

Juan Madrid and Imanol Uribe: *Días contados*, terrorism, novel and cinema

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Luis Veres Cortés

University of Valencia

luis.veres@uv.es

Abstract:

This article explores the film adaptation of Juan Madrid's novel *Días contados* (*Numbered Days*) by Basque filmmaker Imanol Uribe, within the broader cinematic representation of the Basque terrorist group ETA. While the novel captures the atmosphere of the "movida madrileña" through a crime narrative that intertwines political tensions with the drug culture of Madrid's Malasaña neighborhood, Uribe's adaptation recontextualizes part of the story within the framework of ETA's terrorist activities, specifically focusing on the planning of an attack on a police station in Madrid. The divergences between the two works are significant. This article explores the interdependencies and differences between the novel and its film adaptation, examining the transformations that occur in the transition from literature to cinema.

Resumen:

Este artículo trata de reflexionar sobre la adaptación al cine de la novela de Juan Madrid *Días contados* por parte del director vasco Imanol Uribe en el panorama del cine sobre el grupo terrorista ETA. La novela retrata los años de la movida madrileña mediante una trama policiaca en la que se ve integrado el mundo político y el mundo de la droga en el barrio de Malasaña. La trasposición al cine por parte de Uribe inserta una pequeña parte de esa trama en el mundo de ETA y la preparación de un atentado contra una comisaría en Madrid. Las diferencias son evidentes. El artículo trata de explicar las dependencias e independencias de las dos obras y los cambios en su paso de la literatura al cine.

Keywords: Imanol Uribe; novel; terrorism; adaptation; Juan Madrid.

Palabras clave: Imanol Uribe; novela; terrorismo; adaptación; Juan Madrid.

1-Introduction, Objectives and Methodology

The terrorist organization ETA has been a subject of interest in fiction cinema since 1977, only a few years after its inception in 1959. Basque director Imanol Uribe has engaged with this theme in several films, most notably in his adaptation of Juan Madrid's novel *Días contados* (Numbered Days). The novel unfolds as a detective story set during the years of the “movida madrileña”, capturing the atmosphere of major cultural celebrations and the pervasive drug culture in Madrid's Malasaña neighborhood. Uribe's adaptation introduces a significant narrative shift by incorporating a character who is a member of ETA and who is preparing an attack on a police station in Madrid. The differences between the two texts highlight the inherent challenges of representing terrorism in cinema. It is therefore crucial to examine the connections and divergences between the novel and the film, the changes introduced in the process of adaptation from literature to screen, and the complex issues involved in portraying political violence and terrorism—particularly in light of the evident cruelty and criminality reflected in the harm inflicted upon victims.

In this context, one particularly striking aspect of *Días contados* is that just a year after its publication, the story was rapidly adapted for the big screen by Imanol Uribe under the same title. His version—highly liberal in its approach—achieved notable critical and commercial success. Given the creative freedom inherent to cinematic adaptation and the transformations it necessarily entails (Seger, 2007, pp. 29ff; De Felipe & Gómez, 2008, pp. 17ff), it is especially noteworthy that, while the film centers its narrative on the planning of an ETA attack and the day-to-day life of a terrorist cell in Madrid's Malasaña neighborhood, the novel—as previously discussed—contains no trace whatsoever of this storyline. Indeed, such elements are entirely absent. As a result, we are presented with two fundamentally different narratives, despite the existence of compelling points of connection between them. Notably, the novel's sharp critique of the Spanish Transition—a central theme—is also missing from the film. As Seger notes, “the work of adapting a short novel requires more addition than subtraction” (2007, p. 31). It is

important to recognize that any adaptation necessarily involves modifications, whether minor or significant. As Aranzubía, Zumalde, and Zunzunegui point out, adaptation constitutes a semiotic “transmutation” that opens up various possibilities, yet remains bound by certain constraints:

what is adapted is not the literary text as such, but rather a narrative skeleton, a plotline; at times, a set of situations and characters; often both simultaneously, and in most cases, everything outside these core elements is omitted in the ‘adaptation (2010, p. 218).

Since the early days of film theory—from Eisenstein and Balázs to Bazin—adaptation has often been understood as a process grounded in the search for “expressive equivalents to the original literary text” (Garrido Hornos, 2008, p. 20). At the same time, adaptations have frequently been criticized for a certain degree of parasitism (Geduld, 1981; Gimferrer, 1985; Pérez Bowie, 2010; Frus & Williams, 2010), to the extent that “only in rare cases is a film considered to possess greater aesthetic value than the literary work on which it is based” (Sánchez Noriega, 2000, p. 67). This tension has led some scholars to speak of an “eternal rivalry” between literature and film (Vanoye, 1996, p. 126). Nonetheless, the fact that each medium addresses a different audience and operates within distinct frameworks inevitably shapes its content (Stam, 2004, p. 41), and gives rise to a process of transcodification (Lotman, 1988, p. 12).

This article is grounded in a bibliographic review of scholarly literature on both Juan Madrid and Imanol Uribe. As Cronin, Ryan and Coughlan (2008, p. 39) observe, heuristic analysis of data obtained through such a review enhances the precision of research questions and helps reduce potential researcher bias. Reviewing existing literature not only allows new research to build upon prior studies but also supports the development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 101). The inductive approach adopted here makes it possible to identify similarities and differences between the novel and the film, while also clarifying the motivations and contexts in which each work emerged.

2-The terrorism of ETA in cinema.

Terrorism has certainly been a recurring theme in cinema, though perhaps not in the way one might expect. Santiago de Pablo notes the existence of forty films dealing with the topic in Spanish cinema (De Pablo, 2017, p. 443). However, it is striking that, despite the profound social and political significance of terrorism in Spain over the past sixty years, its impact on fiction—both in literature and film—has been relatively limited. This is especially notable considering that during the 1980s and 1990s, terrorism was the foremost concern among Spaniards. The contrast becomes even starker when compared to Italian cinema, which engaged more critically with political violence and terrorism in the 1960s and 70s (Veres, 2018). Various studies have supported this observation. One study, commissioned by Juan José Rosón, the UCD Minister of the Interior, compared the media presence of ETA with that of the three main democratic parties: UCD (Union of the Democratic Centre), PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), and PCE (Communist Party of Spain). UCD occupied slightly more airtime than PSOE, and both had double the coverage of PCE. Yet ETA received more news coverage than PSOE and UCD combined. Furthermore, news related to these parties quickly faded, while ETA-related news stories generated four times more follow-ups. It was clear that ETA had won the media battle (Veres, 2017).

In 1988, the Vasco Press agency conducted a study on how the Basque Country was portrayed in Madrid's press, confirming the dominant media presence of terrorism. Of the national news articles about the Basque Country, 38.81% focused on violence, far surpassing coverage of politics (24.7%), the economy (16.02%), and especially culture (3.64%). The study concluded that one in three media messages about the Basque Country featured terrorism as the central theme. As Altares observed, Spain has "glossed over facts like ETA's terrorism, which have deeply marked the country" (Altares, 2000, p. 18). These particularities give the impression, as Marcos Ramos points out (2023, p. 35), that the subject was "uncomfortable, considered taboo, [due to] the challenges of representing on screen something that stirs deep political controversy and causes painful social fragmentation" (Redondo Neira, 2014,

p. 343). Nekane Parejo and Agustín Gómez have also discussed the controversy surrounding the portrayal of death and corpses on screen (2004, pp. 237–256). As a result, there was little interest in making serious films on the topic until well after the dictatorship had ended. Imanol Uribe's films represented a bold, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, attempt, given the social and political climate that favored silence and censorship. Fear also played a role.

As Michèle Lagny has noted, cinema is “a witness to the ways of thinking and feeling in a society... an agent of transformation, conveying (often stereotyped) representations and wielding ideological, even political influence” (1997, p. 188). It was not until well into the 1990s that Spanish cinema moved beyond decontextualized action with purely entertainment goals and began offering deeper reflections on the Basque reality (De Pablo, 1998, p. 178).

Adding to this is the inherent spectacle of terrorism, present since its inception but acquiring a particular resonance in Spain after the 1973 Carrero Blanco assassination in Madrid—a spectacle that extended through the 2004 Madrid train bombings. This sensationalism has made terrorism a constant fixture in the news. A kind of symbiosis developed between terrorism and the media: while the media offers spectacle and engages public curiosity, it also amplifies the propaganda impact the terrorists seek (Veres, 2017).

Fiction, however, has not kept pace with this media-driven interest or with public concerns. Spanish cinema has generally opted for a historically grounded, documentary-style approach: *Comando Txikia* (1977) by José Luis Madrid and *Operación Ogro* (1979) by Gillo Pontecorvo both deal with the Carrero Blanco assassination in 1973. Other films, such as *Camada negra* (Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, 1977), *La fuga de Segovia* (Imanol Uribe, 1981), *Yoyes* (Helena Taberna, 2000), and *Lobo* (Miguel Courtois, 2004), focus on specific periods of Basque terrorism.

Some works steer clear of overt political statements against terrorism, like *Ander y Yul* (Ana Díez, 1983), along with documentaries like *La resistencia vasca contra el franquismo* or *Ama Lur*, which tend to justify rather than

criticize ETA's violence and murders (Burguera, 2016, p. 25). Other films are set during the violent "years of lead", such as *La muerte de Mikel* (Imanol Uribe, 1983), *El pico* (Eloy de la Iglesia, 1983), *Días contados* (Imanol Uribe, 1994), or *No habrá paz para los malvados* (Enrique Urbizu, 2011), which addresses Islamist terrorism and the Atocha train station bombing.

Yoyes (Elena Taberna, 2000), in particular, stands out for its portrayal of a former ETA leader who abandons the armed struggle and is murdered by the very group she left. In *El viaje de Arián* (Eduard Bosch, 2001), a young woman joins the Jarrai youth movement and eventually becomes an ETA militant. *Felicidad perfecta* (Jabi Elortegui, 2009) explores the challenges of life in the Basque Country after becoming a victim of ETA and living with that stigma, while *El cazador de dragones* (Patxi Barco, 2012) tells the story of an ETA member who continues his militant career as a guerrilla fighter in Latin America, an ever-present influence in the organisation's origins.

In 2013, *Umezurtzak* (The Orphans, Ernesto del Río) aired on Basque television, revisiting a topic first explored in 1987's *El amor de ahora*, which depicted lovers involved in ETA trying to leave the armed struggle. *Umezurtzak* instead focused on ETA's victims. These films marked a clear shift: perpetrators were named, and victims acknowledged.

With ETA's disarmament, the public discourse relaxed, and the topic found its way into comedy. In *Negociador* (Borja Cobeaga, 2015) and *Fe de etarras* (Borja Cobeaga, 2017), a quirky ETA cell awaits action in a provincial during the South Africa World Cup, baffled as the Spanish team keeps winning. Critics praised the irreverent tone: "Rarely has ETA been so ridiculed on screen" (Rodríguez and Roldán, 2019, p. 58), despite initial controversy (Ormazabal, 2017; Muñoz, 2017).

Three more films followed in 2014: *Fuego* (Luis Marías), *Lasa y Zabala* (Pablo Malo), and the blockbuster *Ocho apellidos vascos* (Emilio Martínez-Lázaro), which indirectly referenced terrorism through its passionate abertzale protagonist. The subject appeared to wane in public interest. ETA's abandonment of violence and the return to normal life in the Basque Country

likely contributed to the shift toward comedy. So too did the topic's political exhaustion—especially due to its relentless exploitation by right-wing parties.

More recent films include *La noche en que una becaria encontró a Emiliano Revilla* (Luis María Ferrández, 2016) and *El hijo del acordeonista* (Fernando Bernués, 2019), adapted from Bernardo Atxaga's novel. The latter tells the story of a journey back to the Basque Country, from which the protagonist had to escape after being accused of betraying the organisation. Finally, *Ane* (David P. Sañudo, 2020), portrays a family shocked to learn their missing daughter belongs to ETA. A renewed interest in the subject appears to be emerging, especially after the critical and commercial success of *La infiltrada* (Arantxa Echevarría, 2024), which tells the real-life story of a female agent embedded in ETA for six years.

State terrorism and the GAL (Antiterrorist Liberation Groups) were depicted in *El caso Almería* (Pedro Costa, 1984), *GAL* (Miguel Courtois, 2003), and *Lobo* (Miguel Courtois, 2004). Spanish cinema has covered a broad spectrum—from eclecticism to outspoken criticism aligned with the victims' perspectives, reflecting the brutal evolution of Basque terrorism. Documentaries, too, have ranged from justifying to explicitly condemning, seeking to defend the victims and accuse their perpetrators: from *La pelota vasca, la piel contra la piedra* (Julio Medem, 2003) to Iñaki Arteta's *El infierno vasco* (2008).

Clearly, ETA offers fertile ground for fiction. Yet the subject has not been fully addressed in a way that does justice to the victims without causing offense, at least in terms of fair treatment of the victims (Mota, 2022, pp. 12–16). It is often said that “ETA is box office poison” (Rodríguez, 2002, p. 137). According to Marcos Ramos (2023, p. 35), most filmmakers who have tried to tackle the topic have faced production issues or even interference from the Ministry of the Interior. The emotional weight of the events and the intensity of the pain caused by the attacks—especially those of Atocha, which had greater impact than even the 2003 bombing of the Spanish Embassy in Rabat—has deterred many writers and filmmakers to delve into this issue.

As has been noted, the history of cinema and literature in relation to ETA is a "history of fear" (Veres, 2020). Filmmakers like Ernesto Tellería and Alejandro Amenábar declined to take on the subject, claiming they were "not ready" (Marcos Ramos, 2003, p. 35), while others, such as Montxo Armendáriz, described it as "a very complicated story" that had to be approached "with extreme caution" (De Pablo, 1998, p. 199).

In *Mundos en conflicto: Aproximaciones al cine vasco de los noventa*, Pilar Rodríguez (2002, p. 135) observes that Spanish cinema has tended to avoid these events for fear of offending—either due to the threat of violent reprisals or the expectation of poor commercial returns or low profitability.

Critics have not helped either:

Almost every film that has made ETA its subject—either directly or tangentially—has faced serious problems with the press (whether abertzale-leaning, pro-Spanish, or otherwise), with currents of Basque nationalism sympathetic to ETA, or with the Ministry of the Interior (Roldán, 2001, p. 186).

In conclusion, fiction has approached ETA more from political and nationalist perspectives than from artistic or aesthetic ones.

3. The absence of terrorism in the novels of Juan Madrid: The *Movida Madrileña* and social critique

When it comes to fiction about terrorism, literature initially followed a different path than cinema: during the 1980s, terrorism was largely absent from Spanish literature. Few authors—Raúl Guerra Garrido, Miguel Sánchez-Ostiz, and, from a less critical standpoint, Bernardo Atxaga with *Otros cielos*—dared to tackle the subject. It was not until the publication of *Patria* by Fernando Aramburu that the fear of addressing the reality of terrorism in the Basque Country was confronted head-on, and without fear of reprisal—something only possible after the terrorist group had laid down arms. Fear was a key factor. Writers like Guerra Garrido suffered attacks, a risk faced by

anyone who used their pen against ETA's interests—especially after the murder of journalist José María Portell, director of *Hoja del Lunes* in Bilbao. Guerra Garrido would return to the theme of terrorism in two more novels: *La carta* (1990) and *La soledad del ángel de la guarda* (2007).

Terrorism is notably absent in the work of Juan Madrid. Instead, his novels fall more clearly within the crime and noir genres. Madrid uses these genres to deliver a stark critique of life in Spain over the last thirty years, exposing the grittier sides of reality. His novels reveal the disparities between rich and poor, the degradation of human values, crime, the underworld, slums, drugs, prostitution, corruption, the goodness and wickedness of the working classes—all seen through the lens of political and moral violence and corruption. These elements give his work a distinctly political dimension that shapes the narrative at every turn.

Madrid brings this harsh reality into the realm of fiction through a lean, blunt style in which economy of expression and sharp observation dominate. His writing conveys a bleak, hopeless vision of human destiny—devoid of comfort or optimism. The narrative unfolds at a rapid pace, allowing no room for digressions or elaborate detail, yet making space for irony and *costumbrismo* (the portrayal of everyday customs) as tools for a scornful gaze at reality and its contradictions. This use of *costumbrismo* is grounded in a stripped-down realism, a kind of subjective neorealism aligned with the socially-conscious fiction of the 1970s, marked by a clear-eyed look at life's harshest truths.

Juan Madrid's major works—including *Un beso de amigo* (1980), *Las apariencias no engañan* (1982), *Nada que hacer* (1984), *Regalo de la casa* (1986), *Hotel Paraíso* (1987), and *Días contados* (1993), along with the scripts for the television series *Brigada Central*—offer a kind of chronicle of Spain's democratic Transition (Colmeiro, 1994, p. 247; Salgado, 2020, p. 6). His work rejects the grandiose epic narrative often promoted by official historiography. Political critique permeates every layer of his novels, continually challenging the social order and the lifestyle endorsed by official institutions.

4. *Días contados*, the novel

A prime example of Juan Madrid's revisionist view of Spain's democratic transition is his 1993 novel *Días contados*. Set in the Malasaña neighborhood—the backdrop for many of his earlier novels—the story unfolds during the early stages of the real estate speculation boom that has since defined many Spanish cities. It is a space that devours its own inhabitants (Leronés, 2019, p. 17). The novel is populated by bohemian characters eking out an existence in a world of drugs and prostitution, caught between police brutality and political corruption.

All of this supports the recurring themes of Madrid's fiction: the failings of a Spanish Transition now breathing its last, following the fading echoes of the *Movida Madrileña*—a supposed cultural and social high point that, in reality, was an illusion marketed by the state as proof of Spain's entry into modernity and freedom after the backward, dictatorial and anti-European Franco regime. The novel portrays the daily struggles of desperate, marginalized people living among drugs, prostitution, and survival hustles—outsiders with no place in the so-called golden age of Spanish history.

Enrique, one of these characters, is a photographer hired to produce a book on the *Movida Madrileña*, funded by the Community of Madrid. The American noir influences are clear: detectives straddle the line between the criminal underworld and law enforcement. Toni Romano, for example, is an ex-cop who has rejected his former profession due to police corruption—a common theme in noir fiction (Vázquez de Parga, 1981, p. 202)—and in this case, due to the police's involvement in Francoist repression. Characters in *Días contados* drift between the marginality of Malasaña and the glamour of the *Movida* figures, part of Madrid's image as a European cultural capital.

Romano, caught between these two worlds, moves between high-ranking officials and the underclass with relative ease. This duality allows the novel to revisit Spain's recent past—particularly the Transition—through Romano's disillusioned, skeptical eyes, revealing a world corroded by corruption and social deceit.

The impossibility of redemption, the realization—echoing Baudrillard (1987)—that “the future is already here,” and the pervasive distrust of any form of political messianism, wherever it comes from, lend the novel its bitter cynicism and profound disenchantment. Romano believes little has changed since the Transition. As José F. Colmeiro notes, Juan Madrid’s discourse often culminates in “a critique of society with a certain propagandistic bent that can, at times, become overly obvious” (1994, p. 250). The novel reflects a kind of moral relativism, where the poor behave badly because the rich do so with impunity. Both American noir and the Spanish picaresque tradition are present in this narrative, which takes aim at the deeply conservative ideological roots of state and power (Talens, 1974, p. 27).

Madrid’s critique is directed at characters who represent the antithesis of the working classes—those who swapped their Francoist loyalties for democratic ones, and who, in fiction, embody a shamelessness that society has come to tolerate. Madrid exposes the opportunists who took control of the country’s destiny through big business, corruption, fraud, nepotism, and political climbing.

The novel sticks closely to Madrid’s typical style. The protagonist, Antonio, is a photographer commissioned by the Community of Madrid to produce a good book on Malasaña. As soon as he begins dealing with politicians and council members, Madrid presents a series of conflicts in which official narratives clash with the desire to fabricate a polished image of the city. With Madrid set to be the European Capital of Culture, officials are keen to hide the gritty reality of a city far removed from its wealthier districts and sanitized public events. In this Madrid live prostitutes, a generation devastated by heroin, drug dealers, and those left behind by the so-called golden years. This is a Madrid of dark alleys, abandoned lots, and crumbling buildings—places the authorities prefer to keep out of sight:

Let me remind you this is for the Community. No grimy stuff, no crap. Next year, Madrid will be the European Capital of Culture and they want image. That’s why they’re funding us. (*Días contados*, 1993, p. 42)

The novel repeatedly returns to the theme of disappointment with Spain's democratic Transition, and this disillusionment extends to the *Movida Madrileña*, whose faded glamour is now exploited by local governments and cultural councils to project a modern image of the city:

It was an explosion of fun. The entire Spanish left decided it was time to enjoy life, to have a good time, damn it. Out with the corduroy jackets, heavy overcoats and posters of Che Guevara. Last one's a sissy.

—The boss lit another cigarette and balanced it between his fingers.

You young folks went all out. For us, it was the era of divorces and new partners. (*Días contados*, 1993, p. 70)

And against that brief explosion of freedom stands the present: a world ruled by authoritarian, ambitious councilors trying to win respect through restrictive measures—banning drugs and manufacturing a political contribution through a fake image of the city. But the real Madrid is found in the neighborhoods the media and culture sectors hide out of shame. What emerges is a bleak and sorrowful era: the crisis years of the 1990s, filled with rampant corruption and widespread social disillusionment. Antonio's character encapsulates this decline:

Sometimes I think I've wasted my life in the worst possible way. I was the only one who actually believed all that *Movida* crap in the '80s... I was so young... such an idiot... (*Días contados*, 1993, p. 171).

5. From Novel to Film: *Días contados* and Imanol Uribe

As we have seen, the recurrence of terrorism both in film and literature—stemming from its persistent presence in the everyday life of Spain during the 1980s and 1990s—led to the expectation that a seasoned filmmaker like Imanol Uribe would produce a film of greater social and political depth. However, such an endeavor was never easy—especially considering that Uribe is widely regarded as the central figure in Spanish cinema dealing with ETA (Marcos Ramos, 2023, p. 38), having directed a significant number of films on the subject: *El proceso de Burgos* (Imanol Uribe, 1979), *La fuga de Segovia*

(Imanol Uribe, 1981), *La muerte de Mikel* (Imanol Uribe, 1983), *Días contados* (Imanol Uribe, 1994), *Plenilunio* (Imanol Uribe, 2000), and *Lejos del mar* (Imanol Uribe, 2015). As Roldán observes, this group of films covers a wide range of perspectives that reflect the evolution of ETA: from early disillusionment to overt criticism as Spain's democracy matured and the terrorist group's trail of blood grew longer (2001, p. 182). Uribe himself has admitted to lacking ideological commitment since the time of *La fuga de Segovia*, which significantly influenced his detached approach to events (Marías, 1994, p. 36). In light of this, one can pose ethical questions about how terrorism is treated in *Días contados*, especially given how sensitive the subject is in Spain—where representing terrorism in film is not as straightforward as tackling any other theme. As Jean-Luc Nancy warns, representations have their limits (2006, p. 33), and those limits greatly complicate the cinematic portrayal of ETA and the everyday lives of its members.

In *Días contados*, the sense of social disillusionment that permeates Juan Madrid's novels becomes especially prominent and forms the film's structural backbone. However, in Uribe's adaptation, this disillusionment is merely a starting point. The film's ambiguity—between rich and poor, good and evil, right and wrong—extends to its depiction of ETA, resulting in a portrayal that feels morally blurred. This confusion stems from an attempt at impartiality, a kind of detachment that eventually leans toward a certain sympathy for Antonio, the protagonist turned ETA terrorist, and leads to a conspicuous lack of moral judgment regarding terrorism and its perpetrators.

Thus, the adaptation moves from a novel in which ETA is absent to a film where ETA dominates the narrative from beginning to end. This shift can partly be attributed to the inherent spectacle of terrorism, which can act as a box office draw. One might expect deeper political engagement to offset this spectacle, but that is not the case here. Films must appeal to broader audiences and justify large investments, and so “the material needs to be more accessible to a wider public” (Seeger, 1997, p. 34). Uribe himself explained more simply

how he became interested in the story, in which terrorism became a key element:

Chance played a role in the genesis of *Días contados*... I read it in one sitting, sweating, plagued by nightmares. The stories of the women fascinated me—Charo and Vanessa, the world of drugs and prostitution in that grim Malasaña neighborhood... But the rest of the book didn't interest me as much. Juan Madrid's protagonist didn't fit the story I was beginning to imagine. I had no idea who the new character would be. I went over it again and again. Then, one night, I woke up startled. That's it. He has to be an ETA member. (Aguirresarobe, 2004, p. 147)

In Madrid's novel, Antonio is not an ETA member; he is far more bohemian—smoking hash in bed, divorced—traits entirely absent in Uribe's film. Adaptations inevitably reduce the number of characters and dramatize traits, but in Uribe's version, the only common link between the novel's and the film's Antonio is his fascination with Charo. In the novel, Antonio masturbates while watching Charo in the bathtub—a scene omitted in the film, where such content is toned down. The novel includes more scenes exploring their relationship, while the film renders them as brief, dramatized vignettes designed to hook the viewer. The lovers' trip to Granada, featured in the film, does not appear in the novel, which instead culminates in a party that dissolves into a bleak and lonely dawn, as the characters drift toward despair.

Antonio is a far more complex figure in the novel, stripped of stereotypes, with the textual space allowing for more nuanced development. He discusses photography in depth, in contrast to the more clichéd comments about ETA's leadership in the film. Novelistic Antonio lacks confidence—he is no tough guy, incapable of even holding a gun—traits that starkly contrast with the cold, instinct-driven and viscerally cruel Antonio of the film, who executes a police officer with a shot to the back of the head at the door of a police station following a failed bombing. Uribe based this character on a real-life ETA member deemed insubordinate within the organization (Aguirresarobe, 2004, p. 153). In the novel, Antonio is just another inhabitant of Juan Madrid's world of marginalized people. Numerous characters are also missing from the film,

such as Belén Zarraga and Sepúlveda—the latter possibly modeled on Pedro Almodóvar, a filmmaker planning to move to Los Angeles who is interviewed on TV, with Antonio recording the conversation.

A key feature of Juan Madrid's novels is the backdrop of *la Movida madrileña*, which reflects Spain's transition and contrasts past and present. This context is entirely absent in the film, which instead focuses on terrorism. The same reductive approach affects the theme of corruption: while the film shows only police abuse, the novel implicates political figures, naming well-known individuals like Pujol and Roca, and argues that little has changed since the dictatorship. References to the alternation of power between the major political parties support the thesis that little has changed since the Dictatorship: some govern, while others watch as the former control the game and claim the largest slice of the pie.

This thematic shift also extends to the title of the novel. *Días contados* alludes to that waning period of the *Movida*, as well as to the people who inhabit it—embers of a time whose flame is burning out. In the film, however, those “numbered days” refer to ETA and its milieu, which lose all justification when their struggle becomes a senseless one—culminating in the barbarity of the final scene's massacre, the moment when the car bomb heads toward the police station where Charo and her friends are being brought in under arrest. Antonio's last-minute remorse—he chases the car and dies in the explosion—marks the film's only gesture of moral awakening. But in the novel, it is the underclass, those excluded from the glamour and splendor of the past, the forgotten losers of the Spanish Transition, who are living on borrowed time. Antonio's literary project seeks to capture their reality through his photography—serving as a witness to a truth obscured by political machinations and the façade the authorities wish to project onto the city. His images testify to lives condemned to oblivion, sidelined by society and its power brokers.

The film includes a few scenes taken directly from the novel—Charo's nude bath scene, Ugarte's self-harm out of love for Vanessa—but others are reduced or altered. For instance, Bárbara's aspiration to modelling is barely hinted at

in the film; her literary reference to Dario Fo is omitted entirely. In the film, such elements are trimmed to streamline the narrative.

The character Ibrahim is reimagined as “the Portuguese,” acquiring greater complexity and film-noir gravitas. The final scene in which a cop forces a gun into his mouth in a deserted lot— serves as another sign that these people’s days are numbered. Charo’s husband Alberto is portrayed similarly in both versions; he is released from prison and takes over Ibrahim’s role as the main drug dealer.

These adaptations yield a more kinetic, cinematic narrative, one that tilts toward spectacle without compromising structural integrity in case of Uribe’s film. Nevertheless, much of Juan Madrid’s original social critique is lost in the film. Characters are reshaped for dramatic effect: Ugarte’s self-injection, the police inspector’s racist aside (“and on top of that, black”), all serve the film’s heightened aesthetic rather than its social commentary. A sequence in the novel—Antonio catching Alberto and Charo in flagrante—brims with erotic intensity; in the film, it becomes an act of violence that amplifies Alberto’s brutality.

These differences reflect the usual transformations that occur in adaptations. The critique of the film, then, should not hinge on favoring literature over cinema.

According to De Pablo and López de Maturana (2019), *Días contados* marked “a major shift in the cinematic treatment of terrorism,” but it did little to honor the victims, instead perpetuating the romanticized, adventurous image of the terrorist. The most serious critique, however, lies in the portrayal of ETA’s world as thrilling, populated by compelling characters living on the edge—people risking their lives for a cause that goes unquestioned.

Uribe defended his film by claiming the condemnation of Antonio’s actions is embedded in the film’s most harrowing scenes:

The scene where Antonio (Carmelo Gómez) shoots a policeman in the head while he’s reading the paper at a Metro entrance is devastating. Terrible. It unequivocally condemns him. The film leaves no doubt

about its stance on terrorism. All violence is unacceptable and rejected. But that doesn't mean those who commit such atrocities have no feelings. I've always thought there are probably ETA members who, after committing horrific attacks, go home and kiss their child goodnight. That's the ambivalence the film tries to convey. Official discourse paints them as heartless monsters—and they are, in their murderous acts—but they also have a human side. I think that's what unsettled some viewers: that the characters were portrayed as flesh and blood, with emotional conflict. I remember a woman from Alcalá de Henares who wrote to me after the premiere, furious because she liked the film—because she understood the characters, and that deeply disturbed her. (Aguirresarobe, 2004, p. 152)

There is no doubt about Uribe's good intentions. The film is well-crafted, the story coherent, the characters believable. The problem lies in the neutrality of the approach—treating terrorism like any other form of murder. But terrorism carries far greater communicative weight, and in failing to critique it, Uribe ends up implicitly taking a side. This pattern also appears in his earlier works: *El proceso de Burgos* (1979), *La fuga de Segovia* (1981), and *La muerte de Mikel* (1983). Carmelo Gómez's character aligns with audience sympathies and is never negatively portrayed. Only at the end—when his actions threaten Charo and her friends—does he show remorse, and only for that specific attack. At no point does Antonio grapple with guilt, a burden explored in other films such as *El viaje de Arián* (1999) by Eduardo Rodríguez Bosch or *La playa de los galgos* (2000) by Mario Camus:

The difference between a regular person and one who lives through violence is conscience. As these films show, conscience is everything—it defines our deepest self. Without it, we descend into brutality, and no ideal, no matter how noble, can justify that. And when conscience remains active, it inevitably clashes with the brutality being enacted. That's what drives the trauma and anguish of characters like Arián and Pablo. The dehumanizing act of denying someone the right to live tears

at the conscience in unspeakable ways. (Barrenechea and López de Maturana, 2010, p. 142)

As Merino and Alonso have pointed out, the rhetoric of certain cinematic narratives can be cruel due to “the brutal silence of the voice,” which annihilates “the life of the speaker.” A silence that “cannot be ignored in any reflection on storytelling” (2022, p. 163). Some elements compromise the credibility of the characters by elevating them to a romantic plane: for example, the three terrorists watching explosions as if enjoying them—something implausible in reality for obvious safety reasons. Even the execution shot may be believable as a spontaneous outburst, but it lacks grounding in real-life terrorist behavior. Moreover, there is virtually no ideological content in the characters—apart from a shouted “*Gora ETA*” during a phone call. As such, they could just as easily belong to another terrorist group like GRAPO without any discernible difference. It is true that fiction reflects the fears of its time (Kracauer, 2008; Ramonet, 1990; Francescutti, 2004), and that fear explains *Días contados*' very existence. The Basque conflict looms in the background but is ultimately subordinated to a more cinematic, police-thriller treatment, leaving the film somewhat lacking in philosophical depth.

6. Conclusion

Imanol Uribe's film *Días contados* highlights the ongoing debate sparked by cinema and the criticism that often surrounds film adaptations when they tackle subjects that are especially sensitive in the eyes of the public. In the case of *Días contados*, the semiotic transformation involved in freely adapting a literary text into a filmic one led to significant shifts in the overall meaning of the final work due to changes made to the content. Despite the controversy it provoked, Uribe's film represents a noteworthy evolution in how such themes have been handled in the history of Spanish cinema and in the director's own career.

Uribe made the bold decision to introduce the issue of ETA into a hypertext whose hypotext did not contain this theme, a move not without its risks. This

choice resulted in a narrative fundamentally different from that of the original novel—one that raised objections for undermining a certain critical stance toward the terrorist character, who in the novel had been portrayed with a degree of heroic nuance. By incorporating this element, the film treated terrorism as just another narrative device, without taking into account the sensitivities it could provoke.

In adapting the literary work, the film went on to alter aspects rarely changed so radically in cinematic adaptations: the fundamental components of the plot and the essential nature of many characters. This treatment brought with it a deliberate avoidance of moral judgment, opting instead for a kind of neutrality that favored impartiality and suspense in telling a story centered on terrorist violence. The result was a film that did not pass judgment, featuring protagonists who lacked a clear moral categorization. In crafting an engaging narrative, Uribe chose to introduce a main character affiliated with ETA, without offering an explicit critique of the perpetrators' actions or a sufficiently clear gesture of empathy toward the victims.

As a consequence, the film diluted the social impact of the issue at hand—an issue that is far from just another topic, as underscored by the long list of murdered victims—by lacking an underlying metaphysical or ethical reflection. However, Uribe chose to prioritize artistic and fictional dimensions over political or sociological ones. In doing so, he created believable characters who also revealed facets that broke away from the stereotypical image of the terrorist—the everyday side of a man like any other, who, paradoxically, was not like any other.

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