

Journalists through the viewfinder of Billy Wilder



Translated by Basque Research.

Billy Wilder passed away on 27 March 2002, leaving a huge legacy of memorable films. But before becoming a famous Hollywood scriptwriter and filmmaker, he worked as a journalist in his native Austria and in Germany. **Simón Peña**, lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), has taken Wilder's own professional career and the image he gave to this job in his films together in order to conduct research on the profession, with special attention devoted to the 240 journalists who paraded through the 26 works that he was the scriptwriter and director of, and above all to *Ace in the Hole* and *The Front Page*, inspired by the profession. His thesis is entitled *Caballeros de la prensa. La imagen del periodismo en el cine de Billy Wilder* (*The Gentlemen of the Press. The image of journalism in the films of Billy Wilder*).

In actual fact, the expression *The Gentlemen of the press* appears in both these films. Peña chose it as the title of his thesis because it is a true reflection of the perspective Wilder provides on journalism: "One of the characters always says it to address reporters in a contemptuous, ironic and sarcastic way. In theory, gentlemen is a word that conjures up honour, as if they were talking with respect and out of admiration

for their work, but it is always used in the most negative sense." What is more, when using the word gentlemen, it is clear that the filmmaker is depicting a world of men, and using the word press, he is saying that the print media are involved. "The expression sums up the irony and sarcasm that Billy Wilder felt for the profession, to which has to be added the fact that they are men and that they work in the press," says the author of the thesis.

However, and despite the sarcasm, the opinion the filmmaker has about his former profession is not as low as it seems, according to the conclusion in this piece of research: "Above any ironic, remorseless and hurtful message, the image that remains of journalism is that it plays an important, indispensable role in society."

Based on his experience

Wilder worked as a journalist in the 1920s and mainly in the yellow press newspapers of Vienna and Berlin until forced to escape because he was Jewish when Nazism began to flourish. As regards the sources of information about that time, Peña studied the research carried out by the Viennese journalist Andreas Hutter and also read two anthologies of Wilder's journalistic texts. It can largely be deduced that the reporters in his films were created on the

basis of his working experience: “He had a very clear idea about the journalism being produced in the 1920s: it was learnt in the street, not at university; there was no presence of women; it called for devotion; and it was not a mere way of life. This is not autobiographical, but it was bound to have been close to him, and he used many features that were familiar to him in the characterisation of his figures.”

As proof of this, he depicted the profession with the romanticism that belonged to the time in which he lived, despite the fact that the films were shot considerably later. Furthermore, he always reflected yellow journalism, because that was what he had had experience of, as well as the shady links between the press and politics, which he had been a witness to. And it does not stop there, because many of the people who collaborated in his films were ex-journalists. In fact, like Wilder, the scriptwriters Walter Newman, Lesser Samuels (*Ace in the Hole*) and I. A. L. Diamond (*The Front Page*) knew the profession inside out.

Justifiable

So Wilder’s films are not pure journalistic fiction; what is reflected in them are not lies, but his own professional experience. What happens is that the negative stereotypes of the job are taken to an extreme. According to Peña’s analysis, in these films 90% of the journalists are male, they are absorbed by their work (54.2%), they betray their colleagues (37.5%), they are cynical (54.1%) they are manipulators (37.5%), and their behaviour is far from ethical (73.1%). But Wilder provided this distorted image of journalism on purpose, because it put the spotlight on yellow journalism; that was what he was keen to depict.

So, the negative stereotypes notwithstanding, journalists are not totally bad in Wilder’s viewfinder. “The portrait can be very cruel and remorseless, but at the end of the day his films justified the need for journalism. To uncover the corruption of political power, defend the innocent, report on the situation of those in a dire situation, etc. Somehow, this supreme mission justifies all the defects, vices and errors that journalists may have,” explains Peña. And precisely, when he speaks of denouncing political corruption, it can be deduced that this is the profession which was firmly in his head: “It is no coincidence that of all his films, it is the ones about journalists in which he pours forth his most acid criticism about the political class. The salvation of the reporters comes out of contrasting them with politicians. What this boils down to is that journalists commit many mistakes, but always fewer than those of the political power.”

About the author

Simón Peña-Fernández (Donostia-San Sebastián, Basque Country, 1974) is a Graduate in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication. He wrote up his thesis under the supervision of **María José Cantalapiedra-González**, tenured lecturer in the Department of Journalism II of the UPV/EHU’s Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication. Today, Peña is an associate lecturer in this department and deputy dean of Teaching Planning and Students of the UPV/EHU.