

Subversion of media & journalistic ethics in Spanish cinema: Sensationalism and trash TV in the filmography of Álex de la Iglesia (1993-2022)

Subversión de la ética periodística y mediática en el cine español: Sensacionalismo y TV Trash en la filmografía de Álex de la Iglesia (1993-2022)



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Abstract:

Álex de la Iglesia is one of the Spanish filmmakers whose filmography has most forcefully portrayed the media universe, with a particular taste for constructing a depiction of the profession of journalism with a total absence of professional ethics. This study analyses the ethical dimension of journalists and the media in Álex de la Iglesia's films, looking particularly at the way in which the director and screenwriter approaches the media from its most grotesque, essentially televisual, aspect, which he represents emphasizing its sleaziness and sensationalism. Through the study of his fiction filmography, made

Resumen:

Álex de la Iglesia es uno de los cineastas españoles que más contundentemente ha retratado el universo mediático en su cine, con especial que-
rencia por la construcción del retrato de la profesión periodística, pese a su total ausencia de deontología profesional. En esta investigación se analiza la dimensión ética de los medios y los reporteros del cine de Álex de la Iglesia, al ahondar en el modo en que el director y guionista se aproxima a los medios desde su vertiente más grotesca, esencialmente televisiva, a la cual representa enfatizando la sordidez y el sensaciona-
lismo. A través del estudio de su filmografía de ficción, comprendida

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between 1993 and 2022, a definition is sought of Álex de la Iglesia's idea of journalists and communicators, as well as the characteristics and ethical principles of the media characters created by this paradigmatic director of Spanish cinema.

Keywords:

Álex de la Iglesia; journalism; cinema; journalistic ethics; trash TV.

hasta el momento entre 1993 y 2022, se deslinda en qué consiste la construcción ficcional del periodista y del comunicador cinematográfico de Álex de la Iglesia, así como se analizan las características y los principios éticos que poseen los personajes mediáticos de este director paradigmático del cine español.

Palabras clave:

Álex de la Iglesia; periodismo; cine; ética periodística; televisión basura.

1. Introduction

Cinema is one of the forms of cultural expression with the most prominent public resonance. Its ability to connect with diverse audiences, along with its tremendous visual potency, has helped to outline representations of the world as we know it (Martínez Luna, 2015: 5). Cinema fiction, by employing intellectual and emotional resources, not only contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, but also appeals to the expression of emotions (Rodríguez Mateos & Montero, 2005: 31). This calls for a critical outlook and an understanding of the limits of visual portrayals (Ruiz Berrio in Guereña, 2007: 416), and of their ability to influence. The image that cinema projects of a certain group or profession is not only a reflection of reality, but also involves interpretation. Being a cultural instrument that “functions as a powerful mediator of the collective imagination when building the cultural identity of a community” (Trenzado, 2000: 54), it is important to analyse how high-profile professional groups are portrayed.

There have been numerous studies of the portrayal of professions in film, such as medicine (García Sánchez, 2021), politics (Madriz-Sojo; Sáenz, 2018), lawyers and the judiciary (Galeano, 2017) and journalism (Tello Díaz, 2007, 2010, 2016) which give an idea of their weight in society. Analysis of the cinematographic representation of journalism and the media is extensive, with fundamental contributions from pioneers such as Thomas Zynda, who in 1979 published “*The Hollywood Version: Movie Portrayals of the Press*”, and Howard Good with his book *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (1989). Matthew Ehrlich's *Journalism in the Movies* (2004) is also essential reading, as indeed is all his subsequent research.

However, all of them analyse English-speaking filmography of journalism-media, especially American, there being a total absence of specific studies in Spanish cinema until 2011, which saw the publication of *The image and ethics of journalism in Spanish cinema 1896-2010* (Tello Díaz, 2011) and later *The profile of journalists in Spanish cinema* (San José de la Rosa, 2018). Journalism is shown in these studies to be a professional field of interest to Spanish cinema, given the extensive filmography dedicated to the portrayal and analysis of the profession.

The number of film representations of the media world in Spanish cinema is considerable. Since cinema arrived in Spain in 1896, up to the end of 2010 over 800 films have portrayed the world of journalism, 645 of which have incorporated the figure of a journalist in their plots (Tello Díaz, 2016-A:29).

This interest is offered not only in Spanish cinema as cinematography in general, but in the oeuvre of directors and screenwriters who approach journalistic reality with both depth and regularity. Such is the case with Álex de la Iglesia (Bilbao, 1963), a director who has portrayed some aspect of journalism in all his films, especially in the ethical approach with which

he outlines the media environment. If, as Jiménez Marín and Elías Zambrano maintain, the mass media act as mediating institutions between reality and its environment (2012: 166), Álex de la Iglesia's cinema also dissects journalistic and social truth to contrast them on the screen. By means of a grotesque configuration, the director offers up his work to analyse ethics in the media through cinema. Given that "filmic images are exceptional in facilitating the understanding of messages" (Ortí & García, 2012: 71), this study delineates the ethical meaning of media portrayal in cinema.

2. Method

The methodology of our research is essentially qualitative, based on a content analysis of the filmography under consideration. In this regard, the complete universe of Álex de la Iglesia's feature film production is presented, encompassing his seventeen fiction films, all of them released between 1993 and 2022: *Acción Mutante* (1993), *The Day of the Beast* (1995), *Perdita Durango* (1997), *Dying of Laughter* (1999), *Common Wealth* (2000), *Eight Hundred Bullets* (2002), *Ferpect Crime* (2004), *The Baby's Room* (2006), *The Oxford Murders* (2008), *The Last Circus (A Sad Trumpet Ballad)* (2010), *As Luck Would Have It* (2011), *Witching and Bitching* (2013), *My Big Night* (2015), *The Bar* (2017), *Perfect Strangers* (2017), *Veneciafrenia* (2021) and *Four's a Crowd* (2022). His television series, short films and documentaries are excluded, despite many of them giving notable presence to the media.

Not only are journalists analysed as news communicators, but the ethics of the media universe as a whole have also been considered, this includes television presenters and professionals from all fields of entertainment, even show business, not exclusively informative. Thus, we seek to analyse the contemporary media environment in Álex de la Iglesia's films, including communicators utilising new online technologies, present in the director's latest films.

To gauge the scope of his portrayal of the media, the filmic message is analysed on both narrative and visual levels, by examining the resources used by the director to transmit his message in terms of audiovisual language. This approach emphasizes the narrative scope, essentially with the content and tone of the dialogues, and also mentions the *mise-en-scène* (staging, acting, situations). All of this will configure an atmosphere conducive to the design of media figures in Álex de la Iglesia's filmography.

To take a deeper look into the ethical dimension, content analysis of the feature films has been carried out in accordance with the ethical principles stated in the study "Codes of journalistic deontology: a comparative analysis" by Porfirio Barroso. These principles are applied to the genres of news and entertainment, both in conventional and online media, given that all of them have a public dimension and are based on a code of best practices applicable to all aspects of the media (to inform, educate, and entertain). There are ten deontological keys that are based on this decalogue (Barroso, 2011: 168-169):

1. Truth, objectivity, accuracy.
2. Duty to maintain professional secrecy.
3. Safeguard freedom and independence, with dignity and integrity.
4. Duty to prevent slander, accusation, defamation, insults, and plagiarism.
5. Duty to rectify incorrect information.
6. Respect for people's privacy.

7. Right to freedom of information and expression.
8. Prioritize service to the common good, social well-being, and public interest.
9. Do not commit any discrimination.
10. Use means that are fair, dignified, honest and reasonable.

Four antithetical principles are distinguished from these ethical elements, that is, negative qualities that every journalist and reporter should avoid (Tello Díaz, 2011):

11. Manipulation of information.
12. Sensationalism.
13. Excesses when reporting crime and suicide.
14. Failure to separate private and professional life. Conflicts of interest

These four elements have also been taken into account when analysing media ethics in the filmography under consideration, given their invariable presence in the films studied.

3. Álex de la Iglesia's cinema: media influence

Álex de la Iglesia's audiovisual background is not limited to fiction in cinema but includes his television experience. He began in the 80s as artistic director of the program *Detrás de Sirimiri* on ETB and then, in the nineties, he directed *Inocente*, *Inocente* on national public television; he returned to television in the 21st century with *Film Lessons* (2005) on Canal Plus, while directing films and series such as *Pluto BRB* (La 2) or *30 Coins* (HBO). This television experience has been important to his knowledge of the media universe, an environment that he systematically criticises in his productions and that has given rise to a filmography marked by the absence of professional deontology in the media. Thus, the director offers a hugely critical portrayal of journalism, through a filmography that is as personal as it is scathing.

3.1. Criticism of the media

Regardless of the subject matter dealt with in each film, all seventeen feature films that De la Iglesia directed between 1993 and 2022 featured journalism and/or the media as an essential element. In all of them, the media environment features or mediates reality in order to modify it significantly. Of the different media, television is the most frequent in his plots due to its hypnotic power (García Ureña, 2017: 208), showing television that strives insidiously to offer “repetitive and fleeting information that fosters uncritical attitudes and eliminates any chance of interaction” (Fabbrocino, 2020: 161). Although television occasionally becomes a vehicle of communication that favours the decoding of the object presented in the film (Cerdán, 2004: 254), the truth is that De la Iglesia shows it in all its crudeness: “television imposes its own perversions on other media. Firstly, fascination with images. [...] What is not visible and does not have an image is not televisable, therefore, it does not exist” (Ramonet, 2002:193). Thus, the director:

risers up against the emptiness of catholic culture and the political instrumentalization of the small screen, activating strategies of parodic distortion, which aim to reveal the medium's mechanisms of manipulation and alienation of minds (Bracco, 2014: 407).

De la Iglesia's style consists of mixing the intellectual and the popular (Fraile, 2014:112) and emphasises the role of television as a catalyst for everything consumed by society. It is also true that, in the nineties, De la Iglesia criticised the television model that marked the future of private television in Spain (Buse & Willis, 2007: 74), especially in *The Day of the Beast*, but he would later nuance this criticism towards the whole spectrum of television. The director himself points out the radical importance that the cathode tube device had in his formative years:

Television was the aperture through which we saw the universe during those years. A strange lens that converged things that were impossible to unite. That is the root of this kind of eclecticism or mental confusion we have lived in since then (De la Iglesia in Angulo, 2012: 109).

The importance of the television set as a disruptive element, but also as something lethargy-inducing and analgesic, is essential in Álex de la Iglesia's films. Not as regards its influence as the fourth estate, but as an everyday instrument, a household appliance, and even as a trivial topic for some of his dialogues (Vascónez, 2023: 131). His characters often live in a violent, chaotic world from which they can escape through television, something that is apparent in social criticism of the sensationalism of the medium itself (Pérez Franco, 2010: 51). Thus, De la Iglesia shows television:

intimately linked to violence, as one of the factors of the urban apocalypse set before our eyes, an instrument endowed with a deforming force capable of alienating both reality and our minds. A symbol of the fascination of mass media culture and show business, it absorbs all those who see it, it parasitises image bands and soundtracks: screens are omnipresent in homes, bars, and shop windows. (Bracco, 2014: 406).

This has been so since his first works, including the short film *Mirindas Assassinas* (1991), in which a customer "becomes mesmerised in front of a television in a bar, right next to the waiter's corpse, hopping channels until he finds the broadcast of a bullfight" (García Ureña, 2017: 208). This excess, taken to the extreme in *Dying of Laughter* or *As Luck Would Have It* is defined by a central feature of his cinema: the grotesque.

3.2. *The grotesque tone as an ethical position*

Álex de la Iglesia's cinema has a distorting tone which makes it especially attractive for social criticism. The director deliberately manoeuvres with the script and the mise-en-scène (staging, acting, space, atmosphere) to offer the spectator a grotesque experience. As the director himself states: "in the grotesque we find that distance required to see ourselves as a whole, grossly sketched so as to separate us from our background, clearly and distinctly" (Álex de la Iglesia, 2015:17). The media serve as amplifiers of excess and pathos, especially in the case of television:

Television is non-existent as a mirror of reality, it would be a kind of distorting mirror, a grotesque mirror that disfigures truth. It is when it does not directly refer to reality that it starts to get interesting. Sensationalism, tabloid journalism, or gossip, that is pure television [...] Television in its purest form would generate a fictitious reality (De la Iglesia in Tello Díaz, 2016-B: 38).

This deforming mirror intentionally draws on the tradition of the grotesque, which leads him to include in his films “multiple echoes and traces that belong to the most traditional, most quintessentially Spanish universe” (Heredero, 1999, p.195). The bizarre, therefore, is a tool that he uses to elaborate his particular criticism of the absence of ethics, which he seasons with a “counterpoint between violence, triviality of language and dark humour.” (García Ureña, 2017: 203). The director states the need to develop discourse through comedy, as a nemesis of seriousness used as a weapon of control:

Laughter detaches us from things and allows us to judge them from a distance. Thanks to laughter we can observe what happens from an eccentric point of view, obtaining an overview that ‘serious reality’, immersed in the system, is unable to offer us. Laughter as a method of knowledge, humour as a hermeneutical discipline (Álex de la Iglesia, 2015:17).

Although De la Iglesia usually criticises traditional media, in recent years he has extended that criticism to include social networks (Vascónez, 2023: 125), for which he uses the same tone of excess displayed in the pro-filmic of all his movies. That same tone is what he conveys to his characters, all of them characterised by rudeness and animosity. This trait is palpable in journalists, reporters, or presenters, who flaunt a striking lack of decorum. The director somehow configures “an unbalanced and disorientating space, amplified by a frontier-land mentality and that manifests in the characters’ extreme behaviour” (Mancebo & Sánchez, 2022: 143). The Basque author’s creations tend to be misfits who confront the consumer society that trivialises reality and represses its citizens, leading to authentic explosions of extreme violence (García Ureña, 2017: 203). This converges in an “amoral narrative way of thinking”, in which neither protagonists nor antagonists display a minimum of ethical behaviour to place viewers on the moral spectrum (Jiménez González, 2023: 54). This paradox between behaviour and expectation (Borio, 2022: 135) is evident in the journalists, who find themselves surrounded by ambiguity and violence as “a hallmark of a profession in which everything is inextricable, and of characters whose recklessness makes them live dangerously” (Tello Díaz, 2010: 12).

4. Results

Álex de la Iglesia shows the journalistic-media reality throughout his filmography. Although traditional media (press, television, radio) do not appear in *Perfect Strangers* or *Four’s a Crowd*, their informative function is assumed by mobile devices, tablets or even laptops. This means that all 17 of the fiction films he has made contain informative-journalistic elements and 15 of them (88.23%) explicitly address news reporting.

Furthermore, media figures appear in 15 films (88.23%): in leading roles in 4 movies (23.5%) and in supporting roles in another 4 (23.5%). Such figures have walk-on parts in another 7 films (41.17%). The two remaining films (11.76%) use the media (television, newspaper pages, online press) directly to exemplify media activity.

Several news formats are combined in each film, not employing a single medium for each film. Numerous formats are employed to reinforce the idea of overabundance in media coverage. However, television programs are the most frequent format, appearing in 14 films (82.35%), ahead of the press (periodicals, newspapers, headlines) and the Internet (streaming news shows and news portals) present in 4 films respectively (23.5 %). This data is significant, since the use of the Internet as a resource in De la Iglesia’s cinema did not arrive until 2011 with *As Luck Would Have It* but has achieved in only twelve years

the same representativeness as the traditional press, which has been appearing in his filmography since 1993. Radio is the medium with the least representation, present in only one film (5.88%).

Despite such frequency and variety of formats, it is the representation of media practices that is most complex in Álex de la Iglesia's films, some titles displaying a notable absence of professional ethics. Hence, it is essential to analyse how journalistic ethics are fulfilled in his films and observe whether the practices of news professionals are represented at their best in light of citizens' right to be informed.

To this end, compliance with ethical codes is used as a measurement criterion, as it is one of the most effective self-regulation tools used by the media, along with "press councils, style books, or the figure of the ombudsman" (Díaz-Campo & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019: 16). The codes are made up of a series of ethical criteria agreed upon by the profession as essential for the exercise of its functions (Díaz-Campo, 2016), serving to guide professional actions. Only five of the fourteen ethical principles selected to analyse the ethics of journalism in Álex de la Iglesia's films are systematically repeated, acquiring true prominence in his films: "Truth, objectivity, accuracy" (17 films, 100%); "Sensationalism and respect for privacy" (15 films, 88.23%); "No manipulation" (12 films, 70.58%); "Information about crimes and suicides" (12 films, 70.58%) and "Separate professional life from personal life" (9 films, 52.94%).

5. Discussion of results

The following is a detailed discussion of each ethical principle as shown in the films in which they appear, in accordance with the importance of each principle to media reality.

5.1. Truth, objectivity, accuracy

Truth is fundamental in the media. "Without the truth there is no information" (Brajnovic, 1979: 59) was stated decades ago and, without a doubt, there is no journalism without truth. If the truth is behind every communication act, objectivity is, in Desantes' terms, the foundation on which correct decision-making is based (2004: 100). The news professional who does not seek the truth, who allows themselves to be vitiated by subjectivity, is not performing his/her job correctly.

The Day of the Beast (1995) is the paradigm of the setting out of media truth, criticising the "recourse to falsehood in mass communication" and revealing "the resources utilised by the media to manipulate their audience" (Tello Díaz, 2013: 18). This film not only shows a medium that tends towards the most vacuous, violence-based spectacle (Moreiras, 2002: 276), but also shows how trash television desensitises the audience, rendering them incapable of critical thinking (Rivero, 2015: 371). All this is conveyed through an esoteric programme called *The Dark Zone*, presented by Professor Cavan (Armando de Razza), who teams up with a priest and professor of theology (Álex Angulo), to unravel on his programme the truth of the birth of the antichrist. The pro-filmic is employed on the programme to highlight the lugubrious nature of the universe they are entering, with props that include a fortune-teller's hand, inside which an eye can be seen, the epitome of esoteric symbology of observing the great beyond. This staging undoubtedly implies that *The Dark Zone* boldly seeks hidden truths.

Image 1. Stills from *The Day of the Beast*



Source: created by the author

Despite this, the entire plot highlights the lack of rigor in the quest for truth, when it does not directly highlight manipulation and falsehood. As Cavan says: “Don’t you realize this is all just a farce for assholes? For assholes, who’re the ones who watch my show and buy my book. That’s the truth”. Maintaining his contemptuous tone, Cavan insists: “This book is a piece of crap, a fraud. Tell your wife.” The outburst comes during the Christmas Eve broadcast of a programme about evil. Although the head of the channel celebrates his decision (“You’re a genius, Cavan, tonight we’ll swallow the rest of the networks whole. Everyone singing Christmas carols while we’ve got the devil! We’ll have to repeat the show several days on the trot”), Cavan explains his true intention. Shown in medium shot, Cavan states:

This is a warning to the ten million fucking assholes watching this show. The end of the world is tonight [...] While you’re enjoying the warmth of your home and happily dining while watching TV, outside, in the street, the reign of the antichrist is beginning.

The same search for truth is reflected in *Eight Hundred Bullets* (2002). When the lead’s (Carmen Maura) daughter-in-law buys some land that was once a movie set, the actors mutiny. At that moment, De la Iglesia once again highlights the effect in the pro-filmic: a television screen shows cartoons in which the sign “start screaming” appears, signposting the coming disaster. A timely channel hop jumps suddenly to a news channel where a journalist, Georgina Cisquella, reports: “We’re getting news from Almería that could very well be from a western, although this time the outcome could be dramatic.” Another journalist in situ in Tabernas reports: “there’s a lot of confusion about what is really happening, but they have just confirmed that there have been at least twenty serious injuries.” The pro-filmic in *Eight Hundred Bullets* focuses on the grotesque, showing an authentic

pitched battle, far more than a mere brawl. Its disproportion is resonant of a battlefield, and the journalist looks like a war correspondent. Once again, the mise-en-scène highlights the grotesque in order to startle the viewer.

The truth is also boldly pursued in *The Oxford Murders* (2008), a film that begins with a master class by Arthur Sheldon (John Hurt), who asks a single question: “can we really know the truth?” later arguing that “all the great thinkers of history have searched for a single certainty, something that no one could deny, like two and two make four.” De la Iglesia continues with his emphasis on truth: “There is no truth outside the world of mathematics, there is no way to find a single absolute certainty, no irrefutable argument that helps us answer the questions of humanity”. As happened in *The Day of the Beast*, the director insists on his particular opinion regarding the media: “Everything the newspapers say is a lie, didn’t you know that?” The protagonist himself (Elijah Wood) admits dejectedly: “the truth is not mathematical, as I thought, it’s absurd, confusing, casual, disordered and deeply unpleasant.”

Image 2. Stills from *The Oxford Murders*



Source: created by the author

In *Witching and Bitching* (2013) the media are shown as testimony, as mediators and as a resource. Nothing happens that is not covered by a media outlet. The spectacular chase through the Puerta del Sol in Madrid is broadcast on a television set in a corridor in the emergency ward. As in *Eight Hundred Bullets*, De la Iglesia deploys a hyperbolised pro-filmic, with a car chase akin to that at ground zero of a terrorist attack.

After that, one of its protagonists (Hugo Silva), in response to a news article published in *Cosmopolitan*, says: “That’s a lie. They twist statistics to suit themselves.” When they arrive in Zugarramundi, the owner of a bar (Terele Pávez) plays VHS tapes of the entertainment show ‘Noche de fiesta’ by José Luis Moreno. When they ask her how old the tape is, she explains: “it doesn’t matter, they don’t take anything in. They watch whatever you put in front of them”, in a corrosive reflection on the uncritical gaze of the spectators.

In *Perfect Strangers* (2017), although this film does not portray any media *per se*, the functions that the media normally perform in his films (to inform, warn, keep abreast of a situation or move the plot forward) are replaced by the omnipresent figure of mobile phones, whose access to the internet and the massification that social networks represent more than fulfil this functionality. Apart from the overabundance of messages shared by the protagonists, the suffocating, chaotic atmosphere in which the encounter takes place (once again, an overwhelming pro-filmic, excessive in terms of being grotesque and claustrophobic, whilst also being marked by overly serious performances by the cast), it is notable that *Perfect Strangers*

stresses the idea of truth as something hidden and difficult to pin down. The truth in Álex de la Iglesia's cinema, in short, is presented as a construct, as fiction, not only in the intimacy of personal relationships, but in the media world.

5.2. Media sensationalism

The tendency towards the sensational is a perversion of the concept of truth. The media claims everything spectacular as a news phenomenon, not because of its intrinsic interest, but because of its visual quality. This reality shows its first major staging in *Dying of Laughter* (1999), in which all the elements are deployed to shock the viewer, including a bird's-eye shot, and its spectacular premise, namely, real-time death and killing: "We're going to walk out that door and we're going to record the best New Year's Eve show ever. "We're going to kill them with laughter."

The movie marks the beginning of a frequent trend in Álex de la Iglesia's cinema, consisting of showing the audience macabre images, and for the viewers to think of them as fiction. In an attempt to show how narcotised society is, the director takes the grotesque to the extreme with real crimes taken as part of media subterfuge. Grotesque laughter, televised death and aberrant angles reinforce this reality from the pro-filmic point of view. In this case, Bruno (Santiago Segura) and Nino (Great Wyoming) shoot each other in front of hundreds of people, who cannot stop laughing as they take it to be part of the show.

Image 3. Still from *Dying of Laughter*



Source: created by the author

Also in *Dying of Laughter*, the director incorporates the concept of fame, an issue that he has gone on to develop throughout his filmography. De la Iglesia's characters strive to escape mediocrity: "Look at these people, they're just ordinary punters, their lives are grey, boring. And we, though it's tough to admit, are just the same as them, we're no different. There's no fairy godmother who's going to come and give us a chance." Through countless real television fragments ("Directísimo" by José María Íñigo; the 1981 Tejero coup; the riot in Carabanchel prison; the Barcelona 92 Olympics) a series of sensational images are shown that highlight the need for spectacularity in the lives of ordinary people.

This trend continues in *Ferpect Crime* (2004), in which marriages are the televised reality. Rafael (Willy Toledo) reflects on the situation to his future in-laws:

- Poor man.
- Poor man, why?
- I don't know, arriving like this, with the cameras...
- My daughter loves this program. And so do I.
- Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm sure it's very good. But getting married like that, suddenly, without time to think things through.

Rafael himself will be a victim of the marriage program at the end of the film. The presenter is explicit about his intentions: "Rafael, take your time; but not too much, six million people are watching us right now and we don't want them to change channels." All of this is emphasized by a suffocating mise-en-scène, in which dozens of monitors follow Rafa's actions and the image, distorted by lenses that deform the faces of his fiancée and the presenter, seem to subsume Rafael in an existential chaos.

Likewise, another of the most relevant aspects of the movie is the signalling of the media as creators of stereotypes, whose spectacularity and beauty mark the future of less attractive people. Thus, Rafa will argue to his future wife that hating her is inevitable because of the consumer society: "It's this world we're stuck in that makes me hate you: people, magazines, television [...] we're brought up this way, whether we like it or not".

Image 4. Stills from *Ferpect Crime*



Source: created by the author

However, if there is one film which marks a before and after in terms of sensationalism, it is *As Luck Would Have It* (2011). Roberto (José Mota), an unemployed publicist, falls into a ditch where an iron bar goes through his head. The pro-filmic in this film is the most explicit of all, showing the loneliness of a man moored to life by an iron bar through his head, while everyone watches him fading away. Surprisingly, the victim strives to make a profit from his slow agony: "Look at the attention I'm getting, we can turn this accident into the deal of our lives." His desire to make money is such that he even hires an agent

(Fernando Tejero) to manage his media appearances: “This is a golden opportunity,” he tells his wife Luisa (Salma Hayek), to which she responds: “You can’t turn this into a circus.” When the doctor treating Roberto indicates that he could pass away in seconds, his agent asks: “Right, but... It wouldn’t hurt to do a tv interview, would it?” Despite everything, Roberto does not flinch, on the contrary, he is grateful for the fame, encouraging a security guard to move a screen so that the press can see him better. “I’m going to be a tv star,” he tells him, to which the guard adds: “I tell you something, my friend, you’ve chosen a hard way to make a living.”

Perhaps the phrase that best summarises the sensationalism which society seems destined for is: “You’re hooked on TV, and you can’t turn it off. Why? Because there’s a guy dying live, and you want to see it. Because you’re morbid.” This idea is reinforced by another security guard, who offers a television cameraman another video in the hope of becoming famous: “If you’re interested, I also have a recording on my mobile of a poor guy getting a kicking.” Finally, Álvaro Aguirre (Juanjo Puigcorbé), director of the Antena 5 TV channel, which leads the ratings with their programme ‘Rumore, rumore’, is able to offer two million euros to the victim’s agent if he can guarantee the live broadcast of his death. The TV executive even exhorts Luisa: “I understand your pain; but you have to understand that your husband’s misfortune has transcended the strictly family sphere. And our moral obligation, yours and mine, is to give the people what they want.” Only one journalist, Pilar Álvarez (Carolina Bang), is able to offer respect instead of sensationalism by helping the family when others only want to profit from the tragic event.

Finally, in *Four’s a Crowd* (2022) significant technological progress is once again observed regarding the media. The Internet acts as the omnipotent axis of live news, the film accepts the social networks have assumed the function that other media previously fulfilled in the films (television and press). Thus, when the protagonist (Alberto Sanjuán) suffers an altercation, an exaggerated and grotesque scuffle at a petrol station, the culprit of the event (Ernesto Alterio) uploads the video to his Instagram stories, getting countless views in a matter of minutes:

- It’s amazing how much people get off on seeing this kind of stuff. It’s got three thousand views in just five minutes.
- Have you uploaded it to the Internet?
- Nope... It’s on stories. But people share.
- But with what right?
- It was me that recorded it.
- But it’s me who’s getting hit!

A twist to media sensationalism transferred to the new social networks.

5.3. *Information about crimes and suicides*

Media praxis implies social responsibility (Hutchins, 1947), which suggests a quest for the common good without harming or being detrimental to society, by internalising “community values to turn them into practical criteria in their professional conduct, as if they were working as guardians of morality” (Suárez Villegas, 2013: 311). Such pulchritude implies respect and diligence when informing the public, especially in highly sensitive cases, such as news about deaths, crimes, or suicides. In the

case of Álex de la Iglesia, coverage of this type of events is a constant. In fact, excepting *Four's a Crowd* (2022), all of his films feature the death of one or more characters, including the leading roles, which paves the way for a media response to any event. His first film, *Acción Mutante* (1993), begins with the program 'Sucesos' on the JQK Television channel, as a true declaration of intentions. In it, the bizarre presenter (Jaime Blanch) is reporting on the violent death of a man, while pointing out that it may be due to the terrorist gang "Mutant Action", whose members he describes as "a gang of disabled people with the lowest coefficient in the entire world". They also share images of a shooting involving the terrorists on the programme "Fitness with Susana", where the set is grotesque, full of beaten bodies and blood-smeared walls. Behind him, in a cacophonous mix of news, the presenter of 'Social Echoes' reports on the imminent wedding of the heiress of a well-known tycoon. The media is involved in almost all of *Acción Mutante*, while reporting on the terrorists' crimes, especially concerning the young heiress they kidnap.

Image 5. Stills from *Acción Mutante*



Source: created by the author

The presence of the media is imperturbable in *Perdita Durango* (1997). When the death of the protagonist (Javier Bardem) occurs, there are numerous cameramen, photographers and reporters who mix with the police to bear witness to what happened. Even the kidnapped young woman's father watches *The Girl on TV* while exercising his muscles with his Ab Shaper (a teleshopping product). Finally, Perdita's (Rosie Pérez) expression when faced with the tragedy contrasts with the alienated image of hundreds of attendees at a venue in Las Vegas, who watch the winner of the casino's grand prize on the screens.

In *Common Wealth* (2000), the intertwining of the media and death is evident. A man dies while watching television, an eloquent script choice in itself. When the police enter the house, with rubbish everywhere (again, an intervention in the pro-filmic to repeat the concept of 'trash television') they find his body in front of the television: "here's our pal, watching television." This is underlined by an edition of the newspaper *EL PAÍS*, which includes the headline: "An elderly man dies while watching television," while noting that the device "was on" when the police found his body. De la Iglesia here again highlights an insalubrious atmosphere, with a corpse in front of a turned-on television, all surrounded by filth and stench.

Next, a newspaper reports the macabre struggle between neighbours to get the loot: “A group of neighbours kill each other for money that does not exist.” This use of the press and television “provides the viewer with narrative clues that allow him to anticipate the action to come and makes the true nature of the individuals clear” (Bracco, 2012: 407-408).

This happens in another climactic moment, when the protagonist (Carmen Maura) speaks to her husband of a ‘stroke of luck’, while an advertisement is broadcast on television: “The strongest drug isn’t speed, it’s money”, a narrative-visual device intended to anticipate events and define what drives the character.

Image 6. Stills from *Common Wealth*



Source: created by the author

The fact that Carmen Maura touches the television screen has similarities with *Eight Hundred Bullets* (2002), in which Terele Pávez cleans hers. The self-absorption reflected on her face as she sees the succession of images offered by the media appears undeniable. In addition to following in great detail the uprising of the actors in Tabernas, with all the persecution, destruction and hyperbolic death that this entails, emphasis is placed on the programming itself, by constantly showing what the tv is offering.

Image 7. Stills from *Eight Hundred Bullets*

Source: created by the author

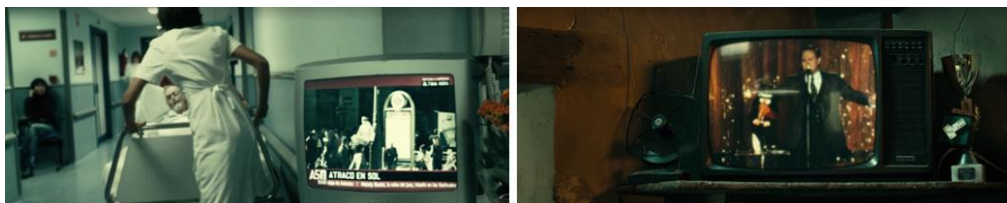
This resource is turned to again in *The Last Circus* (2010). Here one sees several headlines from newspapers such as *Diario de Burgos* ("The war is over!"), and from the international press: "Berlin et Rome poussent France a entrer dans Madrid¹." "À la frontière des Pyrénées L'Armee Catalane et cependant le flot des réfugiés diminue. Les combats continuent devant Figueras qu'écrase le bombardement"². Moreover, the Basque director includes fragments of NODO news reels as visual testimony of the end of the civil war and the new state of things.

This resource evolves towards television images, adapting the news universe to the audiovisual progress of the time. In a hospital corridor (a pro-filmic space that he already used in *The Oxford Murders* and will turn to again in *Witching and Bitching*), a television set reports on the beginning of the trial of a criminal, while some dialogues relate the crimes of society: "As if we didn't have enough with El Lute, now a loony dressed as a clown has the entire country in check. Javier Granados, baptized by the press as the 'Sad Clown', managed to escape from the police with the help of circus workers. He is accused of at least three murders." The death of Carrero Blanco is another of the events that the film points to through the broadcast of a fragment of NODO, which illustrates the director's inclination to portray death through the media.

1 "Berlin and Rome push France to enter Madrid."

2 "The Catalan Army on the Pyrenees border, and yet, the flow of refugees is decreasing. Fighting goes on near Figueres, which is being levelled by the bombing."

Image 8. Stills from *Witching and Bitching*



Source: created by the author

Finally, in *Veneciafrenia* (2021) the mediation of television is again observed to move the plot forward. Turned into a true vanguard for reality, the media and their reporters appear periodically to show the actions of the “Fuori” group of Venetians who act in the same way that “Mutant Action” had done two decades before. Although the mass media is utilised as a news source, in this case emphasis is placed on the Internet as a means of disseminating terrorism and violent content. Furthermore, the TV channels are not watched on a television set, but rather using laptops, mobile phones and tablets. It is interesting, finally, that in *Veneciafrenia* the idea of mixing fiction and reality in the face of death is reiterated. As happened in *Dying of Laughter* and *Eight Hundred Bullets*, what is real is also attributed to fiction: “The world of cinema is frightening, it seems so real.” This phrase, uttered by tourists, shows the murders taken as part of a show, with one of the most hyperbolic mise-en-scène of his entire filmography. The cartoonish laughter, the overacting and the carnivalesque scenery tend towards the grotesque.

5.4. Information manipulation

The term “post-truth” has emerged to define a reality consisting of perverting the concept of truth and setting it in a framework of misinformation and uncertainty (Mayoral, Parratt & Morata, 2019: 396). One of the defining features of post-truth is something as familiar as news manipulation, understood as a communicative, multimodal, and interactional practice that dominates in an abusive and illegitimate manner through the use of discourse (Van Dijk, 2006: 51). It is, therefore, an intentional practice aimed at achieving some advantage or benefit by manipulating the audience. One of the clearest examples of criticism of this type of media abuse is to be found in *The Bar* (2017). The customers of a tavern are locked up for having been in contact with a soldier affected by a contagious and lethal disease. When, to prevent the spread of the virus, the state security forces try to execute them, the media spread news of a fire, distracting attention from the real event:

- There’s no fire, that’s a fucking lie!
- That’s what the tyres are for, so the TV can tape it from the helicopter.
- They’re just brazenly making up a fire.
- It’s a cover up, they’re covering up the murders.
- But why? What don’t they want people to know? [...]

- Because it's the kind of publicity no one is interested in.
- That's why they thought up the fire!

It is also no coincidence that, while the bar users' lives are in danger, they are watching an Extreme Makeover program on television with an expression of total lethargy. The scriptwriters once again introduce an element of reality as an anticipatory element. As someone says in the program: "I'm afraid, nothing is safe in this house. Everything seems normal and, in a second, we could all die." "They fooled us, I don't trust anyone anymore." "Everything is one big lie." This idea of a lie is reinforced with the following televised information, in which the presenter falsifies the data regarding the news: "The causes of the fire that has been raging in downtown Madrid for the last few hours are unknown at the moment."

Despite everything the bar's clientele insist that the media must find out and make public the truth behind the news: "We have to call a radio station, a newspaper, to let people know about this." Despite the importance of the events, the media keep the fact quiet:

- Two people have just been killed in the centre of Madrid, and no one says anything!?
- Maybe we have to wait for the evening news.
- What do you expect them to say, don't you see that they haven't caught it yet?
- They can't say anything.
- If they say that there's a terrorist shooting in the centre of Madrid, instead of leaving, people're so dumb that they'd come to watch, as if this were engineering work on the metro.

Once again, one finds the element of sensationalism embedded in manipulation and post-truth, and reinforced with a mise-en-scène that distorts any naturality, by emphasizing the morbidity aroused by seeing a terrorist or a robbery live.

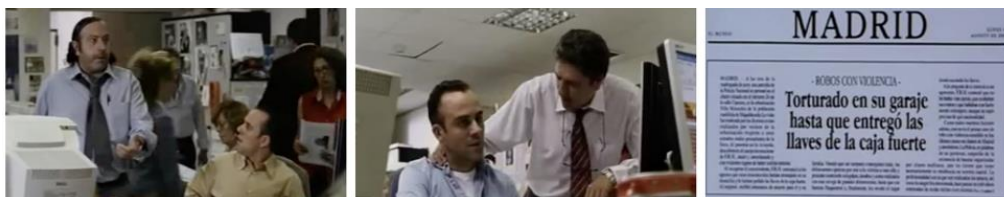
5.5. Separation of professional and personal life

The last ethical principle that frequently appears in the proposed filmography is not related to any communication practice, but to the relationship that the journalist establishes between the private and public spheres. Films such as *My Big Night*, *The Baby's Room* or *Dying of Laughter* emphasise the need to avoid reporters' being subject to conflicts of interest, to separate one's professional life from private life. The journalists portrayed by De la Iglesia are not those whose "work is a form of social commitment that must face numerous threats, sometimes from the very newspaper they work for, others –the majority– coming from a callous and corrupt political and/or judicial background" (Pastor, 2010:193), for they ignore their obligations, choosing instead to settle personal accounts.

That is what happens in one of his least well-known films, the made-for-tv movie *The Baby's Room* (2006), part of the 'Films to keep you awake' series. The protagonist Juan (Javier Gutiérrez) is a journalist whose wife, Sonia (Leonor Watling), and their newborn baby move to a large house which needs doing up. The problem arises when the baby's camera-monitor begins to show images of spirits watching the child sleep, to the despair and terror of his parents. Juan tries to find an explanation for what, at first, he considers mere folly. When he tells Fernández (Antonio Dechent), his editor-in-chief, the editor's reaction means it reaches the ears of Domingo (Sancho Gracia), a reporter of paranormal events:

- I'm going to publish it, it's great fun.
- Not Domingo, you can't.
- But he's the best. Domingo is the one who knows the most about this nonsense.
- So that I can be on the front page with the Loch Ness Monster, or the lady raped by aliens? No, look, no way. If I'd known, I wouldn't have told you.

Image 9. Frames from *The Baby's Room*



Source: created by the author

Despite the situation they find themselves in, at one point they even say: “Imagine having to watch one of those programs with everyone screaming. Whereas us... there you go, a movie with our son in the lead role.” When he loses his job and his reason due to the paranormal events, he is left with no choice but to talk to Domingo, a journalist he had avoided at all costs (and whose discourse is highly reminiscent of that in *The Day of the Beast*):

- How can a camera record images the naked eye can't see?
- What images?
- People, things...
- Psycho-images?
- Is that the name?
- It was in the sixties, but they were all false. Camera tricks. Magazines love them. If you have some of that, we can make good use of it. I know who to sell them to, what are they, ghosts?... Do they cry, moan, crawl?
- It's a murder. A man kills his wife and child in the crib.
- [...] That's called immanence.

The action in *My Big Night* (2015) takes place in a television studio where a New Year's Eve special program is being recorded (again, as in *Dying of Laughter* and *The Day of the Beast*, Christmastime as precipitator of conflict). Here again the falsehood that surrounds television is made patent, using hyperbolic acting and laughter as essential elements of the farce that is the media. When an actor arrives to act as an extra, the floor manager (Luis Callejo) tells him: “Don't look at the camera, don't talk to anyone, don't drink what's in the glasses, the food is fake [...] and smile, keep smiling all the time, this is supposed to be a party.”

Image 10. Frames from *My Big Night*

Source: created by the author

When a workers' strike (grotesque and disproportionate to the point of becoming an armed conflict) threatens to break out, the television professionals do not hesitate to try to stop the recording, against the opposition of the network:

- What's that, a movie?
- No, Benítez, that's happening out there now. You have to stop filming.
- Come on, no way, I'd slash my wrists first.
- Do you realize what could happen if those people come on set?
- That's what the police are for, right?

In *My Big Night*, De la Iglesia not only shows us the conflict between two divorced, unscrupulous television presenters (Carolina Bang and Hugo Silva respectively), but also the violence arising from the failure of personal relationships in journalistic spheres. Their dialogues are incessantly aggressive, and shine a light on inequality in careers in television:

- Do I have to look gormless all the time? [...] Damn it, I don't know. He has to explain everything to me and, on top of that, he gets all the punchlines [...] yeah, right! You say it all, no problem. You're the cool guy, the funny one, and I'm the asshole who flashes her tits.

Her anger grows to the point of paroxysm:

- Do you think I'm an idiot, that I don't know what you're doing? [...] You want to present *Supervivientes*. That's what's happening here. I know your agent has spoken to the network, that you're slagging me off behind my back. You've been sending videos of my cock-ups upstairs for the last three days.
- That's not true.
- They've forwarded them to me!
- The two journalists end up trying to murder each other on stage, as happened in *Dying of Laughter*, while the audience laughs at a show that they take as fiction, though it is pathetically real.

6. Conclusions

After exhaustive review of Álex de la Iglesia's filmography, it is evident that journalists' labours, and particularly their social effects, are of great concern to the director. Not for nothing is he the screenwriter of all his films, together with Jorge Guerricaechevarría, which suggests that the topics he deals with in his films are intimately related to his personal interests.

Despite this, Álex de la Iglesia's filmography is not focused on journalistic praxis *per se*, since it is not interested in analysing specific aspects of the profession such as professional secrecy, freedom of the press, journalistic integrity, defamation, libel, or plagiarism, nor yet freedom of speech, as can be seen from the analysis of the ethical principles that he chooses not to address in his films. However, his plots do highlight those elements that determine the ethics of the means utilised (manipulation, respect for privacy) or the result obtained (sensationalism, morbid fascination, falsehood). It has also become clear that he is concerned about the harmful effect that media practices, especially those of television, can have on making the audience lethargic. Frequent scenes of massacres being ignored by citizens while watching television, make manifest, grotesquely and hyperbolically, De la Iglesia's fear of the analgesic effect of media entertainment on public morality.

In this sense, it can be said that ethical issues do not matter to him in themselves, but in their social dimension, in the influence they have; hence the importance given to staging, performances and atmosphere, by underlining the grotesqueness of the population. The configuration of dialogues is also key here, constantly full of coarse and foul-sounding expressions, with insults and outbursts that further accentuate the sensation of violence and grotesqueness. Foul language is employed as a deforming, grotesque, and subversive element. It can be said that Álex de la Iglesia is not interested in journalism in itself, but rather in its antithetical portrayal, represented by the vices and perversions of journalists. In this sense, De la Iglesia shows a total subversion of journalistic ethics through sensationalism and constant criticism of trash television.

A clear development of the means used can be perceived, reflecting how technology has advanced, not so much because of any notion of societal change, but rather because of changes to the technological paradigm itself, especially considering the period analysed (1993-2022).

Regarding themes, although there have been significant changes since the early days of his career, it remains apparent that there is a persistent chronicle of crimes and the sordidness of society, although some constant tropes have been maintained such as television programmes, live depiction of death, news coverage, Christmas programming (both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve) and the presence of television sets in hospital waiting rooms, packed with images of crime, the epitome of sensationalism's absurdity.

Finally, it should be said that, despite the clear deformation his characters are subjected to, the *mise-en-scène* and the situations, Álex de la Iglesia's portrait of the media universe is completely necessary, since it makes the media accountable for their social function and fosters attractive and undeniably democratic public debate.

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8. Conflict of interest

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