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Author(s)	Jonathan Holland
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AIRBAG

(SPANISH-GERMAN-PORTUGUESE)

A Cine Co/Hispano Foxfilm release (in Spain) of an Asegarce Zinema, Marea Films (Spain)/Road Movies Dritte Produktionen (Germany)/MGN Filmes (Portugal) production, in association with TVE, Canal Plus, ETB, Degeto Film and Virgin, with participation of Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen. (International sales: Road Movies, Berlin.) Executive producers, Adrian Lipp, Inaki Burutxaga. Co-producer, Ulrich Felsberg.

Directed by Juanma Bajo Ulloa. Screenplay, Karra Elejalde, Bajo Ulloa, Fernando Guillen-Cuervo, based on an original idea by Elejalde. Camera (color, widescreen), Gonzalo Berridi; editor, Pablo Blanco; music, Bingen Mendizabal; art direction, Satur Idarreta, Julio Torrecilla, Nuria Sanjuan; costume design, Bina Daigeler; sound (Dolby Digital), Juan Borell, Gilles Ortion, Miguel A. Polo; special effects, Molina Efectos. Reviewed at Acteon Theater, Madrid, July 16, 1997. Running time: 132 MIN.

Juantxo Karra Elejalde
Konradin Fernando Guillen-Cuervo
Paco Alberto San Juan
Fatima

do Espirito Santo Maria de Madeiros
Villambrosa Francisco Rabal
Pazos Manuel Manquina
Don Serafin Karlos Arguinano
Souza Luis Cuenca

Airbag" sets out to be frenzied, fun and daring, and mostly manages it. This third, long-awaited feature from 30-year-old helmer Juanma Bajo Ulloa is a \$6 million postmodern comedy-thriller that shows equal traces of John Woo and Quentin Tarantino, though vitally without neglecting the quirky kitsch of Almodovar. Only an overly complex plotline and a plethora of made-in-Spain references could prevent pic from becoming an offshore cult item at the least. Home B.O. has been excellent, with the help of massive marketing, and strong sales to major offshore territories seem as likely as for any Spanish pic of the past five years. Export version is likely to be about 10 minutes shorter.

With a speaking cast of more than 50, pic thinks big both visually and conceptually, with the same impressive technical virtuosity Bajo Ulloa showed in "Butterfly Wings" (1991) and "The Dead Mother" (1993), but this time on completely different material. Among recent Spanish pics, Alex de la Iglesia's "Day of the Beast" comes closest.

Pic's plot is labyrinthine, and almost cracks under the strain of the scripters' fevered imaginations. Nerdy mommy's boy Juantxo (Karra Elejalde), the kind of guy who falls in love with a hooker on his stag night, is engaged to be married. Dragged unwillingly along to a party by friends Konradin (Fernando Guillen-Cuervo) and Paco (Alberto San Juan), he loses the pricey wedding ring inside the body of a mulatto prostitute.

The ring is found by Villambrosa (well-worn vet Francisco Rabal, lending a touch of class), a Mafioso who owns the whorehouses along the north coast and runs drugs between Portugal and Spain. His rival Souza (Luis Cuenca), who lives in the back of a truck, instructs his sidekick, levitating femme fatale Fatima do Espirito Santo (Maria de Madeiros), to check things out.

Rest of pic charts the frenzied three-day attempt by Juantxo and his pals to recover the ring as they hurtle around northern Spain. Before long they're involved in gang warfare, as the chase takes them from whorehouse to whorehouse, ending up at a plush casino in Santander. Everyone wears black suits and shades, and everyone carries an Uzi.

The absurdities of the storyline

provide the means for some good-humored satire — of bourgeois values, of the Church, of gangster movies — a lot of good gags, a handful of memorable perfs and unfailingly daring lensing by Gonzalo Berridi. Bajo Ulloa has already demonstrated his ability to work a good surreal set piece, and pic is full of them — a meeting between the rival gangs in the center of a deserted football stadium and the showdown in the casino are particularly strong. The fact that they barely cohere, given the out-of-control plot, seems not to matter. This is a road movie, after all.

Part of the fun for Spanish auds is in the way Bajo Ulloa employs actors in unlikely roles. Javier Bardem puts in a brief on-TV cameo as a Venezuelan soap star, while Spain's funniest thesp, Santiago Segura, plays a corrupt politico. Real-life TV chef Karlos Arguinano, as Juantxo's father, Serafin, is delightfully insouciant, and the wittiest lines go to Manuel Manquina, as a Galician petty crook.

Pic is flawed both in its superficial approach to character, with everyone seemingly coming straight out of a comic book, and in its over-reliance on blazing machine guns and exploding cars. Bajo Ulloa seems hellbent on out-gunning his contemporaries in every conceivable way. The soundtrack is suitably noisy.

For a pic that prides itself on its knowingness — there are refs to film noir, "The Deer Hunter" and "Basic Instinct" — it includes some embarrassing moments, mostly involving the central trio, when the humor simply doesn't come off.

Still, for the most part pic successfully revels in its own indie-style cleverness and breathless sense of self-parody, with Bajo Ulloa reserving his best moments for telling details amongst the genre-mixing anarchy. "Airbag" confirms his status as one of the key Spanish helmers of the '90s.

—Jonathan Holland