

# Catastrophe imaginary under the yoke of television discourse in *REC*

## *Imaginario catastrofista en REC bajo el yugo del discurso televisivo*

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### **Abstract**

The present article focuses on the analysis of the first part in the *REC* saga, one of the most important fantasy-horror film franchises in Spanish cinema. We believe that *REC* is paradigmatic for the manner in which it links the catastrophe imaginary with media discourse, and thusly, we opted to analyze this emblematic movie by examining its discourse structures and intertextuality, allowing us to underpin a close interrelation between cinema and television. The investigation concludes that *REC*, in effect, is indebted not only to traditional film narrative structures, but that it also draws on the conventions of contemporary TV reporting in its dealing with a fictional news report.

### **Keywords**

REC; fantastic film; imaginary; TV report; rheme.

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo se centra en el análisis de la primera entrega de la saga de cine fantástico y de terror más importante del cine español. Creemos que *REC* es un ejemplo paradigmático que entronca tanto con el imaginario catastrofista como con el discurso mediático, por lo que se opta por la vía de la intertextualidad y el análisis del discurso para analizar dicha película emblemática: estructuras de discurso que nos permiten apuntalar hacia una estrecha interrelación entre el cine y la televisión en el audiovisual contemporáneo. La investigación concluye que, efectivamente, *REC* no es deudora solo de la narrativa fílmica sino de los resortes del reportaje contemporáneo al tratarse de un reportaje-ficción.

### **Palabras clave**

REC; cine fantástico; imaginario; reportaje; rema.

## 1. Introduction

The first part of the REC (2007) horror saga was a big cinematographic hit in Spain and countries less interested in the habitual consumption of Spanish productions. The franchise's first production sold over 1,428,926 tickets in Spain alone and brought in 8,196,213.75 euros at the box office. In France, it sold over 500,000 tickets and had good results in Mexico and Hong Kong (Tato, 2014:122). Proof of its international success came in the form of a Hollywood remake, *Quarantine*, premiered in 2008.

In the official book on the saga, Guillermo Tato (2014) emphasizes that the production company Filmax went with less expensive production options given the movie industry market at that time that started to feel the consequences of pirating and the beginning of a widespread economic crisis. Finally, the budget of the saga's first movie was 1.2 million euros, financed by the Instituto de Crédito Oficial, la Generalitat de Cataluña, el Instituto Catalán de Finanzas, el Ministerio español de Cultura, Castelao Producciones and Filmax Entertainment, one of the most consolidated Spanish film production companies. The agreement between TVE and Canal Plus was signed just a few days before the premiere, having seen the film.

Fernandez (2014:275), having worked at Filmax and cited by Guillermo Tato, stood for the term "concept products" as part of the production policy, in other words, projects that had a place in the international market and guarantee a recognizable quality standard without having to depend on the interests of a TV channel. Projects, definitely, with mid-level budgets that would escape the interests of a multinational company. Horror movies became an indispensable part of the "Filmax concept"<sup>1</sup> thanks to the success of *The Machinist* (2004), *The Nameless* (1999) and *Darkness* (2002).

REC came from an almost unbelievable communication containment strategy including with the production company, that at one time had two

different names to confuse staff and the press (*Bombers* and *Rabia 6* were the original titles to create the confusion): "This attempt to play hide-and-seek was strengthened by the speed at which everything was done" (Tato, 2014:45). The mystery around the product continues including with the script, which is not available in the legal repository of the Spanish National Library of Spain in Madrid or the Spanish Film Library, or in any other format found by the author of this article.

Tato (2014:46) says that the teaser was created for the first pre-sales in the American film market. It was filmed October 19, 2006 in the same building in which the movie was going to be filmed: "The teaser summarizes to a certain degree the essence of REC: the sequence shot, the sense of claustrophobia and, above all, the descent into hell where both the characters as well as the audience will be confronted with maximum horror".

The TV ad went viral. In it you can see the audience immersed in the movie in a theater thanks to the collaboration of the Sitges International Film Festival (Spain), that gave permission for the mounting of the cameras. The theater at the Sitges International Festival of Fantasy and Horror Films was witness to the (real) reactions of the audience, that released their image rights to Filmax. As mentioned in the official REC book, the person responsible for film communication managed that some news stations, in prime time, show the TV ad as part of the information material. In the second frame, an audience member closes his eyes affected by the fear that the film causes, and in the third frame we see the same reaction under the line "over 1,200,000 tickets sold".

According to the directors notes included in the press kit, they decided to tell this story like a TV news report, "like a recording". REC, therefore, appeals directly to the relationships between cinema and TV and on the use of the digital camera digital to conclude this "effect of the real". The press kit

also says that it tried to avoid mechanisms of suspense and cinematographic narration and let the action take place before our eyes as if it were real, unstoppable. As if it were alive. Like everything was really happening" (...) We artificially created an extreme horror situation and we let it develop itself. Grow.

Use of the digital camera has been a natural progression of horror movies in which *REC* could be classified. The change to digital served to increase the appearance of formal carelessness and of verisimilitude despite the difference digital filming caused even in 2006. Finally, they worked in progressive frames to create a greater TV texture. Thus, *REC* adopted its own style so that the audience –largely Spanish–, accustomed to the mechanics of the TV news reports, is immersed and familiar with this type of story.

Spanish critics (2007) –we will focus on Cahiers du Cinema España– called the film “a species of horror parody of *Aquí no hay quien viva*” or in the subjugation of “a vulgar made-for-TV documentary –“España directo” or “Espejo Público”– in a year in which from the same pages tended to emphasize the idea of TV customs of other numerous films like *Siete mesas de billar francés*, by Gracia Querejeta and *Mataharis*, by Iciar Bollain.

## 2. Theoretic framework

We believe similar to Pedraza (2008) that the issues relative to the imaginary need a constant attention and updating given that it is a constantly evolving universe, especially due to the relationships between the cultural imaginary and the imaged and imaginary creations of the contemporary communication media. Therefore, we consider the study of the imaginary relevant from different various angles: on one hand there is the textualization of the report understood as a happening (Luhman, 2000) and from the cultural and discursive standpoint<sup>3</sup> in which the movie is produced.

Luhman (2000) differentiates between different events in relation to the news and the report (events-explosion; events-appearance and events-results). The explosion events would be singular happenings that are unpredictable and natural (attacks, catastrophes, natural phenomena). It would be original journalistic happenings (accidental events and discoveries). Its degree of exceptionality and its non-media immanence cause the events to override their interpretations. As Langer (2000) says, this news continues to have an amazing similarity with the mythology of the elements of the cosmos: earth, air, fire and water.

Once again we cite the sentence of Balaguero and Plaza in the press kit (2007):

tried to avoid mechanisms of suspense and cinematographic narration and let the action take place before our eyes as if it were real, unstoppable. As if it were alive. Like everything was really happening (...) So we decided to put all the horror pieces together in one scenario and give them life. To let them act for themselves, without anyone changing what was going to happen. We artificially created an extreme horror situation and we let it develop itself. Grow. Then it was only a question of filming it. To record it. As if we were also part of the horror that we had created.

This research falls into the framework of the relationship between cinema and TV in Spanish film work (Iturbe, 2016). *REC* cannot be understood solely from its filmic studies but rather is a result of the intertextuality and the intermediality<sup>4</sup> with the TV world –specifically with the TV news report and with the ecosystem of mass culture<sup>5</sup>.

The film studies tend to use the *Deleuze* rhizome to analyze the writing process of various filmic works. The study of rhizome made it possible, to name a famous case, to itemize the work of Pedro Almodovar (Seguin<sup>6</sup>, 2009). The essay on the body of the Almodovar films concluded that the rhizomes multiply their nuclei until the point they dissolve their centrality. Almodovar,

just as he has been studied by researchers like Smith<sup>7</sup> (2006), Iturbe (2016), Gomez (2014), is one of the Spanish filmmakers that has more profusely adopted and constructed the TV universe in his movies. Smith, for example, goes one step further suggesting that films like *Kika* (1993) should be studied as if it were television.

**Table 1:** key factors of the narrative and informative discourse in *REC*

The informative order in the report versus the narrative order of cinema. The informative or macrostructural order of the formal informative discourse is a hierarchy based on the novelty of the information delivered (Luhman, 2000:45). *REC* alters that order: the end is more surprising. When you begin a report, just as J.M. Almagro (2013:30) says, normally it goes in descending order: the most surprising comes first, then that idea is developed and the least interesting part comes at the end, because supposedly by this point this spectator is already hooked. Yet in film, this order is changed.

Television narrative versus cinematographic narrative. The directors of the film wanted to avoid the cinematographic narration, and in this sense fulfill their television influence. "We started to think about the format of trash-TV, of the reality show (...) The idea of creating a fake report came to us in one of those brainstorming on style the directors do. (...) Like a conventional TV reality show that follows night-shift workers could become something terrifying" (Tato, 2014:32).

Events and happenings. The events, the actors, the weather and the place constitute the material of a tale (Bal, 1985). *REC* reformulates the concept of the report as *happening* (Luhman, 2008) and as the main event. "The idea of real time came to us. Making a horror film with subjective camera, but above all that it would be occurring in real time. That the audience should feel involved in it and could detach itself from it, because it was happening before its eyes, at the same time that he was watching it" (Tato, 2014:31).

Rheme and/or rhizome. Rema<sup>8</sup> is about a statement that contains new information por oposición to the topic. This is precisely what *REC* is: introduces a rheme, new information (the referential attic of the Medeiros girl). It is not about a point of inflexion according to the traditional canon of cinematographic narration but rather the apparition of a presence/new information that isn't closed/ clarified during the four films of the saga.

Source: Author.

We consider that the first part of the saga is mediatized under the yoke and the influence of TV that tends towards a catastrophe story that connects with the contemporary parameters of horror films and fantasy cinema. We also believe it is a key film for its contribution to the TV construction in the Spanish film universe. It is a case that goes beyond the metadiscourse of the fantasy genre (Rodriguez, 2011:150) and the construction of the technique of a false report (Gonzalez-Laiz, 2013:275).

We start with the foundation the filmic text (Zunzunegui, 1994) being

the meeting place of elements coming from very different conceptual universes (...) and that it can be precisely the mix that proposes the concrete textual body, the decisive element for the comprehension of the aesthetic proposal presented(40).

Until now, studies on *REC* had signaled its relation with the videogame world (Gonzalez, 2014). The Mexican researcher considers that there are important factors in sync between this type of narratives and the filmic text: nighttime environment, the auxiliary function of the secondary characters, creation of claustrophobic frames, vulnerability in the field of vision (behind); the threat imposed by the music; presence of the stairs or the activation of the rage on behalf of the camera that focuses on the creatures; religious and medical experimentation.

However, without omitting this influence, we consider *REC* to have other influences coming from the literary and cinematographic tradition, as we will see, and a determinant presence of the forms of discourse of the television report. Olivares (2011), in his book on Jaime Balaguero, co-scriptwriter and co-director of the film object of analysis, analyzes the presence of TV in his filmic texts. He considers them examples of “cathodic apocalypse” to the point of composing

the tragic verses, the horrid dance of masks, as well as the sinister and the ominous of a generation that in the middle of the night dreams of haunted houses and during the day lives out the horror of an existence shown on panoptic servile screens, the TVs of our homes aligned (100-101).

Jaime Balaguero is, together with Pedro Almodovar, the Spanish director that most uses the word “television” in his scripts (Iturbe, 2016): a contrasting and symbolic presence in the cinema of Paco Plaza and Jaime Balaguero. To give an example, in Jaime Balaguero’s debut film, *Los sin nombre* (1999), based on a novel by Ramsey Campbell, shows the significant presence of the TV apparatus. The movie script uses the word “television” 16 times, a presence that stresses the symbolic and physical imaginary within its diegetic universe.

### 3. Methodology

We will base our study on the analysis of the discourse that the formal microstructure (news-worthiness) and the formal macrostructure (the representation in news form) will consider and finally, the formal superstructure (ideology and the constructed imaginary). These will be the 3 basic structures (Manchon, 2014:18):

1. Formal microstructure: news-worthiness
2. Formal macrostructure (theme). The representation in news/report form.
3. Formal superstructure (ideology-imaginary).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Formal microstructure

The news-worthiness of the report of *REC* is not completely clear. The team has arrived at a fire station to film how the firefighters live and work. The news team is made up of a reporter and her camera that is doing the report on a fire station with the intention of portraying their profession, their lifestyle and risk situations. The report created in *REC* doesn’t have a clear objective: just observe, narrate and emphasize how firefighters live and work. Angela Vidal is the reporter of *Mientras Usted duerme*, a program that carries out nighttime reports.



**Photogram 1.** The reporter tries to do an entrance to coverage of a staff of firefighters that are waiting for their next fire. We even see the outtakes: the point of view is that of the TV camera called Paco with who interacts and prepares the report. This is inside the fire station and tells us that we will see “how they live, how they sleep, and how they eat”, entering into their private realm.

The first interviewee is Andreu, a real-life firefighter. Angela, a reporter dying to cover an intense event, doesn’t pay him much attention. She says to Paco, to the camera, that if Andreu is boring, there is no need to tape him, and thus they save film. The reporter tries on the helmet and says that she’s “going to be the hero”. She enters the cafeteria and introduces them to Manu and Alex, the only two actors that are undercover and have been living with their new teammates for 2 days. They test the microphones and ask Alex about his job: about routine operations, rescuing pets.



But the expectations of the journalist point towards more ambitious goals.

Just as they are shooting hoops and playing basketball, the expected siren goes off making everyone, firefighters and the news team, leave quickly. From the beginning, the camera is an uncomfortable companion in a relatively narrow hallway, where they enter packed in together tightly. "Put down the camera", says the youngest agent. Far off, we see an older woman standing with blood on her. They try to calm her but she can't speak. The light from the camera bothers the police and upsets the elderly woman even more, which we see in more detail.

Angela knows they must record no matter what, including the old woman's attack on the most veteran policeman. When they are separated, we see the gore of the attack thanks to the constant presence of the camera, the eye of the audience during the entire feature film.

Chaos takes over the scene, which requires an orchestrated choreography until one of the few cuts arrives. The firefighters take the policeman's body to the portal. Meanwhile, the reporter seems more preoccupied with the filming: "Get everything, goddamnit". They have to leave the blood-soaked body in the portal since they have the order not to go outside.

*REC* is comprised of three different spaces: the public work place (the fire station) and the residence building. From the beginning, we see the sliding of the informative towards the private (we see where the firefighters sleep and eat), as well as the group's cohabitating aspect, just as it happens in the landing of the building that slides towards the construction of the docudramatic. Therefore, the news-worthiness would be both the cohabitation as well as the management of a hypothetical crisis.



**Photogram 2.** Angela Vidal, more and more immersed in her role as reporter trapped together with other residents in the building. The entrance, the intervention of the journalist from the place of the events, says the following: "It's almost 2 a.m. and we are still trapped and without communication in this building which we ran into accompanied by the firefighters at the beginning of the night (...). The police won't let us out" (The extreme body language goes along with the moment in which the journalist takes the reins of the diegesis).

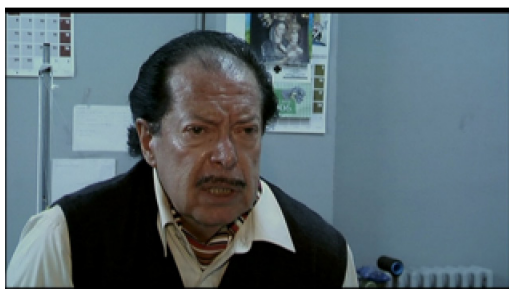
#### 4.2. Formal Macrostructure

The lobby of the house (infected) is the center of operations of the report construction. The lobby of the building closed off serves as a laboratory where you practice and examine the neighbors -contestants that are eliminated and mutually blame each other. The interviews of the reporter accentuate the doubts and mutual reproaches and show the need to confess before the camera. Lipovetsky (2009) understands that the TV reality games are based on the air of authenticity, privacy and live filming and not in the great spectacle nor in cinematographic fiction.

Although the report-fiction of *REC* could not be found in the contemporary Spanish TV listings, the new hypergenres have forged formats that have given priority to docudramatic trends in

Spain starting right from 2008, a year after the film premiere. *REC* could not be understood or contextualized without the dynamic of those success stories that have transformed the public's consumption habits. Therefore, the representation (formal macrostructure) tends towards the docudramatization.

In hyper television, according to Gordillo (2009), the mirror television transforms into run-of-the-mill television, "given that it is no longer the building of the daily but rather the ordinary". The environment that is present in the lobby, with the neighbors supplied with some type of stereotype or defined role, reflects the primitive character of the essence of that television format. The Chinese immigrant, that works incessantly in the textile factory and doesn't relate with others; the mother, out of touch with reality, that doesn't want to address her daughter's problems; the responsible and organized neighbor; the Latin American character, self-complacent and flirtatious who mistrusts immigrants...



**Photogram 3.** The vaudeville or comic sketch aspect which *REC* comes from the most productive roots of Spanish cinema. The directors also emphasize that they had certain reservations about so that said trend would not get out of control: "We didn't want to cross the vaudeville-comic sketch line, with the subplot of the barber with the camera" (audioguía of the making of taken from the dvd).

Rios Carratala (1997) concludes habitual localization of films with great comic sketch pre-

sence is precisely a building in a middle-class neighborhood where "certain characters live"(30). The film production adapted a part of the script to the real space that the team found, like the textile factory managed by Chinese citizens.

In addition, the neighbors, worried and upset by the presence of the TV crew, change or exaggerate their accounts depending on their interests. François Jost (1997) says that in TV reality shows, it would be more correct to use the expression "Role pretending TV". This term better describes the casting of the characters-neighbors that live together in a smaller and smaller space (from the building to the stairway; from the stairway to the lobby). The actors internalized the pretending of the roles characteristic of reality TV. Alberto Miralles (2000) says that cinema actors should avoid certain gestures like putting their hand on their chin to think or actions like biting their lip when considering things which are "unrealistic resources that show the limitations of actors"(188-189).



**Photogram 4.** The acting is inevitably contagious, made to be seen in the TV program *Mientras usted duerme*. Thus, this is how this intervention should be understood and analyzed, which is distanced from some canonic recommendations of cinematographic art<sup>9</sup>.

### 4.3 Formal Superstructure (imaginary)

The second part of the story would be that which makes reference to the Medeiros girl. The purpose of the rheme is to provide new information. In this sense, it plays a key role in this second story where the audience asks itself what is going on in the attic where the presence of the being/monster is observed. What are we seeing? And what has happened in this place full of objects, press references and religious presences? We go from a formal superstructure where there is a strong sense of a new imaginary of fantasy. The rheme provides new information about a new character: the Medeiros girl and brings more questions than answers.

We enter in the territory of the fantasy religious imaginary. Todorov (1975) performs a series of clarifications on fantasy cinema: strangeness, which seems to be supernatural and wonderful, that is governed by unknown laws. Todorov (1975) bases his description on the relationships that are produced in the heart of the text between the real and "other" world or the its appearance, according to the characters' or main character's point of view. The fantasy world is dual but in it, the real has more importance and value than the supernatural.

Cyrulnik (1999: 83), however, talks about the turning off of the "painfully imperfect", of the distressing future and of the irritating conditional. Everything here at the same time, the ease of one click, without having to wait or deal with doubt, "do it all now"; "have fun now"; "wanting is having", words of the order of the entertainment society, introduced by Charles Mellman (2003) when speaking of the mental economy of contemporaneity.

This vision is completed in *REC*: with the now famous "get it all". The statement "Pablo, get it all, goddamnit" of the film shows the obsessive message over the materiality of the filming and the presence/absence of the contemporary condition. Cyrulnik (1999) says that the strategies of semiotic creation generated by the man proceed from a formal transformation of primitive fear of the world perceived/lived in for the an-

guish of the world of the imperceptible, of the representative.

The doubts on the ontology and the interpretation of the images is another point that deserves to be analyzed. In *REC 2*, the first time the GEOX (Spanish Special Operations Group, in Spanish) enter the attic, they discover the iconographic program surrounding the possession of the Medeiros girl. One of the agents says: "They're just kids".

"No, no they're not", says the priest, dressed as a janitor. The image loses its referential part, and it is no longer possible to distinguish between organic body and subject. Starting here, the opacity of the image begins.



**Photogram 5.** It is significant that the face of the boy is erased by the passing of time and the religious image and hierarchy of the composition remind us of the Byzantine hierarchy perspective, where in first instance we see the boy and in the background we see the figure of Christ. Image from *REC-2*.

## 4. Conclusions

In cinema, as industry of the imaginary, shares the imaginary function with mass media (debtor of a mimetic function). On one hand, thanks to the newsworthiness of the microstructure, the audience becomes involved in the creation of the fiction report: an open, opaque report construction, that no one knows where it will go.



Via the formal macrostructure we are able to see a representation between different characters that co-exist in a landing and try to accuse each other: a representation of hints of comic sketch and a docudramatized construction. Then, the story advances thanks to the rheme and enters the territory of the supernatural religious imaginary.

The report is, without a doubt, a genre in constant renovation in both radio and television given that the new millennium has created new forms and structures: transformations in aesthetics, narratives in terms of staging and editing. *REC* is an example of such. A film that is created under TV forms and particularly under the report-fiction aesthetic and the yoke of TV discourse.

## Notes

1. Filmax, one of the production companies that has a TV division, is responsible for some of the biggest hits in Spanish cinema for premiering *Los abandonados* (2007), by Nacho Cerda in the USA before than Spain.
2. Successful fiction series broadcasted by Antena 3 (Spain). It managed to capture 40% of the TV audience.
3. Classic studies on the imaginary consider, among others, the following fundamental aspects: its mythological foundation, its cultural nuances, its showing of the arts (including intense studies on the iconic imaginary in the plastic arts and in the literary imaginary).
4. There are various approaches to the study of the intermediality: literary and narrative and intertextuality studies, among others.
5. The cinema of Almodovar is fed, among other factors, by the intertextuality coming from the mass culture ecosystem, resulting in a daring combination of genres. "Such varied media genre citations make an implicit commentary to the representational conventions of traditional television and cinema" (Gubern, 2005:51).
6. Jean Claude-Seguin (2009:113) suggests that films by Almodovar should be studied with original semiotic analysis including when they address fiction, independent nuclei, limited geography or autonomous territories and the presence of the catholic as "layer that is put over the plain, a division or perhaps a excrescence of the territory that goes crossing its borders" (2009:133).
7. From cultural studies, Paul Julian-Smith (2006:151) emphasizes the importance that the TV world acquires in Almodovar cinema to the point of concluding academic TV studies would not serve as a guide to understand and evaluate the impact and dialogue between both fields motivated by the regularity of its production; familiarity or recognition of his art and his connection with daily life, characteristics that would come from the catholic universe.
8. Within the framework of the theory of discourse, many authors (Prince, 1988; Valldubí & Vilkuña, 1998, van Donzel & Koopmans-van Beinum, 1998; Ostendorf & Bates, 2001; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) have spoken to us about the topic-comment dichotomy.
9. As Paco Plaza states, cited by Tato (2014:84), "we told the actors to never cut. If someone made a mistake, they should keep going. We told them they had to live it like a documentary".

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#### How to Cite:

Iturbe-Tolosa, A. (2017). Imaginario catastrofista en REC. Bajo el yugo del discurso televisivo Andoni. *Comunicación y Medios*, (36), 70-80.