

FILM, AESTHETICS AND CRITIQUE IN THE WORK OF BALDOMERO SANÍN CANO¹

Cine, estética y crítica en la obra de Baldomero Sanín Cano

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ABSTRACT

Baldomero Sanín Cano's prolific work includes a group of articles that refers to the cinema. Those articles, written over a period of three decades, are not only a reflection on

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cinema's development but also on the evolution of Sanin Cano's ideas about that new art form. This text intends to analyze the essays on the topic and make it possible to identify Sanín Cano as a film critic through his analysis of problems such as the classification of the arts, their limits and relationships, and the aesthetic conception from an historical context.

Keywords: Baldomero Sanín Cano, cinema, arts classification, critique, aesthetics.

RESUMEN

Dentro de la prolífica obra de Sanín Cano es posible encontrar un segmento de textos que abordan el tema del cine. Estos escritos, que abarcan un periodo de algo más de tres décadas, reflejan el desarrollo del cinematógrafo y la evolución del pensamiento de Sanín Cano frente a este nuevo arte. Este texto busca analizar los artículos críticos que se ocupan de este tema y que permiten identificar a Sanín como precursor de la crítica cinematográfica, a través de problemas como la clasificación de las artes, sus límites y relaciones y la concepción estética del autor desde un contexto histórico.

Palabras clave: Baldomero Sanín Cano, cine, clasificación de las artes, crítica, estética.

FILM IN THE WORK OF BALDOMERO SANÍN CANO

Baldomero Sanín Cano (1861-1957) is without doubt one of the most prolific essayists in Colombian literature. In his writings he addresses topics such as art, culture, politics, society and literature often in a rather unorganized manner. This non-systematic approach can lead to difficulty tracking a subject or identifying a thesis in his work.

Another challenge is tracking his texts in their various publications as Sanín worked in at least three countries. It is also often difficult to establish the date in which they were written. Jiménez refers to this, writing "this disregard from the author for dates corresponds to something deeper: an apparent or real indifference to his own changes in position" (2009: 163-164).

On the subject of film, as will be discussed later, we can observe in Sanín changes in viewpoint from the most radical to more moderate in his later writings. In his first texts the cinema is a mere spectacle undeserving of further consideration and representing a threat to the theater. Though he never considered film as part of the fine arts, he did later express its value in other regards such as in its ability to educate.

Among the texts found in Sanín's work on film, including those in which the subject was addressed both directly and indirectly, are articles written between

1921 and 1955². In them the author raises several concerns such as the relationship between film and theater, film as art, the classification of the arts and the role of film, as well as his own questions on aesthetics and critique.

On the manner in which Sanín writes, Valencia Goelkel notes that it “makes for an almost nonexistent audience, whose effectiveness he would have good reason to suspect: the public, both literate and semi-literate, of Colombia” (1976: 17). Sanín informs his audience, yet at the same time directs their attention to the instructional function of criticism. He addresses the emergence and development of film, its social impact and relationship with the theater. He shows his readers the relationships between the arts and their influences, ventures to predict the future and gives advice to political leaders. Although there is a noted awareness of the “almost nonexistent” public here (Valencia Goelkel 1976: 17), his ability to interweave topics of interest is also perceived and reflects a desire to make known the culture which he had experienced.

In his criticism, Sanín worried about exalting or disproving certain dramas; however, his concerns were more of an aesthetic nature. He addressed whether or not film were an artistic production before valuing the works themselves. This is dissimilar to his other writings on film where the critical function is more clearly found³.

This article seeks to analyze the texts that address this topic in order to identify the aesthetic conception of the author from an historical context. The texts were selected considering the degree to which they address film either directly or indirectly, its relationship to drama, the film industry, and the public reception and cultural impact of film.

FILM AND THE THEATER

In 1918, Sanín makes some references to film in “Cadenas de estuco”. However, his first work that really addresses this theme is “Shakespeare amenazado”, written in London in 1921 (Sanín Cano, 1975). Film had first appeared around 1895 and by the time Sanín writes of it, movie theaters could be found around the world. The cinema was expanding and seemed to be a threat to the theater. In this

² 1921 corresponds to the year in which “Shakespeare amenazado” was written, 1955 is the date of the publication of *El humanismo y el progreso del hombre*, a work that includes ¿Es literatura el teatro? It is not possible to establish the date that Sanín wrote this last article, however it is possible to determine that it was not before 1946 as he refers to the film *La sinfonía Pastoral*, directed by Jean Delannoy and based on the novel by André Gide, which was released that year.

³ Foster appreciation and facilitate understanding of the work (Hospers, 1997: 98).

article Sanín reflects on the differences between film and the theater, as well as the growing presence of cinema in spaces once reserved for drama.

Now the theater succumbs daily to the tenacious, relentless competition of cinema. [...] The stage most generously equipped by nature to create characters and dissect human passions⁴, changing the curtain for the screen without offering civilization any excuses (Sanín Cano, 1975:156).

For Sanín, using these stages for film is a clear sign of the decline of culture. To him film cannot compare with the great works of drama, which is a reflective art form that captures human passion. Film, according to Sanín, is but a spectacle dedicated to showing movement and it is incomprehensible that it should replace the theater. If that which is seen through the lens is lacking, the machine has no reason to exist and could be replaced by a common photographic camera. Dramatists such as Shakespeare present an intellectual conflict and reflect human passions, whereas, according to Sanín, film does not (Sanín Cano, 1975: 153).

The use of unnecessary movement is an issue that Sanín addresses in several of his texts. In some he refers to meaningless movement as a quality of film or dramas that have had to resort to becoming a spectacle in order to captivate the audience: “The producers began to make up for the lack of movement through dance scenes. This perverse inclination may be due in part to the success of *Casa de muñecas*” (Sanín, 1975: 154). In other works, however, he refers to this aspect as differentiating higher quality films. Such is the case with “Un arte educativo”, which recognizes that the public is no longer seduced by unnecessary movement (1998: Vol. III: 241).

From these writings in which we find movement and lack of reflection linked to film, and reflection to theater, we find one of the persistent concerns of Sanín Cano: What are the values of the theater that film does not possess? Can theater and film be considered as part of the Fine Arts? As we will see, Sanín will develop these issues further though a bit more from the aesthetic viewpoint than the critical. In these texts few references are made to specific films and none are assigned value.

It is possible to conclude that by this time for the author, film and theater were a world apart. For Sanín the first was a show, and the second an art form. He wrote that Shakespeare and Chaplin were stage actors and businessmen, but their similarities only go so far. While the playwright is responsible for looking at the world from the proscenium, taking man as the exploitable element for creating conflicts, the filmmaker is only interested in movement for the purpose of entertaining the audience in an inexhaustible race without reflection (Sanín Cano, 1975).

⁴ William Shakespeare. In the text Sanín compares the dramatist to Charles Chaplin.

This is an issue that will be addressed later by theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1988), who refer to *amusement*, a product of the cultural industry, as opposed to art. For them, the show is designed to entertain the public and does not require intellectual work. As a mechanized escape it succeeds only to allow for pleasure without requiring any effort. Sanín proposes something similar, contrasting entertainment and art, film and theater: the former as fun, continuous movement designed for the average public, the latter as art, albeit minor, that leads one to questioning.

Six years later, in 1927, Sanín Cano recounts his experience of seeing a film that made use of a new invention that would change the way movies were presented: the vitaphone, an industry development that enabled the joining of tape and soundtrack, but not yet with the dialogue of the actors. He wrote: “The art of screen already exists; It has rigid rules and one of these is silence. If the vitaphone becomes a reality, it will manage to create a very different art form” (Sanín Cano, 1998).

With this text we can see that Sanín speaks of film’s own rules, alludes to it having its own aesthetic, although not identified, and refers to the vitaphone as a “distinct art”. This allows us to deduce that, by then, his view had begun to change; it had become more moderate and even though he doesn’t say so directly, seems to have found some quality in film. However, although he uses the term “art” or “a new art”, it cannot be concluded that he is referring to the Fine Arts, but rather a product of human activity. Following this text Sanín addresses the growth of the film industry rather than the technological evolution.

The exploration of the relationship between film and theater will continue in subsequent articles. In “El vitáfono” he concludes that both are forms of representation, but as distant from each other as painting and poetry (Sanín Cano, 1998). Using this analogy, Sanín addresses a problem that has continued to trouble aesthetes from Greece: the relationship of art and poetry and, specifically, the boundaries between the various art forms. He explores this theme in his writings in general and not only in relation to film, alluding to the importance for differentiation between the various art forms, derived from Lessing (1766)⁵. As with painting and poetry, for Sanín, film and drama represent different aspects and one can not be a model for the other.

In “Diálogo indiferente” Sanín does not directly address the importance of media for each of the arts, but states that a writer of literature who creates dramas for the screen is an “usurpation” (1998, Vol. III). The theme is taken up again in 1944 in “La literatura y el cine,” when dealing once more with the differences

⁵ According to Lessing, painting is a spatial art while poetry is temporal; as such, painting can not represent a course of events as can poetry but rather only isolated scenes (Tatarkiewicz, 2008: 148).

between film and theater. The theater, he says, has two elements: the composition of the work and the work of the actors: the first is linked to the literature, the second is not. In film there is no literature, only the spoken word (Sanín Cano, 1998: Vol IV). The same subject is addressed, although less developed, in “Los límites del arte dramático,” which refers to the inability of film to become a literary art such as theater, which is more poetry containing a minor art form that must be placed outside of the realm of literature (Sanín Cano, 1975: 1923). In the same text Sanín writes: “The theater is not literature, and the more it becomes so the further it deviates from its principles⁶” (1923: 121).

It is clear how the idea of each art form having their own medium begins to develop in these texts. The differences between drama and cinema expand to unveil a more overarching theme in the work of Sanín Cano: the classification of the arts. This is a proper subject of aesthetics. In “¿Es literatura el teatro?” (1955), the most recent of the texts that make up the corpus reviewed for this article, Sanín writes that it is not possible to approach film from an aesthetic point of view without taking into account the theater (1955: 63).

FILM AS ART AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE ARTS

When Sanín Cano explores the relationship between drama and film in his writings, two issues become clear: film as art and the classification of the arts. To address them it becomes necessary to determine whether writing for film can be considered art. The issue is not addressed in any of the texts directly and therefore his position can only be concluded through the signs and relationships addressed in his various writings.

The second issue, the classification of the arts and within them the place of film, has not surprisingly been addressed by aesthetes for a long time. The emergence of new techniques and media raises questions, as occurs with Sanín and film decades after the advent of photography⁷.

Sanín was not particularly concerned with film’s position in the classification of art, likely because he never considered film an art. Instead he always addresses

⁶ It is necessary to clarify that Sanín refers to the theatrical representation, not the text. In “¿Es literatura el teatro?” he affirms there is undeniable literary value in the scripts of dramas such as *The Tempest*, *Enemy of the People* or *The Mayor of Zalamea*, but when moving from the script to the stage, it is not longer about the literature alone and its quality will depend on other factors (1955: 64).

⁷ As Tatarkiewicz points out, in the 19th century appear a number of problematic areas that may or may not be included in the concept of art. These are products that include both man and machine, whereas art is supposedly an exclusively human activity (Tatarkiewicz, 2008: 53).

the issue in relation to drama. This leads us to conclude that for Sanín, film is a new creative medium inferior to the theater and fails to keep up with other arts such as literature. For this he references Bahr and his theories that advocate the diverse potentials and values in these mediums.

Between writing “Shakespeare amenazado” and “Vitáfono” 6 years passed, in which time Sanín abandons his concern that film presents a threat to drama. As he writes in “La literatura y el cine”, film does not represent a threat to the Fine Arts; it is a medium that has elements that have not been possessed before, which makes it different, and if there is a decline in the arts it is due to other phenomena (1998, Vol. IV).

That films are created with the intervention of a machine implies that the individual can not make them without it. It is not something that requires a physical effort, such as the mechanical arts, nor merely the intellect, as the liberal arts; it requires, according to Bahr, the most material of the elements. Sanín refers to this in “¿Es literatura el teatro?”:

The motion picture is not the work of an individual and is ingloriously not born of an inspiration or exclusively artistic impulses [...] One of the shortcomings of theater and film as works of art lies in the irremediable and unfortunate fact that they need two people at least [...] art, as noted by experience everywhere, is an individual work (1955: 65-66).

Sanín referring to film as “art” or “new art” does not seem sufficient to conclude that he considered it as part of the Fine Arts. In an isolated manner he refers to values that should be possessed by film, which may indicate that it is art and though the use of the term is not adequate, this does add a solid foundation for consideration. It is rather a criterion that can be used to identify a film as being either good or bad. According to the author, a film must be silent and to omit this rule leads to the formation of a new form of art. The use of movement should also not be used indiscriminately and its strength should be derived from its potential to show human gestures. He further claims that film is one of those arts that distorts reality through the spiritual constitution of the creator.

In “Diálogo indiferente” Sanín qualifies films as either good or bad, a classification he takes up again in “Un arte educativo”, which addresses the quality of the film exhibited in Bogotá (Sanín Cano, 1998: 240). Here he shows an appreciation for the possibility of distinguishing between different qualities of film production but does not state clearly, in addition to the features presented, how they were qualified or what films fit into each of these categories.

Sanín also points out in “¿Es literatura el teatro?” two aspects that prevent film from being art: exploitation and mass production. This text not only reflects his ideas of film 50 years after its first appearance, but is where he most emphatically expresses the impossibility of considering it an art:

This is another area where the origin of film departs organically from the characteristics of art. In its ordinary form it is a shining example admirably achieved from the economic point of view of mass production. Now mass production is set apart from common art which is more an expression of the individual and a reflection of national influences and regional events (1955: 67).

For Sanín, film can not be one of the Fine Arts as it is a thoughtless show that is not the product of the work of the individual, but requires a machine for its implementation and includes the possibility of exploitation and mass production. To this must be added other aspects such as the role of film and the use of diverse media to counteract the notion of art that Sanín develops in his work. As writes Jiménez (2009), Sanín, since writing “Núñez poeta”, welcomes the fundamental approaches of modernism. This leads to his defense of the autonomy of the aesthetic and the need for art to be emancipated from any other purpose.

While it is clear is that when Sanín refers to film as “art,” he refers to the technique and result of human work rather than the Fine Arts. It remains necessary to look at the subject of the classification of the arts addressed by the author in several of his writings on cinema. For this purpose, three articles are essential.

In “Los límites del arte dramático” (1923), Sanín briefly notes the classification of the arts citing “a German critic” whose name he had supposedly forgotten: “He classified the arts, noting their importance according to their immateriality or strength of the element to which they exploit” (1923: 119). Accordingly, theater and dance occupy the last place on the scale as the element which they exploit is man. Although theater is art, it is only a minor art as it uses materials of lesser quality than those using intangible elements.

The matter is taken up with more attention in “La literatura y el cine” (Sanín Cano, 1998: 309-311) and “¿Es literatura el teatro?” (Sanín Cano, 1955: 63-70). In these articles he alludes to the same classification, but begins to define the relationship between theater and literature as well as film. The theater, he writes, contains a literary element in the composition of the work and a non-literary element in the work of the actors. The latter is spoken word and therefore can not be considered literature or the literary arts. In film there is the same, but is even further from literature. Here Sanín refers to the drama represented, not the text. This drama requires the spoken word and therefore the actors. It leads to the use of not only a different literary art medium but its quality will depend on not only what is in the text, but factors specific to the show such as acting, directing and set design, amongst others.

The classification which Sanín Cano addresses in the three texts comes from Hermann Bahr, as deduced from direct references found in two of them. According to Bahr, music is the highest of arts. Histrionic art, along with representation, is

found at a lower scale. His rating reflects the tangibility of the object materiality used, man being the most tangible (Sanín Cano, 1998: 310). Thus one might think that the film would be in the same place, related to both histrionic art and painting, but as Sanín points out film can not be compared with any other form of art. The closest it can come to this, he writes, is in the sketches made in preparation for the film, though these too have limited value as they are not a product of the inspiration of the individual (1955).

If a classification of this type is used, art forms will be found that combine various media as with film, which could be called a mixed form, incorporating many elements such as audio and visual. This is an advantage for creating spatial and temporal relations, but also signifies, at least for the purists, a clear transgression (Hospers, 1997: 118). Sanín seems to belong to this group:

We believe to have found the explanation of this perpetual backing-up, of this disservice that continues to shadow the cinema with its combination of various art forms to give the impression of human movement [...]. It is a function of the cinema that the machine should impose a visible detriment to pure aesthetic intention (Sanín Cano, 1955: 65).

However, Sanín clarifies that to classify film in this way does not mean that it is an art of negligible value. On the contrary, it contains some possibilities that no other art ever has. That it has not been exploited or appreciated as such raises a different point: “I think film has at its disposal rich and promising elements as no other art form has before possessed” (Sanín Cano, 1998: 311).

This recognition from Sanín leads him to see film as playing a role in the educational arts, though at the same time preventing it from being a part of the Fine Arts. Art, for a critic like Sanín who is primarily a modernist, should be autonomous without being subject to any practical purpose and should not combine different media. Therefore if film is not art, it is not necessary to defend its autonomy and thus the author promotes the educational value and the social role it should fulfill.

THE FUNCTION OF FILM

Sanín refers to the public in several of his texts. He approaches it in two ways: as a receiver of his works and as a mass with the ability to generate change. While not indicating directly to which public he refers, he makes constant references to a public which is “unreflective” and the “average” man. With this it is possible to determine that he is referring to “the great public mass” as opposed to the “intellectual mesocracy” (1906). Sanín,

Distinguishes [...] between “the great publish mass” and the “intellectual mesocracy.” Following a distinction that comes from European romanticism [...] The first is a “living body, supremely elastic, educable”, not sophisticated, and has above all the advantage of a lack of rhetorical dogmas. It is the part of the community who do not read, or read very little, but make up its hope for the future (Jiménez, 2008: 135-136).

The audience that Sanín refers to in his texts as “the great public mass” is constantly related to the educational role of cinema. This function is only possible with an audience that can be “molded.” As he points out, film is designed for those who have no other means of access to culture and luxury.

From “Shakespeare amenazado,” Sanín begins talking to the public. In his view the public of Shakespeare was better than that of 1921, “Crowds of that time, who could appreciate the mental activity of Shakespearean characters, were more capable of thought and reflection than the average man of our time” (1975: 153). The speed and constant movement that the audience craves, due to the fact they have lost their ability to think, are what drives the movement and the films themselves, invading the theater. The audience eager for a spectacle has generated unnecessary movement in the theater: “before the bulldozing invasion of film, there were already signs of fatigue in the audience of dramatic performances. Producers began to make up for the lack of movement through dance scenes. (Sanín Cano, 1975: 154).

Not only was the audience without the capacity to appreciate the great works without getting tired, making it necessary to resort to this additional movement, but it had also become thoughtless. It was a softened public, which had lost its ability for opposition: “The impression was so deep that when Covent Garden was invaded by another story on screen, the audience was domesticated” (Sanín Cano, 1975: 155).

Thus for Sanín, the public holds two characteristics: to be thoughtless and to be inclined to movement, even that which does not make sense. This, he writes, is due to the desire to be entertained, being in a state of domestication where they are willing to accept whatever is offered. However, these precise characteristics are those that allow film to be appreciated in its educational role.

In 1939, in “Un arte educativo,” Sanín again refers to the public. On one hand, he points to the inactivity of the spectators, noting that they did not sufficiently complain at the low quality films presented in the theaters of Bogotá. On the other hand, he points out that in reality the artistic ability of the public is higher than the producers of these films think. Without exaltation, he does attribute some merit:

Still they were governed by the belief that the public is left fascinated by perpetual motion, but the motion does not correspond to any requirement of the story. [...] Its principally aesthetic concern is visible, and something from psychology better studied in the latest films. However, the level is still low for the majority of the films they offer to the public, as those in Bogotá, who pay for works of art in proportion to their resources (Sanín Cano, 1998: 241).

Sanín Cano identifies a public that, though not being ideal, possesses a capacity for appreciation and goes in large numbers to the cinema. From there we find the potentials film and the film industry have that are yet to be fulfilled. This phenomenon may be related to the problem of consumption Greenberg associated with kitsch. With the industrial revolution, the urbanizing masses were producing a so-called “universal literacy”; they put pressure on society to provide them with a type of culture appropriate to their own consumption (2002). One response to this need for consumption are the works produced by the film industry.

In “La segunda campanada” (1998, Vol. II), Sanín refers to the social role of cinema in the closing of several theaters in Bogota due to the economic crisis. For him, taking into account the role of film, the doors of the cinema should not only not be closed, but the film industry should be nationalized. Film, he writes, contains a social value: it is better than other forms of distraction, prevents crime, and functions to erase class barriers. It is “one of the few luxuries of the poor” and if the government were clear on this, as well as seeing it as an opportunity for education, it would be better utilized (1998, Vol. II 55).

In “Un arte educativo” he again addresses the role of film as an “element of education and propaganda” (Sanín Cano, 1998: 241). He reiterates his point that governments have not been aware of this, instead giving this function to radio which does not have the same scope. This leads him to conclude that the government does not use the best tool at its disposal to prevent the deterioration of civilization: education. He writes that the film industry has the power, as a means of communication, to educate and propagandize while serving the purposes of the state.

These statements from Sanín, also alluding to popular culture and the public, introduce again the issue of autonomy. Art should not put other considerations before beauty, and should not be subordinate to service or to anything other than the art itself, as stated in “Núñez Poeta” (1977). Therefore “art” preceded by functions of another nature is not art. Thus film, being linked to such a function, loses its autonomy and therefore the possibility to be considered real art.

To this should be added the importance for Sanín in art to abandon the idea of “national.” Although he explains and supports this in “De lo exótico” (1934), it should be noted that his point applies to art in general. For him the great works are not primarily regional and should not presume the existence of a

national literature. A claim of this kind is not a response to the artist but rather one who seeks to gain power (Jiménez, 2008). In the case of film Sanín advocates the opposite, defending the importance of a national industry that serves the state. This is only a sustainable line of thinking if it is understood that film is not a part of the fine arts and thus serves other principles.

SANÍN CANO AND FILM: AESTHETICS AND CRITICISM

From his articles on the topic of film, it can be concluded that Sanín Cano had three principal concerns: the relationship of film and theater, film as art and its classification, and the function of film in general. These are topics he approaches from an aesthetic rather than a critical point of view.

Regarding the films that Sanín Cano may have seen, there are only a couple of direct references such as *Don Juan and Within The Law*. The same applies to the theater, although his references in that case are wider. That Sanín somewhat departs from his work as a critic to analyze from an aesthetic point of view enriches his texts more than it diminishes their relevance.

It is possible to observe how film, an invention which presents a thoughtless spectacle for the masses who only desire movement and which fails to be considered a part of the Fine Arts, becomes relevant for the possibilities it possesses in its media and function. With his reflections, Sanín Cano instructs his readers on topics such as the classification of the arts and appreciation of the Fine Arts and their implications. He shows how the Fine Arts are designed to delight and for him are autonomous, and how the mechanical arts, such as film, are intended for other uses.

In contrast to that with film, Sanín Cano takes a different approach to other forms of art in his work, as addressed by Tobón Giraldo:

Sanín Cano always defends the point that neither art nor culture in general can be reduced to mere means to an end (whether social, political, religious or economic). Against the instrumental conceptions of culture, Sanín Cano states again and again that this, particularly with art, is an element of freedom within the individual facing the demands of a society that constantly threatens to devour him, and to reduce his existence to a mere component of a larger whole. As such the autonomy of the culture and the individual mutually sustain one another (2009: 144).

The author does not grant autonomy to film as it is not, according to him, a pure art. On the contrary, the qualities that Sanín finds in film are mainly linked to its educational function.

While reflections on film occupy only a small fraction of the body of Sanín Cano's work, they represent issues that always interested him. They also allow one to observe the unique development of certain aspects of film that make it distinct from other forms of art. This enriches the overall vision of his work as an essayist.

Likewise these texts, despite a lack of systematization, allows us to identify Sanín as one of the first writers on the subject of film in Colombia. While his work was not directly critical and addressed more aesthetic concerns, as noted, Sanín's reflections on the film industry, cultural industry, popular culture and media communication were clearly relevant in the period in which they were written as well as many years later in the discussions of the great theorists. These texts represent an important section of Sanín's work and allow for the development of issues that have yet to be thoroughly analyzed.

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