

Hypertextual and intermedial paths between the journalistic story and the cinematographic fiction: from the crime of Mazarrón to *El extraño viaje*

Derroteros hipertextuales e intermediales entre el relato periodístico y la ficción cinematográfica: del crimen de Mazarrón a El extraño viaje



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Abstract:

Journalism has always been a rich breeding ground for audiovisual stories, but throughout much of the history of Spanish cinema, recognition of the generic label that "based on real events" implies has not been common. Being aware of the difficulties that arise when approaching a canonical work of Spanish cinema such as *El extraño viaje* (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1964) from this perspective, the purpose of this research is to carry out a comparative study of the transfer that is produced from the narrative journalistic report of the Mazarrón crime (an event that occurred in January 1956) and the fictional account of its film adaptation. This comparative analysis

Resumen:

El periodismo siempre ha sido un rico vivero de historias para el audiovisual, pero no ha sido común a lo largo de buena parte de la historia del cine español el reconocimiento a la etiqueta genérica que implica el "basado en hechos reales". Conscientes de las dificultades que se presentan para abordar desde esta perspectiva una obra canónica del cine español como es El Extraño viaje (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1964), el propósito de esta investigación es realizar un estudio comparatista del trasvase que se produce desde el relato periodístico del caso en el que se sustenta (el crimen de Mazarrón, un suceso ocurrido en enero de 1956) y el relato ficcional de su adaptación filmica, analizando cómo se pro-

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assesses how this transfer occurs, what are the traces of the event from which it derives and what existing documentary references, if any, are recorded in the film credits. We will see how *El extraño viaje* stands as a paradigmatic example of invisibility and erasure of the factual criminal story from which it comes, forced, among other reasons, by some interferences of reality imposed by the Franco's regime.

Keywords:

Journalism; Spanish Cinema; chronical of criminal events; based on a true story; *El extraño viaje*.

duce esa posible transferencia, cuáles son las huellas del suceso del que parte y qué referencias documentales existentes, si las hubiera, se registrarán en los créditos del filme. Comprobaremos cómo El extraño viaje se erige en un ejemplo paradigmático de invisibilidad y borrado del relato factual criminal del que procede, obligado, entre otras razones, por unas interferencias de lo real que imponía el régimen franquista.

Palabras clave:

Periodismo; Cine español; crónica de sucesos criminales; basado en hechos reales; El extraño viaje.

1. Introduction

It is not difficult to realize the historiographical relevance that a film like *El extraño viaje* (Fernando Fernán-Gómez, 1964) has acquired in recent decades. The film, which was condemned to silence by Franco's officialdom and premiered in a marginal way in a neighborhood cinema five years after it was made, has become over time not only one of the canonical works of Spanish cinema but also one of the fundamental pieces to understand the professional career of the Madrilenian director Fernán-Gómez. In this process of academic "recovery" and "vindication" of both the author and his filmography, numerous studies have proliferated since the last years of the 20th century, focusing their analysis (in the case of this film) either on the use of the *esperpento* or black humor as hallmarks of the story (Angulo, Llinás, 1993; Téllez, 1997; Zunzunegui, 2009; Gómez, 2009; Castro de Paz, 2010; Cueto, 2010), or addressing the contemporary cinematographic influences to which the film is indebted (Lorenzo, Kateryn, Izquierdo, 2009) or even analyzing the conception and structure of the work from the postulates of fundamental theorists and authors such as Mijaíl Bajtín, Charles Baudelaire or Pedro Salinas (Zunzunegui, Aranzubía, 2023). The diversity and depth of these approaches have made it possible not only to unravel the singularity of the film within the Spanish cultural tradition, but also to demonstrate the dialogue that the film maintained with other fields that were far removed from the cinema of those years, such as the traces that Solana's black paintings left in his work or the intrusion into a terrain as little explored at the time as that of transvestism.

This interesting and overabundant academic literature lacks, however, an analytical perspective that is particularly necessary and fundamental for us to understand this work in its full dimension. The aim is to analyze the relationship of this film with the real journalistic event from which it is based, a lurid crime that occurred in the Murcian town of Mazarrón in January 1956. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore further and analyze the film from the generic label "based on real events"¹, events recreated by the filmmaker which turn out to be factual stories, coming directly or indirectly from the newspapers, a mediating link that is usually ignored when mentioning the referent ("real facts") as the inspiration for filmic fiction. As a

1 The category "based on real events" is the most widespread or common in the adaptation of events that appeal to reality in the field of cinematographic fiction. Other labels (the true stories common in Anglo-Saxon cinema) or subgenres such as "biopic", "true crime", "instant movies" or historical cinema itself could not be applicable to the case at hand.

matter of fact, the newspaper is an exceptional provider of what Genette called “factual narration” in its modality “account of current events” (Genette, 1990). We should not forget either that this particular category of fictional cinema does not fail to incorporate some textual mechanisms of the documentary, displacing the pragmatic pact with the spectator “subtly but irreversibly, thanks to a simple ‘based on,’ and the space in which the spectator is no longer to be placed is that of purely fictional autonomy, but that of a pseudoheteronomy in which the fictional narrative is sheltered behind a prediscursive outside” (Carrera, Talens, 2018: 140).

We consider especially pertinent, in any case, the proposal of the above-mentioned master of French narratology around the fact that factual narrative and fictional narrative behave differently with respect to the story they “report” by the mere fact that this story is (supposedly) “true” in one case and invented in another one. But as Genette argued, this “supposedly” alludes to the fact that historians sometimes invent details or compose intrigues and novelists sometimes draw inspiration from actual events. *“What counts here is the official status of the text and its Horizon of reading”* (Genette, 1990: 756, 757) (italics added).

If in the field of fictional narrative, both literary and audiovisual, the existing literature in terms of discourse analysis in its different modalities is abundant and enjoys a secular tradition in the case of literature and a considerable corpus in the case of cinema, the literature focused on informative analysis tends to omit what we could call the “semiotic process”, the meaning-generating narrative artifacts, the “dialectical moment” as understood by Schopenhauer, sticking essentially to an analysis-summary of manifest contents on a given topic or to an analysis of the different journalistic genres. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, in the case of the journalistic account, this is usually projected on a horizon of “transparency”, as a specular reflection of the facts, and the “meaning” is not usually clearly separated from the referent in the critical and analytical discourse.

There is thus a vast field of study, virgin in many respects, in the field of the informative account to try to “extract a principle of classification and a focus of description from the apparent anarchy of messages” (Barthes, 2009: 216). Hence, after having noted the substantial imbalance existing between the scarce analytical literature focused on the forms and structures of the journalistic narrative aimed at “making it seem true” (we now leave aside the question of the effective will to be faithful to the facts or their opposite, to betray them) o focus solely on “telling” as opposed to the rather more prolific analysis of the filmic story, it is worth outlining briefly the complex system of mediations that underlies the “based on real facts” approach and therefore alluding, albeit very briefly, to the thorny issue of “realism”. Barthes distinguished “realism” from “verisimilitude” and alluded to the former as “any discourse that accepts enunciations accredited only by their referent” (1987:186). The key to realism would lie, according to him, in “referential illusion”, which seeks to make us forget the tripartite mechanism of the sign: signifier-signified-referent, suppressing the signified to make us believe that what we agree to be real is reality itself.

It is also worthwhile to dwell on the core issue of this research: the transfers from journalism to cinema and its hypertextual paths. Journalism has always been a rich nursery of stories for the audiovisual, but if we think that the dialogue between cinema and literature has become, on many occasions, a kind of polemic combat between theorists and historians of both fields, we can imagine the paths towards which the comparative work between the journalistic text and the filmic text would lead. André Bazin advocated the impure condition of cinema and its intermediality with the other arts. In fact, journalism, although not considered an art, forms a series of discursive practices that, although sometimes not far from literary non-

fiction writing, can be considered as a (macro)medium that in this case becomes part of the network of intermediate relations from which the film under study is nourished and in which it functions. Perhaps, by a kind of informational fluke, the effect of all the emphasis placed on concepts such as “truth”, “facts”, “objectivity” or “informative transparency”, classic descriptors of journalistic activity, there has been a tendency to assimilate journalism more to “natura”, to the realm of the referent, rather than to culture (the terrain of the story), neglecting the analysis of informative rhetoric and the construction of the imaginary “based on real facts”, possibly suffering some of the effects of that “spell of total empiricism” of which Adorno spoke in his *Aesthetic Theory*.

In order to situate this “transtextual” relationship between journalistic and filmic narrative, we must refer, in the first instance, to a controversial question, a key issue in intermedia comparatism, such as that of literary adaptations. We understand that adaptations are interpretations, rewritings that entail, necessarily and naturally, a process of intermediality, a series of decisions that involve transformations or a transwriting of the source text (Gómez, Sánchez-Mesa, 2011: 280). These transformations (contextual or historical, discursive-enunciative, generic, of the fable, etc.) are partly the result of the “reading” or interpretation of the first text (t1) by the producers of the second text (t2) and partly the result of the demands of the film medium or target context to produce an acceptable film according to the specificity or dominant codes of that medium. Here we also encounter the old problem of “fidelity” to the “original”, a classic problem in the history of thought and in transtextual and intermedial practices which, although generally discarded in the most recent theories, continues to weigh heavily on spectators.

If adaptations of literary works are often criticized for “betraying” or not honoring the original from which they start, this kind of “infidelities” seem hardly punishable in “adaptations” of journalistic texts because they are a ephemeral and, in them, the concept of “authorship” is usually blurred. However, this does not imply giving up absolutely the concept of “fidelity” as an analytical artifact, especially if interpreted in the terms that Umberto Eco used to interpret it: “the concept of fidelity has to do with the conviction that translation is one of the forms of interpretation, and that it must always aim, even if it starts from the sensibility and culture of the reader, to rediscover not only the author’s intention but also the intention of the text” (Eco, 2008:22).

However, we must be aware that, in those films inspired by real events, the most complex thing is to identify that “original” source text, because most often their scripts are the result of a diffuse and disparate trickle of informative fragments that sometimes leave their mark on the collective imagination. Transferring this informative story to the cinema screen is a difficult weight to manage successfully when a director imposes himself fidelity to the news referent, regardless of the possible “truth” or falsehood in which the journalistic story may incur. This approach was very common in denunciation films that emerged in the eighties, such as *El caso Almería* (Pedro Costa, 1984) or *Matar al Nani* (Roberto Bodegas, 1988), although it was used by the film’s promoters as an added value to sell the film.

Another aspect that conditions both the process of film construction and the subsequent development of a film “based on real events” is what we could call “interference of the real”, a very relevant aspect in this type of productions. Let us remember, for example, that the participation (against payment) of the three executioners who participated in *Queridísimos verdugos* (B. Martín Patino, 1977) was decisive for the strength and credibility of the film, or that the support of Santiago Corella’s family was

fundamental for the making of *Matar al Nani*, as they consider it an act of public denunciation of the first case of a disappeared person in the Spanish democracy, while at the same time it provided peace of mind and legal security for the film's producers.

Although this is a far-reaching subject, impossible to develop at greater length in these pages, other examples of these “interferences with the real” lead us to refer to the case of *Las Hurdes/Tierra sin pan*, by Luis Buñuel, banned by the conservative forces of the Spanish Republic after its premiere at the Palacio de la Prensa in Madrid in 1933 because it was considered an attack on the image of that region. In the film we are considering here, *El extraño viaje*, its title was adopted after the Minister of Information and Tourism expressly prohibited the authorization of the first title of the film, *El crimen de Mazarrón*, to avoid damaging the good tourist image that was growing in that area of Spain. On November 27, 1964, the Civil Governor and Provincial head of the Movement in Murcia, wrote a letter to Manuel Fraga requesting his help to suppress the title *El crimen de Mazarrón* “of a film that will soon be released” reminding him of “the praiseworthy effort of private companies that have very respectable interests in the town” and “the extraordinary tourist possibilities of the area”. Fraga responded with another letter on December 9, reassuring the Civil Governor that the Board of Censorship had already adopted the agreement to prohibit the title, “so the whole matter would be settled without major problems or resources”². This “interference” on the part of the State to force the creators to eliminate the reference to the crime was decisive for the invisibility of the news referent and the erasure of the traces of the real event not only in the title of the film but also in the film's credits.

It is also worth remembering that César González Ruano praised this decision in *ABC*, in an article written from Cuenca where the famous journalist spent his summer vacations and from where he recalled that “that city still has to suffer the lightness of a comedian (...) who made famous a crime that seems never to have existed”, arguing that the town of Mazarrón, very favored by tourism, “would have faced an uncomfortable label which would have brought who knows how many silly annoyances, and how many years it would have taken to get rid of them”³. The journalist and writer from Madrid could not have imagined then the controversy that a couple of decades later would surround Pilar Miró's film *El crimen de Cuenca* (1980), which recreated an event that was indeed real.

Finally, it is important to highlight another characteristic that defines an important part of the Spanish film corpus “based on real events”, which is the lack of recognition for these films of the very origin of these stories. If in North American cinema this formula has been used without ambiguity, the famous true stories, or its variant true crime⁴, in Spain, during almost the entire twentieth century, there are few filmmakers who include in their credits that their work refers to a criminal event and even fewer are those who recognize the authorship of journalistic sources. Perhaps one of the reasons for this “disdain” for the reference “real events” is due to the negative connotations that for decades have dragged the chronicle of events in our country (seen as

2 General Archive of the Administration, box 36/0486, exp. 31812.

3 “Las etiquetas”, CGR, *ABC*, 30/8/1964, p. 59.

4 This literary genre, also highly popular in contemporary non-fiction cinema, has become in recent decades one of the most successful attractions for platforms such as *HBO*, *Amazon Prime* or *Netflix* with productions, for example, such as those that document or fictionalize the cases of Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer. In the case of Spain, documentaries and docuseries such as *Muerte en León* (Movistar+, 2016), *Lo que la verdad esconde: el caso Asunta* (Antena 3, 2017) or *El caso Alcásser* (Netflix, 2019), to give just a few examples, have invigorated a genre that has also extended to the sound format of podcasting.

a journalistic exercise surrounded by truculence and sensationalism), in addition to the censorship restrictions that suffocated filmmakers. This trend was broken in the late eighties, when filmmakers like Pedro Costa (previously a crime reporter and investigative journalist in different media) made the leap to filmmaking and directed, among other works, the television series *La huella del crimen* (TVE), one of the “fictions that forged the new symbolic imaginaries” on television (Palacio, 2006:317), eliminating the misgivings and prejudices towards the chronicle of events and giving way to a more normalized production in this territory both in cinema and on the small screen.

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this research proposes as a fundamental ground a number of primary documentary sources: the municipal newspaper library of Madrid and the National newspaper library. Our inquiry there looked for knowledge of the informative coverage of the event in four selected journalistic media: the daily *Madrid*, the weekly *El Caso* and the local newspapers *La Verdad* of Murcia, and *El Noticiero de Cartagena* in the dates between January 16 and 28, 1956. This selection has allowed us to offer both the journalistic coverage made by a national newspaper that was in full commercial expansion, as well as the journalistic treatment given in the local press. Obviously, we could not forget in this selection *El Caso*, the only publication specialized in the treatment of the chronicle of events that, although it had been in circulation for only four years by then, was already beginning to achieve great popularity among readers.

In order to carry out our research, it was also necessary to analyze the censorship file of the film, available in the General Archive of the Administration, Culture section, in order to compare the data that could have affected the plot and the making of the film, such as the express prohibition to use in the title the reference to the crime of Mazarrón. The process is completed with the analysis of *El extraño viaje*, a film about which Fernán-Gómez himself stated that it did not intend to narrate that criminal event, but whose viewing will allow us to essay a comparative study of the transfer from the journalistic story to the fictional story. We want to check how this transfer takes place, what are the traces of the event from which it starts and what existing documentary references, if any, are recorded in the film's credits. Likewise, we will identify the transformations to which the stories and factual references are subjected, pointing out what may be the meaning of the additions or developments introduced by the scriptwriters and the filmmaking team.

To test that we will try to demonstrate is that *El extraño viaje* contains decisive elements coming from the journalistic information about this criminal case, fundamental in the narrative construction of this singular story from the moment in which real data and facts have been “used” and processed by the scriptwriter in a number of important elements that are more relevant than what has been previously recognized in different academic approaches to this film (María, 2009 or Zunzunegui, 1993, among others).

3. A “sensational” event jumps to the pages of newspapers

To contextualize the object of study, let us recall, in a synthetic way, the main lines of the proven facts of this crime: on a lonely beach, a few kilometers from the port of Mazarrón, a young fisherman finds the corpse of a distinguished-looking woman wearing a fur coat and underwear. A few meters away, the body of a man lies face down in the sand. On a rock there is a bottle and three empty glasses, as well as a series of clothes laid out to dry, such as a corset from a lingerie shop in Ávila, a man's coat and a woman's fur coat, with the label of a famous furrier's shop in the center of Madrid. The discovery took place early in the morning of January 15, 1956, and in that first search by the Benemérita (the Spanish Civil Guard) 1,700 pesetas (a very considerable amount for the time) were found in the 3 pocket of the gentleman's suit, besides 200 pesetas that the lady was carrying in her coat.

The *Madrid* newspaper reports the first data on the strange appearance of two bodies on the Cueva de los Lobos beach, near Mazarrón, on January 16, 1956. They are a man and a woman who “could not be identified (...) although they are elegantly dressed”⁵. In the edition of the 17th and 18th, the information published by this newspaper continues to be that provided by the *Cifra* agency. It is included that next to the bodies there was a copy of the *Nueva Rioja* newspaper from the year 53, and the statement of a taxi driver who took a man and two women from Cartagena to the port of Mazarrón is recorded. According to this information, the interest of the strangers was to rent a house to rest for a few days, so two women got into the car: a younger one, who was carrying a briefcase that she did not want to get rid of, another older woman, and a man. It seems that during the journey “they neither exchanged impressions nor spoke at all, the driver noticing that the older woman, who was next to him, refused to let him look at her face, so she pretended to be sleeping or looking out the window.” The story continues in the third person, and although it still does not include textual statements from the taxi driver, it reports that the driver “noticed something strange, since they had passed several towns and they did not tell him where to stop,” so he stopped the car and “told the travelers that he would not continue until they told him where they were going”. They ordered him to return to a road already traveled, and shortly after, they ordered him to stop, paid him the cost of the trip, and “stayed in the middle of the field, close to the beach.” The information closes with two important pieces of information: the analyzed remains of the cup were “arsenic” and the unknown persons had died twenty-four hours before the discovery on the beach⁶.

The new data reveal that, of the two women, the younger was “tall, beautiful, somewhat plump and had her hair dyed auburn”. About the oldest, the missing one, it is said that “it can be assumed that her body lays at the bottom of the sea or locked up in one of the small hotels on the Island or surrounding beaches”. It is also added that “the corpse of the youngest woman still has a diamond ring on, and the man has a wristwatch stopped at quarter to ten because it got wet”, which leads them to think that “the death probably occurred about ten minutes earlier”⁷.

⁵ *Madrid*, 16/1/1956, p. 21.

⁶ *Madrid*, 17/1/1956, p. 15.

⁷ *Madrid*, 18/1/1956, p. 15.

The news turn of the newspaper occurs the next day, January 19, when the correspondent in Murcia takes the reins and gives the news a more literary bias. The reporter Francisco Capote Macía highlights that investigation is led by “the competent judge of Totana, Mr. Gabriel González Aguado, effectively supported by the zeal of the Civil Guard and Police forces,” and points out another very interesting fact for our investigation, because the theme of transvestism plays a fundamental role in Fernando Fernán-Gómez’s film. It is the following comment: “As for the other woman (whom the popular imagination, overflowing with a torrent of assumptions, passed off as a man) is also the sister of the dead, her name is Marina and is fifty-two years old.” On January 25, *Madrid* publishes that the thesis that the brothers did not commit suicide seems to be confirmed, but they were rather murdered (note that the word “crime” has not appeared in any of the chronicles) and that “even Marina, the sister searched with fruitless results until today, also perished”, justifying the fact that if the body was not found it was because “the sea always returns its victims, but never the victims of others”⁸.

The news coverage carried out by the local press is particularly interesting for journalistic analysis because these media try to minimize the issue, avoiding to give it the dimension that such a unique event in a small town deserves and hiding it as if it were a shame. We will have to wait two days after the discovery of the bodies for *La Verdad* of Murcia to take to its first page⁹ the appearance of the bodies and the mystery surrounding their identity in a column on the right without a photograph. Inside, on page 7, accompanied by a miscellany of various types of information, it aseptically addresses the basic data of the event without taking up a large space. The next day no information was offered, while on the 19th only a brief on the cover was given (without referring to the one on the inside) in which the identity of the dead was reported. The economic situation of the Pérez Gómez brothers in Haro, the town where they came from and where they were considered “honorable” people, is part of a chronicle by the correspondent in Logroño that is published on the 20th¹⁰. The information details that the three brothers “lived a very retired life, like true misanthropes, being very unsociable in their relationships”, to conclude that “fifteen days ago they left without leaving any address”, all of which were decisive elements in the construction of the characters of fiction. For *La Verdad*, the “Case of the Three Cups”, as they called it (never as the “Crime of Mazarrón”), the event continued to have a more than discreet presence, almost trying to make the matter go unnoticed. Information will not be published every day, it will not delve too deeply into the data collected in the area around the town and at no time it was accompanied by photographs that illustrated the area where the bodies or the deceased were located.

This way of journalistic covering of an event that was clearly uncomfortable is even more evident in *El Noticiero de Cartagena*, an afternoon newspaper whose circulation never exceeded three thousand copies. The newspaper does not give information about the case until January 20 and also places it on its last page. The information, which is not signed, is a story based on rumors, written without rigor or professional ethics. As an example, the comments offered about Marina, the missing sister:

8 *Madrid*, 25/1/1956, p. 17.

9 *La Verdad*, 20/1/1956, front page.

10 *La Verdad*, 20/1/1956, front page.

“it can also even be conjectured that she is dead, and this with a greater chance of success, drowned by other people who put weight on the corpse, since it is well known that, otherwise, the sea returns its dead after three days”¹¹.

Radically different is the information display carried out by the weekly newspaper specialized in events, *El Caso*. For two consecutive editions, the publication directed by Eugenio Suárez¹² dedicates separate covers and a good number of pages inside¹³. In the edition corresponding to January 21, the newspaper illustrates its cover with the portraits drawn by the cartoonist Pinedo about the two deceased brothers. Its headline “Tragedy on Mazarrón Beach” accompanies a brief text in which the event is described as “mystery of the year” and argues why its first page does not use photographic illustration: “our cover reproduces the portraits by Julio and Luisa Pérez Gómez, since we consider those obtained post-mortem unpublishable and in bad taste for our readers.”

After this deference, the inside pages convey the information provided by the special correspondent to Murcia and La Rioja. Photographs of the place where the bodies were found are published, as well as of the fisherman José Rodríguez Navarro, the driver Rivas and drawings of the bottle and glasses. The information published in its pages is meticulous, it focuses on the smallest details and does not lack some literary aspect framing its chronicles. It places Puerto de Mazarrón as one of the main summer centers of our coast, describing its natural riches, its blue waters, its happy tourists who come attracted by its beauty and tranquility, guaranteed by the almost total lack of means of communication. The detailed description of where we are, what its people are like and what their intentions are is accompanied by the basic data of the case discovered in the first hours. *El Caso* also displays continuous praise for the law enforcement forces and the need to “publicly express our gratitude to all the authorities that take part in clarifying these events, for their kind assistance, which has facilitated our informative work”¹⁴.

The pages of this edition include interviews with the taxi driver, Rivas Bascón, and two women (mother and daughter) who spoke with the strangers because they were looking for rental houses. The driver confirms that one of the people who traveled in his vehicle was “a man disguised as a woman.” On the trip to the beach, the driver was surprised by the silence among the three brothers and the order not to turn on the interior light of the car when they were going to pay him in the middle of the road. The three strangers were lost in the darkness of the night, in the middle of nowhere. “I was surprised by the absolute silence of the women. The oldest, in particular, sat in Cartagena next to me, bowed her head, held her hands between her knees, and didn’t move during the entire trip! I have heard the assumption that it could be a man disguised as a woman, which does not seem entirely impossible to me”¹⁵.

11 *El Noticiero de Cartagena*, 20/1/1956, back cover.

12 Let us remember that the creator of *El Caso*, Eugenio Suárez, Falangist and volunteer of the Blue Division, had begun his professional career as a correspondent for the Movement’s press in Budapest. After returning to Madrid to his position as censor, he became a staff editor of the *Madrid* newspaper in 1949. Three years later he managed to get the general director of Press, Juan Aparicio, to give him the necessary support for the creation of the weekly events newspaper.

13 *El Caso* nº 194, 21/1/ 1956, front page and pp. 2-5, y nº 195, de 28/1/1956, front page and pp. 2-6.

14 This reference will be common in the journalistic style of the events weekly throughout its existence.

15 *El Caso*, n ° 194, p. 4.

The report continues with information collected from Haro by special correspondents to this town. From there, the chronicle begins with a grandiloquent tone when it explains to readers that “our news teams, after different efforts in Madrid and Logroño, were able to learn the sensational news that, through masterful investigative work, the Civil Guard post of the city of Haro had managed to identify the characters of the enigmatic drama”. After providing the identities of Julio Pérez Gómez, single, native of Haro, aged sixty-three, and Luisa Pérez Gómez, also single and fifty-seven years old, the information confirms that the missing woman is their sister, Marina, also single and sixty years old.

The journalistic story establishes Pérez Gómez’s itinerary since they left Haro, on January 9, on the express train heading to Madrid, to continue to Murcia. They traveled in first class, carrying several suitcases and dressed in elegant clothes, which matched those worn by the corpses. The chronicle investigates the origin of its protagonists: a respectable and wealthy family that in past times “shined” for their social position. The parents, Valentín and Higinia, had owned a large estate and the Higinia Hotel, which was attended by “a large and distinguished clientele.” When their parents died, the brothers divided the inheritance (with one more sister who lives in Haro and is the widow of the former mayor), transferred the hotel, settled in Bilbao, later in Madrid, and finally they returned to Haro due to health problems. From that moment on, “a silent war, very much like the tortured characters of the Brontë writers, broke out within that family,” explains the chronicle, which is why Consuelo (the other sister) separated from Marina, Luisa and Julio.

The three unmarried brothers were, according to the citizens of Haro consulted, “very strange.” Although their conduct was impeccable, “they lived apart from everyone,” “voluntarily isolated,” “they spoke as little as possible with those they met and knew.” They lived in a beautiful apartment on one of the most important streets in the town and spent many hours “observing the street and the people passing by” through the blinds, always drawn: “From the street you could sense the presence of the three brothers on the other side of that kind of wall behind which they seemed to be hiding”¹⁶.

The special correspondent, who signs as C.H., assures, after interviewing a local merchant as well as other authorities, that “the eldest sister, Marina, imposed her will and her whims on the other two siblings: Luisa and Julio.” “The people to whom we allude (the paragraph continues) have assured us that there was a glimpse of “a pernicious, fatal influence of the eldest sister on the other two.” And under the heading “A dark story”, the information concludes with important data for our research, because they will find a filmic echo in Fernando Fernán-Gómez’s proposal. In the last column, the reporter writes: “a desire for excessive isolation, a deliberate intention to remain closely united in an extravagant society of three: a closed silence in the face of society, make our characters extravagant and sickly beings: heroes of the most shocking story of psychopaths. Their death itself, shrouded in mystery, not only suggests, but would surpass any literary invention”¹⁷.

The following week, *El Caso* headlined on its cover “Mazarrón, the event of the year,” accompanying it with photographs of the three brothers and an image of one of the boats that are combing the coastline in search of the missing body. Inside, eight pages were dedicated to reporting the event from every angle and point of view imaginable. Faithful to its declared philosophy:

16 *El Caso*, nº 194, 21/1/ 1956, p. 5.

17 *El Caso*, nº 194, p. 5.

“we prefer to err on the side of detail rather than leave something in the pipeline that could serve for an exact understanding of what happened”, the pages tried to answer the numerous unknowns that the case raises by stating their way of working (so different from that of the local press, as we have seen) and their professional ethics: “We cannot, nor do we want to, because our objectivity strictly prohibits us, speculate with rumors, the ‘it is said’, ‘it is assured’, which at every moment are launched and that only serve to disorient opinion, interfere with the delicate work of Justice and hinder the tenacious and constant trail of investigators”¹⁸.

Although the reasons that led the Pérez Gómez brothers to leave Haro were never known with certainty, it is known that on their trip to Mazarrón they made a pilgrimage through hotels, guesthouses and shops. The statements of those who saw them give us interesting details, such as that “the lady dressed in black” (Marina) had a “manly appearance, she was rarely made up”¹⁹, “she was always mute, somewhat apart while the other two acted, although it was she who carried the money”²⁰. They also tell us that they bought the press (*El Noticiero* and the *Madrid* newspaper) and *espadrilles*²¹ (in the film it was modern clothing), or that they ate seafood in a restaurant.

The latest information pointed to a possible triple suicide of the brothers. *El Caso* announces the appearance of a letter written and signed by the brothers that they send to some cousins who live in the town of Salinas de Añana in Álava. In the letter, in a very affectionate tone, they inform that they have sent them all the furniture in their house, in addition to a suitcase from Madrid, so that they can enjoy it in the most convenient way and add that they will undertake “a long trip abroad”, but that “the itinerary is not yet determined”²². Despite this indication, no avenue of investigation is ruled out because there is even the possibility that they were victims of a scam: “that of the hidden treasure that would come in a small boat”²³. Whatever it was, “The Case of the Three Cups” or “The Crime of Mazarrón” would begin to disappear from the pages of the newspapers with the same mystery with which it had entered.

4. Results: journalistic transfers and adaptation to the fictional story

A fairly economical strategy in approaching the analysis of adaptations, including those of films “based on real events,” consists of asking a double question: “what is transferred and what is adapted?” (McFarlane, 1996), that is, which elements of the original text (t1) are maintained in the adaptation (t2) and which are transformed or added by it. First, however, it is important to contextualize the circumstances surrounding the production and making of *El extraño viaje*. Fernando Fernán-Gómez embarked on the making of this film after the commercial failure of the suffocating *El mundo sigue* (1963), which, in

¹⁸ *El Caso*, nº195, p. 4.

¹⁹ *El Caso*, nº195, p. 2.

²⁰ *El Caso*, op.cit, p. 3.

²¹ *El Caso*, op.cit, p. 3.

²² *El Caso*, nº 198, p. 14 and back cover.

²³ *El Caso*, op.cit, p. 7.

turn, constituted the closure of a common thread that began with the diptych *La vida por delante* (1958) and *La vida alrededor* (1959). *El mundo sigue* had experienced numerous setbacks with censorship because it was a sour work of melodramatic blackness and insistence on portraying the miserable daily life of the most popular classes. In this film, “visual and narrative elements of the stylizing, distorting tradition of Spanish art with costumbrist, avant-garde and popular roots were already combined, from Goya and Solana to Arniches and Valle-Inclán, from Gómez de la Serna to Jardiel Poncela, from Neville to Azcona and Berlanga” (Castro de Paz: 2010, 217). This devastating portrait of Spanish society in the dark post-war period is the cause, according to the director himself, of the “failure” of the film (Brasó: 2002, 130). A film, therefore, very uncomfortable for the Franco administration, *El mundo sigue* was boycotted and banned²⁴, so the filmmaker found himself, at the beginning of 1964, as he recounts in his *Memoirs*, in a catastrophic economic situation. As luck would have it, a newly created production company, Impala, commissioned him to direct his next feature film, a film in which, for the first time, he would not intervene in the script (Fernán-Gómez: 1990, 467).

The new project has its origins in the Café Gijón in Madrid, a meeting and gathering place, where Luis García Berlanga, Pedro Beltrán and Manuel Ruiz-Castillo, among others, met on an undetermined date in 1963. Among the “curious passions” of the director of *El verdugo* was that of investigating mysterious crimes “as a source of ideas” for possible projects and it is he who comments on the case of “a pair of mentally deficient brothers who had been found on the beach of Mazarrón (...). Then I came up with the plot for a film” (García Berlanga: 2009, 7). Screenwriter Pedro Beltrán explained that Berlanga’s comment that “the old woman’s body was not discovered because they hid it in the town and the murderer left the place using his clothes and disguised as a woman” seemed to him material enough for a film “and I proposed to Luis to buy the idea” (F. Heredero: 2008, 94). For his part, the screenwriter Manuel Ruiz-Castillo recalled that that day the Valencian director read some clippings from *El Caso* recounting the crime and presented his particular theory about what happened: “the idea of the possible transvestism of the murderer was ingenious, brilliant, and, as Luis said, there was a film there, and he encouraged Pedro and me to think about the idea and to start preparing a script” (Ruiz-Castillo: 2009, 63). Beltrán and Ruiz-Castillo begin to draft the plot, they work on a first treatment of the story that García Berlanga gives up directing and is offered to different production companies until Impala Films offers them a contract to produce the script. Despite the good prospects that open up with the purchase of the plot, the disagreements between the scriptwriters become so evident that Ruiz-Castillo decides to abandon the project, leaving only Pedro Beltrán as scriptwriter²⁵.

As we reviewed above, different studies have considered that *El extraño viaje* was based on an original script that referred very vaguely to the Mazarrón crime. In such a way that “when it came to putting into images a proposal like the one offered by Beltrán and Ruiz Castillo’s script, Fernán-Gómez’s work on it was, on the one hand, free of any public relationship with a pre-existing text and, on the other hand, it was presented as an incitement to concentrate the creative weight, independent of any

24 The film, which was financed by the filmmaker himself, was never released in commercial theaters and could only be seen on screen when A contracorriente film distributed it in 2015.

25 Ruiz-Castillo appeared in the film’s credits along with Pedro Beltrán as the author of the plot, based on an idea by Luis García Berlanga.

responsibility with respect to a “canonical” text that had to be “adapted” (that is, “respected”) in the exploration, in the strict terrain of the staging” (Zunzunegui, 1993: 52).

We cannot refer here to a “canonical” text and we must remember that the journalistic chronicle as a plot substrate has very rarely been considered a first-order element in Spanish cinema, but we can highlight the elements that “are transferred” in this comparatist analysis between the factual terrain and the audiovisual fiction. At the outset, it should be noted that these elements are subject to one of the most valued creative findings of the film, which is linked to the artistic tradition of the grotesque in this country: “the configuration of that family of single siblings who survive, isolated from the rest of the town and prisoners of their obsessions” (Zunzunegui, 1993:52). Let us remember that journalistic information already portrayed the siblings Marina, Luisa and Julio Pérez Gómez as three “extravagant”, “sickly” and “very strange” unmarried individuals, with a withdrawn and unsociable character. Both in the informative story and later in the film, the three belong to a respectable family, they live in a beautiful house located in the center of a provincial town and they always spend hours a day observing the street and the people through blinds down. Let us remember that the chronicle of *El Caso* alluded to the “excessive isolation”, to “their closed silence in the face of society”, describing these brothers as “heroes of the most shocking story of psychopaths”, with a mysterious death that “would surpass any invention of a literary type.” All of this is recreated in Fernán-Gómez’s work of fiction.

In the journalistic chronicle carried out from the Riojan town of Haro, the Pérez Gómez family’s place of residence, the weekly *El Caso* detailed the pernicious influence of Marina on her brothers, on whom she imposes her will and her whims without regard. This fact, an essential element in the relationship between the real siblings, would also be present and key in the characters that Tota Alba (Ignacia), Rafaela Aparicio (Paquita) and Jesús Franco (Venancio) play in the fiction. What the inventiveness of the scriptwriters does is to adorn the personalities of these beings by giving them infantile traits in the case of Paquita and Venancio, while Ignacia will reinforce her dictatorial function over her siblings with her physique and her authoritarian gestures.

There is also another element that we find in the journalistic story and that will be of great relevance in the fictional plot: the suspicion that during the trip to the beach the taller sister could be a man dressed as a woman. This issue was used as a fundamental piece of the film plot to expand on transvestism, an exotic and unique narrative proposal in the Spanish cinema of the sixties, but which we can place in the “perverse” erotic imaginary of a certain dimension of Luis García Berlanga’s humor. In this line of argument, the information in the journalistic chronicles alluding to the fact that “extravagant belongings” were found next to the bodies that appeared on the beach, such as a corset, served the scriptwriter to develop a film subplot throughout the entire film (the erotic games between Ignacia and her young lover, Fernando) to generate intrigue and reflection on the external manifestations in Spanish society.

Although the ending of the film coincides with the journalistic story in the appearance of two bodies on the beach, the invention of the character of Fernando (Carlos Larrañaga) is one of the main additions to the film story. From the beginning of the plot, it fulfills a bipolar function between submission to Ignacia (in exchange for a more promising future) and seduction of Beatriz, the chaste and pure bride who creates her trousseau with infinite patience. We have already seen that in the journalistic

accounts there was always talk of the assumption that one of the sisters was a man disguised as a woman. This circumstance is used in the fictional plot to exploit this narrative discovery, with Fernando becoming the key piece (due to his physical conditions similar to Ignacia) to “get rid” of the body of the authoritarian sister, facilitate the escape of the Vidal brothers and “promise them” a trip abroad that never went beyond Mazarrón beach.

If the journalistic chronicles placed the Pérez Gómez brothers in that oppressive, claustrophobic and extravagant family nucleus that we have described, Fernán-Gómez decides to take his film with extraordinary force to “a grotesque model” of representation to portray the Vidal brothers. Aware of the generic mix offered by the hypotext of the journalistic stories, (re) worked in the script created by Beltrán, the film addresses these perverse universes loaded with a black humor that is related to its radically Spanish costumbrist dimension. The scriptwriter used popular language with rich dialogues and well-known sayings (puritanical messages embroidered in cross stitch such as “leave lust for a month and it will leave you three”) to construct a cinematographic story that turns out to be so arnichesque from a literary point of view, as well as filmically Nevillian, in addition to incorporating “certain resources from Hollywood detective, suspense and horror films” (Castro de Paz, 2010: 233). Those presences evoke in us, as has already been studied on other occasions (Zunzunegui, 1993; Lorenzo, Izquierdo, 2009; Zunzunegui, Aranzubía, 2023), the Hitchcock’s filmic bets in *Psycho* (1960), with the shadow of Ignacia walking through the disturbing Castilian mansion (it reminds us a lot of Mrs. Bates), or her first appearance emulating the housekeeper in *Rebecca* (1940) or, as some journalistic chronicles put it, the environment lived by the “real” siblings, the Pérez Gómez, emulating the gloomy passages described by the Brontë sisters. In short, a rich intermedial network where, in addition to the transfer that the adaptation of journalistic stories entails in the “based on real events”, a number of intermedial references are added, both theatrical and plastic, typical of that grotesque or esperpento aesthetics (Rajewsky, 2005).

The film was shot between March 30 and May 16, 1964 in the village of Santa Pola (Alicante) and in Loeches (Madrid), a place chosen for its square, around which both the Vidal brothers’ house and the City Council are located. Along with the actors, an important part of the population of the Madrilenian village had an active participation as extras, (the camera pans over the faces of women and men of all ages, shocked/fascinated by the rhythms of the twist that have recently arrived in Spain in the *El Progreso* dance hall), which brings a certain documentary and “neorealist” air to its images, underlined by the contrasting black and white photography of José F. Aguayo. From the nerve center of the village, the film begins with a tour through the covers of the newspapers and magazines on a kiosk, while the credits are overemphasized. In this visual review we find the front pages of the weekly *El Caso*²⁶, the magazine *Hola*, with a young and modest Rocío Dúrcal, newspapers such as *El Alcázar* and *Pueblo*, with the overwhelming presence of Franco reporting on his interview with Hussein, or *Gran Mundo*, with the images of the wedding of Juan Carlos de Borbón and Sofía de Grecia on May 14, 1962. The journalistic offer captured by the camera is completed with different fashion publications, the humor of *La Codorniz*, which also contrasts with the suggestive photographs of myths as distant as Sophia Loren or Brigitte Bardot on the cover of *Life* magazine. In this unequivocal way the cinematographic story is dated, distancing it from the real dates of the event, January 1956, which serves the screenwriter Pedro

26 The headline of the weekly will refer to aseptic and foreign information: “The police of the world fight against trafficking in white women”.

Beltrán to portray a Spain that experiences a certain schizophrenia among the timid foreign stimuli, via incipient tourism or economic developmentalism, and the sad reality of the country. This will allow for a more contrasted fresco with more nuances than if it had been placed in Spain in the 1950s.

The starting journalistic material, that family of bachelor siblings that has survived in an environment of voluntary marginality in the village and the entire atmosphere that surrounds them, allows Fernán-Gómez a series of stylistic choices in his staging and in his movements of camera that are highly sophisticated for the time. Not only because of the brilliant choice of the actors or casting (Tota Alba, Rafaela Aparicio and Jesús Franco), who have antagonistic physiques (the bony and long Ignacia, who seems taken from a painting by El Greco and the round, fat and screaming Paquita and Venancio) to embody those freaks, but also for the creation of novel “elements” in the film story, such as the solution of incorporating the body of the authoritarian sister into the wine jar to give substance to the broth or the invention of scenes such as tango dancing with headphones that represent the purest grotesque style. All that grotesque and Solanesque aesthetics in the staging of the film, which oscillates between the realism of the village scenes (in addition to the dancing, the gossiping wives who support and criticize the haberdasher), with a shooting and camera movement close to the documentary genre, and the formal estrangement of that “hidden or private face” of non-confessable relationships, drives us to those “perverse” practices that tell us about the Berlanguan imagination recovered through Pedro Beltrán’s script and amplified by the gaze of the director.

Let us highlight that one of the most relevant camera movements takes place when the accidental murder is going to occur, when Venancio and Paquita dare to enter the forbidden “temple” of Ignacia. The camera shows us what will be the murder weapon, a bottle of brandy (another symbol of Spanishness), a box of chocolates (prohibited for the siblings), a dresser or some drawers with sophisticated clothing inappropriate for a woman like Ignacia. The *tempo* in that journey, in that sequence of the fateful night of the murder, refers to the most classic suspense cinema, but at the same time it incorporates at different moments the native black humor of that group of elderly people, formed by secondary characters of great value and relevance throughout the plot of *El extraño viaje* for his vitriolic comments.

This aesthetic and narrative approach would have its immediate consequences in the decision of the Classification Board, which agreed in July 1964 to authorize the film for people over 18 years of age, but with the classification of 2nd B²⁷. Terrible decision for the film’s producer and distributor, which decided to keep the film cans indefinitely while the verdict was appealed. Finally, on January 18, 1966, *El extraño viaje* was classified in 2nd A, but the film would not be released until September 1969, when it was screened at Madrid’s Odeón cinema as a complement to the film *One Hundred Rifles* (Tom Gries, 1969). Jesús García Dueñas, film critic for *Triunfo* magazine, was the only one who denounced the covert screening in a second-class cinema and warned, as if it were a demerit for the film, that *El extraño viaje* is not the “chronicle of an event but an attempt at a grotesque representation of some common traumas in our society”²⁸. García Dueñas highlighted the indifference of the film industry towards this work and its author, a void that extended to the general press of greater or lesser circulation because

27 General Administration Archive, box 36/0486, exp. 31812.

28 García Dueñas, J. “El extraño viaje del señor Fernán-Gómez: cuando ya no se tiene la vida por delante”, *Triunfo*, nº27, 27/9/1969.

no critic paid attention to this film. Miguel Marías' reflection in *Nuestro Cine* went further in this sense. There, the author describes the film as "cursed" because of the delay in its release, because of the quality of the theater in which it took place and because Spanish cinema is a "monument to ruin and intellectual poverty", criticizing the national newspapers for their lack of interest in this work, thus consolidating "their ignorance".²⁹

5. Conclusions

Throughout this research we have corroborated our initial hypothesis, namely, that *El extraño viaje* is a paradigmatic case of the invisibility of journalistic sources in Spanish "based on real events" cinema during Franco's regime. That is, a type of film adaptations of historical criminal events, where the fictional story adapts factual stories of a journalistic nature. To demonstrate this fact we have carried out a comparative study between the journalistic information of that well-known event that occurred in January 1956 and its translation into cinematographic fiction in Fernán-Gómez's 1964 film.

In this line of erasure of the original sources, in the preceding pages we have recorded the numerous restrictions that the film suffered from the censorship board of the Franco's administration, one of the most relevant for our study being the mandatory elimination of any reference to the Mazarrón crime in the film's title, which was obviously also transferred to the film's credits. The blunt decision of the Ministry of Information and Tourism, run in those years by Manuel Fraga, was intended to avoid the (supposed) bad image that the film could bring in an area of large private investments and with extraordinary tourist possibilities.

We have analyzed in detail the news, reports and interviews that were published in four print media in order to detect what traces are visible in this transfer, not always recognized, between the journalistic story and the cinematographic story. Even though we are aware of the difficulties that the study of such a slippery terrain as adaptations has always entailed, and even more so in the case of the factual adaptations domain, our research confirms that both the essential core of the characters that populated this event, as well as the description of their personalities and the claustrophobic, unsociable and distant environment in which they lived in their village, are part of the journalistic story that was published in 1956. In the same way, the assumption, also documented in that story, that the sister who disappeared in the Mazarrón beach was possibly a man disguised as a woman, also serves the scriptwriter to develop a subplot of great film creativity.

On the other hand, we have made it clear that the interpretations of some film historians are not entirely correct when considering that the solution devised by Berlanga is "without a doubt the most surprising and inspired" (Castro de Paz, 2010: 222) because, as we have noted, the journalistic chronicles already pointed to the figure of a man dressed in women's clothing. In this sense, other important elements in the film narrative, such as the appearance of a corset, the corpses and the

29 Marías, M. "El extraño caso de *El extraño viaje*", *Nuestro Cine*, n°94, febrero 1970, pp. 54-56.

three glasses on the beach, became fundamental assets for the construction of the film, and all of them emanated from the informative journalistic story and, ultimately, from the real event.

As we recalled at the beginning of this work, recognizing that a cinematographic work was “based on real events” was not at all common in Spanish cinema during much of the 20th century and, as we have shown, in the case study that concerns us it was not even possible to maintain the initial title of the film (*The crime of Mazarrón*) nor in the film’s credits is there any reference to the plot origin of the journalistic story or to the event in question. Fernán-Gómez himself, in his *Memoirs*, alluded to the fact that *El extraño viaje* did not tell about Mazarrón’s crime, “but rather the solution that Berlanga’s imagination provided, and all the details, the characters and the environment, the situations that the imagination of Beltrán added and that, of course, are not extracted from police files, but rather taken out of his head. By moving away, ignoring what could be true, he achieved a rather unusual mixture” (1993, 468). It is not our intention to refute one of the most interesting and personal filmmakers of the Spanish cinema, but we can conclude that the “use” of this data collected by the press of the time is much more present in the film, of course processed, mixed and reinvented by the pen of the screenwriter Pedro Beltrán, author of a text full of intelligence and creativity, and by the production of Fernando Fernán-Gómez, composing one of the most implacable portraits of the Spanish society of that time.

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7. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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