

Ruido: Media representations of searching mothers. A review through the film and from the Mexican search groups

Ruido: *representaciones mediáticas de las madres buscadoras. Una mirada a través del filme y desde los colectivos de búsqueda mexicanos*

Ruido: *representações midiáticas de mães buscadoras. Uma olhada no filme e nos grupos de busca mexicanos*

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FABIOLA ALCALÁ ANGUIANO¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1200-280X>

DARWIN FRANCO MIGUES²

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2979-2956>

Ruido (2023) is a film by Natalia Beristáin that portrays the story of Julia, who is looking for her missing daughter in Mexico. This paper, focused on the notion of interpretative communities, reflects on the representation of pain and the search through an approach with several Mexican searching mothers to understand how they perceived the media representation of them and how the film tells the story of the search process.

KEYWORDS: search collectives, missing persons, interpretive communities, Netflix, cinema.

Ruido (2023) es una película de Natalia Beristáin en la que se retrata la historia de Julia, quien busca a su hija desaparecida en México. Este artículo, centrado en la noción de comunidades interpretativas, reflexiona sobre la representación del dolor y la búsqueda a través de un acercamiento con diversas madres buscadoras mexicanas para entender cómo percibieron la representación mediática que de ellas se hizo y cómo cuenta la película el proceso de búsqueda.

PALABRAS CLAVE: colectivos de búsqueda, personas desaparecidas, comunidades interpretativas, Netflix, cine.

Ruido (2023) é um filme de Natalia Beristáin que retrata a história de Julia, que está procurando por sua filha desaparecida no México. Este artigo, com foco na noção de comunidades interpretativas, reflete sobre a representação da dor e da busca por meio de uma abordagem com várias mães mexicanas em busca de sua filha, para entender como elas percebem a representação que a mídia faz delas e como o filme conta a história do processo de busca.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: coletivos de busca, pessoas desaparecidas, comunidades interpretativas, Netflix, cinema.

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¹ Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico.
fabiola.aanguiano@academicos.udg.mx

² Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico.
humberto.franco@academicos.udg.mx

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INTRODUCTION

There are currently 116 282 missing persons in Mexico.³ This human rights violation is one of the worst social tragedies that the country is experiencing. Faced with the ineffectiveness of the authorities in locating missing persons and arresting those who commit this crime against humanity, it has been the families of the victims –mostly mothers– who have led the search for them.

According to the *Movimiento Nacional por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México* (National Movement for Our Missing Persons in Mexico), there are more than 100 search collectives in the country, which are organized at regional and national level to carry out search actions, both for the living but unfortunately also for dead persons. Likewise, the collectives organize marches and protests to demand the authorities to search for their loved ones.

In general terms, the disappearance of persons is a crime that is mainly committed against the Mexican youth, since most of the victims are between 14 and 29 years of age (Franco Migués, 2023). The causes of disappearance are multiple; however, research has shown that the presence of organized crime and the macro-criminal networks it generates have made the disappearance of people a persistent and systematic crime (Arteaga et al., 2024); which, since the declaration of “war” against organized crime by former President Felipe Calderón in 2006, has grown exponentially without any response from the State.

This reality has not remained at the sidelines of film production, as dozens of documentaries, fictions and series have been created to portray the drama, but also the strength and courage of the searching mothers in the country. For example, there are productions such as *Volverte a ver* (2020), *Llueve* (2021) or *La Civil* (2022) that portray –in different formats– the search that mothers and search collectives have been carrying out for years in Mexico. Each of these productions has provided a look at an unprecedented type of violence.

³ Information as of August 6, 2024, according to the Registro Nacional de Personas Desaparecidas y No Localizadas (National Registry of Missing Persons) (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2024.)

Some of these films, related to the theme of searching for missing persons, are usually presented at festivals or in the alternative forums organized by the search collectives; however, there are increasingly more of these movies and they have a longer run in commercial cinema, even in streaming platforms, as is the case of *Ruido*, which premiered on Netflix on January 11, 2023.

The selection of this film as a case study for this paper responds to the fact that its streaming on Netflix allowed for a greater audience reach and a crossing of borders that helped to diversify the type of viewers. In its premiere week it ranked in the Top Ten worldwide in non-English speaking productions by accumulating 7.18 million hours of viewing.

At the same time, the searching families held screenings of *Ruido* in public spaces that were significant for their search processes, and even –in alliance with the director Natalia Beristáin and Netflix– carried out the digital campaign #HagamosMásRuido (let’s make more noise), which consisted of extending the discussion around the film, both in digital networks and in public forums where the searching mothers gave their testimonies.

Therefore, this paper proposes two objectives: 1) to analyze the representation of disappearance of people portrayed in *Ruido*, and 2) to compare this representation with the Mexican searching mothers’ perception of the film.

This is relevant to the present study since the film –in the words of its director, Natalia Beristáin– is a fiction, but it is also the representation of “all mothers, sisters, daughters or wives who search” (Del Muro, 2023).

The search portrayed in the film also enables to show that this is not a solitary act, but a collective one, because in the search for her daughter Ger, Julia weaves networks with different families, women and organizations that are affected by violence, but also by the resistance they have created to seek justice.

Another important element is that, although Julia’s search for Ger is completely fictional, there are several scenes in the film in which real searching mothers and families appear, who –within the plot– show Julia how difficult it is to search for a missing person in Mexico.

FIGURE 1
POSTS ON X OF THE #HAGAMOSMÁSRUIDO CAMPAIGN*



*Translation of the text in the figure:

Left: #HagamosMásRuido (#LetUsMakeMoreNoise) for the missing persons in México. Join the #Ruido!

Saturday, February 25, 7:00 PM, Plaza de las personas desaparecidas (missing persons square) (On Washington and Zaragoza, downtown, Monterrey, N. L.)
Right: We share some moments of the filming with @natBeristain and Julieta Egorrola in the filming of #Ruido @NefflixLat #HagamosMásRuido

Source: FUNDENL (2023) and Colectivo Buscándote Con Amor Estado de México (2023).

In particular, the collectives that make an appearance in the film are the *Colectivo Buscándote con Amor*, from the State of Mexico, and *Voz y Dignidad por los Nuestros* from San Luis Potosí; the former appears in the scenes in which Julia attends a support group in which several families talk about their experiences while embroidering handkerchiefs⁴ with the names of their missing loved ones.

⁴ In Mexico, one of the most powerful works of remembrance was developed through the collective project “Embroidering for Peace”, in which the victims of violence were named through the embroidery of handkerchiefs: in red thread all those who were murdered, in green those who disappeared, and in purple those who were victims of femicide (Gargallo, 2014).

Embroidery, in the film's narrative, is a recurring symbolic piece and one of the aesthetic-visual elements to which the director resorts to weaving the *stations of the search* that Julia will go through. The embroidery ceases to be an ornament and becomes a visual element of resistance, just as it is for the real searchers.

Voz y Dignidad por los Nuestros de San Luis Potosí appears in *Ruido* when Julia decides to search for her daughter beyond the institutional frameworks; that is, when the protagonist joins a field search, an action carried out daily by searching mothers to locate, in clandestine graves, the bodies of their missing relatives.

The presence of both groups is key because it anchors this film fiction to the reality of the Mexican context and, according to the director, is evidence of the arduous field work she did to make Julia's search a more accurate reflection of what the country's searching mothers go through.

Consequently, the objective of this paper is to know how the film is narrated, how it represents the pain of loss and the search process, and how different searching mothers (including those who appear in the film) perceived and understood the film *Ruido*, based on the following question: In what way did the Mexican searching mothers feel –or not– identified with Julia, the main character in *Ruido*, and what aspects of the film do they consider reflect the struggle and search they carry out to locate their missing loved ones?

In order to answer this question, two types of analysis were carried out: the first one, of a narrative nature, to understand how the representation of pain and the search was constructed in the film, which was based on the theoretical precepts of Sánchez-Biosca and Berthier (2023), who propose that the representation of certain violent acts constructs its own rhetoric. In a second moment, several semi-structured interviews were conducted, which were focused on the concept of *interpretive communities* proposed by Orozco (1991), and which allowed us to get closer to Mexican searching mothers, including several of those who appear in the film, in order to know how they understood and gave meaning to the representation that *Ruido* made of them.

THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF DISAPPEARANCES IN MEXICAN FILMS

This paper acknowledges that a media representation is “a synthetic cultural creation that seeks to situate and fix a particular type of meaning about a subject, fact or process that is named and/or made visible through a media” (Franco-Mígues, 2019b, p. 33).

This implies that not only the social representations already held about “a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in everyday life and in the course of interindividual communications” (Moscovici, 1981, p. 180) become visible, but that to these “discursive and symbolic elements are added with which it is sought to dispute and/or impose certain sense or meaning” (Franco Mígues, 2019b, p. 34) regarding that which is represented.

In the case of disappearances, Franco-Mígues (2019a) points out, emphasis is placed on those symbolic elements that characterize the search processes led mainly by the mothers of the missing persons, the most characteristic elements being shirts or banners printed with the photograph and name of the person, as well as the date of their disappearance.

In addition, the media representation of Mexican searching mothers also includes symbolic objects such as handkerchiefs embroidered with the names of the disappeared persons, as well as the distinctive features that each search collective incorporates; for example, bandanas or shirts in shades of green, a color that has been adopted, symbolically and aesthetically, by the searching families as an element of hope (Diéguez, 2021).

In short, the media representation of a searching mother not only seeks to incorporate the symbolic elements of the search, but also those elements that, in the words of Irazuzta (2017), make the missing person appear, but not as a liminal entity, but as a person who is always present through the figure of the mother or relative who is searching for them.

This representation is no stranger to Mexican cinema, as at the time of writing this paper there were 21 films that, in various formats, have brought the drama of disappearance to the big screen. For the

TABLE 1
LIST OF MOVIES ABOUT DISAPPEARANCES IN MEXICO

	Title	Directors	Year
1	<i>No quiero decir adiós</i> (documentary)	Ana Ramírez	2013
2	<i>Retratos de una búsqueda</i> (documentary)	Alicia Calderón	2014
3	<i>Geografía del dolor</i> (documentary)	Mónica González	2015
4	<i>Tempestad</i> (fiction)	Tatiana Huezo	2016
5	<i>No sucumbió la eternidad</i> (documentary)	Daniela Rea	2017
6	<i>Las desaparecidas</i> (short film)	Astrid Domínguez	2017
7	<i>Los desaparecidos</i> (short film)	Justo Matías	2017
8	<i>Las rastreadoras</i> (documentary)	Adrián González	2017
9	<i>Sin tregua</i> (documentary short film)	Diego Rebasa	2018
10	<i>Sin señas particulares</i> (fiction)	Fernanda Valadez	2020
11	<i>Buscando a Francisco</i> (documentary)	Gael Castillo	2020
12	<i>Volverte a ver</i> (documentary)	Carolina Corral	2020
13	<i>Noche de fuego</i> (fiction)	Tatiana Huezo	2021
14	<i>Llueve</i> (short film)	Carolina Corral and Magali Rocha	2021
15	<i>La civil</i> (fiction)	Teodora Mihai	2022
16	<i>Te nombraré en el silencio</i> (documentary)	José Espinosa	2022
17	<i>En la boca del lobo: la historia de una madre buscadora</i> (documentary)	Dalia Souza and Mariana Mora	2022
18	<i>Tras la vida</i> (documentary)	Anais Taracena	2023
19	<i>Ruido</i> (fiction)	Natalia Beristáin	2023
20	<i>Toshkua</i> (documentary)	Ludovic Bonleux	2023
21	<i>Perdidos en la noche</i> (fiction)	Amat Escalante	2024

Source: The authors.

purposes of this paper, we only list those films whose narrative plot focuses on the search of a mother, or a group of mothers, for their missing loved ones.⁵

⁵ Although they are not part of this list, the forced disappearance of the 43 teacher-training college students from Ayotzinapa, which occurred on

Documentaries predominate in this list of 21 productions. The dominance of this format responds to the interest in focusing on the image, voice and search of the searching mothers themselves through the combination of cinematographic aesthetics, visual anthropology and journalistic narrative, which is reflected by the professional profile of its creators (Alcalá, 2016), since, from this list, five of the directors are journalists: Alicia Calderón, Mónica González, Daniela Rea, Dalia Souza and Mariana Mora.

It is also noteworthy that most of these productions have been made by women: 16 of the 21 films listed. This makes it clear that among the interests of women's cinema is the recognition of the invisible causes that directly concern them (women), and this is one of the most important recognitions in the country today.

It is important to highlight that productions focused on searching mothers increased significantly from 2020 onwards. This is a way of creating counter-narratives (Alcalá, 2016) to the massive presence of fictions that centered their plots on the big drug lords (e.g. "El Chapo" Guzmán); this fictional glorification of these figures, as Gómez-Rodríguez and Franco-Mígues (2020) have pointed out, places the victims on a secondary level where their pain is nothing but a circumstance on the road to power.

Changing the narratives to talk about the victims and no longer about the perpetrators is a fundamental part of the filmmakers' objective; therefore, they were interested in making riskier fictions to explore the pain, but also the various facets that are experienced in the process of searching for a missing person. So do fictions such as: *Sin señas particulares* (2020), *Noche de fuego* (2021), *La civil* (2022), and *Ruido* (2023); in all of them, as their directors emphasize, there is a strong testimonial and documentary work, as they want to be as

September 26, 2014 in Iguala, Guerrero, has generated significant interest in the national film scene. Some of the most outstanding documentary productions are: *Un día en Ayotzinapa 43* (2015), by Rafael Rangel; *Mirar morir, el ejército en la noche de Iguala* (2015), by Coizta and Témoris Grecko; and *Ayotzinapa, el paso de la tortuga* (2018), by Enrique García.

accurate as possible when portraying the “pain and hope” (Carrillo & Mayor, 2022).

Sin señas particulares (2020), directed by Fernanda Valadez, portrays the search of Magdalena, who is looking for her son, who disappeared while traveling to the United States. Her search brings her face to face with both the State and the drug traffickers responsible for the smuggling of migrants across the northern border.

In *Noche de Fuego* (2021), by Tatiana Huezo, the drama of the disappearance of women in a rural community in Mexico is explored through the story of Rita and María. The mother is forced to perform a series of acts to prevent her daughter from being disappeared by members of organized crime.

In the case of *La civil* (2022), director Teodora Mihai exposes everything that Cielo (mother) had to do to look for her missing daughter. This film is inspired by Miriam Rodríguez Martínez, who led the search for her daughter, Karen Alejandra Salinas Rodríguez, who disappeared in January 2014 in Tamaulipas. Her search led her to locate her daughter’s captors and killers; sadly, the searching mother was murdered on May 10, 2017.

Ruido (2023), by Natalia Beristáin, tells the story of Julia, mother of Ger (Gertrudis), who was disappeared in a bar while on vacation with a couple of friends. This mother’s search leads her to experience a series of *search stations*; for example, public prosecutor’s offices, forensic medical services, listening groups of searching families, night centers, migrant shelters and clandestine graves. This fiction, unlike the previous ones, combines fictional elements with the appearance of real mothers and search groups, characters that, within the plot, help Julia in the process of looking for Ger.

This last element justifies why we decided to focus on this film and not on any other, since it seems important to us to account for how the narrative of the film uses the work and labor of the collectives for Julia to build a search trajectory, but also it places the searching mothers as a node in which fiction connects with the crisis of disappearances in Mexico, through real testimonies that give credibility to *Ruido*, enhancing the story and the impact of the film.

THE SEARCH PROCESS AS *LEITMOTIV*

Through the sum of individual and collective experiences, searching families in Mexico have been creating different *search pedagogies* (Diéguez, 2021), which allow them to learn to search for the disappeared persons –either dead or alive. These searches are carried out by implementing what Franco-Migués (2022) calls *technologies of hope*, the instrumentalization of analog and digital technologies with the purpose of facilitating and making visible the search for their missing persons. In *Ruido*, both processes are present, since the film –as stated by the director– intends to show audiences the different ways in which missing persons are searched for in Mexico, as well as the instruments that materialize such searches.

For the purposes of this first analysis of the film, we decided to name as *search stations* those places in which the film shows concrete actions to locate a missing person. These search stations are made up of the place and/or space that appears in the frame, the action performed by the characters in that scene, as well as two criteria typical of the search for missing persons in Mexico: the type of search (dead or alive) and the form of search (individual and collective).

Together, these observable elements aim to evidence the type of media representation that *Ruido* makes of the search that Julia undertakes to locate her daughter; in the same way, they intend to identify the symbolic and iconographic elements that are used to achieve the verisimilitude of the search process.

Following this analysis, the first search station that *Ruido* shows us is a call to go to the Forensic Medical Service to identify a body that the authorities claim belongs to Julia’s daughter. The visit to the coroner’s office takes place after receiving a call from the prosecutor’s office nine months after Ger’s disappearance, but when her parents (Julia and Arturo) realize the mess in the files and information of each case, it only takes a couple of questions to realize that it is not their daughter’s body. At that moment they meet the new prosecutor, the third one to “take charge” since Ger disappeared.

Next, in the film we see the search attempts of a desperate mother and an inefficient and corrupt government that shows no interest in

solving the cases. Then there is a family breakdown between Julia, who wants to continue the search, which she does on a daily basis by going out to the street to paste missing posters, and Arturo (Ger's father), who is unable to continue and confesses to Julia that he wishes the body had been his daughter's so that everything would be over once and for all. From that moment on, the only one who will lead the search for Ger will be Julia.

A third moment of the search occurs when Julia decides to go to a listening group of other searching families who share their testimonies while embroidering the names of their missing relatives on handkerchiefs. The women and men who appear in this search station are members of the *Colectivo Buscándote con Amor Estado de México*, so what the audience listens to are real cases, not fiction.

FIGURE 2
MEMBERS OF THE *COLECTIVO BUSCÁNDOTE CON AMOR ESTADO DE MÉXICO* PARTICIPATE IN A LISTENING GROUP WHERE, FOR THE FIRST TIME, JULIA TALKS ABOUT GER'S DISAPPEARANCE



Source: Netflix Latin America.

This is where Julia meets Abril, a journalist who has accompanied search processes and who will be part of the process and her guide to locate Ger. This journalistic accompaniment helps Julia to understand

that the search must also go beyond the institutional framework; that is to say, in the face of the authority's inaction, Julia is the one who must act in order for something to really happen. The journalist takes her to a lawyer who shows Julia other places in which to search and explains that the police are only limited to looking for dead missing persons. From this meeting, other search stations are built that lead Julia to visit migrant shelters and various places linked to the illegal human trafficking route. At the same time, Julia learns that the only way to move forward is through payments to informants, institutional and non-institutional; for example, she pays the lawyer to get information, as well as the police for protection and to be allowed to see crime scenes, such as a truck with bodies abandoned on the highway carrying "beautiful girls".

Finding no answers, Julia decides to return to San Luis Potosí, the place where Ger disappeared. When she arrives in the city she meets the collective *Voz y Dignidad por los Nuestros de San Luis Potosí*, and together with them she learns to search abandoned properties, as these are places where the organized crime makes clandestine graves.

FIGURE 3

MEMBERS OF THE COLLECTIVE

VOZ Y DIGNIDAD POR LOS NUESTROS DURING A SEARCH

The presence of Julia and Abril in the field search seems to make many people angry; the searching mother even receives a first threat when a car chases her at night. To protect their integrity, both Julia and Abril decide to leave; however, the bus they take is intercepted by organized crime, but only Abril, the journalist, is taken away, who is never mentioned again in the film and, moreover, is never looked for.

This event is communicated by Julia to the authorities, who upon arriving at the bus station not only offer her security but also the possibility of talking to a drug trafficker whom they have in custody, but who they will have to release soon since “he has good contacts”, to ask him directly about her daughter. Julia shows Ger’s photo to the criminal and he tells her to stop looking for her, that she was carrying a bag of cocaine that was not from them and that she is no longer around; Julia asks him if that is the only reason to abduct her, because of a “fucking bag of coke”, and he answers “no, she was also hot”. Julia, devastated, leaves the place of detention. Outside, a feminist demonstration takes place, culminating in the recovery by the authorities of a public space that had been occupied by various collectives as a sign of disgust at the impunity in various cases of femicide. Julia’s search seems to end when she is beaten by the police.

With this journey, it can be observed that the film presents different search stations in which each place and/or space not only provides the basis for (individual and/or collective) search actions, but also serves as a pretext to show how Mexican searching mothers learn –inside and outside the institutional frameworks– to search for their missing loved ones.

As seen in *Ruido*, these ways of searching also constitute *search pedagogies* (Diéguez, 2021), which are the teaching-learning processes that families have built through the journey –individually and collectively– to search for missing persons. This knowledge does not stand still but is shared from family to family and from collective to collective, as seen in *Ruido* when Julia realizes that the prosecutor’s office is not interested in doing the job; on the contrary, the authority abuses the situation of pain and desperation. In the face of this, those who appear as a guide for her path are other searching families.

In this sense, the search stations that Julia goes through are impregnated with this collective knowledge in which other searching

families intervene, but also journalists and activists who take risks together with them. In Table 2 we frame these search stations by identifying places, actions, as well as the type and form of search that *Ruido* emphasizes.

One of the most important elements in the identification of these stations is that, in the narrative of *Ruido*, the media representation of “the search for the person alive” predominates, which is highly significant because it contrasts with the actions of the Mexican State, which usually only searches for “dead” people. The search for the person alive shown in *Ruido* is significant because it is supported by a series of symbols of hope that the searching families have built over almost two decades of searching.

THE AESTHETICS OF PAIN AND THE SYMBOLS OF SEARCH

The story, in addition to telling this journey of search with each of the stations, also makes use of other resources of a much more metaphorical nature that help to understand Julia’s emotional state. One of them is the noise (*ruido*), the one that seems to stun Julia in the moments when she can’t take it anymore, a noise that she not only hears, but also takes her to an isolated space, far away from reality. As if it were an expressionist space in which pain acquires its own visuality and sonority. Julia in the desert is like the faceless character in Münch’s painting, a cry of despair in which reality has ceased to exist because when one suffers everything else is blurred.

The film also makes use of two symbols that are closely linked to the search: embroidery and the color purple. In the opening credits, all names appear embroidered, an action that has become relevant in the search for the disappeared, since, in addition to remembering all the names of the missing persons, it also places in a position of vulnerability those who are apparently safe and out of the geography of pain.

Embroidery, as we have said, is one of the most representative acts of remembrance and resistance to name the victims of violence in Mexico, because these public and private spaces of collective embroidery are also listening circles where, for the first time, many families narrate

TABLE 2
SEARCH STATIONS IN THE NARRATIVE OF *RUIDO*

Place/space	Search action	Type of search	Search form
Forensic Medical Services	The missing person is identified through the observation of bodies of unidentified deceased persons	Dead	Individual
Public Prosecutor's Offices	Review of case progress	Dead	Individual
Public spaces	Putting up missing posters	Alive	Individual
Listening and embroidery groups	Collective listening of testimonies and actions of remembrance	Alive	Collective
Meetings with civil society organizations	Legal advice and analysis of the context of disappearance	Alive	Collective
Meetings with accompanying journalists	Searching families share their testimony and the journalist helps to think about search strategies	Alive and dead	Collective
Migrant shelters	Search among persons present in the shelter and in records	Alive	Individual
Nightclubs	Search among personnel working at these places	Alive	Individual
Sex work centers	Search among personnel working at these places	Alive	Individual
Clandestine graves	Field search to locate clandestine burial sites	Dead	Collective
Search groups spaces	Collective field search actions	Alive and dead	Collective
Feminist protests	Protest and visibility actions	Alive	Collective

Source: The authors.

their pain and experience (Gargallo, 2014), as Julia does when she attends one of the embroidery sessions of the *Colectivo Buscándote con Amor del Estado de México*.

For its part, the color purple, which embraces Julia at the beginning and end of the film as part of the feminist march where she is beaten and apparently murdered, also becomes a hallmark of struggle that belongs to them. The purple frames the need to be seen; them, their causes, their pain and their struggle

Outside the fictional framework, in Mexico, feminist collectives have been the ones that have most supported and accompanied the search processes of the searching mothers; in *Ruido*, purple/violet (and not green) prevails as that symbolic connection with feminist resistances, since purple refers to the struggle against gender violence, while green is more associated with the fight for the right to decide and the decriminalization of abortion. The color violet gives an affective dimension to the contemporary feminist movement, and in its use, we recognize a symbolic level that integrates and unites, that is visible as a collective and is massive.

In short, the media and cinematographic representation of the searching mothers proposed by *Ruido* revolves around the narrative capacity to combine the symbolic elements of the search carried by the real searching mothers who appear in the film with the aesthetics of pain embodied by Julia, who little by little, and through the search stations she goes through, incorporates it both in her visual representation, but above all in the symbolic one.

The latter is relevant because the representation of the search is not only determined through pain (although this is the *leitmotiv*), but also through hope, an action that allows (in the film, but also in the lives of the real searching mothers) to recover both the power (life pulse) and the capacity for agency that they lost after the disappearance of their loved one.

THE REPRESENTATION OF PAIN AND THE SEARCH PROCESS

In the history of cinema, the representation of pain has been a subject of analysis studied by researchers who have recognized the implications

and characteristics of violent events that have changed the way of narrating and, of course, of making these acts visible in the media. Berthier and Sanchez-Biosca (2023), in *Retóricas del miedo, imágenes de la guerra civil española (Rhetorics of fear. Images of the Spanish civil war)*, reflect on how cinema has given an account of a war that generated its own iconography and its own way of organizing pain, discursively and visually:

Cinema has a twofold peculiarity that makes it a unique space for reflection: on the one hand, its narrative plasticity, in the heart of which the instruments of fiction make it possible to reconstruct and bring to life feelings and emotions –in this case, collective anguish– with a vividness unknown in other forms of expression; on the other hand, its photomechanical image quality, which supposes both the advantage of its visuality, and the limit that a photographic image captured from reality (it is not relevant to this effect that it is staged) poses to the imagination, unlike drawing, engraving, painting or poster art (p. 99).

Around the Spanish Civil War, certain discourses are visualized, certain voices of enunciation are legitimized over others, and symbols are created to understand the pain of that particular war, but which lay the foundation for other rhetorics of fear. In other words, each filmed war and/or painful event demands to answer ethical questions that will almost always find an aesthetic answer to settle them (Alcalá, 2016).

The same happens in the case of disappearances in Mexico: little by little, discourses have been organized that allow giving voice to the victims and not only to the perpetrators, the presence of mothers and their actions are favored over the insensitive official discourses, which, we consider, creates a particular iconography (Alcalá, 2016) both of those who search and the process they face in each of the search stations they go through.

The embroideries, the colors, the altars, the missing posters are all figures that make up this rhetoric of disappearance that aims to account for the violent act from the perspective of hope, visibility and search, as it was represented (narratively and visually) in *Ruido*.

THE INTERPRETATIVE COMMUNITIES AROUND THE SEARCH CAUSE

The *search cause*, as expressed by the searching mother Graciela Pérez,⁶ is a collective action in which the collective is more important than the individual; that is, it is a movement that seeks to involve all people in the search for missing persons, not only the direct relatives.

In order to understand in greater depth the type of media representations that were constructed in *Ruido* around the searching mothers and their search processes, we rely on the theoretical perspective of *interpretative communities* (Orozco, 1991).

We understand interpretative communities as “a group of social subjects bound together by a field of meaning from which a special significance emerges for their social action (agency)” (Orozco, 1991, p. 33). For Orozco –who made a theoretical appropriation of Fish’s (1980) proposal on audience studies– this is relevant because interpretative communities not only coincide in the territorial and symbolic spheres, but also in the instrumental one, since they construct and maintain common objectives and meanings.

In the case of this paper, the sense of community lies in the hope of finding their missing loved ones, but also in the feeling that comes from sharing the search cause. Thus, it is a community that shares meanings not only because of a text (in this case the film *Ruido*), but also after sharing its viewing.

Fish (1980), a pioneer in the conceptualization of interpretative communities, focuses his analysis on three aspects: 1) the place of meaning (which can be the text and/or the readers), 2) the relationship of independence of the readers, and 3) the stability of the texts that are shared. The triangulation of these processes, according to Fish (1980), makes it evident that the meaning is not in the text, but in the reading

⁶ This expression was used in a public tribute of her work on December 7, 2022 in Mexico City. Since August 14, 2012, she has been searching for her daughter, Milynali Piña Pérez; her brother, Ignacio Pérez Rodríguez; and her nephews, Aldo de Jesús Pérez Salazar, Arturo Domínguez Pérez, and Alexis Domínguez Pérez, who disappeared on a stretch of road in El Mante, Tamaulipas (Franco Mígues, 2022).

that is made of it; in this he agrees with Orozco, who also suggests that “a community of interpretation can only be generated when in some text or media product there is a shared common meaning” (p. 45), which is not univocal, but polysemic.

It goes without saying that this common meaning shared by those who have a missing loved one lies both in the representation of the searching mothers (embodied in Julia), as well as in the representation of the search she undertakes (what we call *search stations*), but also in the existence of a common search cause.

Therefore, for the preparation of this paper it was not only necessary to talk about the narrative-fictional and symbolic composition of *Ruido*, but also about the meaning that was constructed through the reception process of the searching mothers who watched the film, either because they appear in it or because they joined the #HagamosMásRuido campaign to make even more visible the work of all the people who search for the disappeared in Mexico.

To understand how an interpretive community was built around the film, we interviewed members of the collectives *Voz y Dignidad por los Nuestros SLP* (San Luis Potosí), *Fuerzas Unidas por Nuestros Desaparecidos Nuevo León* (Nuevo León), *Por Amor A Ellxs* (Jalisco) and *Colectivo Milynali Red* (Tamaulipas). In total, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted to learn about their perception of *Ruido*, as well as the shared meanings around the figure of Julia and the search process shown in the film.

THE FILM *RUIDO* AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE SEARCHING MOTHERS

After interviewing the searching mothers about the media representation of them in the film *Ruido*, we have divided the results obtained into three analytical blocks: the first one related to the general perception of the film, the second about Julia (searching mother), and the third one about the representation of the search process for Ger (the missing daughter).

Regarding the film, the searching mothers interviewed agreed that watching *Ruido* was painful because it implied, at the moment

of viewing, “living the pain again”, not only because there was an evident connection with Julia, but also because they saw their searching partners, which resulted in a greater empathy with the story; this was expressed by Graciela and Edith, who were also part of *Ruido*.

This film has been difficult to digest, between the fiction and the knowledge that there are real families that appear in it and that we know. In addition, there are the handkerchiefs that are also real ... It is a film that really touches us because we feel the same pain (Graciela, searching mother from Tamaulipas).

I like the film because it shows the real protagonists, the mothers, and not only as fiction, but also the real mothers, and we explain to Julia what to do (Edith, searching mother from San Luis Potosí).

Feeling represented also influenced the mothers to connect with the plot centered on the search for Ger, which, for some of the interviewees, is relevant because it helps to generate empathy with their pain, but, above all, because it offers the visibility they have been trying so hard to achieve.

Knowing that the faces of our loved ones can be seen in 190 countries because the film is on Netflix gives us hope, but it was also a great shock (Lupita, searching sister from San Luis Potosí).

Ruido is a film that depicts this nightmare and presents it through the eyes of a mother searching for her daughter, and in that way, it helps others to understand the pain (Mónica, searching mother and wife from Jalisco).

In the interviews we identified two important elements: *Ruido* was meaningful for the searching mothers because it was not only created from fiction, but also from the narrative that they have promoted during years of struggle and search, but also because they appear on screen: “*Ruido* was a surprise to us because we thought that no one could portray the pain and helplessness that you feel when they tell you that your relative is missing” (Lupita, San Luis Potosí).

Regarding the representation of Julia as a searching mother, there was a common meaning: “Julia embodies not one, but all the searching mothers in Mexico”, identifying with her happens, according to the interviewees, because of the pain. The pain represented in the film through the cry that is not heard, but which they feel because it is their own cry.

I could identify with her through the pain, the pain in that deep scream. I remember that scream a lot and it makes me sad ... and it makes me sad because when I see the pain of that woman, I know that I experienced it ... I continue to feel that pain ... It is a pain that does not go away. Maybe you see us feeling more at ease, and, as in the movie, you see us eating, laughing, dancing, but the pain is there ... in that deep scream of silence that one feels, that scream that you don't need to hear it. Julia's muffled scream has a great impact on us, it is exactly what we feel (Graciela, Tamaulipas).

I identify with Julia in how she finds courage and goes out alone against the world to search for her daughter. I identify with her in that cry of pain, in that anguish ... in that request for help that she makes, and no one listens, that no one turns to see, and I identify with her in that cry that everyone ignores. It is that duality of pain, hope and uncertainty what we feel at every second (Edith, San Luis Potosi).

But this sharing of pain through the cry also allowed them to feel a certain distance from *Ruido's* representation of the searching mothers, because, as Monica states, mothers are much more than pain.

In our collective we believe that they wanted to put in her character everything we all have lived, and that is chaotic, I can't completely identify with her, because we only see her pain, but we are not only that (Mónica, Jalisco).

Regarding the search process, the searching mothers had a critical stance, since although they recognize the importance of having their story portrayed, they considered that having several fictional plots linked to the search makes it difficult to understand what it means to search for a missing person.

They put everything in without much context, which makes the search for her daughter suddenly take a back seat, and even the work of the searching mothers seems like something that just happens, but it's not like that ... There is a lot of work behind it that is not visible and that appears very briefly in the film (Mónica, Jalisco).

Something that was very interesting in the interpretation made by the searching mothers about *Ruido* is that they are aware that this is a fiction, which implies that some things are not as they experience them, but they consider that the substance of it was in the film, even if this is difficult to understand for those who watch it.

Of course, it is a film, but what you see does deeply move you because you look at the person who is searching for her daughter, and you know it is a film, you know it is fiction, but the way it is shown ... It would seem that the path that Julia walks has no rhyme or reason, in this case, it is exactly like that for those of us who have experienced it (Graciela, Tamaulipas).

For those of us who were part of the film, it was important that it shows what we do, that we had the opportunity to talk to Julia in the film, but with the great difference that what we say there is real (Edith, San Luis Potosí).

In the analysis of the interviews conducted, we can conclude that the searching mothers have an obvious connection with Julia's pain: "her pain is our pain", they say; however, situationally they know that everything she lives through must be presented to an extreme degree, so that the people who see *Ruido* "feel the pain we feel", says Graciela, from Tamaulipas.

That is, they can separate reality from fiction, but they identify which of the elements shown on screen do reflect their experience: "something important about the film is that it shows the search cause", explains Graciela, because, for her, the film shows everything they have been through, but more than that: "it shows the real protagonists", which implies that, beyond Julia, what prevails is that she could be any of the searching mothers that exist in Mexico.

The mothers connect with Julia because her media representation has a direct correlation with their life, although they realize that, in order to achieve this connection, the film overexposes the drama of the mourning and the search, because they understand that the purpose of the film “is not that they like it, but that it can sensitize those who do not understand the pain involved in having a missing person in Mexico”; this was expressed by Letty, a searching mother from Nuevo León, at the screening of *Ruido* in the Plaza de las y los Desaparecidos de Nuevo León (Missing persons square), on February 23, 2022.

This feeling is shared by the searching mothers, fellow searchers, for whom, from this shared interpretative community, there are things missing in *Ruido*, such as a more hopeful ending, but despite this, they consider it to be the film that is most faithful to their search cause.

Many things were left out, were not included in the film, but the search cause is there ... what each family has suffered ... There are many things that were missing, there is much that needs to be deepened ... this could be a complete series, but what they did include is good because, finally, the search cause can be seen ... This is not only about one person, but about all the people, about the families that appear in the film (Graciela, Tamaulipas).

The film shows what it can show, a part of the search of a person who does not even know how to do it ... That is what happened with us, because like Julia, little by little you find out what you have to do in a terrible scenario where authority does not help (Edith, San Luis Potosí).

The film lacks a more hopeful ending, something that shows that our struggle does yield results, but since it doesn't, it leaves you with the feeling that everything is fucked up and that little can be done (Mónica, Jalisco).

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ruido aims, in a narrative sense, to represent the search process, and it does so, as pointed out in the analysis, by organizing the film by search stations, which are divided into official and unofficial ones. The latter, in addition, allows us to learn about the work of the collectives of

searching mothers, since they are the ones who organize the searches, accompany and support the mothers who are going through the same situation. Just as the real searching mothers who appear in the film did with Julia, the fictional character.

However, the fact that the film seeks to show all these steps –each one complex and not as linear as presented in the film– makes the searching mothers interviewed recognize that the film’s representation of them is correct, but they also find gaps in a work that is more a network of support, accompaniment and strength than just a station to pass through. They also recognize that “the narrative and visual chaos of the film” is the reality experienced by those who begin the search for a missing person in Mexico.

One of the most significant conclusions regarding the connection of the searching mothers with *Ruido* is that, for them, the link with Julia occurs because they “feel her pain”, but above all, because on screen they can see “those other Julias” who are worthy representatives not only of their pain, but also of the hope of finding their loved ones.

Lastly, as one can recognize aesthetic elements that come along with the representation of drug trafficking in Mexico, this film offers images that help to create the rhetoric of the search; these are mainly collective, hopeful and independent. This is something that the searching mothers highlighted because, despite the missing elements within *Ruido*, they do recognize the importance of making their pain and search known through film.

The missing posters, the altars (public and private), the embroideries, the place of the mothers within the feminist marches, embraced by the violet color, but also by the red knit representing the blood of those who were murdered, are some images that are already part of contemporary Mexico; therefore, they are transferred to the movie screens as a presence of the absent, of pain and search, and they are familiar to us because they are always there waiting for justice.

For this reason, it is necessary to make a cross analysis between the media representations of disappearances that are being created in Mexican cinema and the way in which audiences are understanding this narrative approach in which directors –mostly women– seek to place the searching mothers as subjects of action and hope.

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PROFILES

Fabiola Alcalá Anguiano

She holds a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences from ITESO, a master's degree and a PhD in Audiovisual Communication from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, and a master's degree in Creative Documentary from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. She is a member of the National System of Researchers (SNI), level I, and coordinates the Guadalajara Film Researchers Network (REDIC). She teaches at the University of Guadalajara and ITESO. Her research focuses on film analysis, documentary film and visual studies. She has written about Werner Herzog, Harun Farocki and Agnès Varda, among others.

Darwin Franco Miguez

PhD in Education and Communication from the University of Guadalajara. His research interests are: technological appropriations for the search of missing persons, media representations of violence and media and information literacy.