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Remembering the Thirteen Roses: Blurring Fact and Fiction

Kajsa Larson

In the three and a half decades since Spain's transition to democracy in 1975, cultural production has contributed to the public discussion and recreation of the nation's civil war (1936-1939).¹ One particular war story that has attracted the interest of many artists and citizens is that of thirteen young women who were executed on August 5, 1939 for their involvement in the communist youth organization, the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas. They were nicknamed the Thirteen Roses by fellow female comrades who used poetry and oral story-telling to share the women's memory with a small group of sympathizers.² At the turn of the twenty-first century, information about the Thirteen Roses reached a larger audience after the emergence of several literary and cultural interpretations of the women's life and death.³ Through a comparison of two of these works, Carlos Fonseca's book-length historical study (*Las trece rosas rojas*, 2004) and Emilio Martínez-Lázaro's film inspired by Fonseca's account (*Las 13 rosas*, 2007), this essay shows how the Roses' story has evolved from a symbol of communist resistance to a less political, and distinctly communist-neutral, tale that highlights Dictator Francisco Franco's brutal postwar repression.

Both Fonseca and Martínez-Lázaro celebrate women's wartime participation to promote social change. However, their differing approaches achieve distinct outcomes. Fonseca demonstrates how the Roses' execution was unjust, and bases his report exclusively on factual data. In contrast, Martínez-Lázaro melds the same historical facts with fiction to relay a nonpolitical interpretation of events.⁴ Martínez-Lázaro claims that his film keeps the Roses' memory from oblivion. However, I argue that the film's depoliticization of the Thirteen Roses creates a disconnect between Spain's past and present by sheltering the twenty-first

century viewer from fully understanding the ideological divides, hardship, and trauma surrounding calamities such as the Roses' execution. By identifying differences in the accounts by Fonseca and Martínez-Lázaro, it is possible to see a shift in how war stories such as that of the Thirteen Roses are studied and remembered in twenty-first century Spain.

Fonseca's *Las trece rosas rojas* is based on archival research and personal interviews and uses the Roses' memory as a platform to uncover little-known truths about the civil war and its underlying political ideologies. The book offers a detailed overview of every one of the thirteen women to explain how they were connected to Madrid's larger communist network. Fonseca gives equal attention to each of the Roses, drawing attention to their desire for political involvement, and he sympathizes with their position as the civil war's vanquished in order to make a statement about how tragic war stories such as that of the Roses have been concealed from public view in the decades following Spain's transition to democracy. Fonseca's book responds to a public demand for accurate historical information about the civil war—especially regarding those individuals who fought against Franco.

Three years later, Martínez-Lázaro built upon Fonseca's success by creatively capitalizing on the Roses' popularity with the end goal of providing entertainment and earning a profit. Martínez-Lázaro's *Las 13 rosas* selects five protagonists to represent the collective group of thirteen women and provides no details about the women's communist activism. The film's fictitious scenes fabricate romantic relationships between two of the main protagonists and men who support Franco, thus altering the Roses' memory since these events never happened. Unlike Fonseca's account, which traces the Roses' connection to Madrid's larger communist network, the film provides a politically-detached and partially imaginary story about the Roses' martyrdom.

The evolution of the Roses' memory coincides with the larger movement of Spain's recuperation of historical memory of the Spanish Civil War at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century. During the early years of Spain's democracy, which began after Franco's death in 1975, there was little public discussion about the negative effects of the civil war and dictatorship (1939-1975). Spain's democratic government tacitly encouraged the development of a "pact of forgetting"—the *pacto del olvido*—which discouraged citizens from examining the civil war and dictatorship years, and instead encouraged them to focus their attention on current and future goals for the new Spanish democracy. The nation's government desperately wanted to establish a political "middle ground" that was void of any extremist tendencies and could provide a sense of peace, stability, and security (Aguilar Fernández 236). Adolfo Suárez, who served as Spain's President after 1976, was a strong advocate of *moderation* and *tolerance*—two defining concepts of the Spanish transition. Not all citizens, however, were able to adhere to this recommended pact—particularly those whose relatives died or disappeared during the civil war and dictatorship.

In search of more information about those who fought against Franco, individual citizens began private investigations into topics such as the mass graves of the civil war's vanquished, beginning with the creation of the Association for the Recuperation of Historical Memory (ARMH; Asociación para la Recuperación de Memoria Histórica) in 2000. The publicity surrounding the ARMH's mass grave exhumations, along with public demonstrations, pressured the Spanish government to confront some of the atrocities from Franco's dictatorship. The State did take some measures, such as in 2004 when Spain's Prime Minister Zapatero ordered the removal of those statues in Madrid that celebrated Franco and his regime. In 2007, Spain's government approved the Law of Historical Memory, which sought compensation for those who suffered past hardships from the war and dictatorship. The legislation covers a wide range of topics, including the need for public recognition of victims of the civil war and Franco's oppression, and monetary compensation as well as social and medical assistance to help those who were directly and permanently disabled by the war. The law also provides financial support to archival centers that conserve and allow public access to documents from the war and dictatorship.

At the same time that these political developments were taking place, academic scholars and journalists, including Carlos Fonseca, researched and published information about the fate of some of the civil war's vanquished.⁵ Born in 1959, Fonseca is part of a young generation of writers who have an interest in the civil war but did not live through the event. Fonseca has authored five books about Spain's history and culture. Two of these books, *Las trece rosas rojas* (2004) and *Rosario, la Dinamitera* (2006) focus specifically on women's political and military activism during the Spanish Civil War.⁶ *Las trece rosas rojas* presents an account from the perspective of someone who believes that the incarceration and execution of thousands of anti-Franco supporters during the dictatorship was unjust. The insertion of short, subjective comments throughout the text conveys Fonseca's bias, starting with the epigraph by Miguel de Unamuno at the beginning: "Venceréis, pero no convenceréis." Unamuno made this statement in a heated debate with one of Franco's commanders, José Millán-Astray, in 1936. His quote about Franco sympathizers "winning but not convincing" is popular for describing the perspective of the war's vanquished, and sets the framework for sharing the Roses' story—one about women who died as a punishment for upholding progressive political ideas and social values.

Fonseca's *Las trece rosas rojas* is divided into three sections—"La lucha," "La represión," and "La venganza"—which show the progression of events leading up to the Roses' execution. The first chapter, titled "La saca," places the reader in the time frame of August 4, 1939, right before the women's death. Fonseca explains the historical significance: "Nunca hasta entonces había habido tantas mujeres en un mismo expediente. La mayoría eran, además, menores de edad" (14). Each chapter integrates biographical information about the women who belonged to the Thirteen

Roses' group. Read together, the chapters provide an overview of Madrid's political and social context in 1939, as well as the character profiles of the main political agents of the youth organization to which the Roses belonged, the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas (JSU). Inspired by worker values and the image of Lenin, the JSU followed the Stalinist propaganda of the 1930s. Its mission was to fight against the perils of fascism and create a socialist country where children and the elderly were privileged citizens (Casterás 7). Young women were drawn to the JSU because of the chance for personal growth that the organization offered, including education and employment opportunities as well as cultural exposure.⁷ Their involvement in the JSU was crucial to the organization's continued success and the promotion of the communist cause, as demonstrated in Madrid at the end of the war.

In February 1939, while Franco's troops approached Madrid, Spain's Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España; PCE) sent its leaders into exile to assure their safety. In their absence, the JSU took charge to uphold the communist cause in the city. In Madrid's unsafe streets, the JSU depended on women to serve as go-betweens because they could move about with less suspicion than men. Many of the Thirteen Roses maintained the Communists' network of solidarity in a perilous political climate (Fonseca 63).

Fonseca's text portrays several of the Roses not only as political activists, but also as visionaries. Women's political and cultural work allowed them to negotiate the limits of their social roles. Dionisia Manzanero was active in the PCE's military prior to joining the JSU in 1938 (Fonseca 86). Later, she was recruited to be a messenger between Communist Party leaders. Ana López Gallego was recommended to be a female secretary of her section of the JSU because, as Fonseca states, she had "carácter y dotes de mando" (97). Virtudes, Carmen, and Pilar also held leadership roles in the youth organization. The Roses' activism aligns with Gina Herrmann's observation of Communist women's sense of "public happiness," which she defines as a "sensation of euphoria in collective civil action" (90).

Las trece rosas rojas incorporates communist references to describe the Roses' bravery and to explain how they fought to uphold women's rights. Fonseca uses a famous quote from Dolores Ibárruri (la Pasionaria), the most visible female leader of the PCE, to characterize Virtudes González García's determination: "Más vale morir de pie que vivir de rodillas" (Fonseca 27). Like la Pasionaria, Virtudes is a figure of resistance: "Era necesario dar la sensación de estar en condiciones de plantar cara, porque sólo así sería posible alcanzar una paz con garantías" (Fonseca 29). Carmen was another strong figure who fought to uphold women's rights by devising a plan for women to participate in the PCE's resistance efforts: "Días después, Carmen presentaba un proyecto escrito a lápiz en dos cuartillas, en el que proponía que la dirección del partido tuviese una responsable femenina y una adjunta, y describía las funciones reservadas a las mujeres comunistas...Su propuesta más ambiciosa era

crear una gran organización femenina” (Fonseca 89). Using Carmen as an example, the narrative describes the significance of the young activists’ actions: “Había que demostrar al nuevo caudillo que aunque hubieran perdido la guerra, los comunistas no se iban a rendir. Ellos estaban allí para demostrarlo” (Fonseca 90). Fonseca’s interpretation highlights the Roses’ strong desire to create a political system where both men and women could participate in creating legislation that would improve the lives of all Spaniards—especially those from working class backgrounds. Since these class politics correspond to the goals of Spain’s current democratic system, readers of Fonseca’s text may be able to identify with some of the Roses’ beliefs and life situations. The women serve as both past and present day role models: strong women who fought for gender and social equality. Martínez-Lázaro’s film, *Las 13 rosas* (2007), also presents the Roses’ effort to create a better society, although without the same political undertones found in Fonseca’s text.

Born almost fifteen years before Fonseca, in 1945, Martínez-Lázaro did not live through the civil war but did experience Franco’s dictatorship. In interviews, the director explains his interest in the Roses’ martyrdom and the importance of remembering such war stories: “Tenemos que hablar de esto, sacarnos los demonios. Además no es lícito, no vale el revisionismo sólo para un bando, no es justo que algunos arzobispos consigan sus mártires y los eleven a los altares en el Vaticano y no se puedan desenterrar los muertos de la represión” (Ruiz Mantilla 52). At the same time that Martínez-Lázaro shares the same opinion as Fonseca that the civil war’s vanquished have a right to recognition, he clearly expresses a disinterest in taking sides in the current public debate over the recuperation of historical memory: “Yo no soy nada partidario del cine de denuncia; es más, me horroriza, creo que para eso están los periódicos y los libros de historia” (Ruiz Mantilla 50-51). The film largely reflects the director’s apolitical sentiments and as a result, his production contributes detrimentally to the historical revision of the Roses’ memory.

Las 13 rosas incorporates the three main phases found in Fonseca’s account: “La lucha,” “La represión,” and “La venganza.” The visual representation modifies some of the Roses’ story to provide a reduced and synthesized interpretation of women’s leftist activism and their sacrifice. Of the film’s five female protagonists, only four of them belong to the group of women who were executed on August 5th: Blanca, Adelina, Julia, and Virtudes. The other nine Roses are left out of the film, including the Roses who were the most involved in Communist politics: Pilar and Dionisia. The fifth protagonist, Carmen, is the Roses’ friend and comrade, and does not meet the same fate as the other heroines. Due to its condensed nature, the film, unlike Fonseca’s *Las trece rosas rojas*, does not provide a detailed explanation of the organizational structure or goals of the JSU. In fact, the film omits all political references, except those related to the fight against fascism.

The visual representation does provide a snapshot of some women’s wartime roles: Adelina volunteers in a soup kitchen, Julia is employed as a

street car ticket vendor, and Virtudes and Carmen are involved in the diffusion of anti-Franco propaganda. In the opening scenes, the film takes the viewer back in time to Madrid in 1939 by showing Carmen and Virtudes speaking on soapboxes to a small crowd. The camera's point of view, which focuses on the two women, turns the twenty-first century spectator from an outsider to an insider as he or she listens to the women's antifascist message about the dangers of Spain falling to the injustices of social repression. The speech given by the two women avoids mentioning their communist values, including those outlined in the Roses' personal letters found in Fonseca's text as part of the women's judicial brief ('sumario 30.426').

The portions of the judicial brief in Fonseca's narrative reveal how the Roses' political involvement was based on personal economic need and a concern for workers' rights. In her part of the brief, Pilar gave a written statement about her passion for political activism, which began after the October Revolution of 1934. During this uprising, coal miners in Asturias rebelled in an armed fight against the Spanish Army and were eventually overcome. This incident transformed Pilar into "una mujer comprometida en la lucha contra las injusticias que veía a su alrededor" (Fonseca 79). She also expressed a desire to help people in a direct and practical way: "[E]mpezó a nacer en mí un espíritu de rebeldía por lo que nos explotaban..." (Fonseca 79). Pilar's outlook reflects the importance of fighting against workers' exploitation. This information might not only be meaningful to a modern day reader with similar democratic beliefs, but also helps him or her identify with the Thirteen Roses—both their life experiences, and their political and social beliefs.

In Martínez-Lázaro's film, the Roses' political activism is limited to their involvement in the fight to prevent Franco from taking power. Later scenes show Virtudes and Julia distributing flyers that read "Menos Franco, Más Pan Blanco." The film conveys how the Roses publicly spoke against Franco and the hunger and difficult conditions that were created as a result of the war. In the process, it may contribute to a current perception that fascism and Franco were the only motives behind the Roses' political involvement. With these alterations, film spectators do not learn about the importance of the Roses' communist ideologies, the complicated political factors behind the Roses' death, or the fact that the Roses were activists who promoted workers' and women's rights.

The film turns the Roses' memory into an appealing martyr story by focusing on visual aesthetics and selecting historical details that best reflect present day interests and values. This suggests that the film's director and perhaps the general public have little curiosity about the movie's political component. The make-up and hair-dos of the actresses remain faithful to the time period of the late 1930s, but Martínez-Lázaro explains in an interview that he also wanted the visual representation of the time period to conform to contemporary tastes: "[E]l maquillaje y la peluquería en general no deben traicionar la época pero deben hacerlo mínimamente para que los gustos de entonces no interfieran con la

imprescindible identificación del espectador con nuestras heroínas” (Meseguer 94). Martínez-Lázaro’s concerns about the contemporary audience clearly reveal his intention to create a marketable product with the Roses’ story; the director’s goal is not to produce a film that would isolate the twenty-first audience from what they are viewing on screen. Instead, he wants spectators to connect with and enjoy what they are seeing.

By examining the film’s content as well as its marketing, it is possible to see how the Roses’ story has been transformed into a cultural product that appeals to the masses, a tendency that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno associate with the cultural industry of the twentieth century. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Adorno and Horkheimer propose that the cultural industry uses familiar plot patterns, clichés, and social stereotypes to create “cultural commodities”—products that allure the general public and in doing so, earn a profit. Their perception of commodification is based upon Marx’s definition of a commodity, “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Cook 28). To turn a film or television program into a commodified product, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that producers must carefully think about making the act of going to the movies a pleasant experience for viewers and market the product accordingly.

The film’s marketing affirms that its creators did not want to advertise a gloomy account but rather a martyr story with Hollywood appeal. Blanca, the Rose who had no political involvement with the JSU and who has often been characterized as the “innocent victim” by Fonseca and others, is centrally featured on the film’s posters and on the matching cover of the newest edition of Fonseca’s book, which also contributed to the consumer interest in the Roses when it was released at the same time as the film. Blanca’s face, with a serene gaze and bright red lips, symbolizes the sweet, innocent, doe-eyed heroine.

The movie stars featured in the film are one strategy for selling the production. Richard Dyer explains the important function that famous actors and actresses have in generating spectator interest: “The star’s presence in a film is a promise of a certain kind of thing that you would see if you went to see the film” (606). Martínez-Lázaro casts several glamorous actresses as protagonists, including Pilar López de Ayala (Blanca), Marta Etura (Virtudes), Nadia de Santiago (Carmen), and Verónica Sánchez (Julia).⁸ Scholars have noted a direct relationship between movie stars and Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of cultural commodification, as Robert Witkin explains in his chapter on the topic: “The Hollywood phantasmagoria is a powerful one. Millions have been drawn to the box office, attracted by ‘stars’ who have been manufactured with even rows of teeth, flawless complexions, formless features, and with the pupils of their eyes enlarged by belladonna” (137). By analyzing the film’s advertisements featuring the actresses, it is possible to recognize some of the tactics that Witkin associates with Adorno’s theory.

The eyecatching front cover foldout photograph of the cultural section of *El País*, with the caption titled “Escalera hacia el cielo: Trece jóvenes actrices dan vida a uno de los episodios más crueles de la represión franquista,” features scantily clad actresses posing on a ladder. The smiling women wear trendy dresses and skirts—many of them alluringly short—as well as high heels. The actress in the center of the image gazes seductively while draped across the ladder. The photograph aims to accomplish a similar objective to what Susan Martin-Márquez observes of other recent Spanish Civil War interpretations: “[S]oft history, however, particularly when coupled with soft porn, sells” (746). The photo in *El País* sends the message that the film is about an exciting and sexy “true story” from Spain’s past.

In addition to the actresses’ sex appeal, their clothing is another promotional tool that lures viewers and further transforms the Roses’ memory into a commodity. In her observations about the role of fashion in film, Charlotte Herzog coins the term “powder puff” to discuss how film “is host to a variety of sales messages which are subsumed by the entertainment value of the show and the sum total of its attractions” (136). The trendy wardrobe selection for the photo shoot clearly represents twenty-first century fashion and appeals to both men and women.

While the photograph suggests that viewers may see a story that is visually satisfying, the caption below the photo hints at the tragic and saintly quality of the Roses’ martyrdom, as well as their lost potential: “[E]sa historia de futuros truncados... ha sido...elevada a la senda de la memoria gracias al cine” (Ruiz Mantilla 46). The advertising projects what the filmmakers think the audience will like: a depolitized and glamorous martyr story from the Spanish Civil War, equipped with suspense, romance, and tragedy—albeit one that is not overly traumatic.

Instead of unifying the audience around a set of common political and social ideals or shared values, the film relies on familiar and entertaining fictitious subplots—another technique that Adorno and Horkheimer ascribe to commodification. According to Douglas Kellner, Adorno notes that “film in culture industries utilized standardized formulas and conventional production techniques to mass-produce films for purely commercial—rather than cultural—purposes” (91). In *Las 13 rosas*, one of the standardized formulas—or clichés—occurs when both Adelina and Julia fall in love with two men from Franco’s army. This subplot embellishes on the well-known pattern of “sleeping with the enemy.” Adelina briefly dates a nationalist sympathizer whom she meets in a small town outside of Madrid prior to her incarceration. After Julia is laid off from her job as a streetcar ticket vendor, she falls in love with one of Franco’s soldiers, Perico. He provides much-needed food to Julia and her family, while also offering a chance to go on a date to the movies. When Carmen confronts Julia about her relationship with Perico, Julia dismisses her concern. Julia’s behavior suggests to the audience that her love interests and personal needs are more important than an allegiance to any political cause. The film gives the impression that at least one of the

young Roses easily abandoned her political cause in exchange for material and emotional comfort. This message contradicts the information from the second section of Fonseca's account, "La represión," which describes the extreme loyalty of many young activists.

According to Fonseca, when the JSU's general secretary, José Pena Brea, was detained, he admitted only under the effects of torture to the Roses' political involvement. Fonseca interprets the pain and shame that José felt after revealing his comrades' names:

Hacerlo, aunque fuera bajo el más atroz de los castigos, era considerado una traición, una muestra de debilidad ideológica. José quiso pero no pudo. ¿Dónde está el límite del dolor físico a partir del cual un hombre deja de ser él? ¿Dónde el contorno del miedo insuperable? Se derrumbó y contó lo que sabía para acabar con aquel suplicio...Aquellos hombres feroces tenían suficiente rencor para hacerle hablar al precio que fuera. (150)

Fonseca's speculation paints a grim picture of police interrogations, showing little sympathy for the interrogators themselves. His description of the effects on victims of torture is another significant difference between his book and Martínez-Lázaro's film.

The film's police interrogation scenes are not as graphic as the historical reality, especially for women. *Las 13 rosas* omits details about how women were dehumanized through rape, being forced to swallow castor oil or have their heads shaved. The producers believed that this brutality would be difficult for the audience to watch ("Las 13 rosas: Escrito en la historia" 3). In an interview, Martínez-Lázaro justifies the omission of these details:

La auténtica represión, de la残酷 de los franquistas aquellos primeros meses, sólo hay una centésima parte de lo que pasó. No contamos que a una de las chicas la violaron ocho veces en comisaría antes de llevarla a la cárcel, ni cómo las pegaron...Lo que se cuenta es ridículo respecto a lo que pasó. Sólo hay apuntes, porque tampoco quiero echar leña al fuego. ("Las 13 rosas: Escrito en la historia" 3)

By downplaying these difficult memories of the past, however, the film offers only a partial view of what took place during and after the Spanish Civil War at Ventas, one of the main female prisons in Madrid. This tendency has been noted in other literary works about the civil war that have been adapted for film.

In her assessment, Susan Martin-Márquez asserts that the avoidance of difficult truths from Spain's civil war era can prevent "an intellectually and ethically rigorous engagement with the Francoist past" (747). Similarly, the omission of graphic torture scenes in *Las 13 rosas* results in a failure to educate the public about the physical abuse that the

war's vanquished endured and even suggests that the Roses' trauma and torture is a detail not worth being passed on to viewers.⁹ To depict the Roses' repression, the film selects information from the second section of Fonseca's text ("La represión") that specifically focuses on the Rose who was the least politically active: Blanca Brissac.

In the second section of Fonseca's text, the author pieces together information from interviews and documents and shares photos with the reader to explain what life was like, both politically and socio-economically, for several of the Roses' families, including those related to Blanca Brissac, Joaquina López, Julia Conesa, and Adelina García. *Las trece rosas rojas* reveals how despite Blanca's lack of political involvement, she became unfairly implicated with the other twelve women due to her husband's connection to anti-Franco supporters. Blanca's husband, Enrique García Mazas, was a musician who befriended a communist militant, Juan Canepa. When Canepa requested a meeting with him, Blanca decided that it was too dangerous for her husband to attend. She arranged to meet with Canepa in his place; however, Fonseca adds, "su amistad les iba a costar tan cara" (Fonseca 127). In March 1939, Madrid was the "capital de los delatores" (111). Manuela de la Hera, a woman who knew Blanca, falsely told police that she was involved in a plot to kill Franco: "Un complot que sólo existía en la mente de aquella muchacha de diecinueve años nerviosa y asustada..." (128). When she died, Blanca had an eleven-year-old son, Enrique, who provided much of Blanca's biographical information for Fonseca's study.

Fonseca and Martínez-Lázaro portray Blanca as an innocent woman, caring mother, obedient wife, and devout Catholic. However, Martínez-Lázaro's interpretation, unlike that of Fonseca, demonstrates a strong bias toward her. The film casts Blanca as the main heroine, which perhaps confirms the director's desire to keep away from political ideologies. Blanca's character weaves together the main story line about how the five female protagonists are connected, beginning when Julia and Virtudes meet Blanca at one of her husband's concerts. The encounter between Canepa and Blanca is also included, but the film puts the most emphasis on Blanca's family dynamic and her role as a mother. Blanca's devotion to her son not only takes the spectators' attention away from the politics associated with the Roses' story, but also has the most potential to pull at the heartstrings of viewers.

In *Las 13 rosas*, Blanca's positioning as the innocent victim is not only a crucial component to the commodification of the Roses' story, but also key to transforming the spectator into a subjective and sympathetic witness. In prison, Blanca's complacent demeanor makes her a model prisoner to whom the female guard in the film shows favoritism. The film highlights Blanca's moral, ethical, and spiritual qualities, thus heightening the tragic element of the Roses' story. Not only does she play the organ during church services in prison, but Blanca also protests the mistreatment of young children in prison after an infant dies. At this

moment in the film, the audience is reminded of the theme of motherhood and Blanca's love for her son.

Both the written and visual accounts about the Roses generate sympathy from readers and viewers by drawing on the personal relationships that the women had with their loved ones. Yet each employs an approach that generates distinct outcomes. One example involves the personal correspondence that the Roses exchanged with family members. In the last section of his text, Fonseca appeals to his readers by including authentic letters that the Roses wrote to family and to Franco in hopes of overturning their verdict. The letters provide a more detailed description, in the first person, of the women's point of view and their perceived roles and participation in the war (Fonseca 238). In Fonseca's text, the complete collection of the Roses' letters serves as a useful reference for twenty-first century readers, allowing them to see that the Roses were a diverse group of real people who had concerns and aspirations similar to their own. Nonetheless, these goals and values also led to an unfair demise.

Through the letters, Fonseca shows how all of the women were puzzled over why they received such a brutal punishment (Fonseca 239). In her letter to Franco, Dionisia Manzanero describes the difficult economic circumstances that drove her to join the Communist Party: "En descargo de estas acusaciones que se me hacen tengo que manifestar que ingresé en el Partido Comunista en abril de 1938 para ver si tenía medios de poder trabajar en algún sitio y solventar un poco mi situación económica, pues no había encontrado trabajo en mi oficio de modista" (Fonseca 238). Prior to her employment as a streetcar ticket collector, Julia Conesa joined the JSU because of her personal passion for sports, but she was forced to abandon her involvement because she needed to work. She wrote to Franco on August 3, 1939 that her only involvement in the JSU was related to sports: "Jamás intervino en ninguna otra actividad que no fuera relacionada con el deporte..." (Fonseca 291). Fonseca also uses the letters to insert an attack on Franco's regime by noting that the missives never left Ventas prison nor were read by anyone, "olvidada en el cajón de la directora de Ventas, a la que habían llegado de la mano del capellán de la prisión, más interesado en la salvación espiritual de aquellas muchachas que en su perdón terrenal" (240). Fonseca calls the sentencing "una farsa" and concludes his account with a famous statement written by Julia Conesa in the last letter to her mother: "Que mi nombre no se borre en la historia." The author adds, "Que así sea" (Fonseca 257). The use of Julia's statement—a phrase that has been repeated in almost every public discussion about the Roses in the twenty-first century—can be interpreted as a defiant call to action not only to remember the women who died, but also to recollect that Franco's regime wanted to eradicate innocent people who held progressive beliefs.

While one of Fonseca's goals is to educate the reader about the complex set of events and the unjust tragedy that happened to the thirteen women, Martínez-Lázaro's film concludes with a less political message. Nevertheless, the film does make a similar emotional appeal by using an

authentic statement from Blanca. In the film's last scene, Blanca's voice narrates a portion of the last letter to her son, which is also found in Fonseca's text:

Querido, muy querido hijo de mi alma. En estos últimos momentos tu madre piensa en ti...Enrique, no se te borre nunca el recuerdo de tus padres. Que te hagan hacer la comunión, pero bien preparado, tan bien cimentada la religión como me la enseñaron a mí. Te seguirá escribiendo hasta el mismo momento, pero tengo que despedirme de todos. Hijo, hijo, hasta la eternidad. Recibe después de una infinidad de besos el beso eterno de tu madre. Blanca. (Fonseca 297-98)

The letter provides no description of politics or the motives behind the Roses' activism but stresses Blanca's innocence and religious faith with the effect of reinforcing the message of her martyrdom.

The final scenes of the film, leading up to the execution, also avoid specific political references but instead generate sympathy from the viewer. Prior to the execution scene, the film's climax, the Roses are transported to the cemetery while singing the official theme song of the JSU, "Joven Guardia." The film includes the lyrics only to the song's chorus, and leaves out the last verse that describes the organization's political beliefs: "Mañana por las calles, masas en triunfo marchará. Ante la guardia roja los poderosos temblarán. Somos los hijos de Lenin, y a vuestro régimen feroz el comunismo ha de abatir con el martillo y con la hoz." When the women are lined up on the cemetery wall, Julia defiantly yells to the executioners, evoking a response from viewers as they imagine what it may have been like to be in that situation. Then, the camera focuses on Blanca, the startled, doe-eyed, innocent heroine. With the sound of gunshots and very little bloody gore, the spectator witnesses the Roses' defeat and sympathizes with the tragic circumstances, especially Blanca's concern for her young son's future.

In the last scene of the movie, Enrique reads Blanca's farewell letter, which she wrote to him in the chapel prior to her execution. The last scene juxtaposes an image of Blanca with that of young Enrique. On one side of the screen, Blanca narrates the letter she wrote. On the other, Enrique is pictured walking away with his bicycle while reading his mother's words. He passes a group of young boys playing in the streets who are reenacting an execution. This innocent play communicates that even after the Roses' deaths, there are still two competing visions for the future of Spain. As the children imitate the violence of their elders, the cycle of oppression will continue throughout the three decades of Franco's dictatorship. Without the war, Enrique would not have been faced with this predicament, thus prompting the viewer to think about the impact and transcendence of historical victimization as it is passed on to Enrique.

The wistful perception of the civil war, as seen through the eyes of a boy, is a technique found in at least one other civil war film: José Luis

Cuerda's *La lengua de las mariposas* (1999), which is based on three short stories by Manuel Rivas. In the last scene of Cuerda's film, the boy protagonist struggles to understand why his favorite teacher is arrested and taken away by nationalist soldiers. In an article published in *The Guardian*, David Archibald assesses Cuerda's nostalgic film, along with Oscar-winning *Belle Epoque*. In her analysis, Martín-Márquez mentions Archibald's term "sugar coated history," and includes his definition of it as "a harsh and bitter world, magically transformed into an idyllic and pre-modern utopia about to be cruelly crushed by fascism. There is refusal to engage with a concrete historical past, and what is presented in both films is a nostalgic recreation of a republican Spain that never was" (746). The last scenes of *Las 13 rosas* conclude with a similar message by sensationalizing the Roses' martyrdom at the hands of Francoist troops and highlighting the idea that the women died trying to make Spain a better place for future generations—including Blanca's son, Enrique, who is left behind to comprehend what happened to his mother.

The Roses' story shares elements with Greek tragedy: the fall of a noble hero or heroine who cannot accomplish his or her wishes due to inevitable limitations such as human flaws, social barriers, fate, or because they go against the gods' desire. Fonseca and Martínez-Lázaro take advantage of the allure and timeless popularity associated with this type of tale, but with different goals in mind. Fonseca's *Las trece rosas rojas* remains faithful to historical fact and aims to educate readers about these women as historical figures. His research not only pieces together the bigger picture of what happened to the Roses, but in so doing, assists in providing both answers and closure for the women's family members. His book also educates the public about the communist effort to promote women's equality and workers' rights and reveals the unjust process by which the Roses—and others—were accused and punished.

Martínez-Lázaro's representation entertains his audience by taking liberties in its interpretation of aspects of the past such as the Roses' execution—something that Fonseca's account does not do because the author is most concerned with accurately interpreting the available historical documents, which do not discuss the execution. One consequence of the film's fictional representation is that the Roses' story is stripped of much of its political context. This trend has been noted in Spain's post-transition literary production about the country's civil war. In her article "La mitificación de la guerra civil como proceso semiótico," Maryse Bertrand de Muñoz writes about how the Spanish Civil War has been depolitized in several contemporary novels and serves as a backdrop for entertainment that functions much like a myth: "Un mito implica la carencia, el detenimiento total del tiempo, siempre relata acontecimientos que han tenido lugar en un pasado lejano y fabuloso" (42).¹⁰ Bertrand de Muñoz concludes that the action presented in these novels could be applied to any fight: "El resto de la historia podría desarrollarse en cualquier conflicto bélico. Así la contienda civil se convierte en un acontecimiento que ha quedado en el imaginario colectivo,

en un mundo mítico del cual se recuerda sólo un ambiente de odio, de maldad, de revancha” (42). Bertrand de Muñoz’s ideas can be applied to contemporary historical ‘docudramas’ about the past, including *Las 13 rosas*.

At the end of the twentieth century, there is a proven market in Spain for representations about the civil war—particularly those interpretations that feature the mythical qualities outlined by Bertrand de Muñoz or those that evoke what Martin-Márquez calls “Francoist fire and brimstone” sentiments and nostalgia for the Second Republic—Second Republic prelapsarianism” (745). Citing Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, David Archibald notes that more than half of the three-hundred historical films produced in Spain between 1970 and 2000 present themes related to the Second Republic, the Civil War, or Franco’s dictatorship (76). In his analysis, Archibald suggests that “the country’s recent past has become a rich historical seam for Spanish film-makers” (76). The pattern continues in the twenty-first century with more civil war films including *El viaje de Carol* (Imanol Uribe, 2002), *Laberinto del fauno* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006), and *Los girasoles ciegos* (José Luis Cuerda, 2008).¹¹

Martínez-Lázaro’s film also fits into a larger trajectory of Spanish Civil War films that portray women’s involvement in the conflict. Films in the 1990s such as Carlos Saura’s *iAy Carmela!* (1990) and Vicente Aranda’s *Libertarias* (1995) brought the topic of women’s political and military participation in the fight against Franco into the public eye. Nonetheless, some argue that Aranda’s *Libertarias* provides a false sense of appreciation for women’s military heroism.¹² Similarly, *Las 13 rosas* creates an elevated sense of sacrifice through the glorification of the Roses as martyr figures rather than communist activists.

The messages conveyed in *Las 13 rosas* are important because, as Archibald argues, information presented by film has the power to transform public perception of the past: “When historical events that have been suppressed over generations are projected onto cinema screens, these representations become increasingly important for formulating how audiences conceptualize past events” (79). Contemporary representations about the past also provide clues into current interests. Martin-Márquez explains that “contemporary literary texts are also routinely brought to the screen for their narrativization of the concerns that dominate Spanish newspapers, particularly the on-going violent conflicts with ETA and immigration issues” (750). The recuperation of historical memory has been in the media spotlight at the turn of the twenty-first century and onward. Artists and the general public are staking various claims in the debate through differing interpretations of civil war stories, including that of the Thirteen Roses.

Both Fonseca’s textual account and the Roses’ film clearly depict the women as symbols of the fight against social oppression. Fonseca’s account is more complete in providing a well-rounded assessment of the events leading to the Roses’ execution as well as some of their individual

roles as communist activists. The written narrative also provides a commentary on the challenges and difficulties of the recuperation of historical memory in the twenty-first century. In the afterglow of Fonseca's success, *Las 13 rosas* shows how some cultural works are moving away from historical discovery and experimenting with other imaginative forms of representing the past. The Roses' film combines fiction and history to create a cultural product that aims to entertain and inspire, rather than educate, people about the past. While this experimentation may be successful, it can also be historically misleading.

Although it was nominated for several Goya awards and won for best soundtrack, photography, costume, and supporting actor (José Manuel Cervino), *Las 13 rosas* was not as popular as Martínez-Lázaro's previous films—both of which are comedies (“Las trece rosas”). *Otro lado de la cama* (2002) had close to 3 million spectators and earned 23.5 million euros in box office revenue (“Otro lado”). *Otro lado*'s sequel, *Los 2 lados de la cama* (2005) attracted 1.5 million spectators and grossed close to 8 million euros (“Los 2 lados”). *Las 13 rosas* had 863,000 viewers and brought in 4.5 million euros in revenue (“Las trece rosas”). The film's success may have been affected by the negative media coverage of Martínez-Lázaro's decision to depoliticize the Roses' story.

Published on the leftist news website www.laRepublica.es, the article “Las Trece Rosas ya no son Rojas” denounces the portrayal of the Roses and how their lives were recorded by the film. The author also connects the motives of the film with Prime Minister Zapatero, who lobbied in support of the Law of Historical Memory: “Despojar de su dignidad, sus principios y su ideología a esas trece mujeres asesinadas por los franquistas en aras de llenar las salas de cine o de ayudar a Zapatero a ‘vender’ una floja Ley de Memoria Histórica es lo que se ha hecho con esta película.”¹³ Martínez-Lázaro blames the Law of Historical Memory for heightened criticism of his production, which was released a few months prior to the Law on September 14, 2007: “Seguro alguien se molesta. Pero no tanto si no hubiera habido un momento político tan crispado como el que vivimos con ocasión de la aprobación de la Ley de la Memoria Histórica” (Estrada 15). He also alludes to the fact that *Las 13 rosas* is not restricted to historical facts in the same way as Fonseca's nonfiction account; the film does not cite sources, nor does it need to have a logical argument or weigh evidence. Nonetheless, film and other cultural media do play a role in how individuals and groups inherit social and cultural knowledge. Martínez-Lázaro's interpretation most definitely shapes not only the Roses' memory but also their legacy.

Through a comparison of Fonseca's text and Martínez-Lázaro's film, it is possible to see how the Thirteen Roses are deeply implicated in the ongoing process of remembering the Spanish Civil War and how war stories are appropriated, interpreted, and negotiated within a public framework. As shown by these two interpretations, there is no unified consensus for how to represent and discuss the Spanish Civil War. While some writers like Fonseca remain faithful to the historical reality—perhaps

in an effort to promote social awareness and activism—other artists such as Martínez-Lázaro avoid using their work as a means to accomplish these outcomes. Because of its omission of torture—among other things—Martínez-Lázaro’s film does not adhere to Adorno’s concept of “authentic art,” defined by Kellner as “an aesthetic experience that generates critical consciousness and the need for individual and social transformation” (93). While film spectators no doubt ponder the Roses’ defeat, they leave the theater with only a vague understanding of the conflict and trauma from the civil war and dictatorship, and with even less of an understanding of how these events are related to twenty-first century Spain.

The accounts by Fonseca and Martínez-Lázaro represent two differing approaches to commemorating the Roses, and point to the contrasting debates over the larger process of recuperation of historical memory in Spain. Fonseca’s narrative addresses the politics of the past, but also uses the Roses’ commentary to critique politics in the present by pointing out a gap in the public knowledge of this time in history. Fonseca gets his readers to think not only about what happened to the Roses, but also about the politics of the present by revealing some of the pitfalls in the process of recuperation of historical memory in the twenty-first century—including the difficulty of conducting archival research.¹⁴ In contrast, the Roses’ film makes audiences only shallowly reflect upon Spain’s recent past by steering them away from serious debates and inserting sexy actresses, humor, and suspense as distractions. In so doing, the film suggests that it is not constructive to delve into traumatic, controversial, and painful realities of the civil war. Instead, it is more beneficial to avoid such topics. Although Spaniards are far from reaching an agreement on how to heal from past divides, the Roses’ alluring story will continue to be interpreted and told, thus transforming their legacy as well as their memory.

Notes

¹ In her article “Memory and Modernity in Democratic Spain: The Difficulty of Coming to Terms with the Spanish Civil War,” Jo Labanyi identifies some of the key literary and cinematic works on this topic.

² The “Thirteen Roses” include Carmen Barrero Aguado, Martina Barroso García, Blanca Brisac Vázquez, Pilar Bueno Ibáñez, Julia Conesa Conesa, Adelina García Casillas, Elena Gil Olaya, Virtudes González García, Ana López Gallego, Joaquina López Laffite, Dionisia Manzanero Salas, Victoria Muñoz García, and Luisa Rodríguez de la Fuente.

³ Literary and cultural accounts about the Roses include novels by Dulce Chacón (*La voz dormida*, 2002), Jesús Ferrero (*Las trece rosas*, 2003), and Ángeles López (*Martina, la rosa número trece*, 2006); theater productions by Júlia Bel (*Las trece rosas*, 2006) and Maxi de Diego (*Abuela Sol y las Trece Rosas*, 2008); Carlos Fonseca’s book-length historical study (*Las trece rosas rojas*, 2004); and Emilio Martínez-Lázaro’s film inspired by Fonseca’s account, *Las 13 rosas* (2007).

⁴ Historians have heavily debated the narrative mode of representation of historical accounts, including whether events can be truthfully represented using techniques more commonly associated with fiction. In *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Hayden White addresses the function of narrative structure in historical writing, concluding that “what distinguishes ‘historical’ from ‘fictional’ stories is first and foremost their content, rather than form” (27).

⁵ For a larger study about the executions that took place in postwar Madrid, see Mirta Núñez Díaz-Balart and Antonio Rojas Friend’s *Consejo de guerra: Los fusilamientos en el Madrid de la Posguerra (1939-1945)*.

⁶ Fonseca’s other works include *Negociar con ETA* (1996), *Garrote vil para dos inocentes* (1998), and *Tiempo de memoria* (2009) about the attempted assassination of Francisco Franco in Ceuta by José Rico.

⁷ The testimony of Maruja Cuesta, found in Shirley Mangini’s *Memories of Resistance*, is one example that explains why some women joined the JSU.

⁸ Sánchez also appeared in the popular television program *Los Serrano* before appearing in other recent films such as *El calentito* (2005).

⁹ Scholars such as Hayden White and Geoffrey Hartman have written about the ethics of visual representations of historical events, drawing upon examples from the Holocaust. Hartman points to the responsibility of historians and film-makers alike to represent the past; the representation of Nazi genocide, for instance, is considered “an act with an entailed responsibility” (3). Hartman argues that fictional recreation of the past can also be “open to popular misuse, especially in the form of televised simplification” (30).

¹⁰ In her analysis of *Mazurca para dos muertos*, Bertrand de Muñoz states that “el partidismo, la pasión política han desaparecido en este libro...” (41).

¹¹ On October 15, 2006, during its opening weekend, *Laberinto del fauno* grossed €1,545,313.

¹² See María Asunción Gómez's "Feminism and Anarchism: Remembering the Role of Mujeres Libres in the Spanish Civil War" (293-94).

¹³ The article questions why the release date of the film was delayed, stating: "La razón parece estar clara: había que esperar a las fechas en las que se llegara a un acuerdo sobre la Ley".

¹⁴ See Fonseca's critique of how archival documents have been poorly handled (116).

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