

# Identity Avatar<sup>1</sup>

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In the late 1990s David Vilaseca and myself shared a fascination with the autobiographical work of Catalan writer Terenci Moix (born in 1942). Although there are autobiographical elements in some of his fiction (*El dia que va morir Marilyn*, 1969), our interest was most engaged by the memoirs, a series of volumes titled *El peso de la Paja*. Three volumes had come out at the time, *El cine de los sábados* (1990), *El beso de Peter Pan* (1993) and *Extraño en el paraíso* (1998). At the time of Moix's death in 2003, the project which could have included at least two more volumes remained unfinished. I remember David saying that the thing that fascinated him most about the memoirs was their lack of reserve, their shamelessness. We settled on the Spanish "impudor" to name this attitude. David was a very private person in many ways, but Terenci modeled for him a way to at his own experience from the outside when writing his own autobiographical book. I guess he also strived to convey some of Moix's "impudor" in his own autobiographical fiction *L'aprenentatge de la soledat* (2007).

And yet my reading of the memoirs will take me into a different path to the ones followed by Vilaseca in his great essay on gay autobiography *Hindsight and the Real* (2003). At one point in this book he brings up an example from Sigmund Freud's response to the case of the "impotent Slovene" brought to him by a colleague; because of his absolute lack of morals and his blatant disrespect for the law and its implications, Freud considers that the subject is "beyond analysis." There is something in Moix's extraordinary account of himself that brought that example to mind. In spite of his actual resistance to psychoanalytic treatment in life, I am not saying that Moix is "beyond analysis" (and Vilaseca produced a great essay on Moix for his posthumously published collection *Queer Events*) but the Moix who represents himself as a young man in the text (the "Terenci" beyond "Ramón") seems to be so beyond the confines of the law of the father, so articulate in expressing his subjectivity that it encourages an analysis that engages with the literal rather than going beyond the literal through psychoanalytical codes. There was something in Moix resisted all kinds of limitations, including notions of what a writer should be like, what a Catalan should be like, and of course any cliché regarding masculinity or sexual identity. Actually, one key concept in Moix's childhood is that of "desorden," the intended title for what became *El dia que va morir Marilyn*. As described in *El cine de los sábados*, the "desorden" can clearly be likened to

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<sup>1</sup> This is a section of my David Vilaseca Memorial lecture read at Royal Holloway, University of London on 15 November 2016. It was a tribute to one of the most brilliant Spanish academics who died prematurely in 2010, and whose key work, *Hindsight and the Real* (2003), was on queer autobiography. It is a part of the research project entitled "Diversidad de género, masculinidad y cultura en España, Argentina y México" (FEM2015-69863-P MINECO-FEDER).

queerness. It presents queerness as the direct consequence of lack of order and structure. This of course is linked to the idea proposed by Michael Warner and taken up by Alexander Doty about the inherent “messiness” of queer expression in his volume of essays *Making Things Perfectly Queer*.

In the following pages I shall focus on two issues that are often closer than they should be, and I shall look into the reasons for their proximity. On the one hand, there is the story of growing up (or becoming) gay and the way this is represented in the writing. Vilaseca’s notion of “hindsight” in autobiography is extremely relevant here: one’s autobiographical account of growth into gayness needs to be framed within the logic of the “future perfect.” It is the future Terenci Moix who is always already the individual young Ramón will become. In her book on the queer child, Kathryn Bond Stockton puts this in terms which are closer to my own project on proto-gay children:

We should start again with the problem of the child as a general idea. The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy, making us wonder: Given that we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves, should we stop talking of children altogether? Should all talk of the child subside beyond our critique of the bad effects of looking back nostalgically in fantasy? (Stockton 5)

Ramón is Terenci’s fantasy, but it is never just a nostalgic one. In fact, grown-ups imagining queer childhoods can only do so through the metaphors of the ghost, and in his work Moix creates a series of ghosts that accompany his key characters.

Secondly, I will discuss a certain tendency in gay autobiography to represent this process through cinematic references and points of identification. Although I am not attempting here to answer to the question why so many gay authors describe their growing up in terms of a strong association with the movies, I’d like to look into such a process in the case of Moix and place him within this tradition in gay writing.

Moix’s memoirs are undoubtedly shameless, both narcissistic and self-deprecating. When he represents himself as an ungainly kid prone to Machiavellian plots and tantrums, he loses no opportunity to suggest how irritating he may have been. The process of growing up is not represented heroically, as a straight line of self-realisation, but, on the contrary, as a series of faux pas, mistakes, loose ends and dead ends that brings to mind the difficulties for queer children to grow “straight” as discussed by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. In the context of the 1950s Barcelona, Ramón is a certainly a failure, but a queer failure in a very queer world. He is not a very good student or very popular among his peers, he keeps on disappointing his parents, and when at 15 he starts work, he is almost immediately fired. While the voice narrating the story guarantees the “successful” end of the story (Moix will indeed become a famous writer), the fact is that the story is far from reassuring and it is made very clear that it did not look like success as a writer could be achieved at the time. Ramón’s childhood is hardly represented as an example to follow, a model, or even a cautionary tale.

Most autobiographical accounts, particularly Anglo-American ones, by writers born in the 1940s, would have some kind of common structure of struggle and coming out, a consequence of listening to one's own desires in a context that discouraged acting on them. In a way, such a struggle is present in the second volume of *El peso de la Paja*, but the "coming out" is subdued, undramatic, as if there was no real threshold to be crossed, given the narrative voice has been diagnosing what was wrong with the child at every turn, as if berating the kid for not having wised up to what he was. The closest to a coming out moment in the memoirs comes near the end of *El beso de Peter Pan*, and rather than a clash with society or the law, it is presented as "accepting oneself": young Ramón was a homosexual who was denying his truth.

Entonces me detuve y decidí hacer frente a la verdad. Yo era un idiota, no hubo imbécil mayor en toda la historia de la imbecilidad. Era un cretino. Era un deficiente mental para ponerlo suave. Hasta mi madre me lo decía sin decirlo: "Vive, hijo, vive, que son cuatro putos días." (Moix, *El beso* 515)

This is a key moment that finds an equivalent in many autobiographical accounts: coming out as a moment of accepting oneself, of achieving reconciliation with the self. Coming out as a turning point and as the moment that gives meaning to one's life. The arc between self-disgust and self-acceptance is dutifully followed in Moix's account, as it would be in most gay autobiographies.

The usual approach to this is through the concept of *authenticity*. Almodóvar has dramatized the aspiration of authenticity that may lead to sexual dissidence very clearly in *La mala educación* [*Bad Education*] (2004), but also in the Tina strand of *La ley del deseo* [*Law of Desire*] (1987). Moix implicitly seems to refer to it: bad faith and excuses that wrap Ramón in darkness or indecision are regarded negatively in the first two volumes. The imperative from the present is that Ramón must come to terms with what he is. Ramón will come to regret his rejection of Roberto in volume two and in volume one he will represent metonymically his return to the past in terms of the failed reacquaintance with the Niño Rico and will reframe the meeting as a revenge plot in which the former child who rejected him and called him a faggot gets his literary comeuppance in terms of character assassination. Although the teenage Ramón may not "know," the writer Terenci does know, he is clear about the path that leads from the former to the latter, and in terms of growth and development it is the right path, the path to the truth about himself. Still something is odd in this search for "authenticity" and for realising the truth about himself. It seems that such truth is only possible if it feeds on images that come from outside, which are clearly distorted representations of reality and which have been thought and produced in contexts which are distant from Moix's own.

In terms of subjectivity, I take the point that one "becomes" through identification. As we can see none of the real models provide, in Moix's diagnostic, strong identifications for the queer child. They constitute experience, no doubt, but experience that is to be rejected, which does not fulfil the need for the kind of selfhood little Ramón aims for, the selfhood that is represented by the

"future perfect" Terenci Moix (a concept linked to Stockton's ghostly child). This is where culture - and the movies in particular - come in.

I said earlier that authenticity was a key notion for understanding the process of growing up as represented in *El peso de la Paja*. But it is indeed a queer authenticity that is composed of fragments of shockingly inauthentic texts. Escapist films of the 1950s, which constitute the basis of Moix's cinephilia in these books, were indeed among the least "authentic" ever made. Technicolor adventures, family melodramas, musicals and epics are at the heart of the writer's taste (whereas westerns and war movies are systematically dismissed). We have seen how the child felt removed from real manifestations of homosexuality. At the same time he relates to the movies, which somehow take the place of his homosexual self. Here is the moment the link between the self and the movies is introduced in *El cine de los sábados*:

De repente, la homosexualidad, palabra que el pequeño Ramonet desconoce por completo, adquiere los tonos brillantemente sofisticados de las películas que le gustan. No se detiene a pensar que todo el oropel de Cornelio y su exquisito amigo corresponde a una condición que sus compañeros de escuela empiezan a denigrar con palabras malsonantes. Todo lo contrario: desoye la vulgaridad de los demás, se olvida de su antigua tendencia al taco, y arrebatada a la pantalla las imágenes idóneas para sublimar a los dos primeros homosexuales de su vida. Este niño ya es todo un experto en transferencias. (Moix, *El cine* 414)

Displacement of experience into movie plots and images: this particular approach is typical of queer autobiography. The extract is fascinating in taking for granted that there is a "natural" link between the movies and reality; that, indeed, faced with an unacceptable reality, the movies will do to fill emotional and identitarian needs. At the same time, the movies are presented as a source of selfhood and self-construction. And this is even truer in Moix's generation. Several essays have also been published to explore the links between the movies and queer growth (see especially Patrick Horrigan's *Widescreen Dreams*). In more strictly theoretical terms, Halberstam has investigated the role of popular culture in the formation of queer subjectivity. They both see the queer child as someone who picks up the "wrong" references to become "different." In *The Queer Child*, Stockton introduces the concept of "growing sideways" as an alternative to growing up. Growing up is only one aspect of growing, determined by adults' expectations, and basically stops when the child becomes an adult. Growing sideways, she suggests, includes other aspects germane to growth and describes more the way a child (a queer child) develops. Movies have a central role in this particular approach to becoming a teenager or a young man.

The movies were not, it bears repeating, an ideal treasure trove of gay-friendly images. In fact, most images of sexuality in the movies are very negative and remained so at least until the end of the century. It is just that these literal images do not really matter to the queer kids, because they take a particular approach that does not involve reading literally. Alexander Doty has insisted on the essential queerness of certain movies and how, in despite claims from more "activist" positions (for

instance the work of Vito Russo), queer cinephilia is not about literal representation, art, or textuality, but about identification and appropriation:

classic texts and personalities actually can be more queer-suggestive than “openly” gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts. That is, the coding of classic or otherwise “mainstream” texts and personalities can often yield a wider range of non-straight readings because certain sexual things could not be stated baldly—and still cannot or will not in most mainstream products—thus often making it more difficult to categorize the erotics of a film or a star. (Doty 1)

It is Doty’s proposal that helps to account for Moix’s cinephilia as a kind of life or death issue. The movies shape fantasies in specific ways, but were it not for the shaping of the fantasies, Terenci would not have “a life.” We still need to develop the contents of such relationship or, in other words, to come closer to defining the particular uses of particular kinds of film and asking why the queer canon is relatively constant across so many cultures during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The word cinephilia is often taken, in a very general way, to account for an excessive passion for film. Still, when I hear about cinephilia there are two different definitions which, in my understanding, can coexist, but have very little in common. Cinephilia, as defined by key Anglo-American proponents like Jonathan Rosenbaum, or as taken for granted by Susan Sontag, is a particular cultural practice that originates in attitudes and tastes of certain Parisian audiences in the late '50s. A cinephile was a spectator endowed with “distinction,” to use the concept developed by social scientist Pierre Bordieu. They are people who “understand,” who have the right taste for the right directors (both young turks like Godard or Rivette or classical heavies such as Hitchcock or Ray), who share an approach and are authorized to have canonical discussions within that approach. But in reading about such academic definitions, I tend to feel disengaged and a bit removed from the kind of phenomenon at hand, the kind of love for the movies that I experienced and that is at the heart of work by Eduardo Mendicutti, Manuel Puig, Pedro Almodóvar, and Moix.

The truth is that the cinephilia of Moix and many queer writers does not work in quite the same way. Where cinephiles seek prestige and intellect, Moix (who nonetheless was as obsessed with cultural prestige as anybody else) sought something closer to real life and the body. As Marijke de Valck and Malte Hanger write in their introduction to their collection *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, there is another side to cinephilia that encourages pleasure, experience, collection of images, identification and a physicality that is not characterized by distinction, and displays a passion that is not detached and intellectual; quite the opposite. Cinema is not something one enjoys from a position of authoritative detachment, but something one merges into, a *jouissance* that becomes part of what one is, not external, but assimilated into the self. I like to call that *cinephagia*, to distinguish it from the more mature concept. No doubt Moix became something of a cinephile as he grew up, but his teenage years are marked by this approach, and it is important to note that he never abandoned it. And Moix was indeed as central a figure of European cinephagia

as Almodóvar would be: not just a man who saw and remembered thousands of films, but also someone who fetishistically collected images and attitudes and plots. As I see it, cinephagia is to cinephilia what queer is to gay.

Queer cinephagia is specific and it has a long tradition. It has worked both in terms of subjectivity and community. I am now following proposals by Doty, but also Janet Staiger, in defining how gay cinephilia arose out of cinemagoing practices in New York in the mid-1960s as a shared activity that developed into conventions, a canon, and myths. For Doty, the movies lend themselves to this kind of appropriation. And even when focusing on the film text, cinephagous audiences seem to be engaging with it from the margins: costumes, elegance, or muscles, to mention three points of attraction in *El peso de la Paja*, are key nodes of attention to spectators. Doty resists the idea that such appropriation is “perverse” because it is as legitimate as any other reading. But he finds threads, meanings and ideas in the films that can only be labelled “queer.” In the memoirs, this idea had been developed by Moix in more radical terms: the movies become not a complement to community, but a replacement for it. He puts this idea very blatantly in *El cine de los sábados*:

Mi sexualidad era de papel, en 1969. Mi sexualidad era de celuloide desde muchos años antes. Y acaso no disfruté nunca del acto sexual porque mis orgasmos quedaron oscurecidos por la tinta china, mediocre y barata, de algunos tebeos. Porque mis besos más auténticos sólo existían cuando devolvían los besos de la pantalla, con la indiscriminada seguridad de que allí todo vale [...] Ningún cuerpo vale lo que una fantasía, ninguna ciudad lo que su literatura, ningún amor lo que la idea del amor [...] Por esto asumo que sólo tendré la compañía de los fantasmas, devolviéndome constantemente a una sexualidad que nunca será adulta. Una sexualidad que se niega a reconocer la insoportable mediocridad de sus opciones. (Moix, *El cine* 437)

The full implications of this quote are important, particularly as it throws some light on the title of the second volume of the memoirs: *El beso de Peter Pan*. Being kissed by Peter Pan spoiled Moix for any real kiss; nothing will ever live up to it. It wasn't just identity, articulated by the movies, that was at stake. What Moix is telling us in remembering his process of growing up is that even his perception of sex became shaped and to some extent replaced by those texts. Sex is always, after all, sublimation and sublimating sex through voyeurism is may not be so distant from sublimating sex through sexual acts. Actually, if sex is somehow a metonymy for desire, one can argue (and this is suggested in Moix's writing) that voyeurism and camp identification may be closer to the real thing than the always limiting sexual act itself.

Moix father often said he'd rather have a dead son than a faggot. Through *Extraño en el paraíso*, Moix returns the compliment, wishing the father figure was dead. As we can see, Moix's cinephagia is more than simple love for the movies; it is a way of life. Cinephagia shapes attitudes and behaviours, makes sense of deeply complex relationships to fathers and mothers, provides a set of gestures when the straight models are unachievable or not interesting enough, acts as consolation for the forlorn teenager, and provides affirmation and enjoyment. Cinephagia was central to the

negotiation of the process of growing up and becoming Terenci, not just in the process of growing sideways but, as the above quotes suggest, his drive to “grow against” circumstances and become himself. Sontag claimed “cinema” died in the mid-1990s and I am not sure that’s true. But I am positive this particular relationship between queerness and cinema was specific to a period that may have ended around that date, and that Terenci, like myself, both went through.

As the 1960s progressed, Moix found other sources of interest, often non cinematic: Egypt, traveling, and theatre, but it was the cinema that remained at the heart of his identity as a writer and as an individual. Cinema informed directly many of his fictions and essays. Cinema became a part of what he was before Terenci was born, the movies created Terenci and provided the material for growing up, for finding plots about himself and for supporting the process of growing up queer as a fiction.

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