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Bearing Witness: The Representation of Francesc Boix (1920-1951) in Lea Vélez's "El jardín de la memoria"

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CHAPTER THREE

BEARING WITNESS: THE REPRESENTATION OF FRANCESC BOIX (1920-1951) IN LEA VÉLEZ'S *EL JARDÍN DE LA MEMORIA* (2014)

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss the representation of the historical figure and Catalan war photographer, Francesc Boix Campo—who survived the Mauthausen Nazi concentration camp—in the 2014 testimonial grief memoir, *El jardín de la memoria*, by the contemporary Spanish author and scriptwriter, Lea Vélez (Madrid, 1970). Firstly, it will give a brief introduction to Francesc Boix. Secondly, the focus will be on the lack of both public and political acknowledgement accorded to Spanish Republicans who endured the concentration camp experience. Subsequently, consideration will be given to some of the ethical and aesthetic issues which arise for authors and artists when attempting to portray something as horrific as the Holocaust, particularly when creating fictional representations of affiliative postmemory. Finally, the chapter will reflect on the extent to which Lea Vélez manages to negotiate these ethical and aesthetic obstacles in her representation of Boix.

Introduction to Francesc Boix

After fighting on the losing side of the Spanish Civil War, Francesc Boix, along with nearly half a million Spanish Republicans, went into exile in France. Faced with the prospect of returning to Spain, where they were no longer welcome, many volunteered for the Resistance or French Foreign Legion, fighting against the Germans. Boix joined the *Compañía de Trabajadores*. During the German invasion of France in World War II, a number of these Republicans were sent to Stalags and then deported to Nazi concentration camps. On 27 January 1941, Boix was transported to Mauthausen, along with 1506 other Spanish Republicans (Tobin Stanley 2011, 41), where he would remain for the next four years until the camp's liberation. He was one of an estimated 7000 Spaniards who would pass through the camp. At first, he was forced to endure the grueling task of constructing the camp, working in a nearby quarry which was connected to the camp by a staircase of 186 steps, the so-called "Staircase of Death".¹ Boix joined the communist resistance movement in the camp, the aim of which was to save as many Spaniards as possible. They did this by moving *Kapos* from their posts of responsibility and by collaborating in the camp's administrative services. Boix, who had learned some German during his stay in the *Stalag*, was soon assigned the role of camp interpreter. As he was a photographer, in August 1941, he managed to assume a privileged position in the *Erkennungsdienst*, or photographic laboratory, revealing the negative photos, alongside another Spanish photographer, Antonio García and, later, José Cereceda. Aware of the documentary value of these images—they were evidence of the brutalities that were taking place inside the camp—Boix made extra copies of the photos, and, with the assistance of the communist resistance movement, the *Poschacher*,² and the Austrian and Republican sympathiser, Anna Pointner, the photos made their way outside the camp and were hidden in a hole in Pointner's garden wall in the village of Mauthausen.³ Although there are conflicting versions about who was responsible for revealing and concealing the negative photographs—Antonio García claimed that Boix stole photos that he himself had revealed and hidden—the majority of historians and eye-witness accounts side with Boix's version of events.⁴ With the fall of Berlin and Hitler's death by suicide, Boix got hold of a Leica camera and photographed

¹ Gary Weissman describes these fatal steps in *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* 2004, 2-3, whereby prisoners were forced to carry stones—weighing up to 50 kilograms—up the 186 steps. Prisoners often collapsed from exhaustion, falling on other prisoners in the line.

² The *Poschacher* were youths between 14 and 18 years old, children of Spanish Republicans, who worked outside the camp in a quarry belonging to the *Poschacher*, from which they got their name.

³ It was not until 2015 that a plaque was unveiled to commemorate the role played by Anna Pointner for helping the *Poschacher* Kommando, to smuggle photographs—including over 2000 Leica negatives collected by Boix—out of the camp.

⁴ See Sara J. Brenneis: *Spaniards in Mauthausen: Representations of a Nazi Concentration Camp 1940-2015*, 2018, 62, footnote 34. See also David Wingeate Pike's recent publication, *Dos fotografías en Mauthausen: Antonio García and Francesc Boix*. 2018. A Coruña: Ediciones del Viento and "Les photographes de Mauthausen: aspects nouveaux d'une

the moments following the camp's liberation. Once the Second World War came to an end, these photographs, and the stolen negatives, were crucial to the Nuremberg trials at which the young Boix gave evidence in 1946 in the prosecution of war criminals, and later at Dachau, before he died at the age of 30 in 1951. Notwithstanding the fact that he was the only Spaniard to testify against the Nazis, until recently, his role in contemporary Spanish history has been eclipsed in both the Spanish public and political spheres. In order to understand this lack of recognition, it is important to consider Spain's contradictory relationship with the Holocaust.

Spain and the Holocaust

According to the French political scientist, Pierre Nora, "Whoever says memory, says Shoah".⁵ However, as we shall see, this ostensible association between memory and the Holocaust has heretofore not been so apparent in Spain. Notwithstanding the boom of interest in historical memory which has influenced Spanish culture, politics and society since the 1990s, the country's relationship with the Nazi Holocaust has not been afforded adequate attention. The history of Spaniards (mainly male Spanish Republicans)⁶ who suffered and/or were killed in Nazi concentration camps—specifically Mauthausen—has not been sufficiently acknowledged in Spain, nor has it formed part of the broader discussion in Holocaust Studies on an international level. Although the number of Spanish victims of Nazi fascism pales in comparison to that of their Jewish counterparts, and the cause and type of suffering they endured was different, this does not justify the silencing and minimising of their experience.

Although there is no consensus on the exact figures, an estimated 10 to 15000 Spaniards were sent to Nazi concentration camps in Germany and Austria, of which more than 5000 were killed.⁷ The camp of Mauthausen-Gusen in Austria held around 7,300 Spanish prisoners-of-war, of whom less than one-third survived.⁸ These "unacknowledged ghosts"—in the words of Sara J. Brenneis—were vilified and disowned by Franco (7). Through creating an authoritarian climate of fear and repression, the *Caudillo* pushed numerous Spanish Republicans and sympathisers into exile and later washed his hands of them by denying them their Spanish citizenship and leaving them to suffer an inhumane existence or death in Nazi concentration camps.⁹ Montserrat Roig, in her 1977 publication, *Noche y niebla: Los catalanes en los campos nazis*, repudiates the silence imposed by the Franco dictatorship against those who, having lost the Civil War, were forced to suffer the nightmare of deportation and Nazi concentration camps:

Mientras que de la Guerra Civil nos han llegado noticias, falseadas o no, a las nuevas generaciones, sobre los campos de exterminio nazis había un silencio total. Parecía que no hubiesen existido nunca republicanos víctimas del nazifascismo alemán. Hasta 1968 no hay ninguna nota oficial sobre los muertos españoles en los campos nazis. Si algún deportado pregunta sobre su situación a los organismos oficiales, le contestan que todo está en estudio. Hasta

affaire célèbre". *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*. 2005. 2: 218: 85-99. Online: <https://doi.org/10.3917/gmcc.218.0085>

⁵ Cited in Jay Winter: "The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the 'Memory Boom' in Contemporary Historical Studies" *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* Vol. 1, March 2007, 363.

⁶ Although the majority of Spaniards who ended up in Nazi concentration camps had either fought on the side of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War or were sympathetic to the Republican cause, a small minority were civilians in exile. As Sara J. Brenneis points out in *Spaniards in Mauthausen: Representations of a Nazi Concentration Camp 1940-2015*, most of them were not Jewish. As a result of the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century, there were very few Sephardic Jews left in Spain in the 1940s. Brenneis differentiates the status and treatment that the Spanish Republicans received at the hands of the Nazis from that of their Jewish counterparts: "they are not victims of the Holocaust. Rather, they are victims of the policies and practices of the Nazis and witnesses to the Holocaust" (5). They were not persecuted in the same way as Jews—"they were not subject to policies of extermination" (6)—yet they were also targets of Nazi brutality; they too were imprisoned, subjugated, enslaved, and in some cases, killed (5). As Brenneis explains, the fact that they were not Jewish helps to clarify one of the reasons for their exclusion from Holocaust studies, but it also provides justification for a distinctly Spanish representation of Nazi oppression (7). Brenneis also observes that "A disproportionate number of Catalans figured among the Mauthausen deportees. Their language and culture was repressed by Franco and thus they were marginalized twice over, denied their Catalan identity as well as their Spanish identity by the dictatorship authorities who deported them to Nazi camps" (38).

⁷ As Brenneis points out, historians have not been able to reach a consensus about the exact number of Spaniards who suffered the concentrationary experience, nor of those who died as a result. See Brenneis, 5, FN 3, 2018.

⁸ Sánchez, P., "Francesc Boix, un fotógrafo en el infierno nazi". *Cultura en acción*. 26/10/2015 <http://www.culturaenaccion.com/francesc-boix/> Access date: 22/03/2018.

⁹ Ramón Serrano Suñer, Franco's foreign minister and brother-in-law, met with Hitler in Berlin in September 1940 to discuss what to do with Spanish exiles in German-occupied France. As a result of this meeting, the Gestapo ordered the forced imprisonment of the Spanish *Rotsparienkämpfer* ('reds'). Although Suñer never admitted that he or the Spanish government had any awareness that Spaniards were being imprisoned and killed in Nazi concentration camps, documents and letters have proved otherwise. (See Brenneis, 11).

1974, el Gobierno español no ha transmitido ningún certificado de muerte en el campo de Mauthausen. ([1977] 2017, loc. 6585)¹⁰

The history of the defeated Spanish Republicans who were deported to Nazi camps has been silenced, oppressed and underrepresented in the public and political realms, not only during the Franco dictatorship, but also in certain political groups during the Transition and the Democratic periods in Spain. Indeed, it was not until 2015 that the first five *Stolpersteine* plaques or “stumbling blocks” were installed in Spain by the artist Gunter Demnig in memory of five Catalans who had been deported to Mauthausen.¹¹ Only in 2017 did the Catalan government commemorate the victims of Nazism with a plaque at Mauthausen camp.¹² It is also significant that it was not until that same year that the French gave Boix an honourable burial in the Parisienne Père-Lachaise cemetery, which, quite tellingly, was attended by only one low-ranking consular representative from Spain. The Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy’s decision not to be present at the event, even though he was in Paris at the time, was criticised in a number of Spanish media outlets.¹³

Although it pales in comparison to the boom of historical memory texts related to the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship, there is a growing corpus of works which deal with Spanish Republicans in Nazi concentration camps. While historical literature was published during the Franco dictatorship in relation to the experience of concentration camps, with works by Joaquim Amat-Piniella (*K.L. Reich* (1963)) and Jorge Semprún (*El largo viaje* (1963)), it was not until the 1970s and ’80s when testimonies were published by authors such as Montserrat Roig and Neus Catalá, among others.¹⁴ As Brenneis points out, the pact of silence in the 1980s coincided with a lull in the Spanish representation of concentration camps, particularly Mauthausen, but by the late 1990s, a second wave of survivor memoirs, a surge in personal testimonies, and historical studies had been published, showing an increasing interest in the Spanish experience of Nazi concentration camps (Brenneis 2018, 183).¹⁵ The last decade has seen a boom in what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory” accounts by second- and third-generation relatives and “affiliative postmemory” creations by individuals who have no family connection to the Holocaust. Notwithstanding this, Brenneis laments the lack of recognition accorded to Spanish narratives that depict the Mauthausen concentration camp. As she states in her book which analyses various literary and artistic representations of Spaniards in Mauthausen, published in 2018: “These creations remain relatively unknown inside Spain and entirely unknown outside the country” (p.7).

Until recently, the same could be said for Francesc Boix. Montserrat Roig briefly mentions Boix in her book *Noche y niebla: Los catalanes en los campos nazis* (1977). However, it was not until 2000 that the film director Llorenç Soler, the executive producer Oriol Porta, and the historian Benito Bermejo, saved him from oblivion with their documentary *Francesc Boix, un fotógrafo en el infierno* (2000), which is based on witness testimonials, mainly from survivors of the camp.¹⁶ Two years later, Bermejo published a book in which he reconstructs the life of the photographer and illustrates many of the photographs taken at the camp.¹⁷ This followed a theatre production in 2014,¹⁸ along with Lea Vélez’s book, *El jardín de la memoria*. In 2018, there was an

¹⁰ This book was originally published in Catalan with the title: *Els catalans als camps nazis* (1977).

¹¹ The artist Gunter Demnig commemorates the victims of National Socialism by placing brass plaques or *Stolpersteine* in front of their last address of choice. See <http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>

¹² “El Govern homenatja a Mauthausen totes les víctimes del nazisme” *Prensa: Generalitat de Catalunya*. 7 May 2017. Online: http://premsa.gencat.cat/pres_fsvp/AppJava/notapremsavw/300646/ca/govern-homenatja-mauthausen-victimes-nazisme.do

¹³ “El Gobierno tendrá que explicar por qué Mariano Rajoy ignoró el homenaje al fotógrafo español de Mauthausen”. *El Diaro*. 20/06/2017. Online: https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/Gobierno-Mariano-Rajoy-fotografo-Mauthausen_0_656534799.html

¹⁴ Such as *Españoles bajo el III Reich. Recuerdos de un triángulo azul* (1970) by J. Alfaya, *Los años rojos: Españoles en los campos nazis* (1974) by M. Constante, *Els catalans als camps nazis* (1977) by Montserrat Roig, *El carretó dels gossos: Una catalana a Ravensbrück* (1980) by Mercè Núñez Targa and *De la resistencia y la deportación* (1984) by Neus Catalá.

¹⁵ *Spaniards in the Holocaust. Mauthausen, the Horror of the Danube* (2000) by David Wingate Pike, *Una inmensa prisión: Los campos de concentración y las prisiones durante la guerra civil y el franquismo* (2003) by C. Moliner, M. Sala and J. Sobreques, *Les dones als camps nazi* (2003) by David Serrano i Blanquer, *Un español frente al Holocausto. Así salvó Ángel Sanz Briz a 5000 judíos* (2005) by Diego Caicedo, *El Holocausto de los republicanos españoles: Vida y muerte en los campos de exterminio alemanes (1940-1945)* (2005) by Eduardo Pons Prados, *Los campos de concentración nazis: Palabras contra el olvido* (2005) by Rosa Toran, and the recently published *Spaniards in Mauthausen: Representations of a Nazi Concentration Camp, 1940-2015* (2018) by Sara J. Brenneis.

¹⁶ For an analysis of this documentary, see Brenneis, pp.210-213. See also Alicia Alted Vigil’s article, “Reflexiones en torno a un documental histórico: Francisco Boix, fotógrafo en el infierno”, *Migraciones & Exilios*, Madrid, n° 1, 2000, pp. 235-238.

¹⁷ Bermejo, B., *Francisco Boix: El fotógrafo de Mauthausen* (Barcelona: RBA Libros, 2002).

¹⁸ *El triángulo azul*, written and directed by Laila Ripoll, was performed in the Valle-Inclán Theatre, Madrid, April 2014.

exhibition on the photographer's life,¹⁹ a comic book, entitled *El fotógrafo de Mauthausen* (2018) by Salva Rubio, Pedro J. Colombo and Aintzane Landa,²⁰ and a Spanish film, also entitled *El fotógrafo de Mauthausen* and directed by Mar Targarona, which was premiered in Spain on 26 October 2018. A number of these latter texts have been influenced by Soler, Porta and Bermejo's aforementioned documentary, which, according to Brenneis, portrays a biased view of the photographer as a mythical hero:

It is clear that the filmmaker depends on drama and suspense to elicit an immediate reaction in his audience: outrage and disgust at the actions of the Nazis melded with admiration and pity for the heroic and long-gone Boix [...]

Francisco Boix [: *Un fotógrafo en el infierno*] is a glossy melodrama told with urgency. (210)

However, as Boix died at the age of 30 in 1951, the only way that spectators and readers have of accessing his past is through witness testimonials (such as the documentary) or imaginative recreation, which, as we shall see, is apparent in Lea Vélez's *El jardín de la memoria*.

“Affiliative Postmemory” and Fictional Holocaust Representation

In this generically hybrid grief memoir, Vélez reconstructs key events from the life of Boix. However, unlike the documentary, this reconstruction is not a first-hand, or even a second-hand, testimonial account. Rather, it is appropriated by Vélez as a thirdhand “affiliative postmemory” of the experience of others. Hirsch first coined the now well-known concept of postmemory in the context of Holocaust Studies, but it has since been expanded to include

the relationships that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. [...] Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection and creation. (2012, 5)

Hirsch also refers to the “affiliative postmemory” of those who have no direct familial relationship to the Holocaust. This chimes with what Marije Hristova calls “distanced witnessing” (Hristova 2016, 189). This “imaginative investment”, and distancing from first-hand witness accounts inevitably leads to the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction. This raises a number of ethical and aesthetic questions that intersect with controversial debates over how an event such as the Holocaust should be represented and who has the right to represent it.

Contentious debates have arisen in the field of Holocaust Studies regarding the fictionalisation of such a barbaric and traumatic experience, which, for some, has been deemed inexpressible. Theodor Adorno's oft-quoted statement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1983, 34) reflects the idea that Holocaust fiction and films etc., risk dehistoricising and minimising the inhumane atrocities experienced by those in Nazi camps.²¹ Elie Wiesel, among others, has argued against fictional representations of the Holocaust, particularly by those who had not experienced it and he claims that “‘The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration’ is a contradiction in terms” (1997, 7). In *Hispanic Studies*, Antonio Muñoz Molina's *Sefarad* has been criticised for dehistoricising the Holocaust.²² Javier Cercas's *El impostor* recounts the deliberate yet false impersonation of a concentration camp survivor, Enric Marco.²³ On the other hand, Jorge Semprún, who survived the Buchenwald camp, emphasises the importance of transmitting historical events through the medium of story and counteracts the notion that the concentration camp experience is unspeakable. As he states in his 1995 memoir *La escritura o la vida*, “Únicamente el artificio de un relato dominado conseguirá transmitir parcialmente la verdad del testimonio” (25). In this regard, Maureen Tobin Stanley purports that

History is perceived as more real when narrativized, when a reader's pathos is awakened and s/he can then identify with the experience, with having lived through and partaken in events. Semprún communicates that only when shocking history is told as a story (relato) can it be transmitted, can the destined audience understand it. A specific universal connection is then made between the narrator and the narratee, the emitter and the receptor because of its

¹⁹ “Españoles deportados a campos de concentración nazis 1949-1945”. Portal de Archivos Españoles. Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte: Gobierno de España. <http://pares.mcu.es/Deportados/servlets/ServletController> Access date: 22/03/2018.

²⁰ Salva Rubio, Pedro J. Colombo and Aintzane Landa: *El fotógrafo de Mauthausen*. Cómics Europeo, 2018.

²¹ Adorno later tempered this claim, recognising that “suffering [...] also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids” (1997, 252).

²² See: A. Gómez López-Quiñones. 2004. *El Holocausto según Antonio Muñoz Molina: Ética y escritura en Sefarad*. *Ojancano: revista de literatura española*, 26, pp. 59-75; H. Lauge Hansen. 2007. *España y la otra cara de la modernidad europea. Una lectura de Sefarad de Antonio Muñoz Molina*. F. Linares Alés and María del Carmen Ávila Martín (eds). *Actas del X Simposio Internacional de la Asociación Andaluza de Semiótica* (Granada: Universidad), pp. 241-248; and Sara J. Brenneis. 2018. pp. 35, 230-231.

²³ See Sara J. Brenneis, 2018, pp. 35-36, 225-227.

human import. By being pulled into a work (be it visual or written) the viewer/reader has a subjective experience and awakens to an other's unique experience that now becomes a shared experience. (Tobin Stanley 43-44)

Francesc Boix in *El jardín de la memoria*

How do third-generation authors represent something as horrific as the Holocaust when they have no direct experience or memory of such an event? According to Jessica Lang, they represent it through indirect means.²⁴ Lang notes a trend among third-generation authors, who, she claims, tend to consider the Holocaust “as an indirect part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important histories” (Lang 46). Typical of this trend, *El jardín* is not principally about Boix. The central storyline is told from the first-person perspective of the author-narrator, Lea, in which she charts the final month of life of her terminally-ill husband, George Collinson, and his subsequent death from cancer. As she cares for him and looks after their two young children, she decides to write about her experience, which, in a metafictional turn, becomes the book that we are reading. This main narrative thread alternates with two stories from the past which the author reconstructs. The second plotline centres on letters between George's English family and his brother Stephen in the 1950s, while the ill boy was in hospital before he died of leukemia at the age of ten, when George was seven years' old. It is the third narrative thread which focuses on the historical reconstruction of key moments in the life of Boix. Vélez's text of mirrors explores a number of parallels between these three seemingly disparate tales. The text is a generically hybrid assemblage, which interweaves grief memoir, autobiography, biography, personal essay, testimony, the epistolary genre, and film script *inter alia*. This generic fusion oscillates between the public and the private, the historical and the personal, individual and collective memory, autobiography and biography, and between testimony and fiction.²⁵

Vélez's portrayal of Boix, and of the Spanish experience of Mauthausen, is highly subjective. She is completely removed—both temporally and geographically—from the experience of the camp. Yet, she does not aim to give an objective rendition of events and continuously emphasises her subjective perspective as well as the constructed nature of the text. Although the basic information of the photographer's story and the Mauthausen experience reflect the historical reality of the time, Boix is represented from a twenty-first century perspective through a fictional lens. Vélez explicitly blends historical events with subjective invention. In the prologue, she clarifies:

Esto es una novela real que algunos describen como testimonio. Los personajes de este libro son o fueron. Las cartas de Stephen y sus cuadernos de colegio existen. De ellos no he cambiado ni una coma. El presente es fiel hasta la extenuación y del pasado tan sólo he recreado algunas escenas y diálogos para mostrar las piezas perdidas de la historia.

Not only does Vélez blend reality with fiction by referring to the text as a “novela real” (similar to Javier Cercas)²⁶ she also openly acknowledges that she has recreated scenes and dialogues which are based on historical facts. It is these “piezas perdidas de la historia” which constitute the most fictive elements of the text. The author reinforces this blending of historical facts with imaginative recreation by stating near the end of the text that: “Todo es verdad, hasta los momentos recreados y reconstruidos, porque para hacerlo me he basado en una exhaustiva documentación” (243). However, apart from the translated and transcribed letters relating to Stephen's final months of life, Vélez does not provide any paratextual or textual bibliographic information to support her exhaustive documentation on Francesc Boix or the Mauthausen experience. Notwithstanding this, Vélez discussed her source materials in a recent Skype interview. Inspired after reading an article on the historian Benito Bermejo's research on Boix, Vélez recounts that she then went on to study the recordings and transcriptions of witness testimonies from the Nuremberg trial. Subsequently, she watched the documentary by Soler, Porta and Bermejo as well as various eye-witness accounts uploaded to *YouTube* by the Amical de Mauthausen.²⁷ Indeed, Vélez's generically hybrid text substantiates Aarons and Berger's view that, “[t]he third generation makes pilgrimages to

²⁴ Jessica Lang, “*The History of Love*, the Contemporary Reader and the Transmission of Holocaust Memory”. *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1: 43-56 (2009). Lang is referring to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, yet this could also apply to the generation of “affiliative postmemory” (Hirsch 2012, 5) in Spain.

²⁵ In relation to both genre and subject matter, this text has similarities with Rosa Montero's *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte* (2013). For an analysis of Montero's 2013 text, see Deirdre Kelly. 2018. “Aesth/Ethics of Distance: (Un)Veiling Grief in Rosa Montero's *La ridícula idea de no volver a verte*”. *New Journeys in Iberian Studies: A (Trans-)National and (Trans-)Regional Exploration*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing Ltd. Eds. Mark Gant, Annaliese Hutton and Paco Ruzzante, 19-34.

²⁶ In both *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *Relatos reales* (2000), Cercas continuously emphasises the constructed nature of his stories. In the former text, Cercas, the narrator, introduces the concept of “relato real”: “el libro que iba a escribir no sería una novela, sino solo un relato real, un relato cocido a la realidad, amasado con hechos y personajes reales” (2001, 52).

²⁷ Deirdre Kelly: Unpublished Skype Interview with Lea Vélez. 10 November 2018. For information on the Amical de Mauthausen, see the website: <http://amical-mauthausen.org/>

what Pierre Nora terms ‘sites of memory’, engaging in extensive archival research [...] in its quest for further factual knowledge about the Holocaust”.²⁸

In her reconstruction of Boix’s life, Vélez mainly focuses on the photographer’s life after Mauthausen. She refers to verifiable historical events of his life, interspersed with the other two plotlines and narrated in achronological order: collecting the photos from Ana Pointner; the liberation of the camp and Boix’s presence at the death of the S.S. officer Zeireis; Boix’s move to Paris and giving the photos for publication to the French magazine *Regards*; his involvement in the Spanish Civil War and subsequent internment in the French refugee camp at Stepfonds; bearing witness at the Nuremberg trial in 1946; and his death in 1951 at the age of 30. In a cinematic style—evincing her background as a scriptwriter—Vélez recreates Boix’s testimony at the Nuremberg trials, in which he describes in detail a number of the photographs he took and others he copied.

Although the author remains faithful to the basic historical facts, she fills in the gaps through imaginative recreation. Early in the text, George advises Lea to use her poetic licence and to transgress the rules: “No seas literal. Nunca seas literal. Salte siempre del renglón, en tu vida y en tus novelas” (103-104). Thus, her portrayal of Boix is full of speculations and conjectures. For instance, despite the fact that Boix was not present at the Battle of Ebro, she imagines that he was there: “Boix no estuvo en la Batalla del Ebro [...] pero su fantasma literario se me aparece junto al margen del río, en retirada, fotografiando la triste voladura del puente de Flix” (53-54). Although Vélez cannot possibly know what he was thinking, she speculates about this by imagining what she would have thought if she were in his situation: “Boix pensaba que volvería a España. Al menos, yo imagino que lo pensaba porque yo lo habría pensado” (54). Rather than providing a semblance of narrative reality, Vélez self-consciously alludes to the artificiality of the text as she openly admits to reconstructing scenes with Boix. Furthermore, she highlights the subjectivity of her portrayal of Boix as she refers to him affectionately as “mi fotógrafo”. Vélez sees the ghostly apparition of Boix appear before her eyes, and she admits to feeling responsible for how she portrays him. The narrator imagines what Boix must have been thinking, and in a process of free association, she visualises these speculated thoughts: “Mi fotógrafo se dice que una forma de hacer justicia sería obligar a los nazis capturados a reconstruir cada edificio con sus propias manos y después, pasarlos a cuchillo. Imagina ríos de sangre por las calles empedradas” (97-98). She gets away with such conjectures by subsequently acknowledging that they are based on speculation: “Puede que se diga eso... O tal vez no se diga nada” (98).

Vélez alludes to an incomprehensible, unimaginable secret that she believes Boix must have kept to himself about his experience in Mauthausen: “Yo juraría hoy que Boix, desde París, piensa a veces en la vida en Mauthausen y le parece que ha muerto [...] No desea volver a la incomprensión. Mi fotógrafo guarda un secreto. Tiene un secreto que no quiere compartir. Algo inimaginable. Un secreto sobre su encierro. Su secreto no se ve en las fotos” (38). Upon first reading, it appears that this secret alludes to the inexpressibility of the Holocaust experience. However, later in the text, it is inferred that the fictive Boix reveals this unimaginable secret to Lea in a dream. In her most fictionalised portrayal of Boix, Lea recounts a dream she had in which she is sitting in the sun in the Père-Lachese cemetery having a conversation with the photographer and the Deputy Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier (220-226).²⁹ This conversation is reminiscent of Miralles in Javier Cercas’s *Soldados de Salamina*.³⁰ The fictive Boix tells Lea: “La mayoría de mis amigos no tiene lápida ni nombre, nada más que perviven en la memoria”. Lea replies: “Perviven en más que en eso, Paco. Están en nuestros gestos, en nuestras creencias, en la opinión que propagamos al vivo. Aunque suene a frase mil veces repetida, somos como somos gracias a los que ya fueron” (221). The imaginary Boix tells Lea that death is not the worst thing that can happen in life, and that he even experienced moments of something close to happiness in Mauthausen. He goes on to describe a day when the S.S. stripped down all of the 8000 prisoners and left them sitting naked in the patio all day. The prisoners took the opportunity to organise a communist meeting: “Estábamos en pelotas, sobre el granito caliente y hablábamos de comunismo y de todo lo que nos quedaba por hacer. Aquel día fui feliz. Lo recuerdo con nostalgia” (225). This description of Boix could lead to accusations of sugarcoating such an atrocity and minimising the horrors of the concentration camp experience. Throughout the text, Vélez focuses on his smile, (“Boix siempre sonreía” (14)), and his optimistic, nostalgic outlook on life. She does not include any of the disagreements he was alleged to have had with Antonio García. Similar to Soler, Porta and Bermejo’s aforementioned documentary, Vélez’s text may be accused of providing a one-dimensional portrayal of Boix—presenting him as an optimistic, heroic legend—and of minimising the Spanish concentration camp experience, which is described here in nostalgic terms. However, as Lea’s conversation with Boix is presented overtly as an

²⁸ Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger, *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 11 (2017). Aarons and Berger are referring to the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, yet this could also apply to the generation of “affiliative postmemory” (Hirsch 2012, 5) in Spain.

²⁹ Deputy Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier was a hero of the French Resistance who also testified at the Nuremberg Trial against the Nazis.

³⁰ “[C]uando Miralles muera, pensé, sus amigos también morirán del todo, porque no habrá nadie que se acuerde de ellos para que no mueran” (Cercas 2001, 201).

entirely fictional, oneiric encounter, rather than as an apparently real, historical event, such accusations may be tempered. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that, for most of his time in Mauthausen, Boix held privileged positions in administration posts, and although he documented them with his camera, he may have been sheltered to a certain extent from the atrocious conditions of some of the other prisoners. Also, it is necessary to consider Lea's dream-conversation in relation to the very real situation that the author-narrator was going through at the time, as she was confronting the fast-approaching death of her husband to cancer.

Why is Vélez so attracted to Boix's past, which she had never directly experienced? Why does she identify with him to such an extent? And why write about him in a memoir that focuses on the illness and death of her husband? Although it is easy to establish a number of links between the text's first two narrative threads—such as family ties and cancer narratives—the relationship between the Vélez-Collinson family and the Spanish Republican Boix, is—at first glance—not very clear, even to the author-narrator herself. In a metafictional slant, Vélez tries to substantiate and rationalise her reasons for her obsession with Boix. She says that she has always wanted to write a film script about his life. She suggests to George another one of the motives for writing about him: “Puede que busque algo aún peor que lo que nos está pasando” (27). She also gives both herself and her husband a joint project to work on together in the face of death. Boix's story helps her to understand her present situation and to justify her reasons for documenting and bearing witness to her own experience. Vélez wants to leave a testimony of the last stages of her husband's life not only for her young children to have something to remember their father by, but also because, although at times she thinks that she has turned his life into a literary project, she feels that she should tell it—“[r]egistrar lo vivido para contarlo” (98). She draws a parallel between her own manner of bearing witness, and that of Boix, who decided to let the world know about the atrocities that were being committed at Mauthausen, risking his life, so that the photographs of that horrific time would come out one day.

Boix and Stephen appear before Vélez as ghostly apparitions, with whom she becomes obsessed: “Era un aparecido. Stephen estaba en mi buhardilla. Me di cuenta de que también se me aparece un fotógrafo republicano. Los muertos del pasado vienen de visita” (43). In line with Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntologie, Vélez “ontologiz[es] the remains of the dead, making the defunct present in order to have knowledge of and face the past that continues to haunt in the present”.³¹ Vélez's affinity with Boix can also be understood by taking into account Hirsch's aforementioned concept of postmemory, which, according to Hirsch, “look[s] back to the past in order to move forward to the future”. Hirsch suggests that memory studies “might constitute a platform of activist and interventionist cultural and political engagement, a form of repair and redress” (2012, 16). In a similar vein, Alison Landsberg has claimed in her work on prosthetic memories—that is, memories that are not experienced directly by an individual but rather transmitted from parent to child or circulated through community life—that reconstructing, challenging and negotiating past events encourages empathy for others and a more profound understanding of life. Landsberg explains that, as “a person sutures himself or herself into a larger history”, prosthetic memories produce the “conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the other” (2004, 10); such memories “produce empathy and social responsibility” (2004, 21) so that one can “imagine and theorize strategies for a less oppressive, more just world” (2004, x). This view chimes with what Hirsch has termed an “ethics and aesthetics of remembrance” (2012, 2), which involves reflecting on and reconstructing a traumatic and significant past event and identifying with victims of injustice through “transgenerational empathy” (2012, 136) in search of a more tolerant, hopeful and humane future.³²

The story of Boix is represented as a mirror image for Vélez: like him, she suffers; she reassembles the vestiges of a fragile existence; and she wants to safeguard memories. Vélez is not comparing the pain of losing a loved one with the inexplicable atrocities experienced by Boix, (and, by extension, other Nazi camp survivors), but rather, she is drawing parallels between their ways of bearing witness to underline the importance of recording testimony. Notwithstanding the sugarcoating of his experience, through her depiction of Boix, Vélez draws attention to the underrepresented memory of the defeated and silenced in order to legitimise their version of reality. The alternating storylines of Stephen and Boix help Lea to find reference points, answers and guidance to aid her with navigating what was for her heretofore uncharted territory, dealing with the impending death of her partner. In each of the narrative strands, a witness documents suffering, and, as the author-narrator explains: “Ser testigo justifica la propia salvación” (150). Thus, there is a unifying thread which holds together these apparently fragmentary tales. *El jardín* encourages the reader to reflect on how we respond to extreme situations; by showing

³¹ Collins *et al.* 2016. “Introduction”. *(Re)Collecting the Past: Historical Memory in Spanish Literature and Culture*. Ed. Collins *et al.* Newcastle Upon Tyne. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. x-xiv; xii.

³² For a more detailed analysis on the intersections between postmemory, prosthetic memory and testimony, see Maureen Tobin Stanley's chapter, “The Accusatory Gaze of Children: Memory and Victimization in Fortes's *Waiting for Robert Capa*, Muñoz Molina's ‘Silencing Everything’ and Rodoreda's ‘Night and Fog’” in Collins *et al.* 2016, pp. 47-67.

how someone can face up to something as difficult as the death of a loved one with maturity, tenderness, love and dignity. It also sheds light on—and pays homage to—an uncomfortable historical figure from Spain's past. Vélez emphasises how little is known in Spain about Boix (and about Spanish Republicans in Nazi concentration camps), and yet, that, nevertheless, he was the only Spanish witness to testify in the international military tribunal in Nuremberg. Vélez transgresses the taboo of death and learns to accept it, as the three interwoven narrative strands bring us to an ending which is a celebration of life. She alludes to Boix as a reference point to give her guidance during a time of sadness, and to remind her—and the reader—of the importance of documenting one's suffering so that others can learn from it. This focus on Boix is also a way to help her contemporaries come to terms with the underrepresented legacy of the Civil War and to make a place in the public realm for those who suffered the consequences of Fascism and Nazism.

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Documentary

Francesc Boix, un fotógrafo en el infierno. 2000. Spain. Documentary. 55 mins. Production by Area de Television y Canal + Spain. Director: Llorenç Soler. Executive Producer: Oriol Porta. Historian: Benito Bermejo.