

RICARDO GASCÓN AND HIS BRAZEN VISION
OF THE UNIVERSE OF
WENCESLAO FERNÁNDEZ-FLÓREZ:
HA ENTRADO UN LADRÓN
[*A THIEF HAS ENTERED*] (1949)

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In his fifth feature film as director, Ricardo Gascón faces his own personal vision of the work of one of the most influential writers on Spanish cinema before and after the Spanish Civil War, adapted by filmmakers such as Edgar Neville, Eusebio Fernández Ardavín, Rafael Gil, José Luis Sáenz de Heredia or Fernando Fernán-Gómez. In fact the critical, regional and reflexive nature of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez's short stories and novels have become- together with Arnichesesque skits- the most fertile area for experimentation for scriptwriters and filmmakers to create formal stylings of a common taste, close to that of their natural audience. Moreover, *Ha entrado un ladrón* [*A Thief has entered*]- filmed at the end of the decade- is held up as a dark and exemplary melodrama whose romantic plot, like that of many other films of the period, expresses the inextinguishable injury of war with a painful metaphor.

Given the relatively relevant activity of the actor and Barcelona hotelier Antonio Bofarull Ferrer as a producer- whose production credits with Titán Films include titles with filmmakers such as Alejandro Ulloa, Gonzalo Pardo Delgrás, Carlos Serrano de Osma or Arturo Ruíz Castillo as well as Ricardo Gascón-, it is of no wonder that he decided to set up his own line of subtle cinematic stylings. In search of creating a people's cinema with the ability to connect with best of our pre-war cinema as well as offering a worthy discussion about the darkness of the present, filmmakers such as Rafael Gil (with *El hombre que se quiso matar* [*The Man who tried to kill himself*] and *Huella de luz* [*Lightprint*], 1942), Antonio Román (*La casa de la lluvia* [*The House of Rain*], 1943), or- more importantly- José Luis Sáenz de Heredia (the historiographically decisive *El destino se disculpa* [*Destiny apologizes*], 1943) had begun to mould films from the war based on short stories and novels by the Galician writer Wenceslao Fernández Flórez.¹

Together with Pedro Antonio de Alarcón or Jacinto Benavente, for example, Fernández

¹ We should not rule out the possible influence from the chief of production Antonio Sau Olite at the time of defining the project. Very close to Fernando Fernán Gómez- Another great admirer and future script adaptor of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez- the zaragozano Sau Olite, author of the anarchist film *Aurora de esperanza* [*The Dawn of Hope*] (1937, first fiction film from Sie Films) is one of the masters in directing the author of *El malvado Carabel* (1955). On the other hand, Fernán-Gomez himself would state in more than one occasion his wish to create an adaptation of *Ha entrado un ladrón* and perhaps his presence in the casting would have ended by enhancing the importance of the film itself. As the premier reviews have not ceased in mentioning that the acting of Roberto Font does not unfold well and is an excessive tear-jerker (Barbero, Antonio, "Cartelera madrileña.. Cámara 175 (1950):44).

Flórez is often quoted as one of the most popular and appreciated writers by Franco's regime, and therefore so profusely adapted for the screen after the Civil War, but things are not entirely clear insofar as his contribution to Spanish cinema is concerned. Due to his journalistic work with *ABC*, *Semana* and *La Codorniz*, he was very popular at the time and as well as his famous novels and short stories it is also important to note his early defence of the cinematographer and the critical work of cinema in *Cámara* and *Primer Plano*.

His public support of the rebel cause after the Fascist uprising cannot take away from the fact that almost all of his writings which were adapted for cinema after the war were originally published during the 1920s, before the Second Republic during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, and written from an ideological position that could be defined as that of a progressive conservative who came to declare himself a "heterodox socialist".²

Profoundly critical of Spain's unjust, backward and vulgar situation, deeply hopeless (Mainer, 1997, 114), with even its deepest strata permeated with a fatalist realism and tender yet disenchanted humour, or surprisingly modern due to reflexive and self-aware narrative conception, Fernández Flórez's short novels would give rise to very diverse films. But these would increasingly become fragmented sketches, significant thumbnails or original reinventionings of aesthetic traditions, crossed with the dominant cinematic models of the time (especially, of course, the classic cinema of Hollywood) on a foundation of indigenous cultural forms rooted in national tradition. Indeed, Fernando Fernán-Gómez, great admirer of the Galician writer, wrote in his memoirs that the smell of stew "should be the natural odour of our cinema, as was the odour of some of his novels, which I admired" (Fernán-Gómez 1990, 454)³.

Fernández Flórez, therefore, provided the adequate material for a Spanish cinema of the people, close to the daily problems of normal people, the Spanish "poor". The author portrays people in his work who are characterised by the conscience of the defeated one who projects a pessimistic and melancholic vision of life. It is this conscience which, two decades after its establishment in literary fiction, would tragically reappear in collective form as Spanish post-war society. The pessimistic and melancholic portrait of society and its individuals the author created in the twenties seems to have later invaded the national consciousness, with the result that a distinct identification is established between the fictional characters of the twenties and the real individuals of the forties. In some way- if we may simplify- Fernández Flórez's work is a great flash-forward which foretold, twenty years earlier, the collective pessimism of a society bled dry by the war. We could say that the Civil War scattered Spain with Fernández-Flórez-like characters.

Jacinto Remesal, the protagonist of *A thief entered*, is- with all probability- the saddest, most afflicted and depressed of all Fernández Flórez's characters. Despite the fact that Gascón and Manuel Bengoa use subtle brush strokes on the surface of the story in their

² Fernando Fernán Gómez stated that fact in more than one occasion: "...él era un hombre absolutamente de derechas, pero con una literatura absolutamente disolvente, de izquierdas, libertaria, antimilitarista, defensora del amor libre..." (Galán, 1997, pag. 114).

³ Original text in Spanish: "debía ser el olor natural de nuestro cine, como era también el olor de algunas de sus novelas, que yo admiraba."

cinematographic adaptation to avoid such a mournful tone, this character doesn't change that radically from its literary origin. Ricardo Gascón covers the film's text with a layer of humour, always with the aim of changing the appearance, but without changing the central content of the novel. Humour plays the role of the sugaring the pill of crude reality described in Fernández Flórez's work, but it affects the peripheral aspects of the story, whereas the central narrative remains true to the original.

Jacinto Remesal (Roberto Font), therefore, maintains the essential qualities of the literary source in his film. In one sentence, the voiceover expresses the kind of life he has in Madrid by speaking of a "sad" and "melancholic" existence. This affirmation combines the reflexive passages which prowl about the character in the novel's first chapter, in which his homesickness is expressed as well as financial and vital shortcomings. He then meets Natalia (Margaret Genske). Yet again the voiceover sheds light on Remesal's trauma as he meets the woman who is to become his lover. "For the first time in his life, Remesal had found himself with a beautiful woman. His existence, until now vulgar and monotonous, now had a purpose." We therefore have four adjectives which describe the protagonist's life before meeting Natalia: sad, melancholic, vulgar and monotonous. And as is habitual in Fernández Flórez's fictional world, she is a woman who symbolizes the (fleeting) light that shines in a dark life.

The literary account begins with the protagonist working in Madrid in the Queen Mother Theatre, but we are immediately informed that he arrived in the capital from a small village in A Coruña (Galicia) called San Fiz. In this respect, the film starts with the village march. In both cases the idea is expressed of a coming out of the mother's womb, giving birth into an outside where the inclemencies of the real world are found.⁴ The conscience of the defeated one is forged in the distance that exists between desire and reality. All Fernández Flórez's characters achieve a state of false hope which gives optimism a free rein and lets them imagine a radiant future where their desires are fulfilled. Nevertheless, once this state of stupefying happiness is encouraged, reality imposes itself with all its brutality to give the character's mood a killer blow. Consequently the character regresses to the womb to protect himself from brutal reality, which has been interpreted as a return to the human being's childhood. However, this decision brings with it a burden which has repercussions in his way of life, since the placidity of the maternal universe has routine as its travelling companion. In fact, this safe haven implies a life with no great changes, in its positive as well as negative aspects. The positive aspect is that it keeps the miseries of real life at bay, whereas the negative aspect is that, enclosed in this world, life goes on in an insipid way. Calm is gained at the price of monotony. The step from the countryside to the city is shown in the literary account as a painful process from the beginning. "He made a dark suit, bought a tinplated trunk and decided- with no great enthusiasm- to enter the hubbub of the

⁴ The presence of a feminine character to bring warmth to a home is a reiterative aspect in the works of the Galician writer. In the novel *Ha entrado un ladrón* is his motherhood sister Margarida who as a symbol of sweet home maker fusses over the appetite of Jacinto with her meals.

Court.”⁵ (Fernández Flórez 328). We glimpse, therefore, that the beginning of a new life is presented without enthusiasm, as if the character were aware of his vulgarity and that the capital were not his natural habitat.⁶

The presence of this metaphorical maternal uterus reinforces the symbology of space in Fernández Flórez. His short stories are located in some coordinated spaces integrated in a universe where the maternal home is characterised not only by its physical and geographical but also by the psychological connotations which define a fainthearted character. This correlation between space and a character's psyche come from semiotized spaces which sum up the writer's work, in such a way that a full identification is established between the description of the location and the conscience of the individual. The intimateness of the protagonist takes shape in the surrounding space, either by first-person or third-person narrative powerfully focused on the character's vision. This means that a series of abstract concepts- fundamental to comprehend the story- translate themselves into a visual image, since they refer to concepts which make up the conscience of the the defeated one. In the novel the space which surrounds Remesal reaches the reader subordinated by the pessimism that he radiates, from which each descriptive passage becomes an exercise of outward projection of all the worries expressed by his conscience. As a result, the space becomes a characterising element of the character, since the focused space conceals a subtext beneath which lies an intimate portrayal of the individual. This portrayal lends the narrator a subjectivism that frames its surrounding reality which in this way achieves a fusion between the interior and exterior worlds in which the leading role is mainly cut off by the first, or which is the same, the subjectivism that Remesal imposes on himself under the objective gaze of the narrator. Thanks to this resource, all the worries that wander around Remesal's mind are conveyed to the reader not by information which proceeds directly from his thoughts, at least not exclusively, but rather by means of the external space bathes the scene with the same mood lighting that colours the protagonist. With a view to comparative narrative, we cannot ignore the importance of a crafted literary passage to make the inner world of subject

⁵ “Se hizo un traje oscuro, compró un baúl forrado de hojalata y se dispuso, sin grandes entusiasmos, a ingresar en el bullicio de la corte.”

⁶ We should bear in mind that in his novel *Remesal* arrives in Madrid against his will. He was expelled from his mother land due to a conflict among caciques, in one word, by a political circumstance which makes him be a political exiled: “La obstinada visión de estos sitios le entristecía, y en el fondo de su carácter recogido y velado por la timidez, había nacido como un punto de irritación contra la banalidad de su existencia y contra la gran ciudad, en la que se consideraba un desterrado” (Fernández Flórez, 328). It is for this reason that suffers from melancholy since the very first time that puts a step in Madrid. He suffers the anguish of being an exile and the mutilated state of mind that the narrator states it once more with an eloquent commentary. “Ocupó un asiento el repatriado en un vagón de tercera...” (Fernández Flórez, 440). Precisely, one of the characters in the novel, the novelist Arturo Porcet, gets great success with his work *Sol de España*, “en la que se intentaba demostrar que nadie es feliz fuera de su tierra” (Fernández Flórez, 407). The film, trying to soften the tone of the novel to avoid having problems with the censorship of the time, gets rid of any reference of caciques as a direct cause of his trip to Madrid and a voice-over reports that Remesal “el deseo incontenible de conquistar el mundo. Entonces la aldea se le hizo pequeña y decidió partir”. It is his cousin Andrea when she goes out to say goodbye tells him that he is most fortunate to get away from that place, besides she foretells that he will become a man of good will in Madrid. As far as his uncle is concerned he would compare him with Columbus longing to conquer new horizons. Nothing to do with the sad description of the departure stated in the original scripts of the novel.

tangible through the means of visual figures. When fragments of the lives of the lady who covers her balcony with flowers or the schoolmaster are described, what is really happening is that the conscience of the defeated one that consumes his days in monotony and vulgarity is being projected in images. All that concerns the reader about the lives of the people that the protagonist contemplates from balcony is tied to those aspects which, by their similarity, illustrate Remesal's mood.

Perhaps the first intention of a director who tried to faithfully represent the special treatment of a novel, based in focussing on descriptions through the character, would consist of filling the film up with subjective scenes. This would be a priori, the conventional formula to emulate the descriptive style of the novel. However, though the resort to an eminently subjective shooting could appear to be the equivalent to this literary use, the result wouldn't be the same. In any case, in literature the focus on the description of space is a way to relate the character with his surroundings, as if both were one and produced just one portrait of the person and the space. In that way- and that is the answer contrived by Gascón after the useful and subtle precedent by Rafael Gil- the effect of fusion builds up effectively in the film with objective scenes which show the character while he reveals himself in space.

Furthermore, as well as objective shooting, the profusion of medium and long shots facilitate the simultaneous presence of character and space on screen. In this way, the spectator can observe the protagonist in contact with his surroundings, and make his own conclusions from the interaction that affects the significance of the sequence. If we have already shown how space is used to express the character's intimate feelings in the novel, the film also offers examples of a special construction designed to externalise the protagonist's mood. After the humiliation of not being to pay for Natalia and her friend's chocolate, Remesal returns home downbeat and ashamed of what has happened. An upward shot captures an individual overwhelmed by a space which seems to descend upon him, with a shot that defines the diagonal lines and very dark lighting. The protagonist put his head in his hands as if there were something that eating his conscience. It is the intense image of a subject defeated on the battlefield of love, where wounds are much more painful. The diagonal lines in this shot seem to anticipate the nightmare sequence that follows, constructed through the medium of oblique frames which provide a sensation of perturbation and uneasiness which refers in some way, together with masks, to German "expressionist" cinema. In the same way, the film also highlights the contrast in the vital spaces which each one of the principal characters occupies. Remesal's loft, with its austere decoration and reduced dimensions, has nothing to do with the luxury of Natalia's apartment. Already in Remesal's first visit to the young lady's home, during his trip around the house in search of the supposed thief that entered her house, the camera captures the extravagant decoration that seems to cover every corner of the house, like a symptom of agoraphobia. This instance not only unites the psychological function of the space but also the semiotic function which reveals the characters' personalities. She is a woman obsessed with her material belongings, as her continual allusions to her wardrobe and jewellery demonstrate, and she has deigned to marry Ricardo not out of love but for the possibility of enjoying an opulent life. As for his part, Remesal lives in an apartment as humble as his financial status as well as the mood which motivates his acts. They are two contrasting characters in different worlds, and one

can deduce the distance between them through this contrast. For Remesal, Natalia's apartment becomes a hunting ground because, although he has had access to Natalia and it for a time, is inability to adapt to this world of luxury and money is continuously shown. It is in this context where the full meaning of the novel's title is reached "A thief entered". In some way, Remesal behaves like an intruder who presumes to jump over the social barrier which separates the rich from the poor in order to be able to benefit from the kind of life that the well-off enjoy. That is how he feels when he hides in Natalia's house on the night of her death, while he observes a print of a comfortable couple having dinner. Since he met the young lady, his desire has always been to reach the place that Ricardo occupies at the table in the company of Natalia one day.

The importance of space as characterising element of psychological relations is also evident in those sequences which are shared by the two protagonists. The director does not once try to hide the difference in stature in favour of Natalie, indeed he insists on expressive compositions which define this difference. In this way he seeks to establish a visual reference which creates a situation of female dominance over the man, underlined on various occasions by poses which seem to turn Remesal into a yapping dog at Natalia's feet. In all, the unequal relationship is especially formalised on film by Gascón by time and again denying us the man's point of view, though he does not stop watching her: her blinding look-resplendent "Imago Pedestal" that literally praises on his eyes, through a quick movement of the camera, in the last shot of the sequence in which she accepts him- the female figure is presented to us in an objective way, playing the part of a loved one, but without obliging us to share the irresistible splendour that she causes in him. This wise distancing makes up one of the most impressive achievements by Ricardo Gascón in this film.

During the time that the romance lasts, Remesal thinks he has left his reality to one side, with all its penuries and deficiencies which give his life its grey hue. Natalia incarnates the hope of a far happier life, but she stands on lies or, at least, untruth. The relation between both is incompatible with reality since, in the film version, Natalia avoids answering Remesal's questions about her feelings for her husband, because she is aware that these answers put her romance in danger. On one occasion Remesal asks her "Do you really love me, Natalia?" to which she replies with an evasive answer "You can't ask me that, Jacinto". The same situation reoccurs when Remesal questions her about her husband: "What was your marriage like?" which again elicits the elusive response "Let's not talk about that, it's banned". It's clear that the truth is incompatible with a romance between a beautiful young woman like Natalia and a character like Remesal.

We all know that in the book the love between both characters has a sell by date and will end as soon as Ricardo returns from Argentina, but it is a painful certainty, that painfully creeps up until the arrival takes place. Jacinto insists on feeding this fable, and tries to prolong it by giving it the consistence of reality, since the only consolation left to them is fantasy, but it is reality that ends up taking it apart.⁷

⁷ Behind each avoided question by Natalia, it is hidden behind a true enemy of that romance, a truth that the best friend of the young girl, Leticia, reveals without euphemisms or periphrasis to Remesal: "Natalia no la ha querido nunca, usted ha sido ni siquiera una aventura, era la voz que repetía diariamente: "Eres bella, estás hecha para

In a sequence which takes place in Natalia's apartment, where both characters go out on the balcony, Remesal declares "We'd live so well in San Fiz! Wouldn't we, Natalia?" To which the woman responds "Let's dream a little, dear". It is then that the principal character imagines how life could be with Natalia in his village, surrounded by the delights of the Galician countryside, while she seems only to worry about the dress she has to wear. Remesal insists on planning a life in touch with nature, until Natalia interrupts him to imagine herself dressed in another costume that accentuates her body.⁸ During this conversation, both characters set their gaze outside the frame, outside the balcony, searching for more than a physical space for their gaze to dwell on, an unreal, imaginary sphere. Even then, Remesal observes his companion every now and then, who, for her part, never once turns to look at him. In this way a game of looks is set up in a medium shot in accordance with the dialogue content. Remesal's stares search for a meeting in Natalia's, but the girl pays no attention to the protagonist because her future plans feature nobody but her. In the literary work, Natalia's indifferent attitude is shown through a mirror in which she regards herself:

"If you really loved me... Will you let me dream aloud a little?"
 "For goodness' sake, yes, dream!" she permitted him, looking at herself carefully in the mirror, "But tell me... it looks like I have something shiny on my nose" (Fernández Flórez, 390).

The mirror represents Natalia's individualism, which depends only on herself and the ability to climb through life without being hindered by the bodies she leaves in her wake. At the end of the sequence, Remesal asks again if indeed she loves him, and she replies in an ambiguous manner: "As far as I am able to love you". With this answer, Natalia avoids lying, but nor does she openly tell him the truth because she, in these moments, is enjoying the relationship and knows perfectly that the truth would end up destroying it.

From this point, a relationship of absolute dominance by Natalia is established, which is moulded from the point of the first sexual encounter between the characters. The sequence opens with an initial shot of hands fingering a hat, which denotes a certain nervousness. The camera backs off to reveal a medium shot of Remesal sat in the apartment hall, waiting to be received by Natalia as if he were there to meet someone of a higher class, until the maid's voice offstage calls him in. He walks in an excessively pious way towards the door. The cuts to inside the lounge where Remesal will enter, where the svelte figure of Natalia is seen out of focus in the shot's foreground, while in the background, in sharp relief, Remesal appears shyly with his hat in his hands and his head slightly tilted. The composition shows a dominance of the female figure over the male, not only by the difference in size, but also by

dominar, te quiero". Y hubo algo más, la piedad". La irrealidad de esa breve historia de amor se confirma cuando Leticia le dice: "¿Y qué mal ha recibido usted de ese engaño? Durante unos meses fue feliz con una mujer hermosa como nunca pudo soñar".

⁸ This sequence keeps big analogies with another of *El destino se disculpa*, when Elena, the main feminine character laughs at the plans for the future of Ramiro Arnal anxious of sharing wither a little home in his home town surrounded by nature and farm animals.

the solidness which one profile imposes over the other. The maid stays still at the man's height, giving the meeting of two people from different social classes an air of protocol. The young lady shows her displeasure at Remesal's presence in her home, stating that she nearly didn't let him in as he had rejected her invitation to meet that very morning. Natalia turns her back on her guest, at the same time as the camera changes its focus to capture her furious expression sharply, while Remesal's silhouette goes out of focus. In this precise moment, the distance between them is enormous, created by Natalia's behaviour. Remesal approaches Natalia until he is right behind her and in focus. The distance is cut by his words of regret which appear to move the young lady who, as Remesal is about to leave, says "Stay!" This moment is captured by a medium to long shot of the woman, capturing her whole body, in a symmetrical image embedded in the lounge's lush décor. The camera then zooms into Remesal's ecstatic face. Next, an ellipsis takes us to the next day. By their conversation we gather that they achieved the sexual act the previous night. Nevertheless, again the distance between them accentuates the distance between the two and the dominance that Natalia has over Remesal. It is then that she decides to call him Chinto, using a pet animal's name, which is reinforced when she lies on the sofa and he sits at her side on the floor, like a small dog. Natalia is not in love with Remesal, and is content to be his short-term lover out of apathy or even pity, but the abyss which separates them forecasts a traumatic breakup for one party- the male- who really has believed in the farcical love affair.

Ultimately, more than a real episode, what Remesal fleetingly experiences is nothing more than a romantic dream and, for that reason, impossible. It is a dream that he will enjoy for an instant to finally die, madly, in a Solanesque carnival night. This would confirm the oriental legend mentioned by Fernández Flórez in *Huella de Luz* and according to which, moments from death, a person gets to make real what he most desires.

In short- and like so many other male protagonists in Spanish Cinema of the time- the character travels down a one-way street to obsession, insanity and death in the film, in one of the most effective textual formulations of the inescapable wound of conflict. This sums up- at its most diverse- the decade's best films, but especially present (though not only) in films made near the end of the era by the most conscientious filmmakers. This is a wound that becomes incarnate as similar semantic and formal knot, most clearly expressed in the exceptional *Vida en Sombras* (Lorenzo Llobet-Gràcia, 1948). Like a painful scar it crosses all their diegesis flesh, whatever their genre: *La casa de la lluvia* (Antonio Román, 1943), *Barrio* (Ladislao Vajda, 1947), *La sirena negra* (Carlos Serrano de Osma, 1947), *Cuatro mujeres* (Antonio del Amo, 1947), *La calle sin sol* (Rafael Gil, 1948, with a script by Miguel Mihura), *Siempre vuelven de madrugada* (Jerónimo Mihura, 1948, also written by his brother) or *Un hombre va por el camino* (Manuel Mur Oti, 1949). The irredeemable loss of a loved object (incarnated in the diegesis by a woman, murdered, banned, disappeared, o betraying) and the resulting loneliness and melancholia (even madness) could be seen as metaphors of a desolate and angst-ridden country, inhabited by stifling and sombre memories, burdened with a guilt complex which gets out of control. These are sad events, destructions and historical loneliness which become lucid Wounds of Desire (Castro de Paz, 2002).

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Editors' note

In order to facilitate the reading of the text, during the translation of the original article, all quotations in Spanish from film scripts have been translated and presented only in English.