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# Performing Radical Basque Nationalism in Borja Cobeaga's *Negociador*

- Euskal nazionalismo erradikala irudikatzen Borja Cobeagaren *Negociador* filmean
  - Representando el nacionalismo vasco radical en *Negociador* de Borja Cobeaga
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**RESUMEN**

La comedia negra de 2014 de Borja Cobeaga, *Negociador*, estructura su narrativa de conflicto político mediante la práctica cultural vasca de la *bertsolaritza* para ficcionalizar la desintegración de negociaciones entre el PSOE y ETA en 2005-6. La película ataca la utilización de la cultura vasca por parte de ETA para independizarse, e interroga su reapropiación de tradiciones culturales al vincular el colapso de la organización con su negación a tomar parte en la misma práctica que tanta estima.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Bertsolaritza, Identidad vasca, Negociador, Cine contemporáneo, Borja Cobeaga

**LABURPENA**

Borja Cobeagaren 2014ko *Negociador* komedia beltzak bertsolaritzaren euskal praktika kulturalaren bidez egituratzen du gatazka politikoari buruzko bere narratiba, 2005-6an PSOEren eta ETAREN arteko negoziazioen desintegrazioa fikzionalizatzeko. ETAK independentzia lortzeko euskal kultura erabiltzearen aurka egiten du filmak, eta zalantzan jartzen du erakundeak kultura-tradizioekin egiten duen birjabetze-prozesua, hainbeste estimatzen duen praktika berean parte hartzeari uko egitearekin lotzen baitu erakundearen kolapsoa.

**GAKO-HITZAK**

Bertsolaritza, Euskal nortasuna, Negociador, Zinema garaikidea, Borja Cobeaga.

**ABSTRACT**

Borja Cobeaga's 2014 dark comedy, *Negociador*, structures its narrative of political conflict via the millenary Basque cultural practice of *bertsolaritza* to fictionalize the disintegration of 2005-6 peace talks between the PSOE and ETA. Through its ironization of this practice, the film effects a mordant criticism of the latter's weaponization of Basque culture in its quest for sovereignty, and interrogates ETA's reappropriation of cultural traditions by linking the organization's collapse to its failure to participate in the very practice it esteems.

**KEY WORDS**

Bertsolaritza, Basque Identity, Negociador, Contemporary Film, Borja Cobeaga

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Basque filmmaker Borja Cobeaga's 2014 dark comedy *Negociador* is, at its core, a tale of communicative failure. The *largometraje* chronicles the unsuccessful efforts of incompetent, albeit well-intentioned Manu (played by Ramón Barea) to negotiate an armistice on behalf of the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero with the radical left-wing Basque nationalist group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), via its leaders Joxian (Josean Bengoetxea) and Patxi (Carlos Areces Maqueda). The film fictionalizes the historic peace talks that took place in 2005 and 2006 between the Basque division of the ruling center-left *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), led by its president, Jesús Eguiguren, and two powerful senior leaders of ETA, José Antonio Urrutikoetxea Bengoetxea, alias Josu Ternera, and Francisco Javier López Peña, alias Thierry. The talks between these two parties, which take place at an unnamed French resort, are mediated by international arbiters from a fictional Frédéric Passy Center: the stiff, middle-aged Northern European James (Jöns Pappila) chairs each session with his young, attractive interpreter, Sophie (Melina Matthews). The conversations and miscommunications between the multilingual representatives at the negotiating table, whom among them speak Spanish, French, Basque, and English to varying degrees of fluency and mutual (un)intelligibility, consolidate a biting criticism as ideological incomprehensibility proves to be just as contrary to achieving successful negotiations between the PSOE and ETA as linguistic confusion.

The 2005-6 talks sought to put an end to decades of politically-motivated violence between the Spanish state and ETA, which endured between 1968 and 2011. The group, whose name signifies Basque Liberty and Homeland, began in 1959 as a response to frustration towards the perceived reticence of the conservative Basque Nationalist party in exile, the *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea-Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (EAJ-PNV), to take immediate action to assert Basque sovereignty in the face of worsening Francoist repression of minority rights in the decades following the Spanish Civil War. Beginning in the 1960s, ETA waged small-scale campaigns that sought to resist the ongoing institutionalization of Castilian identity and the imposition of Spanish nationalism upon which the larger, ongoing policy of national homogenization centered. In 1968, the group—after a series of internal divisions led to a radical ideological transformation— began using armed force, including murder, kidnapping, extortion, and blackmail, to achieve its explicit objective of liberating the Basque Country from Francoist Spain. It sought to establish the utopic *Euskal Herria*, a socialist (re)union of the seven traditional Basque provinces of Biscay, Gipuzkoa, Alava, Navarre, Labourd, Lower Navarre, and Soule. During the four-plus decades it was active, ETA murdered approximately 850 victims, although the exact number is disputed.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, it cultivated a narrative of essential difference to “effectively invent and mythologize a picture of traditional Basque culture” that stressed Basque cultural difference from Spain, (re)appropriating millenary practices as weapons to affirm its desire for sovereignty from the Spanish state.<sup>2</sup>

Cobeaga's film directly challenges ETA's weaponization of Basque culture through its engagement with *bertsolaritza*, a traditional Basque oral practice deeply symbolic of ethnic and linguistic identity. As *Negociador* structures the eponymous negotiations between PSOE and ETA through this cultural touchstone, it renders its negotiators *bertsolaris*. Their failure to end the political conflict between the Spanish state and extreme Basque nationalists is largely contingent on the breakdown of this practice over the course of the film, thereby interrogating ETA's claim to, and weaponization of, Basqueness in its quest for sovereignty. In *bertsolaritza*, the competitive performance of an improvised verse in Euskera, the Basque language, verses, known as the *bertso*, are traded between multiple *bertsolaris*, the performers.<sup>3</sup> As an ironization of a deeply-rooted cultural practice deployed to consolidate a narrative of Basque cultural difference, the *bertsolaritza* structure of the film effects a mordant criticism of ETA and its deployment of Basque culture for its own ends, turning a cultural touchstone appropriated by the organization into a catalyst for its collapse.

Upon its 2014 release, critics were impressed by *Negociador*'s unequivocal, clear-cut repudiation of ETA's inconstancy in its dealings with the Spanish federal and Basque autonomous governments. Writing in *El Mundo*, Luis Martínez compared *Negociador*'s representation of these negotiations to the deformed *esperpentos* of Ramón del Valle-Inclán a generation earlier, describing the film as “una comedia que apunta maneras de tragedia; un drama que, a su pesar, no le queda más remedio que romper en esperpento. No hay gags, sólo fragmentos de vidas diminutas. La realidad, de repente, se antoja tan blanda como ridícula, tan graciosa como sangrienta”.<sup>4</sup> For his part, in interviews, Cobeaga stressed that *Negociador* “[n]o es una historia sobre las negociaciones, sino sobre los detalles colaterales y domésticos que la rodearon y que terminan influyendo mucho. En ningún momento, quise centrarme en el diálogo político”.<sup>5</sup> Hence, while the “what,”—the actual details of negotiations between the parties depicted in *Negociador*—is almost never shown on screen, the “how”—that is, the characters' energetic verbal sparring—is the near-constant tool by which Cobeaga's film builds the *bertsolaritza* structure through which it effects its criticism.

## 2. BERTSOLARITZA AS A CULTURAL CURRENCY

The Basque term *bertsolari* is a combination of *bertso*, verse, and the suffix *-lari*, communicating maker; a *bertsolari* is then a maker of verses, which are sung according to particular metric and rhymical structures, in front of an audience.<sup>6</sup> Typically, a public *bertsolaritza* performance features two or more performers who must improvise verse according to the whims of the *gai jartzaile*, a kind of master of ceremonies and moderator who decides the theme and sets the rhythm. The *bertsolaris* generate their sung, rhyming verses in response, with a panel of judges (and often input from the public) deciding on the winner. Criteria for judgement include meter, rhyme (the former is variable; the latter is always consonantal), metaphor, tone, melody, and wit.

An act defined by immediacy and improvisation, the message of the *bertsolari* is fundamentally less important than the experience of *bertsolaritza* itself, with the performance taking place through a “complete immersion in the present”.<sup>7</sup> The practice of *bertsolaritza*

depends on a multivalent temporal structure that is simultaneously ephemeral and enduring, occupying both the past and the present. Although the *bertsos* themselves may elude concretization within the written form—as Linda White affirms, “[a] transcribed verse is several stages removed from the intended form (...) everything necessary to the creation of a *bertso* is lost”—the continued practice of *bertsolaritza* in the twenty-first century setting of *Negociador* nonetheless attests to how the practice has been passed down through generations of Basques, evoking the ancient lineage of the form.<sup>8</sup> This simultaneity locates *bertsolaritza* in a “privileged role in defining sociocultural situations” within the Basque community, making the practice ripe for weaponization by both ETA and *Negociador*.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, as Natalie Morel-Borotra asserts, the Basque community has long esteemed spoken word and song as central to their cultural heritage; *bertsolaritza* is seen as an ongoing continuation of this community’s veneration for oral culture.<sup>10</sup> Given that knowledge of Basque is a requirement to understand *bertsolaritza*, the practice is fundamentally dependent on its linguistic community of origin, reinforcing a unified vision of cultural identity based on language.<sup>11</sup> If *bertsolaris* seek to reach larger audiences outside of their traditional *euskaldun*, or Basque-speaking, sphere, they must rely on translators, again raising questions of authenticity in a practice defined by its speakers’ skillful employment of “euskeraren indarra, the force of Euskera”.<sup>12</sup> These linguistic factors result in *bertsolaritza*’s use as a valid cultural currency used to identify a privileged in-group of Basque speakers.

The linguistic exclusivity and immediacy of the practice render it one in which few can partake. In both past and present-day, this singularity has made it ripe for appropriation as a powerful symbol of identity by both the moderate conservative Basque nationalists of the EAJ-PNV, as well as the terrorism of ETA and its political arm, *Herri Batasuna*, known as Popular Unity in English. Beginning in the sixties and seventies, HB, alongside nationalists of all stripes, turned to this oral tradition to express, validate, and celebrate Basque difference through the performance of heavily politicized pieces.<sup>13</sup> Long used as a tool of cultural resistance to Francoism since the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, the art form’s continued engagement with local and national politics throughout the second half of the twentieth century

equated the *bertsolari* figure with Basque patriotism (...) the names of certain individuals, such as “Bilintx,” who died as a result of wounds received during the Second Carlist War, can evoke *abertzale* (“patriotic”) sentiment in the Basque breast regardless of which side one’s ancestors fought for.<sup>14</sup>

This process of politicization eventually resulted *bertsolaritza*’s transformation into a battering-ram of the radical left-wing Basque nationalism of ETA, in its “quest to maintain and develop the whole of the culture carried on through the medium of Euskara”.<sup>15</sup>

**3. MILLENNARY  
PRACTICE,  
CONTEMPORARY  
CRITIQUE: THE CASE OF  
NEGOCIADOR**

Language ability was crucial to the group's ability to reform the deeply-rooted discourses of Basque ethnic purity and isolationism popularized by Sabino Arana, the founder of Basque nationalism in the late nineteenth century, in order to recruit new members by defining Basque identity solely on language fluency. Within this context, the chief allure of *bertsolaritza* for nationalists broadly is thus its function as a performance of linguistic nationalism, one that appeals to both Basque difference while simultaneously resisting the sovereignty of Spanish linguistic imperialism. Its demonstrated value as a signifier of Basque culture thus transforms *bertsolaritza* into a powerful weapon for *Negociador* to shape its critique of ETA through one of the practices the group most esteemed.

Within *Negociador*, each *bertsolari* serves as a metonym for, as much as the actual representative of, the political ideology which has brought him to the negotiation table. The metonymic quality of each character relates *Negociador*'s interest in "poner en pantalla cosas que ves en la calle (...) Aquí se juzga y se distingue a una persona dependiendo de qué periódico lleva bajo el brazo, si te saluda con un 'Buenos días' o un 'Egunon' o si utiliza la palabra 'Euskadi' o 'Euskalherria' [sic]".<sup>16</sup> Here, the director emphasizes the essentializing binarization of national and cultural identities as a result of the independence conflict. Throughout this conflict, the established differences between Spanish and Basque cultures, politics, and languages that had begun to develop through the appearance of Basque and Castilian protonationalism in the nineteenth century, ramped up. The film's evocation of *bertsolaritza* thus places the twenty-first century struggle for dominance between the PSOE and ETA in dialogue with an extensive history of competing Spanish and Basque sovereignties, as it translates a millenary cultural practice into a contemporary critique of binarized politics and identities. Through making the *bertsolaritza* structure visible in this way, Cobeaga interrogates the weaponization of shared cultural heritage. As rapid-fire verbal exchanges between the competing *bertsolaris* go nowhere, the organization's collapse is brought about by its refusal to participate in the very practice it esteems.

The interpersonal debates that make up the core of *Negociador*'s narrative—particularly, the encounters between protagonists Manu, Joxian, and Patxi at the negotiating table—establish the *bertsolaritza* frame within the film, as Cobeaga employs this cornerstone of Basque oral culture to ironize ETA's weaponization a traditional practice, which in turn causes communication between the negotiators/*bertsolaris* to fail. In line with the director's expressed desire to avoid centering his film on explicit political dialogue, the negotiations that take place between these characters (and on occasion, arbiter James and interpreter Sophie) do not concern the fate of the Basque Country as much as they offer the interested parties a concrete opportunity to engage in an improvised verbal battle. Therefore, while the actual details of these negotiations are never revealed in Cobeaga's film, "los detalles colaterales y domésticos que la rodearon y que terminan influyendo mucho" are frequently emphasized.<sup>17</sup> The metonymic *bert-*

*solaris* compete to outfox each other with the future of their shared homeland riding on their success in convincing an audience of the validity of their argument. As much as they argue for ETA or the PSOE, then, the theme of their improvised battles remains clear: who will decide the fate of the Basque Country? Who will shape the destiny of the Basque people?

The first of the three debate scenes in the film corresponds with Manu and Joxian's first encounter at the negotiation table in a drab, windowless conference room at an unnamed French resort. The scene opens with a sequence of close-ups featuring the utterly mundane contents of the conference room (pens and notepads; leather chairs; a glass pitcher of water; assorted treats). James' voice, immediately followed by Sophie's interpretation, can be heard off-camera. The film then jumps between medium close-up shots of those present, rapidly moving between Manu and Joxian, who sit on opposite ends of a long rectangular table, and James and Sophie, who sit together on one side, bridging the literal and symbolic gaps between the two parties.

As James, via Sophie's interpretation, attempts to establish the ground rules for negotiation, the camera leaps back and forth between Manu, Joxian, and Sophie and James. Simultaneously, an occasional medium long shot providing a brief respite to the dizzying movement of the camera between speakers. The velocity with which the camera shifts subjects mirrors the rapid-fire exchange taking place at the negotiation table:

Sophie [interpreting on behalf of James]: El objetivo de la primera fase es la redacción de un documento que sienta las bases para el diálogo.

Joxian: Negociación.

Sophie: ¿Perdón?

Joxian: Que las bases son para la negociación, no para el dialogo.

Manu: Yo con dialogo estaría más cómodo.

Sophie: Mejor avancemos. Esto lo podemos ver luego, porque el propósito del texto es el fin del conflicto.

Manu: La violencia. El fin de la violencia. Lo de conflicto, mejor olvidarlo.

Joxian: ¿Por qué?

Manu: Porque es ambiguo.

Joxian: Violencia sí que es ambiguo. ¿Violencia de quién?

Manu: Eso mejor lo hablamos más adelante. No vamos a entrar ahora en un debate de terminología.<sup>18</sup>

Although brief, this initial encounter between the negotiating parties, the arbiter, and the interpret establishes the *bertsolaritza* framework employed throughout *Negociador*. In this context, Manu and Joxian are the dueling, improvising *bertsolaris*; James (through Sophie), the *gai jartzaile*; and the film audience, the public and the judges.

I have previously discussed why Manu and Joxian are *bertsolaris*. Suffice to say that while not actually *singing*, both characters embody the *bertsolari*, who is a “genuine generator of expressive culture”—here, the clashing views of the PSOE and ETA towards political violence—and also renders “into speech collective sentiments of solidarity” through oral improvisation.<sup>19</sup> The immediacy of Manu’s rebuttal to Joxian, and vice versa, clearly articulates these characters’ association with the structure. In this sense, as Manu and Joxian make evident, each character is simply responding, via spontaneous improvisation, to the problem with which he is presented; “it is a response to the public and to the bertso challenge of another bertsolaria [sic]”.<sup>20</sup>

Begun in this scene, Manu and Joxian’s verbal duels will dominate the peace talks, beginning the first of many rapid-fire interchanges of terminology, vocabulary, and ideology that mimic the *bertsolaris*’ exchange of verses. Each character utilizes this structure in order to improvise a defense for the ideologies and identities they represent at the negotiation table and invalidate for their audience the “collective sentiments of solidarity” evoked by the other.<sup>21</sup> Given that the “validation of the bertsolari’s performance rests on his individual skills,” in order to advocate for their positions’ superiority, both Manu and Joxian must prove themselves the more skillful improviser, fending off their competitor in rapid-fire oral combat. With Manu and Joxian (and later, Patxi) in the role of *bertsolaris*, the *bertsolaritza* structure necessitates that Sophie and James must fill in a key remaining position required in the typical performance: that of the *gai jartzaile*. Mediator James’ attempts to lead the peace talks through Sophie make him the *gai jartzaile*, as he proposes the (social, political, and cultural) themes around which the *bertsolaris*, the peace talk participants, will construct their responses. Ironically, these themes are dialogue and conflict—the very actions provoked by the *bertsolaritza* structure used in the film. The metathematic aspect of James’ suggested topics aside, each subject catalyzes the *bertsolaris*’ performance, provoking an immediate, improvised antiphon by Manu or Joxian. This first episode of *bertso*-making by the respective *bertsolaris* provokes the other’s response in turn, setting off a chain of creative improvisation as each *bertsolari* repudiates, rejects, or otherwise returns fire at his competitor.

At the same time that his attempts to negotiate between the two parties mark James, via Sophie, as the *gai jartzaile*, the mediators’ neutrality invalidates their ability to function as the public or the judge(s) of the *bertsolaris*. Hence the remaining roles necessitated by the *bertsolaritza* structure are shifted onto the film’s audience itself. The diegetic narrative of *Negociador* opens a window into conference room proceedings, reifying the public’s role as both the viewer of the performance and, absent the customary panel of judges, its critics. Unlike true *bertsolaritza*, the improvised oral en-



counters that dominate *Negociador's* narrative take place in Spanish. However, despite this sensible linguistic (and undoubtedly, economic) appeal to a wider audience, the *bertsolaritza* format is still exclusionary; each *bertso* exchanged by the dueling *bertsolaris* consolidates specific visions of Basque culture and nationhood exclusive of the other's ideology.

At its most basic, to understand the following exchange between Joxian and Manu, the viewer must have certain familiarity, at the very least, with the political conflict between the Spanish state and radical Basque nationalism in the late twentieth century. More specifically, the viewer should recognize the broad political interests of the PSOE and ETA, and the social, cultural, and linguistic implications of each bloc's vision for the future of the Basque Country and its people, which are at a crossroads in this scene. The camera once again leaps between speakers, creating a sensation of rapid, nauseating movement as Joxian and Manu improvise, each seeking to defeat the other:

Joxian: Derecho de decidir.

Manu: Respeto a las decisiones.

Joxian: Procedimientos democráticos.

Manu: Legalidad vigente.

Joxian: Euskal Herria.

Manu: El pueblo vasco.

Sophie: ¿Perdón? Es que no entiendo una cosa. Es por la traducción. Sé que es diferente, pero...

Joxian: Claro que es diferente.

Manu: Una cosa es Euskal Herria, y otra pueblo vasco.

Sophie: Sí, ya lo sé, pero no sé cómo traducírselo, en inglés se dice igual.<sup>22</sup>

Although "Euskal Herria" is usually translated as the Basque Country, the Basque word *herri* contains a multitude of simultaneous, overlapping meanings, including "people." This means that "Euskal Herria," like "el pueblo vasco," can refer to the Basque people, as it does in this context, causing the interpreter's confusion. Furthermore, Sophie's difficulty in differentiating between "Euskal Herria" and "pueblo vasco" underscores the powerful role of *bertsolaritza* as an exclusionary practice central to Basque identity formation. This identity is tied to a particular political ideology that goes beyond the shared value of socialism to inform the radical nationalism of Joxian, and later Patxi, versus the more center-left beliefs of Manu.<sup>23</sup>

When the *bertsolaris* respond to a political topic through the performance of *bertsos*, they consolidate an exclusive view of Basque identity based on political affiliation. This view is restrictive in a double sense: firstly, in that any viewer unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the political conflict may be excluded from comprehending the film's central narrative; secondly, each *bertsolarí*'s claim to determine the future of the Basque Country disallows the existence of the other's, further winnowing down an already exclusive practice of identity formation to a particular ideology. As such, both Manu and Joxian construct their corresponding vision of the future upon representative perspectives exclusive to their bloc. The connotations contained within "Euskal Herria" and "pueblo vasco," then, are exploited by each *bertsolarí* to delegitimize their competitor's contending vision of Basque culture and identity, and every one of Manu and Joxian's rapid-fire rebuttals serves to negate the existence of other's goals. Through the above exchange of political *bertso*, each *bertsolarí* seeks to install and maintain his exclusionary vision. Yet, ironically, Manu and Joxian fail to convince Sophie of the superiority of their vision of Basque identity, leaving her to revert to a catch-all term that satisfies neither: the Basque Country.

Manu and Joxian continue to face off in dramatic oral battles that see each *bertsolarí* attempting to sway the peace talks in favor of their representative identities. However, Joxian's sudden disappearance from the negotiation table puts a stop to these performances before any particular agreement—or winner—can be announced. In his place arrives the rough and tumble Patxi, a character whose irascibility far exceeds that of Joxian, and who catalyzes the communicative breakdown between the negotiators/*bertsolaris*, thereby provoking the destruction of the greater *bertsolaritza* structure at play within the film. Through this disruption and consequent collapse, the director's ironization becomes clear, as Cobeaga skewers radical left-wing Basque nationalism for misappropriating a traditional communicative practice on behalf of political gain.

Upon his first appearance within the conference room/symbolic stage, Patxi's refusal to participate in the preestablished *bertsolaritza* structure catalyzes the disintegration of communication between the two factions; Manu's attempt to engage Patxi as a fellow *bertsolarí* is precluded by the former's refusal to cooperate. Patxi spends much of the negotiation glowering in silence, only speaking to repudiate the previous efforts of *bertsolaris* Joxian and Manu, and the *gai jartzaile*, Sophie and James:

Sophie [interpreting on behalf of James]: El borrador a limpio, pero con todas las notas. Creo que será un buen momento para firmarlo.

Manu: Sí.

Patxi: Un momento. Aquí habrá que incluir un anexo.

Manu: Es que si hay un anexo, no tengo autorización para firmar esto.

Patxi: Pues si tú no tienes poder para firmar esto, ahora hay que hacer una llamada.

Manu: No creo que sea la manera.

Patxi: Excusas, bah. Saca el móvil, ¿eh? Ahora lo digo en serio. No me vengas con chorradas.

Sophie: Hemos estado trabajando en este documento durante casi un mes.

Patxi: Pues lo que iba a decir, si me dejáis, es que yo pensaba que mi interlocutor aquí tendría plenos poderes para negociar.

Manu: Para dialogar.

Patxi: ¿Qué?

Manu: Para dialogar.

Sophie: Lo siento mucho, pero es fundamental que James esté al tanto de todo de lo que se dice en esta mesa. Es fundamental.

Patxi: ¿Lo ves? ¿Qué te decía yo? Que era mejor que lo arregláramos tú y yo. Esto así es un engorro. [to Manu] ¿Vienes o qué?

Sophie [to James in English]: I don't know what *engorro* means.<sup>24</sup>

Patxi then marches Manu off to his car for a pointless drive in which he will proffer a one-sided ideological rant laced with death threats. Throughout this diatribe, Manu will remain uncharacteristically soft-spoken, as he becomes increasingly aware of Patxi's volatility—and the fact that he carries a gun in the waistband of his jeans. This episode, which abruptly ends with Patxi threatening Manu's life, as well as those of his political allies, in no way resembles the previous exchange between Manu and Joxian. Patxi's deliberate interruption of the previous format evinces several immediate and deliberate ironies. Above all, he has disavowed the communicative practice that had allowed Joxian and Manu to negotiate, through the *bertsolaritza* structure, a peace treaty previously acceptable to both ETA and the PSOE. Hence, with his interruption of the practice entailing threats, complaints, and a stubborn unwillingness to cooperate, he has destabilized the established back-and-forth of *bertsos* previously employed by Joxian and Manu.

For his part, Joxian's willingness to participate validates the role of the *bertsolaris* as the aforementioned "genuine generator of expressive culture...[who] is rendering into speech collective sentiments of solidarity and proposing solutions" to conflict.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, it affirms the character's—and Manu's, by proxy—role as *bertsolaris* in the film, as their performance expressed their individual "community's political voice."<sup>26</sup> Patxi's refusal to participate in the *bertsolaritza* structure, as seen via his insistence removing Manu from

the conference room/stage, forces both characters outside of the sphere of this practice. In this sense, Patxi rejects the role of *bertsolari*, with all of its associated communicative benefits; above all, the culturally-dictated right to represent, in public performance, a particular ideological and political community associated with traditional Basque identity. As the character's bewilderment at Manu's insistence on dialogue demonstrates, he is unwilling to respond with a *bertso* of his own. Thus, Patxi has disrupted communication between the two parties. That this has been effected through the character's refusal to participate in an oral practice that would legitimize his vision for the future of the Basque Country and its citizens marks it as darkly ironic.

Further compounding this irony is the aforementioned cultural esteem and prestige maintained by Basque nationalists of all stripes, ranging from the conservative, anti-violence PNV to the radical left-wing HB and ETA, for *bertsolaritza*. According to Mouillot, it is crucial to recall the long-existing association between *bertsolaris* and Basque identity: "[b]ertsolaris, as masters and promoters of the Basque language, often either self-identify or are perceived by their audiences as patriots, nationalists, or even separatists".<sup>27</sup> Hence Patxi's refusal is not only a repudiation of a representative role of Basqueness, one that would validate his viewpoint of Basque identity through a traditional cultural framework, but also the rejection of a practice long used to solidify the very vision of Basqueness as separatists that ETA sought to establish through political violence.

That Patxi would be unaware of the consequences of his disavowal of the *bertsolaritza* structure only emphasizes the film's critique of ETA's appropriation of communal cultural heritage. Upon this occasion, the organization refused to engage with this practice, ostensibly to its own detriment; this decision is rendered all the more ironic given the parallels between ETA's employment of indiscriminate, random bloodshed for political gain and a cultural practice in which "unpredictability and improvisation in the course of action is essential".<sup>28</sup> Both acts, whether political or poetic, subscribe to what Zulaika describes as "the exigencies of the urgent present," justifying both the ephemeral creative spirit of the *bertsolaris*'s verses before his public as much as the immediate need for an act of political violence by ETA.<sup>29</sup> Yet despite these preexisting corollaries, Patxi rejects the *bertsolaritza* structure with which he could engage his political rival, giving up his right to address the entire community he represents and make statements about said community.<sup>30</sup>

The ultimate irony related to this structure within *Negociador* comes the film's close, after the communicative collapse between ETA and the PSOE has led to Patxi carrying out his threat; ETA murders a member of the PSOE. The film cuts from a shot of a grim Manu dressing for his colleague's funeral to a dynamic action shot tracking the French police force as they arrest Patxi and several other unnamed militants in a surprise sweep of his safehouse. As the police drag a handcuffed, belligerent Patxi towards a waiting police car, the press swarms him, thrusting their microphones towards his face. While Patxi's response is obscured by the beat of the extradiegetic Basque hard-rock

song that accompanies the scene, a handful of phrases make it through the background noise: his shouts of “Gora Euskadi askatua!” and “Garaituko dugu!”.<sup>3132</sup> The satire of the scene is obvious. It was only upon his arrest that Patxi sought to communicate his beliefs to the public. Yet these are obscured by the extradiegetic music, limiting him to just two tired slogans.

If the character had taken advantage of the *bertsolaritza* structure with Manu, perhaps he could have convinced the audience of the validity of desire for an independent Basque state. But his refusal to engage in the practice, which offered a legitimate cultural framework to perform and validate his associated ideologies, forestalled the success of the character’s final, desperate attempts at communication. Like the previous ironies that were elicited through Patxi’s disavowal of the *bertsolaritza* structure, this ultimate failed attempt at public (in)communication drives home its director’s criticism, via ironization, of ETA and its appropriation of communal cultural heritage. As the increasing imbrication of these ironies evinces, ETA’s desire for sovereignty prohibited it from taking advantage of a traditional practice that would have permitted the legitimization of the organization’s vision of Basque independence. By this logic, the film asks, is ETA truly even Basque?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In reference to a series of *bertsos* performed by the *bertsolari* Lopategi after the death of a young ETA member and community member of the Basque village of Itziar, Zulaika writes that

the *bertsolaria* [sic] has provided the words by which the community redefines itself in relation to a local son killed in the armed struggle for Euskadi’s freedom. Only one other forum in Itziar allows for statements about the community as such—the church. However, the priest’s discourse is in prose, conversational, within a dogmatic religious rhetoric, and in a shrine sacralized by the presence of religious icons...for the *bertsolaria* the language is the only sacred house.<sup>33</sup>

Through its contextualization within the Catholic Church, the relevance of this model as a representative of collective Basque identity formation is evident. Like a priest, the *bertsolari* holds a unique right to address the entire community he represents and make statements about said community; in the above example, Lopategi’s *bertsos* affirmed the patriotism—and the nationalism—of the young militant and his community, reappropriating his death from its tragic circumstances and recasting it into a narrative of separatist martyrdom on behalf of an independent Basque Country. In the same way that the *bertsolari* Lopategi, in improving *bertsos* on the occasion of the young militant’s death, makes visible the violent struggle for control between the Spanish state and ETA through this cultural model, so does Cobeaga’s *Negociador*.

The film deploys the *bertsolaritza* structure to frame the narration of the eventual communicative catastrophe between the two competing parties, the PSOE and ETA, represented by the *bertsolaris* Manu, Joxian, and Patxi, respectively. In their role as *bertsolaris*, these characters seek to validate and legitimize through oral performance to an audience—in this case, that of the film itself—a particular set of identities and ideologies related to a specific vision of the future of the Basque Country that defies that of their competitor. Each *bertsolaris*'s *bertsos* take on a broader political symbolism as markers of left-wing Basque nationalist or Spanish Socialist democratic identity creation through cultural performance witnessed on screen. When the *bertsolaritza* structure established in negotiations between Joxian and Manu is interrupted by Patxi, the oral exchanges between competitors immediately disintegrate, indicating the director's critique of radical left-wing Basque nationalism.

Through making the *bertsolaritza* structure evident, Cobeaga interrogates the weaponization of shared cultural heritage. As rapid-fire exchanges between the competing *bertsolaris* go nowhere, the organization's collapse is brought about by its stubborn refusal to participate in the very practice it esteems; Cobeaga interrogates the left-wing Basque nationalist role as an arbiter of communal identity. A natural paradox emerges from the film: ETA's collapse, as evinced through Patxi's ultimate arrest, stems from the organization's unwillingness to participate in a practice of which it would be a key beneficiary, one closely associated with the Basque identity it seeks to establish as the foundation of its future sovereign state. In this sense, it was ETA itself, more so than police or governmental intervention, that brought about its downfall, affirming the unviability of radical left-wing Basque nationalism in the twenty-first century.

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# Notas

- 1 Marcos García Rey: "El legado mortal de ETA: todos los datos sobre sus 858 asesinatos", *El Confidencial*, 3-VI-2018, [n.p.ea](#)
- 2 Cameron Watson: *Basque Nationalism and Political Violence*. Center for Basque Studies Press, Reno, 2007, p. 173.
- 3 Officially, *Euskera* has multiple accepted spellings, most frequently *Euskera* and *Euskara*. This article employs the former. However, citations may employ the latter. Likewise, the Basque phrase *bertsolari* has multiple acceptable spellings. I use the most widely accepted form, *bertsolari*, throughout this analysis; Zulaika uses the less common *bertsolaria*.
- 4 Luis Martínez: "Todo fue peor", *El Mundo*, 13-III-2015, n.p.
- 5 Rocío García: "Borja Cobeaga: 'En el País Vasco hay todavía mucho por contar'", *El País*, 22-IX-2014, n.p.
- 6 François Mouillot: "View of Resisting Poems: Expressions of Dissent and Hegemony in Modern Basque Bertsolaritza", *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques en Improvisation*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, p. 3.
- 7 Linda White: "Orality and Basque Nationalism: Dancing with the Devil or Waltzing into the Future?", *Oral Tradition*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2001, p. 13.
- 8 White: "Orality", p. 17.
- 9 White: "Orality", p. 15.
- 10 Michelle Bergadaà and Thierry Lorey: "Preservation of Living Cultural Heritage: The Case of Basque Choirs and Their Audience", *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 17, no. 3, Spring 2015, p. 5.
- 11 Alfredo Retortillo and Xabier Aierdi: "A Sociological Study of Sung, Extempore Verse-Making in Basque", *Oral Tradition*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2007, p. 30. Mouillot: "View", p. 5.
- 12 Joseba Zulaika: *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*, Reno, University of Nevada Press, 1988, p. 214. Alison Wellford: "Breaking the Circle", *World Literature Today*, vol. 94, no. 1, Winter 2020, p. 31.
- 13 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 213.
- 14 White: "Orality", p. 20.
- 15 Retortillo and Aierdi: "Study", p. 30.
- 16 García: "Cobeaga", n.p.
- 17 García: "Cobeaga", n.p.
- 18 Borja Cobeaga: *Negociador*, 2014, 00:18:17-00:19:13.
- 19 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 231.
- 20 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 225.
- 21 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 231.
- 22 Cobeaga: *Negociador*, 00:19:31-00:20:11.
- 23 This schism becomes particularly visible when considering that ETA assassinated twelve members of the PSOE over the course of its existence, including Isaías Carrasco, the PSOE councilman for the Basque town of Mondragón, who was killed in 2008.
- 24 Cobeaga: *Negociador*, 00:53:12-00:54:15.
- 25 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 231.
- 26 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 231.
- 27 Mouillot: "View", p. 8.
- 28 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 230.
- 29 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 234.
- 30 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 214.
- 31 Cobeaga: *Negociador*, 01:08:40-01:08:52.
- 32 "Long live a free Basque Country", "We shall overcome".
- 33 Zulaika: *Violence*, p. 214.