

“To know who you really are, not who you’d like to be”: masculinity and melancholy in Cesc Gay’s *Fiction* (2006)*

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1. Cesc Gay’s men

The films of Cesc Gay (Barcelona, 1967) provide a vivid account of contemporary evolving masculinities, specifically those of his own generation, namely those born around 1965 and 1975. That generation has undergone a shift from a traditional society following conventional gender, sexual and familial scripts to a new environment marked by manifold identities, which seems to have led many men into confusion, instability and uncertainty. The tired, ambiguous but still pervasive trope to describe this paradigmatic change is “the crisis of masculinity”. However, in feminist film theory, that crisis do not affect the notion of maleness; the very meaning of “being a man” is not something steady that has been lost, but on the contrary the term questions masculinity as something “theoretically and historically troubled” (Chaudhuri 2005, 105).¹ The analysis of masculinity reveals that such concepts as “man” and “male subjectivity” are fluctuating and ideologically unstable, permanently reshaped through cultural representations. The point is that, even acknowledging the instability of masculinity over the last decades in Western societies, it seems clear that traditional assumptions underpinning the male gender are being interrogated.

Cesc Gay belongs to the new breed of Catalan filmmakers of the nineties along with others such as Isabel Coixet, Marc Recha, Marta Ballebó and Dolors Payàs. His feature film debut was the experimental *Hotel Room* (1998), a story he shot together with Daniel Gimelberg. Yet, Gay’s first national and international success was *Nico and Dani* (2000), a bromance between a gay teen and his straight friend²; he revisits the genre in his latest film *Truman* (2015), which is focused on a male couple again, although they do not feel sexually attracted in this case. The other films are *In the City* (2003), *Fiction* (2006), *V.O.S.* (2009) — the short for “original version with subtitles” — and *A Gun in Each Hand* (2012). Besides largely depicting homosociability³ and clashing patterns of masculinity, other features are choral casts, metafiction, theatricality, double moral standards, gender relations, the urban milieu, the mixing of genres and multilingualism. Gay has also directed the sitcom *Jet Lag* (2001-2006) for the Catalan television; *Félix* (2018) a crime drama television series for Netflix; some

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¹ Some scholars have even criticised the expression “masculinity in crisis” for being reactionary since underlying the crisis of Western men entails ultimately an act of regarding them as “victims” of the improvements achieved by women and the queer community. In consequence, the “crisis” would suggest the nostalgia for male supremacy in the past — the “real man”.

² The original title is *Krámpack*.

³ “‘Homosocial’ is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual.’ In fact, it is applied to such activities as ‘male bonding,’ which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (Sedgwick 1985, 1).

commercials and short films.⁴ The stories usually portray urban middle-class male characters, as a result of which the movies have been broadly described as urban comedy, one of the four major tendencies of Catalan cinema (Martí-Olivella 2011, 188). Even so, *Fiction* is actually closer to melodrama because it features an impossible love story as well as suggesting loss and melancholy as the cause of the male protagonist's emotional state; it revolves around the typical "love that could have been" of melodrama (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 135). Therefore, in this article, I examine the male protagonist of *Fiction* "as a site of emotion, of grief, rage, and loss" (O'Rawe 2014, 82), which are affective responses of men to the much repeated crisis of masculinity. O'Rawe (2014, 46) talks about the "melodramatized man", that is to say, the male comedy protagonist who "appropriates female suffering in the service of a beleaguered masculinity".⁵

Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas (1998, 140) hold that criticism of conservative masculinity is one of the most relevant trends of contemporary Spanish cinema. These films do not only denounce the harmful consequences of sexism on women but also the negative implications for male identity. The same can be said about Catalan cinema.⁶ Some scholars have approached masculinity in Catalan films, specially the work of Ventura Pons (Martí-Olivella 2000; Fouz and Martínez 2007; Fernández 2012; Fouz 2013). I believe that Eric Anderson's theory of inclusive masculinity, despite its explicit reference to Anglo-American societies, is useful to understand this moment of change — or *zeitgeist*, to use this scholar's own term — depicted in Catalan films. Anderson claims that in cultures of inclusive masculinities two dominant — but not dominating — forms coexist: one orthodox or conservative and one inclusive. The latter describes a paradigm of multiple masculinities with no hierarchical order which encompasses gay men and straight men's femininity; it diminishes sexism, patriarchy, gender segregation and above all homophobia — the fear of being homosexualised (Anderson 2009, 9). Yet, both patterns coexist — "neither form of masculinity retains cultural hegemony" (Anderson 2009, 8). Actually, the dramatic conflict in Gay's movies leans on the clash between inclusive and orthodox masculinities.⁷

⁴ Unlike the films, *Jet Lag* is more focused on female characters, although they belong to the same generation as their film male counterparts —they are thirty something. It tells the everyday life of three air hostesses who share a flat in Barcelona.

⁵ Although I focus on masculinity, the film suggests that also women suffer the consequences of social changes in marriage and family, gender roles, sexuality and love. Moreover, Cesc Gay is more concerned about exploring male cultural and social scripts as the greater number of male protagonists in his films proves.

⁶ As we know, Catalan films are usually subsumed into Spanish cinema in most studies: "And yet, cinema in Spain, and hence 'Spanish cinema,' is inconceivable without Catalonia and, more specifically, without the industrial infrastructure that in the early twentieth century made Barcelona a veritable motor of cinematic production" (Epps 2013, 70). On the other hand, there are some scholars who examine Catalan cinema from a national approach of its own — Jaume Martí-Olivella, Josep Anton Fernández —, although an in-depth monograph to establish a tradition of its own is still to be written. The very discussion whether Cesc Gay or other director's films are Catalan, Spanish or just "cinema" is an example of the glocal dynamics Martí-Olivella (2011, 203) talks about. He discusses the "Catalan culture's own in-between and transnational location", that is to say, its double position as a nation within the Spanish state and on the global stage. Certainly, it becomes more and more difficult to conceive national cinemas in an increasingly transnational industry. On top of that, a further distinction could be also made between Catalan cinema and cinema in Catalan language. The creation of the Catalan Cinema Academy in 2008 and the Gaudí Awards in 2009 have helped to develop the notion of a distinctive cinema with a specific tradition and a social and cultural projection. Industry, spectatorship, institutions, academia and critics are involved in the definition of a national cinema. However, I cannot adequately address the matter in this article.

⁷ Resina (2003, 75) argues that Catalan masculinity could be considered somehow different from the archetype of the Iberian male because of some positive attributes such as the tradition of antimilitarism, pragmatism, antidogmatism or pactism, among others. In this regard, there could be a clash of national

As well as the independent movie *Hotel Room* — which stands aside from the main strands of his subsequent work —, Gay's exploration of masculinity begins with *Nico and Dani*, in which he specifically addresses male homosexuality. In the following movies, he exclusively focuses on hegemonic masculinity by unveiling its contradictions, shortcomings and weaknesses, usually in contrast with a more empowered femininity. *In the City* tackles friendly and love relationships, which are chiefly built on lies, secrets and social appearance. *Fiction* takes a step further by showing wider patterns of family, sexuality and gender, while *V.O.S.* and *A Gun in Each Hand* are satirical comedies that play on clichés about gender relations and masculinity. Finally, *Truman* revolves around illness and how it affects friendship, fatherhood and kinship in general. *Fiction* was released in 2006; Cesc Gay and his usual co-writer, Tomàs Aragay, wrote the script. It stars Eduard Fernández (Àlex), Javier Cámara (Santi), Montse Germán (Mònica) and Carme Pla (Judith).

The film centres on Àlex, a script writer who pays a visit to his friends Judith and Santi in Puigcerdà, a small village in the Catalan Pyrenees. While there, he gets to know Judith's friend Mònica, who is spending a few days with her. The film confronts Àlex and Mònica — who are both married and epitomise mainstream sentimental, sexual and family relationships — with Judith and Santi, who represent more liberal and alternative options: she is a lesbian and has a female fiancée, whilst he is having an affair with an elder married woman. Furthermore, these characters want to have a baby of their own without marrying or establishing a conventional family. They respectively embody the emerging archetypes of “the reconstructed new man” and “the independent new woman” (Jordan and Morgan-Timosounas 1998, 152). *Fiction* can be regarded as a sequel to *In the City* (2003), for Eduard Fernández performs another version of the same male ideal: an expressionless, restrained man, who overrides his wife's wishes but at the same time watches over her. The film evokes the typical “mid-life crisis”; as the saying goes, at 40 years, one reviews what his or her life has been so far: the failures of the past, the achievements made, the shattered dreams, the challenges still to be faced. Comas argues that *Fiction* draws a psychological portrait of a “misfit generation”. (2010, 307) The protagonist undergoes a kind of existential crisis that leads him to ask himself “who you really are, not who you'd like to be”, as he exclaims in one scene. Àlex's crisis suggests the doubts about his current life and the life he could have had; in particular, if he would have preferred to marry and found a family or be single and free instead. This possibility comes when he meets Mònica. Both fall in love with each other, but neither of them dares to express their feelings until the end of their holidays, once Àlex has made clear his inability to leave his wife — Sílvia, a character played by Àgata Roca, who is the real wife of Cesc Gay. Therefore, *Fiction* tells a love story that might have existed; it reminds of other films such as *In the Mood For Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), whose protagonists fall in love but give up the idea of having a relationship.⁸ Gay confronts the protagonists with the moral dilemma of having an affair, even beginning a new relationship, at the expense of breaking up their families: what would be the cost of making one or another choice? Troubled and failed love stories are not uncommon in the director's work; on the contrary, other films such as *Nico and Dani* (1999) depict unhappy love.

masculinities between some characters in the films, although I think in general Cesc Gay does not consider the national in his discussion of maleness.

⁸ The Chinese original title of the film is “The Magnificence of the Years Goes By Like Flowers”, which is a remaking of the widespread literary theme about the brevity of life, the need to make the most of it and missed opportunities; all these meanings can be traced in *Fiction* too.

MacKinnon (2002, 120) notes that, according to Freud, Lacan and Barthes, love always feminises men and undermines masculine power. To explore the “melodramatized” male hero of *Fiction*, I combine several approaches to affect in film: psychoanalysis, affect theory and hapticity. Some scholars draw on Gilles Deleuze’s notion of autonomous affect, whereas phenomenologists and feminists analyse hapticity and the body; on the other hand, cultural theorists call for specific attention to the senses, thus shifting their attention away from visual and sound aspects (Brinkema 2014, 26).⁹ In addition, others place emphasis on the way movies influence the audience, the emotions they arouse, the feelings they convey; in short, the “affective” response the screen elicits. Therefore, the affective turn in film studies has facilitated the slip from the analysis of form, meaning and ideology to the feelings and emotions transmitted as well as the reactions they trigger off in the moviegoers.¹⁰ The discussion problematises the words Àlex utters in a scene: “to know who you really are, not who you’d like to be”; “who you really are” hints at the idealised self to which the protagonist feels melancholically attached, whilst “who you’d like to be” suggests the social fiction of marriage, family and fatherhood. The story focuses on the dramatic clash between those two selves: the public and social and the “inner”, repressed self. Paradoxically, as Žižek observes, social and ideological life is a fiction, because what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls “the Real” is that hidden self who arises through dreams and illusions.

2. The melancholic male gaze

Although Azcona (2009, 234) considers *Fiction* an example of romantic comedy, I think it is closer to melodrama, a genre linked to melancholy, the pervasive feeling in the story and especially in Àlex, the male hero. Melodrama has been traditionally deemed as a female genre, for it focuses on home life, family and children. It also stresses emotivity and intimacy, sacrifice and the fear of losing the beloved ones (MacKinnon 2002, 87). As regards British soap operas in particular, while agreeing it is a female genre, MacKinnon (2002, 89) claims that there has been a process of masculinisation, which is clearly illustrated by the increasing number of male characters, the use of crime series tropes or business issues. Gorton (2008, 89) also emphasises the broader scope of melodrama, which can deal with any kind of social matters about class, sexuality and race. The point is that it covers the issue of a socially “unwelcome” relationship. I think Cesc Gay’s innovation and peculiarity in the context of both Catalan and Spanish cinema lie precisely in the exploration of the feelings and emotions of mainly straight men — unlike Almodóvar and Pons, who are more concerned about queer masculinities. In consequence, Gay uses a traditionally regarded female genre to explore male feelings and emotions.¹¹ If conventional melodramas display excessive affectivity and theatricality — which is coded as feminine (Williams 1998, 55) —, Gay’s male versions single out the opposite, a strong emotional restraint and the problems it provokes in romantic and family relationships.

⁹ Hapticity refers to the tactile and the cinesic, the texture and, in general, the interaction between the body of the film, the body of the characters and the body of the viewers.

¹⁰ Gorton (2008, 117) holds that affect theory provides new insights to desire by moving “beyond the restrictive boundaries of psychoanalytic theory and away from simple opposition between psychoanalysis and Deleuzian conceptualisations of desire”. However, I follow the psychoanalytic approach to melancholy in my discussion of the film for it is still predominant in cultural theory.

¹¹ MacKinnon regards some classic Hollywood movies such as *The Men* (Fred Zinnemann, 1950), *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) or *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) as examples of melodramas with a strong male component.

In general, Cesc Gay deals with one or another type of loss in his films: a lover, a friend, a love affair or a wife. It could seem that, in *Fiction*, Àlex expresses his sorrow for a missed chance to have an affair with Mònica; however, what distresses him is actually his ideal self, “who he really is”, “not who he’d like to be” and, in fact, is: a devoted husband and a caring father. The Freudian theory of melancholy suggests that, like mourning, this feeling is based on loss. The melancholic subject despises himself but his rebukes and laments are, as a matter of fact, complaints about another person. Thus, the other individual is the lost love object he has internalised and is unable to get rid of: “we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego” (Gay 1989, 586). Unlike melancholy, the process of mourning allows the subject to get through grief for the loss of the object; hence, melancholy is considered a pathological, failed mourning. That is why it is “a persistent condition [...] a structure of desire, rather than a transient response to death or loss” (Gorton 2008, 135). Through this operation of displacement, the torment the melancholic subject inflicts on himself implies meeting his inner demands of sadism and hatred he would really cast upon the loved object. Therefore, the Freudian approach to melancholy lies in a paradox: punishment becomes self-punishment. The melancholic subject takes revenge on his loved object and haunts him/her with his illness as a strategy to openly show his hostility towards him/her. As for *Fiction*, melancholy is actually narcissism, since Àlex longs for himself, whether it is his self from the past or his idealised self: the free single man without either wife or children, like his friend Santi, who becomes his “other” in the film. As Peter Gay puts it, some individuals “are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love object, and exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic’”. (1989, 554) Thereby, melancholy turns into narcissism, because the loved object is withdrawn into the ego. That is why Freud talks about an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. The narcissistic identification means that the hatred the subject would address to his love of the past, now is thrown into himself. Neale (1993, 15) connects narcissism with the resistance to social standards and responsibilities, in other words, to social integration through marriage and family. Narcissism, thus, implies full freedom and enjoyment.

From this vantage point, melancholy is related to the conflict between several patterns of masculinity, which is an overriding concern in Cesc Gay’s films. Traditional men are caught between the nostalgia for a lost autonomy and the commitment to their wives and families. In contrast, Àlex’s friend, Santi, embodies a more flexible male archetype, as he is involved with a 55 year old woman and wants to have a baby with his lesbian friend Judith. Àlex’s female counterpart, Mònica, is also a sad character; having been single for many years, she has just recently got married to Paulo and is arranging the adoption of an African child. The possibility of having an affair with Àlex is her last chance to be a free woman before founding a family and give up her independence once and for all. *Fiction* neatly illustrates, like Gay’s other films, the crisis of long-standing relationships and ultimately the family. One scene of the film exemplifies the discredit of marriage. Santi comes back home from work and says hello to Àlex, who is cooking the dinner in the kitchen:

–Santi: Hello, dear.

–Àlex: Hello, my love.

–Santi: Have you made the dinner?

–Àlex: Yes, of course.

–Santi: That’s lovely, isn’t it? To come back home and find someone.

–Àlex: Yes, I think otherwise.¹²

Azcona (2009) holds that the filmmaker describes a moment of transition between a traditional society — which is predicated on monogamy, marriage and family, social decorum — and a modern pattern — “serial monogamy” or short affairs, several sexual orientations, alternative family models, open relationships. This modern understanding of social, sexual and sentimental relations provokes uncertainty in many people, like Mònica and Àlex in the film; that is why he is afraid of abandoning a well-established life and following a new path with different rules.

MacKinnon (2002, 33) explains that, according to Nancy Chodorow and other psychoanalysts, femininity is based on connection to the world, whereas masculinity imposes separation and emotional distance. Virility is thus a sign of male anxiety or affective dullness; nonetheless, Àlex’s usual reaction is not anxiety — which entails aggressiveness more commonly — but melancholy as a kind of emotional paralysis. The sense of touch, a sign of warmth and affection in Mediterranean cultures, is unknown by this character and instead he privileges sight, as a result of which facial expression, gestures, silence and gaze are crucial in the film. The importance of the gaze is evident in the abundance of close-ups, which show Àlex and Mònica smiling and timidly looking at each other or Mònica getting more and more angry as the storyline unfolds, once she realises Àlex is incapable of proposing to her. Rather than telling a game of seduction, the film illustrates the frustration of desire, the inaction of the male character, who is caught up in his melancholic voyeuristic emotional structure. Thus, unlike typical female melodramas of emotional excess, Cesc Gay’s male version of the genre is about restraint. Only at the end of the film does Àlex dare to touch, hug and kiss Mònica. He even utters some words to allegedly corroborate the “real” nature of what was just hinted at by ambiguous glances; nevertheless, he is just confirming he is not going to make his desire come true, but instead it will melancholically remain as what it has always been: an illusion.

3. Melancholic fiction

The term “fiction” has some meanings in the film: metafiction — which is explicit in the descriptive title —, the criticism of the bourgeois understanding of kinship or friendship, the script Àlex is supposed to write during his stay at Santi’s home, the video recording Santi makes during his trip to the mountains and the portraits and pictures Àlex melancholically beholds all alone. I examine all these aspects in this section.

First, apart from the title, many characters in Cesc Gay’s films play the role of script writers, actors, actresses and directors. In general, theatre has a major influence on Gay’s cinema.¹³ As a matter of fact, both *Nico and Dani* and *V.O.S.* are adaptations of plays. Metafiction is most evident in *V.O.S.*, which is a film within a film. The use of theatrical or cinematic performance exemplifies the distance between the intimate subjectivity of the characters and the social role they play in public or rather the conflict, more precisely, between the social and the inner selves. In consequence, theatre is employed to convey the idea of social performance, for the characters seem always caught in a world of appearances.¹⁴ They live a secret life that, if disclosed,

¹² All quotes of the film come from the script and are my translation into English.

¹³ Fernández (2012) also emphasises the importance of performativity and theatricality in Ventura Pons’s films.

¹⁴ Maybe we should distinguish between Butler’s notion of performativity, film performance and just performance in an article on masculinity in cinema like this one. One possible distinction is made by

would provoke social chaos. In fact, secrets within the family or a group of friends is a recurring theme in comedy and drama. Most films about families or friends deal with secrecy, double life, appearance, performance, lies and the danger it entails to unveil the inner feelings and relations. In sum, they question the bourgeois public/private divide, which is really a trope or “visual metaphor” in Catalan cinema for Martí-Olivella (2011, 191); it could be summarised by the popular idiom “no treure els draps bruts al sol” — “don’t hang your dirty washing out in public”. The trope can refer either to the historical past the establishment wants to overlook or the private lives the characters wish to keep hidden in accordance with a social and moral double standard. The dialectic interaction between indoors and outdoors in Cesc Gay’s films is usually shown by shots in which the voyeuristic camera is placed from outside; thus, the window frames work as a screen (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Àlex sees his wife, his daughter and Mònica from the kitchen.

In addition, when the camera takes Àlex’s subjective view, it also hints at the displacement of the character from his object of desire, the fear of approaching it and the shame the desire brings on him. On the other hand, opticality has been regarded as an instrument of control: “haptic visuality does imply a critique of mastery, the mastery implicit in optical visuality” (Marks 2000, 184). Consequently, Àlex’s gaze remains ambiguous, for we do not know exactly why he just stares at his objects of desire, whether the reason is mastery and possession or fear and shame. In fact, the plot relies upon this oscillation, this “emotional suspense”; in other words, whether the characters will have a love affair or not.

Deceit, undisclosed desire, silence and, to sum up, appearances are a key issue both in *Fiction* and *In the City* (Azcona 2009, 242). Many comedies are actually based on appearances because characters impersonate other people, thus being a common genre to denounce social hypocrisy. In Gay’s films, desire is bound up to space: though generally concealed in the city, it is unveiled in the country, where characters seem to lift social restrictions. This is an innovative approach to the country, as it has been traditionally regarded as a conservative and backward space. In Cesc Gay’s own words, it is a place where “characters can reinvent themselves” (Deleyto 2008, 358). However, Azcona does not delve into the implications of the concealment of desire as regards gender, particularly if the reasons compelling men and women to deceive are

Peberdy (2013, 54), who defines the latter as theatrical self-presentation or production, whilst the Butler’s notion of performativity entails the shaping of a gender identity through a “stylized repetition of acts” culturally imposed and maintained. Finally, film performance would involve gestures and mannerisms associated with specific social roles. Hence, I mean particularly performance as social play before an audience, rehearsed and pre-established, as a result of which the notion has obvious theatrical implications.

different. On the other hand, this scholar contradicts herself when she claims that the city can also be a place of sincerity and that it is in domestic spaces where repression becomes more severe, especially for women. Although she agrees that Gay's movies highlight the importance of sexuality in the shaping of identity, she does not fully examine the complexity of sex and gender spaces. While it is true that the city allows the characters to satisfy their desires, they usually must keep them secret; for instance, in *In the City*, Irene suffers repression at home as a lesbian wife and mother, although she finds a way out to her desires by meeting her lover away from the gaze of others. Yet, the point is that the country, by way of contrast, is where Judith as a lesbian and Santi as an alternative or inclusive man can act more freely in conformity with their wishes and aspirations, without being tied down to gender and sexual scripts, probably because they are isolated; having moved away from the city, they find an anonymous space to be anything they want. I think that Cesc Gay subverts or, at least, complicates the traditional association that links the city with freedom and the country with repression; in general, his films present the city as a stage of trickery, with double-faced characters who wear "a deceptive social mask" (Azcona 2009, 135).¹⁵ The drama of Àlex and Mònica is that, even though they should feel freer in the mountains, they seem unable to take out their masks and obey their desires. In any case, the mountains are a space where they face their fears and wishes.

Second, besides the fiction of social life, the script Àlex is meant to write at Santi's home tells what happens to a man who is to celebrate his 39th birthday — so, an alter ego of him —, particularly the conversations he holds with his friends or, in Judith's words, "his stuff", "his crisis". It is an autobiographical account or, rather self-fiction, about his own life. The multiplicity of narrative levels is further complicated by the video recording Santi makes when they head off for a trip by car to the lakes; from there, they will go hiking to the mountains. The screen directly displays the images of the home video camera held by Santi: the landscape and the other three friends. Hence, there is a confusion between different levels of representation, a documentary within the fiction and ultimately the ontological confusion between reality and fantasy; in sum, the film hints at the metafictional dimension of Cesc Gay's work.¹⁶ Additionally, another meaning of fiction is the love story with Mònica that never happens, only existing as a fantasy. Àlex himself outlines the script when they joke about them getting lost during his trip to the mountains and taking shelter in a hut: "Well, two people heading up the mountains, each one with their own worries...". In other words, it is their own storyline, their own (meta)fiction. Losing their way is also a metaphor for their wishes: they would like to abandon their wretched but socially sanctioned lives and, specifically, marriage. The script would have an unforeseen turn at the end, a supernatural assistance coming from the outer space that would rescue them from their unhappiness, as a *deus ex machina*:

–Mònica: Why don't you shoot it?

–Àlex: [...]

–Mònica: How would it finish?

–Àlex: A spaceship would come and take them away.

This utterly implausible absurd ending about an alien abduction lays bare Àlex's doubts about the chance of having an affair and ultimately sacrificing his bourgeois

¹⁵ We must remember that Nico, the gay teen in *Nico and Dani*, can also unleash his desires in his family's beach apartment, where he can play sexual games with his friend away from the repressive gaze of his parents and society.

¹⁶ It is a metaphor for the dream-like trip through the mountains Àlex and Mònica make as well, something I will discuss in the next section.

life. Asked by Mònica about the role she performs in the script, he remains silent. He does not dare to confess it is the role of a thwarted lover.

The question is: are Àlex's scripts a fantasy or is his "real" life what belongs to the field of dreams and illusions instead? Freud regards fantasy as a satisfaction of desire, whilst for Lacan it is a narrative that stages that desire. Freud holds that fantasy is detached from the subject, outside of him: it is a thing one does not have and consequently wishes and tries to satisfy through fantasy. However, Lacanian fantasy itself produces the lack that makes it desirable and the subject is a result of it. Drawing on Lacan, Žižek explains that the ideological fantasy consists of ignoring the illusion that shapes the Real, the relation with reality. Reality is a fantastic construct that allows us to mask our desires, which is the same as ideology. People prefer to live within the fantasy because reality is more traumatic: "'Reality' is a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the Real of our desire" (Žižek 1989, 45). Àlex is quite aware that he has built a fantasy around himself. He gets upset when his wife Sílvia goes to Puigcerdà with their children. One morning, in the kitchen, he holds tight his wife's arm with no apparent reason, scarcely controlling his rage, because she has spoilt his evasion from family life. To work properly, fantasy — the ideal domestic and public life — and reality — desires, the craving for independence — must be kept apart. However, fantasy must be safeguarded and, in the end, Àlex goes back to the city after having faced the Real of his desires, which threatens to undermine the fantasy built on his life: a monotonous and tedious marriage, a mainstream masculinity as husband and father. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the Real of his own desire is his own self. In the mountains, he finds the ghost of his past, to whom he feels melancholically attached. The country is also the space of his "others", that is to say, his friends Judith and Santi, who are not subordinated to a mainstream social life focused on marriage and family, without bonds or prejudices. The pressure of social norms, the ideological fantasy, keeps Àlex stagnant, expressionless, almost dead like the portraits he tenderly stares at. Looking at the portraits becomes something even masochistic, for the melancholic subject punishes himself for his inability to quit his love object:

If the love for the object — a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up — takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. (Gay 1989, 588)

The outburst of violence towards his wife in the kitchen reveals the aggression of the sado-masochist subject. From this point of view, melancholy and the subsequent masochism femininise the male protagonist.¹⁷ Feeling guilty, Àlex curbs his desire and go back home, where he can feel safe cloaked in his protective fantasy.

Third, another meaning of fiction is shown by the portraits the characters carry with them and the pictures hanging on the walls of Santi's home. Images of people and the fictions they represent are a source of melancholy. The sadness that permeates the whole story is also conveyed through music — the soundtrack of Mahler and Albinoni's adagios — and nature — the hilly landscape, the rainy and foggy weather, the sun hiding behind the mountains. Moreover, Gay's intimist and evocative style is shown in abundant close-ups, slow-motion sequences, long shots and silence, which allow the viewers to focus on the inner life of the characters and provoke their affective responses. Music, conversation, ambient sound and silence foster bodily and sensory

¹⁷ Some scholars like Cohan and Hark (1993, 2) have criticised Laura Mulvey's famous equation of masculinity as a synonym for activity, voyeurism, sadism and fetishism as opposed to femininity as passivity, exhibitionism, masochism and narcissism. However, I do not think Mulvey's explanation is wrong, but the traditional gender scripts are falling apart and Àlex would be a good example of that.

experiences (Marks 2000, xvi). In *Fiction*, those experiences are related to the isolation and peacefulness the rural space favours, but they are also linked to the break both protagonists make in their lives to interrogate themselves about their failures, wishes and aspirations. Besides the photo album Àlex flicks through at the beginning of the film, Àlex and Mònica exchange personal portraits in the mountain shelter. She shows the portrait of Nirina, the African girl she wants to adopt, while Àlex shows the portraits of his father, who died when he was a child and he just knows through those images. On the other hand, when Àlex arrives at Santi's home, the first image of this character the viewer gets is an oil portrait. Furthermore, in Àlex's bedroom, there is a copy of Pierre August Renoir's *Two Girls At The Piano*. The pianist draws a parallel with Mònica, who is a violinist. Renoir's musician stresses the fictionality or spectrality of Mònica as love object and the possible affair he could have with her. Thus, he curiously stares at her, as if he was trying to decode a difficult enigma.

In addition to suggesting desire, memory, nostalgia or the link between facts and representation, images also insinuate the unfathomable mystery of people in video recordings, pictures and portraits, since they just stand as a copy, a simulacrum. Finally, images satisfy the voyeuristic male impulses, but voyeurism is always spectral, because there is never direct contact: men are just fascinated by the illusion, not the real act of possessing a body. As I have suggested before, Cesc Gay's gaze is male and voyeuristic too, because in most films he places the camera outside the domestic interior to look into what is happening inside. The distance between the view, the camera, and the scene accentuates the fictional nature of what is seen—shown. To put it simply, Àlex is infatuated with a ghost, the ghost he has created in his mind, not the real Mònica. As a matter of fact, Cesc Gay pays a tribute to Hitchcock's necrophilic film *Vertigo* (1958), in which Scottie (James Stuart) falls in love with Madeleine (Kim Novak), who commits suicide by jumping from a bell tower. After some time, one day he finds a woman, Judy, who resembles Madeleine. Then, he changes her look to turn her into his dramatically dead beloved; hence, he falls for a ghost. Similarly, after having spent a night together in the mountain shelter, the next morning Àlex and Mònica visit a church in the village in the Pyrenees. Like Scottie in Hitchcock's master work, Àlex is afraid of height. The feeling of spinning represents in his case the fear of adultery or, rather, its possibility (fig. 2).¹⁸

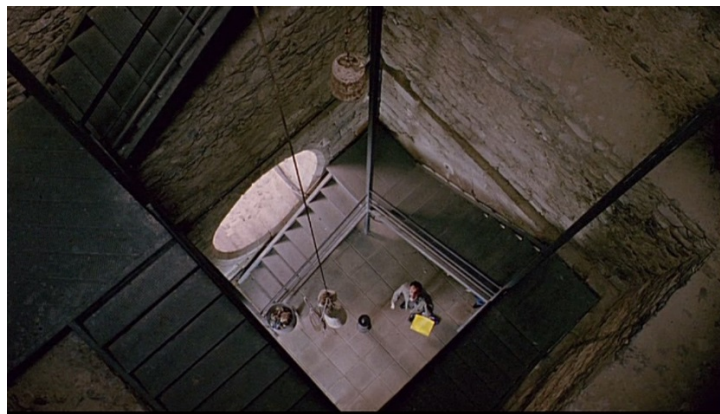


Fig. 2. The stairs inside the bell tower.

¹⁸ The bell tower as an uncanny place is used in other films such as Buñuel's *Tristana* (1970) (Poyato 2014, 737). However, in this case, it is the heroine (Catherine Deneuve) who fears the vision of the phallic building as it reminds her of male sexuality. The surrealist imagination of Buñuel turns the clapper of the bell into the head of Don Lope (Fernando Rey), *Tristana*'s former lover and eventually husband, an old man she finds repulsive.

Photography, art, video recordings are an attempt to keep memory alive and a proof of intimacy; however, they are just spectral images representing lost or unattainable loved objects, ghosts. According to Roland Barthes (2000, 78), portraits show pictures of dead people, since those who are portrayed do not exist any longer: “the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing”. Therefore, the portrait of Àlex, a free and independent young man, his past self, is dead. To put it another way, the portrait, as the representation of an idealised person, is a fiction, like the scripts he writes and the unrealised love story the protagonist could have had with Mònica. Portraits and pictures show spectral, fictional identities of friends and relatives: Mònica’s adopted child, Àlex’s father, Àlex’s children, Santi’s own painted portrait, young Àlex and Santi’s photo album. Paradoxically, in a male code, touch and gaze are confounded. Then, Àlex can only take hold of people through his possessive gaze, which is also melancholic, because he has lost them. Brinkema notes that “the presencing of grief through the photograph suggests a theory of affect as a force that takes form in texts”. (2014, 92) Grief is an effect of melancholy. Àlex just touches those ghostly images with his eyes. His aloofness is actually a symptom of his failure to possess his lost love objects, as his father, his children and Santi have literally or metaphorically passed away; they belong to a dead past he cannot recover.

Images are fictions Àlex gets wrapped in to evade from the prison of his everyday life. As memories, videos, pictures and portraits keep him stuck to the past — his youth, his childhood, his father — thanks to their evocative, ghostly power; on the other hand, images can also reveal dangerous desires — a love affair — that may destroy the fragile fantasy of his life. Thus, at the end of the film, scared by his own fictions, he gives up the idea of flirting with Mònica and goes back home. He tells his wife he is not quite sure if he likes living outside Barcelona. Unable to fulfil his desires, he prefers to live in the protective womb of the city.

4. A trip to desire

As I have suggested before, while the city is associated with hidden desires and public life, other settings such as the beach or the country help unleash passion. Cesc Gay chooses a rural setting for the film, thus countering the predominance of Barcelona in stories about contemporary society, to such an extent that the capital has actually taken the place of Catalonia itself, which evinces the process of touristification many critics such as Martí-Olivella (2011, 189) have pointed out.¹⁹ Other contemporary films like Marc Recha’s *Some Days in August* (2006) illustrate the flight from the city. In this regard, Àlex would be the urban tourist who finds his true “other” there. The otherness of the character is shown in some specific scenes such as the double image of the rear-view mirrors of his car, like a self-portrait (fig. 3).

¹⁹ Yet, although roughly speaking *In the City* could be considered an urban comedy, Barcelona is actually far from that “hospitable meeting point” image displayed in other films, as the characters actually feel imprisoned rather than free.



Fig. 3. Àlex driving.

Gorton (2008, 89) asserts that melodrama frequently deploys distancing devices and techniques such as mirrors, which could be also extended to portraits as regards *Fiction*. However, for this scholar the meaning of mirrors is obscure although they generally suggest any kind of separation: from viewers, from bourgeois ideology — the bourgeois home — or “the trapped nature of the characters themselves”. In any case, the gaze is key to melodrama, for it establishes the relationship between the couple of lovers.

The mountains and, specifically, the trip the four friends take up to the hills, serve as a metaphor for the inner journey through the characters’ fears and wishes. Thereby, the film revisits the Catalan national landscape, the sacred mountains of Romantic poetry, which encourages the subjects to mingle their souls with nature. Unlike the city, which is usually described in terms of change and development, the country has traditionally been deemed as a space of continuity. Other understandings of the opposition emphasise urban claustrophobia and alienation against rural freedom and authenticity, touristification counter to historical memory and national essences, dystopia versus utopia. Due to the sense of permanence and eternity, the country is usually defined as a “national” “venerable” space in a nostalgic mood where characters escape from reality and try to return to a golden age tied to the nation’s past and, by extension, Àlex’s past. The blend of collective and personal memories is evident the protagonist’s attraction to an idealized space where his friends live harmoniously with nature and their own wishes:

The rural-agrarian milieu itself represents a closed, secure world in which disruptive and corruptive elements from the outside world rarely intrude and in which the sense of alienation and depersonalization — two key hazards of modern, urban-industrial life — are replaced by a sense of belonging, of community and collectivity. (Fowler and Helfield 2006, 11)

Although in the previous films the city accounted for the anonymous labyrinth of passions where double-faced characters live all kind of secret and adventures and the beach had to do with the notion of border — for it dealt with teen homosexuality —, now the country favours introspection and sincerity. Paradoxically, the immensity and openness of the mountains provoke the characters’ seclusion. Cesc Gay recreates the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime by filming many shots that show the grandeur of the overwhelming landscape and, in contrast, the smallness of characters.

The mountains are a space of isolation and concentration: the altitude hints at a space of spiritual retreat where Àlex and Mònica face their fears and desires. For Martí-Olivella (2011, 203), *Fiction*, like Coixet’s and Recha’s films, are examples of the new experimental Catalan cinema in which nature is the territory “of the unspoken

and the uncanny”. It also reflects the dynamics of *glocality* (Martí-Olivella 2013, 56), which denotes the interaction between the local and the global, in other words, how the national culture — myths, literature, history — is adapted to the transnationalism of current cinema. In this case, the mythical meaning of the Pyrenees is contrasted with the tourist metropolis as a space for introspection where the characters confront their “true” selves.²⁰ Judith’s feeling about “happening nothing”, inactivity, silence and the slow passing of time have also to do with the notion of impasse and transience. In fact, Àlex and Mònica’s unfulfilled love affair would have been probably momentary if it had occurred. The mountain as a silent and affective space (Barthes 1979, 167) influences the relationship between Àlex and Mònica, characterised by silence, bodily distance and emotional gaze.

While the group of friends climb up to the summit, Àlex and Mònica are left behind, until the distance becomes unbridgeable between them. All of a sudden, she asks if the small figures of Santi and Judith are real or imaginary. The fog around them, the inconmensurability of the rocky landscape, the spirituality of the mountains and the psychological introspection it provokes turn the trip into the mental, inner and even unreal journey I have mentioned before. The visual illusion suggests that these friends are their “others”, what they do not dare to be: a man and a woman who have been able to cut through traditional conventions — particularly strong in the Mediterranean cultures, built around kinship — by moving from the city to the country, founding an alternative family and enjoying freer love relationships. Pointing over the horizon, they embody the emerging patterns of masculinity and femininity which are unattainable for Àlex and Mònica.

However, for Àlex the mountain is a troubled rather than idyllic space, as he performs a character “confronted with the entrapment of his own fictional self” (Martí-Olivella 2011, 203). In any case, although his goal was to escape from the city and his household life in the peaceful country, it becomes a space where he faces his unhappiness, caused by the failure of his marriage and his incapability of breaking the marital bond. The scene in the village bar where they go after having spent a chaste night in the mountain shelter illustrates Àlex’s undecisiveness, which provokes Mònica’s frustration and discontent. They sit back to back and remain silent and thoughtful. As the scene goes on, we notice the mismatch through their silence, bodily position and elusive glances (fig. 4):



Fig. 4. Mònica and Àlex in the bar.

²⁰ “Poliglòssia”— multilingualism — is another central feature of *glocality* — and a strategy of resistance as well — for Martí-Olivella (2013). In *Fiction*, Santi, performed by Javier Cámara — an actor born in La Rioja —, speaks Spanish.

The filmmaker extends the tension to the following scene in the car as they go back to their friends' homes. While Àlex seems satisfied with an ingenuous flirt with Mònica, instead she is more upset. He seems paralysed by melancholy and thus bound up to an imaginary lost object; in other words, he does not really want to make his wishes come true, but on the contrary the source of happiness for him is the pure illusion of fantasising. The protagonist's attachment to the past is symbolised by the souvenir he buys for Mònica in the village they visit in the Pyrenees, which reminds of the famous snow globe that slips from Charles Foster Kane's while he lies in his bed just an instant before dying in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). The globe is as a nostalgic object that evokes childhood and home.²¹ Only at the end do they seem to clear things up: in the final scene, Judith is taking Mònica to the station by car, but suddenly Àlex shows up. *Fiction* is also a story about how the language of love works: gestures, silences, hesitations, glances, actions and words. Neither Àlex nor Mònica utter a single explicit word to express their feelings. He apologises in this final scene for not being able to talk about what he was feeling for her. However, Mònica has perfectly understood what was going on between them all the time. Their dialogue, full of interruptions, is a perfect example of the significance of silence and ambiguity:

–Àlex: I haven't been able to...

–Mònica: Neither have I.

–Àlex: I would really have liked to...

–Mònica: So would I... But that's the way you are... And now I am changing things. It's good to fall in love with someone from time to time. Otherwise...

In consequence, Àlex is a reserved, blocked, irresolute, whereas Mònica has decided to give up an independent life to start a family. The characters have been embarrassed and their ambivalent behaviour and silence express shame for having illicitly fallen in love: "In melodrama, I will argue, shame is used to question the rightfulness of a couple's desire; it forces them to justify their desire, their interest, and even their lack of shame" (Gorton 2008, 68). The failed love affair illustrates one of the two gendered melodramatic climaxes Linda Williams (2009, 167) indicates: a masculine reaction of flight, being the other alternative a feminine "paroxysm" of suffering. Gorton discusses women's conflict between the feelings of shame and confusion on the one hand and liberation and empowerment on the other. Nonetheless, this conflict also affects men, who are undergoing a process of redefinition in contemporary society. Therefore, in *Fiction*, both Àlex and Mònica fly away to avoid facing their contradictions, doubts and fears: are they happy with their respective marriages and families? Fearing the uncertain horizon of a new life, they give up the idea of having a romantic relationship. While their friends have chosen liberation from traditional social rules, they decide, with some hesitation, to stick to them.

As regards rural cinema, Fowler and Helfield (2006, 10) claim that investing in the past and nostalgia also has a dark side: a fear for the future. That is exactly what happens to the male protagonist of *Fiction*: he feels threatened by the possibility of an affair with Mònica, which would be the destruction of his familial and sentimental fantasy in the city. Thereby, he prefers not to go on with it. Inertia, routine, convention and, above all, the paralysing melancholy he suffers, win the game. The melancholic attachment to the object of pleasure is also consistent with the masochist personality I have mentioned earlier: "The masochist seeks not to reach a final consummation, but

²¹ Obviously, the tribute Cesc Gay pays to Hitchcock and Welles in the film illustrates another aspect of *glocality* through the blend of the national tradition —the symbolism of the Pyrenees in Catalan culture—, multilingual characters and international cinematic references.

to hold it off, to prolong the frenzy, for as long as possible” (Shaviro 1993, 57). In this regard, the mountains are a hole where, from a Lacanian approach, the character faces the Real of his desires. That is the reason why he returns to the protective city: he does not want to get out of his own melancholic prison, his fantasy, as there is no obstacle, except for himself, that prevents him from fulfilling his wishes. Àlex could also feel ashamed for the very possibility of an illicit love affair with Mònica.

5. Conclusions: fiction and melancholy

The films of Cesc Gay explore contemporary shifting masculinities at all stages of life, from adolescence — *Nico and Dani* — to middle age — *In the City, Fiction, V.O.S., A Gun in Each Hand* — and maturity — *Truman*. They focus on Catalan urban middle-class, mainly straight men of Gay’s own generation living in a bilingual and multicultural society which is redefining gender and nation over the last decades. *Fiction* is a male melodrama, as Cesc Gay centres on Àlex to examine how impossible love affects a man. Gender is inextricably linked to space in the films of the director. *Fiction* is most remarkably set in the country, conceived of as an enabling environment for introspection, a place to think about “who you really are, not who you’d like to be”. Therefore, Gay reinterprets the commonplace idea of Catalan culture that opposes the deceptive, illusory urban milieu of Barcelona, where people lead a fake life, to the authenticity of the Catalan country, a setting where one can live unmasked, like Àlex’s friends Judith and Santi. In general, the discussion on the dialectic of the inner/genuine/straight/rural versus the public/fake/dishonest/urban pervades the entire work of the filmmaker. In *Fiction*, Gay’s view on the matter is not that simple: on the one hand, these characters do not adhere to conservative patterns of life according to the traditional view of the country as a place of customs and essence. On the other hand, Àlex cannot strip off his mask and, conversely, remains melancholically attached to his idealised self, “who he really is”; thereby, he gives up the idea of having an affair with Mònica and returns to the city with his wife and children. Melancholy has been described as the attachment to a lost love object — the mother, from a psychoanalytic approach — the subject is unable to get rid of. Àlex remains undecided, stagnant, thus hinting at a moment of personal crisis and change that echoes broader social transformations. The character somewhat represents the typical emotional weakness and the victimism which is normally attributed to Catalan masculinity. He epitomises the individual who, in Žižek’s terms, prefers to live entrapped in an ideological fantasy — family and marriage, patriarchal masculinity — rather than living a “real” — honest, genuine — life. Nevertheless, the film does not make clear what kind of love object — which I have described as his idealised self — Àlex is tied up to; it could be either the inclusive masculinity Santi symbolises or even the typical young bachelorhood and independence in a patriarchal system that allows men to have illicit love affairs while keeping their respectability and authority. In any case, confusion is what clearly describes Àlex’s situation.

The dialectic of the private and the public is symbolically represented by mirrors and portraits, which show the duality of the “real” or inner and the “fake” or social self. Windows and frames draw the borders of the public and private spaces as well. Furthermore, Àlex writes fictions to lead a vicarious life through his characters. Stories, portraits and mirrors — and even Mònica, who provides a chance of having a lover without family obligations — are ghosts in the spectral world Àlex has created to flee from reality. Another relevant aspect of the visual in the film is that *Fiction* is a strongly masculine story: whereas opticality and distance are associated with maleness, hapticity and closeness is related to femininity. In sum, *Fiction* depicts those

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melancholic men who tragically cling to a decaying hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity because of their fear to choose new emerging options.

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