

EXPLAINING THE PRESENT AS IT HAPPENS: DIAS CONTADOS OF JUAN MADRID AND THE HISTORY OF *LA MOVIDA*

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Introducing an edition of insula dedicated to the historical novel, the Spanish academic Germán Gullón explains the extraordinary popularity of both history books and historical novels in Spain at the end of the 20th Century with an elemental observation: “ambos se refuerzan simplemente porque a la gente le gusta leer libros donde se explica el pasado” (3). As his topic is the historical novel, Gullón posits that this form requires two conditions, “la de ser popular con el lector y la de servir para larga distancia,” and completes two functions, “la de hacer patria y la didáctica, enseñar el desarrollo social de una determinada cultura” (3). Referring to canonical works of authors such as Galdós and Clarín as models, Gullón claims that the historical novel then contributed to inventing their idea of country: “el discurso de ficción histórico decimonónico espejeaba la realidad con pretensiones panorámicas a la vez que intentaba cumplir el propósito de enseñar algo, de que los lectores aprendieran de los errores cometidos en el allende” (3). He notes that the historical novel has evolved through the 20th Century, and that even though novelists recount histories of the distant past (medieval settings have been popular of late), he observes, “Uno tiende a sospechar que la literatura histórica indica un regreso a la literatura de tipo

contendista, una que testimonia nuestra epoca" (5). Gullón thus indicates that a contemporary historical novel may be as much about the time in which it is written as the past that it recreates.

A wrinkle that Gullón does not include in his discussion of historical novels about the distant past is the practice of contemporary Spanish authors who provide histories of the present nearly as they happen. The practice is especially apparent in the works of crime fiction writers who have risen to prominence since the democratic transition of the 1970s and 1980s. Of these novelists, Juan Madrid (Málaga, 1947) has fictionalized urban misery with the *novela negra* since the early 1980s. Adopting much style and tone of "hard-boiled" detective stories from the United States, Madrid uses graphic realism to portray present-day Spain as a corrupt and dysfunctional society. Through a sharp critical perspective, he reveals a profound disappointment with the transition's outcomes that have happened as he writes. His 1993 work *Días contados* becomes a historical novel that explains the recent past and the present of Spain at the beginning of the 1990s, unmasking another truth about *la movida*, the cultural explosion that still symbolizes modern Spain.

Jose R. Valles Calatrava writes that Juan Madrid generally writes "un amplio retrato critico de la sociedad española de la transición y contemporanea" (156). The writer tends to set his novels in the Spanish capital, where he describes "la vida, ambientes y personajes tipicos de los diversos sectores sociales madrileños, sobretodo los mas bajos" (Valles Calatrava 156). For Patricia Hart, the author has a special affection for the capital, given the manner in which he "lovingly describes the inhabitants of his city and their haunts" (160). Despite this fondness, Madrid underscores the sordid repugnance of his world, and he himself writes that therein lies his purpose with the *novela negra*: "[La] novela realista y urbana en la que me siento plenamente integrado desvela los entresijos de una sociedad basada en la explotación, el consumo y en la marginalidad (1989 20). He continues by saying that the novelistic detectives who inspire him "levantan con impudicia las faldas de este mundo y muestra la verdadera cara sucia que se intenta esconder" (1989 20). John Machlin affirms that the social dimension of these novels

consists of confronting the brutality of urban life (49), suggesting that various sectors-rich and poor classes alike-ultimately are connected (56). In Madrid's world, the rich are the evil ones, and their corruption causes great suffering among the poor, who in turn feel no obligation to respect social norms and rules for public order, since the privileged seem honorable only until their facade of wealth is torn down. Juan Madrid tends to create flat, schematic characters, a trait Machlin posits that Madrid uses to give a symbolic or representative value to them (57). Valles Calatrava describes how Madrid uses "una narración siempre muy concisa" with "un estilo rapido y directo, de frases cortas y oraciones simples" (155). The narrative method follows the treatment of characters, as Machlin observes that "many sections open with a brief description—of a bar, of a street, the interior of a home—and superficially could be said to analyse modern life and socio-political malaise" (57). Quite possibly the author explains this characteristic himself when he describes the contemporary novel in general as "escueta," "directa," "menos descriptiva," and "agil" (1990 7). Juan Madrid makes this analysis of contemporary life—above all of life in post-Francoist Spain—the object of novels in which he tells the adventures of private investigator Toni Romano. With this series Madrid has not been nearly as prolific as Manuel Vazquez Montalban and his detective, Pepe Carvalho, but Toni Romano is no less interesting for appearing in fewer stories. *Un beso de amigo* (1980), *Las apariencias no engañan* (1982), *Regalo de la casa* (1986), and *Cuentas pendientes* (1995) tell the adventures of this literary investigator.

With *Días contados*, Juan Madrid leaves the detective plot, but he departs from the *novela negra* only because there is no specific crime, investigation, or resolution of a case. All of the other integral elements are indeed present in the novel: sordid settings, general atmosphere of lawlessness, type-cast and desperate characters, and a brutal life in which all of the weak people suffer. The novel takes place in 1991, a year before the celebration of Madrid as the Capital of European Culture (and other important events in Spain). By there is no reference to the transition, and the dictatorship is a distant memory. Spain is a modern country, com-

pletely integrated with the developed world. The *movida madrileña* still inspires images of fun, progress, and style, and continues to attract international tourists. Such is the official version of popular culture, but this truth is incomplete: there is an immense underworld of people who have not participated in the progress. Madrid places much of the action in a specific zone of the Spanish capital: the Plaza de Dos de Mayo, in Malasaña, one of the very centers of the *movida* scene. This neighborhood of the city is well known for night life, but perhaps more notorious for drug traffic. In this way, Madrid (the author) describes some of the lowest places in Malasaña, calling attention to the Spanish reality behind the polished image of *la movida*.

With his contact of this story to events of recent history, Madrid takes up an often recognized practice in postmodern literature, which Linda Hutcheon has termed "Historiographic Metafiction" (3): the intentional union of history and fiction in the same work. When writers are aware of precedents both of history and of fiction, the influence of each crosses over to the other. Hutcheon believes that such writing has dispersed the center of narrative in general, highlighting the marginal members of a society: "One of the effects of this discursive pluralizing is that the (perhaps illusory but once firm and single) center of both historical and fictive narrative is dispersed. Margins and edges gain new value. The ex-centric-as both off-center and de-centered gets attention" (12). The novel, then, will tell the story of people whom traditional discourse in history and literature has ignored.

It may be worth reviewing scholarship about *la movida* to show how Juan Madrid's recounting in *Días contados* supports and questions conventional history. Elena Gascon-Vera offers a convenient definition: "un movimiento de cultura popular que coincidió con lo que se ha llamado el período de la transición" (162). For Frederic Strauss, the golden age of *la movida* is from 1977 to 1983. He finds the perfect image of the movement in "Laberinto de pasión," a film by Pedro Almodóvar, because all its principal participants are present in the film, which creates contemporary image of a city where everything is possible (25). Alejandro Varderi crystalizes *la movida* with Almodóvar, because through him Madrid acquires "el calor de la 'movida'

artística democrática caracterizada por su humor, ironía e irreverencia hacia las instituciones" (157). Varderi states that the Spaniards were casting off the ghost of the dictator at that time, and that *la movida* wished to work with its back to that past (157). Kathleen Vernon and Barbara Morris observe that the Spaniards of this time identified with and imitated various tendencies of international popular culture: "punk and glam rock, drug culture, women's and gay liberation" (5).

While it is true that *la movida* is an authentic artistic and cultural phenomenon that has advanced Spanish society, not all commentators see it in completely positive terms. For Teresa Vilaros, *la movida* was one facet of disappointment following the death of Francisco Franco. During the dictatorship, "el pensamiento de una parte importante de la intelectualidad española de izquierdas se estructuró alrededor de un proyecto utópico," but the utopia disappeared after 1975 (1998: 8). When the progress, the Marxist anti-Francoists of the 1960s abandoned their original goals, the younger generations took up their own rebellion against their elders. According to Vilarós, these younger people, who had not fought against Franco, "reaccionaron a este momento con una voz rota, fragmentada, en un gesto expansivo y trágico" (1993: 163). Quite soon after its realization, the movement became a consumer commodity, and its followers pursued the market over esthetics. Given this transfiguration, some evaluators problematize the results of so much social change in Spain. Pablo Luis Gallero, for example, believes that "la superficialidad y la frivolidad son los grandes éxitos de *la movida*" (Gallero 83), while Borja Casini declares that *la movida* has generated "una sociedad hiperconsumista, acrítica, y ha dado lugar a unas generaciones posteriores, como los jóvenes de ahora, realmente repugnantes" (Gallero 19). The conservative politician José María Álvarez del Manzano, the former mayor of Madrid, would support these opinions from a different ideological perspective. The mayor claimed prior to municipal elections in 1999, "*La movida* empobreció la vida cultural, amañó a la gente y confundió a la cultura. Si dijo entonces que aquello era cultura, aquello que no dejó ni un libro, ni una obra de música, ni una pintura. No dejó nada. *La movida* fue un gran vacío" (Martinez Ahrens 6). A wide

range of positions has developed in a relatively short period of time, and this fact suggests difficulty in producing a historical account so close to when events actually occur.

The protagonist of *Dias contados* is Antonio, a freelance photographer who becomes the axis around which different social classes revolve in the novel. Antonio lives in a rented garret on the Plaza del Dos de Mayo, but he is not from the neighborhood. Although he comes from an upper middle class family, he has sought the bohemian life after separating from his wife. Antonio is not a well-known photographer, and he dreams of becoming a famous graphic journalist. He continuously regrets having missed an opportunity for a photograph that would have won him celebrity: the suicide of a woman who jumped from the Viaduct with her daughter. Antonio did not react in time to shoot the woman's fall; he could sell only photos of the broken bodies lying on the pavement. The concise description of this scene typifies Juan Madrid's novelistic style: "Eran dos cuerpos tirados en la calle sobre un enorme charco de sangre. Uno de ellos era el de una mujer joven y despatarrada. El otro, el de un bebe" (26). When working as a photographer, Antonio leaves the impression of a passive observer who can become a vulture to take advantage as others suffer. He claims, "si llegó a sacarla cuando estaba en el aire... bueno, seguro me me hubiesen dado un premio" (27). Antonio hopes to encounter another such scandalous scene to shoot, but he pessimistically seems incapable of looking for it: "Otra oportunidad como esa no se me volvera a presentar" (28).

The photographer meets various neighbors in Malasaña. Next door live Charo and Vanesa, two young women who typify the hard life of their social class. Moments after meeting Antonio, Charo shoots up in his bathroom; even though her arms are scarred with years of needle marks, she denies the reality of her life: "No soy una yonqui," she claims while preparing her needle: "Me ha dado un poco de pavo porque estoy nerviosa, pero puedo dejarlo cuando quiera" (21). Charo and Vanesa have no jobs and they barely have an education. They spend their days telling each other their fantasies about the future, hoping to marry and live with their families in pretty houses. In reality, they earn a meager living as prostitutes, and the men in their lives always have ignored or abused them.

Ugarte is one of their friends, a young man who tries to be Vanesa's boyfriend. He works in a messenger company, but he is not a regular employee. He also is a heroin addict and shares similar fantasies about the future. Ugarte enthusiastically pursues any suggested occupation, photography, for example, when he meets Antonio. At the same time, he says that he would like to be a musician and a journalist, but his ideal would be a motorcycle racer. He claims to be saving money for a new bike, carrying a worn photo of a Yamaha to buy when his company offers him a permanent job. However, the circumstances make clear that neither he nor Vanesa and Charo will ever have stable jobs or lives. Another friend in this gang of junkies is Lisardo, a curious and enigmatic character in the novel. The other addicts in Antonio's circle are truly poor, but Lisardo is the son of an important business man, and has opted for life in the drug culture. The future of these characters could not be more pessimistic, but they prefer to focus on their unrealistic fantasies over admitting reality. Lisardo presents another perspective, because he would have a privileged life if only he chose it. Explaining to Antonio when the two meet, Lisardo begins to romanticize, but quickly shows that only he understands the future: "¿Sabes por que estoy en la calle? En la calle esta la gente mas guay, los mas legales. Yo soy como un pirata moderno, un corsario, tio, aventurero. Y la voy a palmar en seguida. Soy un yonqui de verdad" (32). This negative outlook pervades the environment, giving the title of *Dias contados* a symbolic value for respect to its addicted characters.

Like Antonio, Lisardo is a nexus between classes because he has access to both. In the course of the novel, Madrid inserts various scenes in which the rich abuse the poor. Readers learn that Lisardo's father owns property in the area. He plans to shed himself of the present tenants, all poor people in Malasaña, by letting their building fall into ruins so that the renters will flee. He then will take advantage of municipal subsidies for restoration, with the goal of selling luxury homes in a gentrifying neighborhood. The poor do not even consider protesting these injustices, accepting the abuse as a normal part of life. Effectively, the poor become the toys of the rich. Lisardo uses his contacts with the upper class to find customers for Charo and Vanesa, who offer

themselves for all perversions. Charo tells Antonio about a party where they worked: "Era en un chalet de La Moraleja que no veas. Nos dieron veinticinco papeles a Vanesa y a mí y lo único que tenemos que hacer era bañarnos en la piscina en pelotas. El dueño nos tenía que avisar, y entonces, Vanesa y yo nos quitábamos la ropa y nos metíamos en la piscina" (84). Antonio is amazed at these dealings and asks Charo, "¿Y siempre es así? Quiero decir, ¿os tenéis que desnudar y esas cosas?" Charo's answer reveals just how ingenuous Antonio has been: "Hijo, Antonio, algunas veces pareces tonto, de verdad. ¿Para qué nos dan el dinero, eh?" (84-85). Following this theme, a family friend has hired Lisardo to recruit women for a business party. He offers 20,000 pesetas each to Charo and Vanesa for their services. The women prefer these contacts to their normal customers—when there are no parties to work, they hustle taxi drivers and other working-class men who cannot pay nearly as much.

The author contrasts their miserable life with the comfortable world of the wealthy. Valles Calatrava observes that Juan Madrid uses irony and comparisons to degrade the reality of his characters from a critical perspective (156). The older brother of Antonio, Pascual, and some of his business partners are the author's targets here. Pascual had been part of the anti-Francoist opposition; once a member of the Communist party, he was jailed during the dictatorship, and later became the first director of Television Española during the transition. Now he carries this past a badge of honor, purporting to be a hero of the new democracy. However, he has sold himself to consumer culture, pursuing money instead of the social justice for which he fought twenty years earlier. Pascual is secretly forming a new public relations firm, taking advantage of his political reputation to impress investors from the United States.

Currently, though, Pascual manages a publishing company that has hired Antonio to write and photograph a guide to *la movida madrileña*. Author Madrid uses Antonio's project to insert quasi-journalistic descriptions into the novel, all of which coincide with historical accounts of the movement. Madrid holds a negative view of *la movida*, focusing on Pascual as representative of those who were subversive in the past, but now have

adopted the ways of their former oppressors. Considering that the novel takes place in 1991, the attempt to promote *la movida* as a current cultural trend seems frivolous, since the authentic *movida madrileña* burned out in the mid-1980s. In reality, Pascual and his partners want to exploit recent history to sell a sterilized image to tourists. Antonio's visits to Pascual's office explicitly sketch the chasm separating two worlds. Pascual's office has plush carpeting and double-pane windows that silence street noise, while Antonio clearly hears all of the bustle from his garret on the Plaza del Dos de Mayo. Pascual dresses well and has perfect, white teeth. A bit before, Antonio meets Rosa, a bartender in Malasaña, who wears worn stockings and has only a few black teeth. Contrasts of this nature are abundant and frequent in the novel.

The upper class vision of Pascual and his associates is apparent in their criteria for Antonio's book. The publisher wants a good image for the city; the guide should include "nada de cutre-río, ni de mierda" (43). They overlook the reality around them and they have forgotten their previous causes. One topic of conversation is a labor dispute in the publishing company. Under Franco, Pascual had allied himself with workers, but now he has become management. Planning negotiations with the union, he seeks to eliminate job security and to avoid increasing salaries. He is ready to provoke a strike in order to fire the workers illegally, and the moment before entering a meeting with his employees he says, "Tengo ganas de joder a estos tíos" (49). These are terribly ironic words from the mouth of a man who once fought for workers' rights. As with many in his socio-economic class, Pascual isolates himself with the elite. He forgets, or prefers not to see, the poor people of the lower class, believing that his life has nothing to do with them. However, Madrid creates a definite link. Pascual and his partners are going to host a party for their U.S. investors; in reality, it is the same party for which Lisardo has recruited Charo and Vanesa. In other words, the prostitute junkies are the "[jovencitas] finas educadas y buenísimas" (211) who are going to entertain the distinguished businessmen.

Antonio's guide to *la movida* reveals additional contrasts

between social classes. The photographer seeks interviews with the famous personalities of the period: politicians, club owners, film directors, designers, etc. These reports coincide perfectly with history. A designer tells her version: “[E]mpezó después de febrero del ochenta y uno [...] Y tuvo su punto en el ochenta y dos y en el ochenta y tres [...]. Madrid se llenó de galerías de arte, de revistas como *La luna de Madrid* y *Madrid me mata*... Era también la época de los fotógrafos y los animadores culturales [...] y de los pinchadiscos” (132). The principals were beautiful people, who maintained their image and liked to be seen; furthermore, it was a elitist and exclusive group. A director alleges to Antonio: “*La movida* éramos cien personas, como mucho. Cien que íbamos de bar en bar, de local en local, de restaurante en restaurante... Nosotros éramos los que lanzábamos a la fama cualquier establecimiento” (169). Now part of mass culture, *la movida* no longer exists for these people, and they resent the imitations that they inspired. The same director claims, “Ahora todo está lleno de horteras” (166). As a narrator, Madrid does not directly judge these versions of history, but he does make them appear superficial, insubstantial, and completely unaware of current reality.

While the author withholds direct comment on *la movida* and its followers, he does not fail to leave a critical impression over its results. Antonio speaks of his disillusionment as he considers his own situation: “A veces pienso que he perdido el tiempo de forma miserable. Fui el único que se creyó toda esa mierda de *la movida* en los años ochenta” (178-79). To a large extent, Antonio resents mostly that he has not gotten rich like everyone else: “Bueno, yo sí que perdí el tiempo, pero otros no. Otros se lo montaron bien. Ahora son gente situada [...] gente famosa que vive de puta madre. [...] Hasta mi hermano se lo ha montado de maravilla, el tío, que fue comunista y antifranquista y estuvo en la cárcel y todo” (60). For his part, Pascual no longer claims his past, but he knows how to make money from it: “Tengo muy claro que ahora nos toca a nosotros ganar dinero. Siempre han ganado dinero los mismos. [...] Ahora me toca a mí. Quiero ese dinero” (210). Therein lies the outcome of years of struggle against political oppression. The anti-Francoist opposition has passed from resistance to exploitative capitalism.

Antonio perceives the contradiction of a society that values the empty culture of wealth and appearances without addressing fundamental problems. He has the idea of making another photographic book, this one on Malasaña. His subjects are to be from his circle of friends from the neighborhood, and he shoots tremendously repugnant photos of them: Lisardo injects heroin through a vein in his neck, Charo masturbates in the bathtub, Vanesa sits on the toilet in a filthy bathroom with a bloody syringe on the floor next to her, the two women sleep half nude on a bed covered with soiled sheets. These dark visions of life become truth for Antonio, and he confronts Pascual with the story: “Después de que vuestro Franco muriera, después de la democracia, esto es lo que queda. Chicas podridas por la droga que tienen que prostituirse para sobrevivir, gente que no sabe que hacer ni adónde ir, atrapados en sus sueños vanos” (214). Antonio tries to convince his brother to publish this project in order to reveal reality: “Debajo de la prosperidad, del lujo, de la abundancia, hay otro mundo, un mundo sórdido y explotado, sin horizontes” (217). Pascual immediately rejects his brother’s vision: “¿Y a quien coño le interesa la vida y esas zarandajas? ¿Tu sabes lo que estas diciendo? Estas fotos dan ganas de vomitar, hay demasiada droga, demasiado pus, demasiada mierda... La gente quiere olvidarse de que todo eso existe. Quiere algo más bonito, no se, más artístico, más elegante” (214-15). In other words, the prosperous citizens of the New Spain would prefer to cover the reality around them even though it affects them to the core. Presenting this received version of democratic Spain, Pascual approaches a practice of the dictator he opposed. David Herzberger details how Francisco Franco subjugated his country with “la narrativa del poder” (135), zealously defining the essence of Spain by exercising authority over its history. The public history is the one that those in power create, control, and allow to be told.

The novel leaves Antonio’s actions undetermined when his project is rejected. Although he has developed a social conscience, he seems to fold under the resistance of his brother. At the end of the novel, Antonio returns to his ex-wife, who tries to convince him to leave Malasaña for their house in a developed

community outside of Madrid. As he considers her proposal, Antonio receives another opportunity to become a famous photographer. Ugarte and Lisardo start a fight, and during the struggle Ugarte stabs Lisardo in the stomach. The latter, dying with his intestines falling out of his body, kills the former with a gun shot to the forehead. Lisardo begs Antonio for help, but rather than calling the authorities, the photographer gets out his camera. He takes advantage of the brutal scene for his own interests, thinking, "Esa sería su gran foto. Estaba seguro" (262), all the while taking care not to step in the growing pool of blood.

While Antonio dreams of his prize, the narration focuses on the long-awaited business party. It is the morning after, and Charo and Vanesa still are with Pascual and his associates. These businessmen have not realized that the women with whom they have spent the night appear in Antonio's photographs. Ignoring the infections that two junkie prostitutes might bring to an orgy, they insist on satisfying their desires. The men have spent the night sodomizing the women, but they do not understand why Charo, sore and bleeding, does not want to continue. The novel ends with this scene. Charo and Vanesa embrace each other while the men shout obscenities. The powerful men have been figuratively screwing these women all their lives; now it has been a literal act. The rich coincide with-and abuse-the poor without even realizing it.

Juan Madrid creates a historical novel in *Días contados*, a fictional work based on events in his time. He appropriates references to contemporary people and places to present two visions of Spain. The first is a polished and stylized world where people play with the latest fashion. For them, *la movida* has carried Spain into modernity, and they are content to see more beauty and novelty. Those who accept this vision do not align with the author's view of a sub-human world, full of suffering and pessimism. The inhabitants of this sphere live in misery, with no options to improve their conditions. *Días contados* departs from conventional historical fiction because it recounts a contemporary circumstance instead of the distance past, and it focuses on marginal characters who never would have seen their stories told. Nevertheless, the novel fulfills the criteria of Joan Oleza Simó,

who writes "La ansiedad de ficción histórica desvela nuestra falta de conformidad con el presente, del deseo de que las cosas hubieran sido de otra manera" (94). Constructing the recent history of an important time in his country, Juan Madrid explains the present and shows a reality that he certainly would change.

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