible the subtlest of relations between an actor's facial features and their character, Cinema's autonomous simulations are able to achieve representations of emotions that the Theater cannot match either. Photography in the Cinema refuses the static norms of academic composition in favor of contingency and even incongruity (e.g. the opening of a deadbolt, two bound hands that keep an object hidden from view, an arm that reaches out from behind a curtain) and can forego a certain amount of exposition that is required in pantomime theater and, in the same way, in so-called descriptive

music.

In Spain we can only track bits and pieces of these transformations to the art of Cinema, but even the few examples of works of the new cinematic art, which we've been able to see in private showings, still seem to maintain a connection to the theater, mixing old techniques with new ones, making an effort to, for example, resolve a spiritual conflict through physical interactions. We do not need to exaggerate: Goethe's *Werther*, Senancour's *Obermann* and Constant's *Adolfo* should never be "filmed" in this way.

19. The Parable of the Flower

Writing in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Rob Wagner, a veteran of the Cinema, argues that photographic illusion is a filmmaking strategy that is essential to cinema as an artform, and it is a procedure that is more commonly utilized than many viewers realize.

On the one hand, everyone understands that the appearance and disappearance of ghostly apparitions, a cat capable of flying through the air, a star that becomes dislodged from the sky and falls to crack the astronomer's telescope, or the collapse of the Eiffel Tower under the weight of a very fat woman are all optical illusions that are created by superimposing one photograph onto another, by using mirrors, by cuts in filming that enable the substitution of one object for another, and by a series of analogous procedures that one day in the future we might explain.

But on the other hand, the majority of viewers are shocked by that sustained shower of water Fatty Arbuckle must endure in *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Keystone Film Company, 1916), and they assume that the scene was filmed during a storm.

And there is no such storm. Any film aficionado knows the effects that rain can have on a sensitive photographic plate: the image becomes "saturated" with light, and arbitrary flashes appear, creating absurd visual combinations. The required frame rate for cinematography makes filming on a rainy day, from any point of view, nearly impossible. What's more is that it is not always possible to delay filming until the weather is just right: directors need the rain to begin on command, arriving at the precise moment it is required and leaving when it is no longer needed. This miracle is created with the sustained winds produced by electric fans, with shower heads, fabric tubes and other similar mechanisms.

The process consists of conceiving in miniature what will later be enlarged and projected. Consider, for example, that by taking a pencil and drawing a single line on a film, one can make pronounced landscape features disappear. Consider further than, when completing a take, any tree can serve as a tool to hide elements that need to be concealed. Depending on its distance from its object of focus, the tree can hide a man, a machine or even an entire city if it

is in the background.

“Camouflage,” which has gained significant importance during the war, began in the Cinema. In France, they, wisely, have made a caricaturist (my understanding is that he worked at the *Petit Parisien*) the director of the “camouflage” division. A caricaturist is the person most familiar with the movement of things, with the essential and foundational elements of bodies and, therefore, most familiar with the processes for concealing them. If they have not done so already, the United States should seriously consider charging a film director with the task of heading an agency dedicated to “camouflage.” Pulling the wool over our eyes is the chief task of the cinema director’s profession. They are capable of transforming a ramshackle wooden house abandoned in the desolate Omaha into a poetic Norman castle, with only the assistance of a few paper cones.

In what follows, we share several other anecdotes to strengthen these claims.

One day on a film set, the task was to film a rainy scene, but production needed to be halted and left for a more opportune moment. Can the reader guess the reason why? Because it had actually begun to rain.

On another day the task was to film a feast in an enormous banquet hall. But the effort was a spectacular failure, and they needed to refilm the movie. The cause? Rooms large and small are to the creators of Cinema what the Theater’s stage is to a master playwright: a room without a wall, which is the empty space behind the curtain. But this is more pronounced in Cinema: sometimes they only have two walls angled together and often only a partial roof is sufficient for the scene. Filming it any other way would not provide enough light. For this reason, to register the banquet on screen, there was almost no other choice than filming it outdoors. When doing so, the director, who had a congenital weakness for realism, decided to serve his actors an actual feast without appealing to any cinematic illusions. The result? Flies were drawn from every corner of the earth to the banquet table, covering not just the food but also the actors’ hands and faces. From that day forward, the director insisted that when filming any similar kind of scene that only poisoned food could be served, and preferably, food with a poison that could do its job at a distance from the set.

There was another movie where they needed to film a tornado, which, having completely leveled a farm in Kansas, laid waste to a bell tower, uprooted trees and blew all the way to the neighboring state a number of cows. All of this was carried out within the studio, without causing anyone alarm or raising the concern of the authorities. Passersby remained completely unaware that it was even happening. The disaster zone was no larger than a backdrop hung in the library. The houses and cows? They were purchased in the toy store next door. The tornado was created by using two fans angled at each other, which made the air currents come together as one.

As for the sequence in *Tío Vivo*, the ability to transform a measly thirty men into an army of hundreds needs no explanation: those who exit the frame on one side circle around to enter again from the other side.

For Rob Wagner, filming a real event is something that anyone can do. The successful filming of a staged scene is something only an artist can do. Indeed, filming a sequence in which the King attends the races is an easy business. But it takes a real expert to give us a representation of the King engaged in a fist fight with his ministers and advisors.

There is a moral to this story, which we can now explain: Enrique Díez Canedo recently observed that the inability to exercise judgment in matters of art always emerges when treating the so-called realist phenomenon. This inability to judge tends to manifest in its most extreme form in the following two paradoxical statements:

1. That flower is so beautiful! You could mistake it for an artificial one.
2. That artificial flower is so beautiful! It looks so real.

How must we now assess the well-worn theory that art is simply the imitation of nature? And what about the equally stale view that nature imitates art? Both of these can be reconciled in the following formulation: art is an entity that is distinct from nature, an autonomous field (*campo aparte*). Art is, as critics often say, another form of nature, a different order of creation. This is so even though one cannot help but make art by making use of objects that already exist in the world. As circumstances that constantly outwit our ingenuity will tell us: any object available to us can have no other origin. Art is what nature will never be, and nature is what art will never be. (This, of course, is premised on the notion that art, in itself, isn't a part of nature, which, in turn, means that nature does not necessarily have a reason to imitate art, even when they bear a resemblance to each other).

It is often said that “what we know we will never be” can, within the context of affective response, be transformed into “the very thing we most want to be.” That which is inaccessible to us becomes our idealized object of desire: Flérida was as sweet and appealing as a bunch of grapes that remain out of reach. In this way, appearing to be real or natural becomes, under conditions of affective response, the measure by which the artificial flower is judged. And appearing to be artificial is transformed, in a similarly automatic reaction, into the paradigm within which we see a flower growing in a garden.

As we sometimes hear in cinemas, a snarky viewer will exclaim “That’s not believable!” And they’ll continue: “A five-year-old child could never jump onto a moving train from a car.” (And one wants to say to every cinema’s resident blockhead: that’s what makes it great! In its newness, it decisively transcends

what is habitually valued in daily existence.)

But whenever those slow-burning Italian melodramas give us the villain who insists on stealing his orphaned cousin's inheritance (Mario versus Anarda, let's say, or Ancleto versus Epidonia), we immediately hear that snarky viewer blurt out, "Now that's what life is like! That's reality!"

At the end of the day, what is at issue is that we tend to confuse (and what a confusion it is!) what is real with what is disagreeable, unpleasant, repugnant or appalling. While for some of us, that confusion produces in us an intense rage, in others those latter phenomena produce a fondness that parallels the depraved pleasure of the coprophagist. Once we understand realism in this way, it is reduced to an aesthetics of the ugliest aspects of reality: when faced with the choice between the golden hues of a lake at sunset and a puddle teeming with green-colored flies, the "realist" never vacillates. They always follow their sense of smell, but in reverse.

Let me end by saying that I believe the mystery of art can be understood very well in the sarcastic question a friend of mine asked one day after seeing pinned to my lapel a flower that was particularly appealing to the eye: "And tell me: where do you get your fresh-picked flowers painted these days?"

NOTES

1 José de la Colina, “Fósforo,” *Letras Libres*, January 31, 2010, <https://letraslibres.com/revista-espana/fosforo/>.

2 Alfonso Reyes, *Anthology*, Edited by José Luis Martínez, Translated by Dick Gerdes, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2009.

3 The Spanish-language title is *Simpatías y diferencias*, which Gerdes translated as *Notations and Digressions*. I’ve used his translation of the title here.

4 While the following is not an exhaustive bibliography of scholarship analyzing Reyes’s writing, it is representative of some of the scholarly contributions made in recent decades in addition to the work by Perea, González Casanova, and Dávila cited in the main text: Roberto Cantú, Ed. *A Scholiast’s Quill: New Essays on Alfonso Reyes*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019; Miriam V. Gárate, “Tradição letrada e cinema mudo: em torno de algumas crônicas mexicanas de começos do século XX,” *Alea: Estudos Neolatinos*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2008; Betina Keizman, “Alfonso Reyes y el cine del porvenir,” *Aisthesis* 57 (2015), pp. 203-218; Matt Losada, “El cine de la Revolución: Dangerous Spectatorship and Instrumentalization of the Filmic Image in Martín Luis Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente*,” *Hispanófila*, no. 175 (2015), pp. 263-72; Mabel Moraña and Ignacio M. Sánchez-Prado, Eds. *El lenguaje de las emociones: Afecto y cultura en América Latina*, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2012; Gustavo Nanclares. *La cámara y el cálamo : ansiedades cinematográficas en la narrativa hispánica de vanguardia*, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2013; Rielle Navitski, “Early Film Critics and Fanatical Fans: The Reception of the Italian Diva Film and the Making of Modern Spectators in Postrevolutionary Mexico,” *Film History*, vol. 29, no. 1 - Mexican Silent Cinema (2017), pp. 57-83; Rielle Navitski, *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*, Duke University Press, 2017; Rocío Oviedo Pérez de Tudela, “En el punto de mira. Análisis cinematográfico de ‘La cena’ de Alfonso Reyes y *Aura* de Carlos Fuentes,” in *Cine y literatura. Reflexiones de la palabra a la imagen*. Coordinated by Eduardo Huárag Álvarez, Diana Elisa González Calderón y Pedro Gonzáles Durán, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México and Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2020, pp. 125-36; Sebastián Pineda Buitrago, “Alfonso Reyes y la recepción inicial de las vanguardias en Hispanoamérica,” *Valenciana*, 2019, vol.12, n.24, pp.51-73; Adela Pineda Franco, “The ‘Metaphysics of Life’ at a Standstill: Alfonso Reyes’ *Visión de Anáhuac* in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *A Scholiast’s Quill: New Essays on Alfonso Reyes*, Edited by Roberto Cantú, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019. pp. 13-32; Felipe Pruneda Senties, “A Writing Haunted by Cinema: The Film Theories of Three Latin American Fictions,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2015): pp. 414-32; Rafael Utrera, *Escritores y cinema en España*, Ediciones JC, 1985.

5 Reyes and Guzmán begin writing their columns when Onís left Spain to begin his

appointment as professor at Columbia University in New York. For an overview of Onís's early years at Columbia and his Hispanism more generally, see Fernando Degiovanni, "En la cima más alta de Nueva York: Federico de Onís, frontera y mercado," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, vol. 74, no. 1 (2021), pp. 37-46.

6 It is possible that Reyes is referring to Carlton W. Miles, who was the drama critic reviewing vaudeville, theater and motion pictures for *The Minneapolis Journal* in the same period in which Reyes is publishing his columns in Spain. For example, on May 28, 1916, Miles published a column discussing an uptick in market demand for films and the diminishing quality of films resulting from the effort to meet the demand. "Two reelers" were being padded out with unnecessary scenes to achieve "feature-length" status, and Miles reflects on whether length alone is what makes a feature. It is unclear if the narrative structure comment Reyes highlights in the main text is from correspondence he maintained with the journalist in question (likely Miles) or if it is from one of the columns on film he published in the *Journal*.

7 Rocambole was a character in a series of folletinesque novels by Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail. According to John McCormick, Ponson du Terrail was "the most popular novelist of the Second Empire," and his increasingly fantastical adventures as a "sort of gentleman-burglar" (216) or "a mixture of the Byronic superman and the gamin, purified by a period spent doing hard labor" (216) made him a popular form of escapist fiction. As McCormick puts it, "Ponson subscribes to most of the clichés of melodrama" (2016). As Monica Dall'Asta notes, Rocambole as well as other characters from the French folletin tradition would be mainstays of Italian serial films from 1917-1924, films that Reyes held in low esteem as evidenced repeatedly in his assessments here. See Dall'Asta's article on film: "Italian Serial Films and 'International Popular Culture,'" *Film History*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2000), pp. 300-07. McCormick's book focuses on the nineteenth-century French theater tradition: *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth Century France*, Routledge, 1993.

8 According to Amy Sargeant, George R. Sims was the scriptwriter and producer for this film. See *British Cinema: A Critical and Interpretive History*, Bloomsbury, 2019. For more general information related to title or production details, there are records for this film (and several others Reyes discusses) on both IMDB and Wikipedia.

9 Information on this film is available in a record from the Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ih/as/loc.mbrs.sfdb.6890/default.html>

10 The Instituto Cervantes maintains a page with a list of filmic adaptations of works by Cervantes. For an analysis of the role of Cervantes in silent film productions, including a detailed account of various efforts in this era to film movies based on Cervantes's work (including the Gual film Reyes likely saw), see Jean-Claude Seguin's essay "Las novelas ejemplares en tiempos de cine silente," *Cervantes creador y Cervantes recreado*, Emmanuel Marigno, Carlos Mata Induráin y Hugo Hernán Ramírez Sierra, Eds.), Pamplona, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2015 (Biblioteca Áurea Digital, BIADIG, 26), pp. 249-279, <https://dadun.unav.edu/>

bitstream/10171/37699/1/CervantesCreador_16_Seguin.pdf.

11 The essay Reyes cites here is titled “Are the Movies a Menace to the Drama?” which Matthews published in the March 1917 issue of the publication. The quote from Howells below is the original quote that Reyes had translated for his essay. See Brander Matthews, “Are the Movies a Menace to the Drama?” *The North American Review* (1821-1940), March 1917, ProQuest, p. 447.

12 *The Black Box*, dir. Otis Turner, 1915, Universal Film-Transatlantic Film Company; *The Broken Coin*, written by Emerson Hough, starring Francis Ford and Grace Cunard, Universal Film-Transatlantic Film Company, 1915. Reyes analyzes here the silent serial film *The Black Box*, adapted from E. Phillips Oppenheim’s novel (both of which are listed and discussed on the blog “CineFania” (<http://www.cinefania.com/terroruniversal/index.php?id=213>) with *Project Gutenberg* making a copy of the novel with film stills freely available: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17197/17197-h/17197-h.htm>). According to a digitized record at the Catalunya Filmoteca, it was also released in Spanish under the title “El cofrecito negro:” https://repositori.filmoteca.cat/bitstream/handle/11091/8852/116_117.pdf.pdf?sequence=9&isAllowed=y Several online auction sites for collectors show the particular advertising items used during this serial film’s debut in Spain. In Barcelona, it debuted January 9, 1915 at the Cine Kursaal (<https://en.todocoleccion.net/cinema-flyers-and-ads/el-cofrecito-negro-15-episodios-troquelado-estreno-cine-kursaal-barcelona-1915-su-precinto~x170069594>). It was also shown simultaneously in Madrid at the Cine Príncipe Alfonso, where it is possible Reyes saw the film (<https://www.prospectosdecine.com/el-cofrecito-negro>), though Reyes’s column wasn’t published until the end of the year. This particular cinema (the Cine Príncipe Alfonso, later renamed the Cine Génova) was one of the Gran Empresa Sagarra establishments, and it played an important role in the history of both Spanish and Latin American cinema. The Cine Príncipe Alfonso was the place where Antonio Armenta began his career as a ticket seller and projector operator, eventually working his way up in the company to be named general manager of the Gran Empresa Sagarra in 1923. Armenta was responsible for hiring Ricardo Urgoiti as a kind of strategy consultant when Urgoiti returned to Spain in 1924 after studying electronics in the United States. Sometimes called the “media mogul” of Spain’s famed Generation of ‘27, Urgoiti was a pioneer in Spain’s nascent sound cinema in the late 1920s and 1930s, and he was an important collaborator with Luis Buñuel during the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War. These productions, of course, were important and influential in Buñuel’s eventual period of making films in Mexico in the period following the Republic’s defeat in the Civil War. See Román Gubern and Paul Hammond’s *Los años rojos de Luis Buñuel* (Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2021) for more details on this portion of the milieu that shaped Buñuel’s cinema. As for *The Broken Coin*, a synopsis of the film along with a film still appears in the June 19, 1915 edition of *The Moving Picture World*: <https://archive.org/details/movingpicturewor24newy/page/1946/mode/2up?view=theater>.

13 For a detailed account of these new developments in Tourneur’s cinematic work, particularly the appeal to the visual tradition of tableau, experimental set design and

innovative use of light in the composition of the image, see Richard Suchenski's essay "Turn Again, Tourneur?: Maurice Tourneur between France and Hollywood," *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2011), pp. 87-100.