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No Strangers: Older Gay Men in the Films of Ventura Pons

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ABSTRACT

In a career spanning more than five decades Catalan filmmaker Ventura Pons (Barcelona, 1945) has directed over 30 films. His eclectic filmography does not easily fit categories or labels of any kind, including queer cinema. However, the frequent presence of gay male characters and same-sex desire in his films is significant, especially given the advanced age of a very high proportion of those men. Pons' camera does not shy away from presenting their bodies as both desirable and desiring, older bodies that don't hide away from the camera. Starting with a re-reading of *Amic/Amat* (1998) from the perspective of aging studies, the article focuses on key examples of older gay and queer men in his work, with special emphasis on films that Pons directed in his sixties (*Forasters* (2008), *A la deriva* (2009), *Mil cretins* (2010)). It identifies recurring themes and tropes in this context, such as cross-dressing, memory or inheritance and finds that the filmmaker's interest in queer memory is closely linked to arguably the main preoccupation of his work: the cultural history of Catalonia.

KEYWORDS

Aging masculinities; Catalan cinema; queer cinema; LGBTQ+; older gay men; memory; Ventura Pons

Despite a growing presence and importance of older characters in film and media and an impactful body of scholarly work in this evolving field of study (Chivers, Cohen-Shalev, Dolan, Gallop, Goltz, Medina *Cinematic*, Medina and Zecchi, Mortimer, Shary and McVittie or, in the contest of Spanish cinema, Marr or Zecchi et al.), there is still work to do in queer masculinities. With some important recent exceptions (Tracy and Michaela Schrage-Früh on European and Anglophone cinema, Goltz on queer temporality and gay representation, or, on Spanish literature, Armengol and Medina), research in this field has been characterised by a focus on women. A recurring conclusion in these recent publications (and earlier ones, such as Holmlund) is that men have an easier time than women getting old on the screen. This is both in terms of male stars' ability to extend their careers even beyond the average retirement age of most professions, and their depiction as active and valuable members of society. This is what Dolan has called "vintage masculinity" (240): male characters, and the stars who embody them, are allowed to maintain a youthful appearance and even father children into old age, thus reinstating the gender binary and male privilege on the screen and in real life (160).

Some of these studies identify an absence of elder LGBTQ+ characters and compare their treatment on the screen to that of older women (Guarions Galán 71, Richardson 30). Goltz and Richardson have studied stereotypes associated with older gay and queer men on mainstream, mostly English-language media, with woeful findings. Older gay men are presented as the epitome of failed masculinity, falling into two key stereotypes: either "the predatory gay man who seeks to

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‘corrupt’ innocent, younger men” or, conversely, “the desexualised figure of ‘the old queen’, a body whose aging effeminacy removes him from the scheme of sexuality” (Richardson 174). Yet, as Richardson also argues, queer men are not constrained by “heteronormative courtship rituals”, since there is no biological clock on their sexual activity (179). Buoyed by Freeman’s and Halberstam’s work on queer temporalities, other queer theorists have found potential in LGBTQ+ older lives as the ultimate challenge to heteronormative constraints of time, bodies, sex, and gender identities (see, for example Gallop, Port, Sanberg, or Sanberg and Marshall). This is a familiar resistance strategy for queer communities, used to turning oppression against itself. The absence of procreation and any heteronormative understandings of futurity, as Edelman established, opens a set of possibilities, including, indeed, having children and various configurations and understandings of the family, as we find in some of Pons’ films.

Aging in the Cinema of Ventura Pons

One of many aspects that makes the films of Ventura Pons remarkable is the consistent presence of older characters (male and female), frequently in leading roles. With rare exceptions – *A la deriva* (2009) or *Mil cretins* (2010) – age is not a theme in the older characters’ stories. It is not an exaggeration to say that presence of older characters in the films of Ventura Pons, since the 2000s especially, is not the exception, it is almost the norm. Young characters, male and female, also abound, but their lives and their storylines do not always take center stage and are often tightly intertwined with those of the older people around them, whose narrative and visual perspectives usually predominate. Arguably, this is related to Pons’s background as an experienced theatre director who knows the actors well and trusts older and very experienced performers (see Fouz Hernández “Tablas” 147). We find older narrative voices guiding us through the main events of the storyline, either through voice-over or in conversation with other characters. They have the vantage perspective given by experience and time, but also as witnesses of history. Older characters are thus the ideal vehicle for Pons’ mission of retelling the history of Catalonia. As Fernández has explained, Pons does this by adapting to the screen stories penned by renowned writers and playwrights, and by hiring highly experienced and easily recognizable actors in Catalonia, contributing to build its own star system (98).

Although this essay will focus on older gay male characters, it is worth noting that the films of Pons are populated by at least just as many older female characters in protagonist roles, an aspect of his work that bucks the trend identified by scholars in other cinemas and that merits a separate study. These characters are either based on real-life women and stories in feature films or play themselves as the subject of documentaries. Key examples in just the last decade include Mercé Rodoreda (Vicky Peña) in *Un berenar en Ginebra* (2012), Colita, Teresa Gimpera, Núria Feliu, Rosa Maria Sardà, Maruja Torres or Rosa Regàs playing themselves in the documentary *Cola, Colita, Colassa* (2014), Gimpera again in *Oh, quina joia* (2016) or Clare Bloom and Siân Philips in *Miss Dali* (2017). The films celebrate these women’s impactful careers in areas such as journalism, literature, photography, theatre and, indeed, cinema, and reclaim their agency over their own personal stories and the history of Catalonia. These *herstories* are narrated from their point of view, either as indisputed protagonists (Roderada, Colita) or because their narration (in dialogue or voice-over) assertively positions them as a driving force in stories associated with men (*Miss Dali*). *Anita no perd el tren* (2000) and *Any de Gràcia* (2011), both starring the late Rosa Maria Sardà, are crucial earlier examples of films directed by Pons where older female figures are in control of their own affirmative-aging narratives.¹ While there is no room to discuss those examples in detail here, it is relevant to stress that Pons’ camera does not shy away from focusing on close-up and extreme close-up shots of older female faces, showing their wrinkles and their grey hair in all their beauty, enhancing their dignity and unfiltered star quality. When comedy is part of their story, it is never at their expense; audiences are invited to laugh with them, not at them.

Queer Memory and Mature Gazes in Pons' Early Work

Pons' consistent preoccupation with memory and the narrative weight given to older characters in his films is a stand-out feature of his entire filmography.² This is very evident in his documentary films, but memory gradually gained importance also in his features. Older queer characters matter in terms of visibility and diversity in a culture stereotypically obsessed with youth. They also have a role in creating a queer genealogy that, as I aim to demonstrate in this article, is comparable in effort and importance to his preoccupation with Catalan cultural memory. Indeed, I will argue that both run in parallel with each other and often are tightly interwoven in the trope of inheritance.

Films and television series about queer memory in Spain have gained some mainstream popularity. In cinema, a stand-out example is Almodóvar's in part autobiographical *Dolor y gloria* (2019) – a film that has already attracted a significant amount of scholarly work in the field of aging studies (Armengol and Varela-Monograsso, Collins and Gilligan, Jerónimo, Martínez-Expósito, Medina 'Cinema', Smith). In television and streaming, the clearest examples this decade so far include *Veneno* (2020), based on the real-life story of transgender performer and celebrity Cristina Ortiz Rodríguez (1964-2016), the sequel *Vestidas de azul* (2023-24), based on the 1983 documentary *Vestida de azul*, that followed the lives of six trans women during the Spanish transition, and *Las noches de Tefía* (2023), a fictionalized story set in a concentration camp for homosexual men and other dissidents in Francoist Spain – based on the real-life “Penitentiary Agricultural Colony” in the Island of Fuerteventura. Almodóvar's film and these series are remarkable in that they prioritize the perspective of older queer characters who, in looking back at their younger selves, invite a reflection on older models of society. In turn they inspire a critique of outdated, oppressive, and repressive values that always threaten to come back, as seems evident in the rhetoric of the recently revitalized far-right ideology in Spain and globally.³

Released in the year in which censorship was abolished in Spain, Pons' *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (1978), alongside the perhaps just as important but often forgotten short documentary *Informe sobre el FAGC* (1979) about the first Pride march in Barcelona led by the Front d'Alliberament Gai de Catalunya (Gay Liberation Front of Catalonia), are major milestones in the construction of LGBTQ+ identities in Catalonia and in Spain and an illustration of how Pons' life-long project about Catalan identity and memory runs hand-in-hand with his important work on queer memory. Scott Ehrenburg has written persuasively about *Ocaña's* contribution to queer memory. Using Elizabeth Freeman's concept of Erohistoriography, he argues that through *Ocaña's* body the film queers history, time and space, disrupting notions of past and present or rural/urban and private/public spaces. As Alberto Berzosa has noted, the film also introduces the figure of an older man as spectator. In his famous public performance in Las Ramblas, the old man watches *Ocaña* with curiosity and seemingly without prejudice. Circumstantial as it may seem, his interaction with *Ocaña* is a stand-out moment in the film in that it breaks the expected divide between his performance and older generations that the public would unconsciously associate with repression and prejudice. It also anticipates what would become a constant throughout his filmography: the older male as bearer of the gaze.⁴ This is further evidenced in Pons's very first feature film, *El vicari d'Olot* (1981), and has continued through to recent examples such as *Sabates grosses* (2016).

Beloved/Father. Queer Genealogies and Father Figures

Relationships between men in the films of Ventura Pons are often characterised by a considerable age gap. The narrative of these films tends to favor identification with the older man, making the younger body the focus of our attention in a visual economy that Thomas Waugh defined as “the third body”. We find examples in *La rossa del bar* (1986), *Carícies* (1997), *Amic/Amat* (1998) or

Food of Love (2001), where these relationships are framed within the context of sex work.⁵ As I have written elsewhere, in the context of male bodies and the homoerotic gaze in the work of Pons, this process of identification makes spectators complicit participants of that transaction (see Fouz-Hernández “Caresses”, *Cuerpos*, “La mirada homoerótica” and “Tablas”).

Pons’ films also invite us to reflect and question the power balance in these relationships from different perspectives. In *Carícies*, for example, the Home gran (literally “the big man”, played by the late Jordi Dauder) reasserts his social and financial power in the bedroom, demanding exactly what he wants from Noi (“the boy” – Roger Coma) who, in turn, bears the weight of the gaze as the object of desire. In *Amic/Amat* and in *Food of Love* the power balance is teasingly unstable, with the older men becoming quite vulnerable and sharing some of the erotic tension as objects of the gaze themselves.

In *Amic/Amat* Jaume, the old Professor played by Josep Maria Pou, is in a clear position of power over his young student David (David Selvas), not only as his teacher but also as a close friend of David’s girlfriend’s father. Conversely, David takes full advantage of his physical strength and sexual appeal over the old man, who happens to be terminally ill and has his hopes on David, his most accomplished student, as the chosen heir of his academic (and personal) legacy. With all copies of his last and most important manuscript eventually destroyed, David will bear that responsibility as the only reader of Jaume’s labor of love, an unpublished essay about Ramon Llull’s thirteenth-century book *Llibre d’amic e amat*, a classic of medieval literature in Catalan. This is one of several examples to follow in this essay that demonstrate how Pons’ interest in the cultural history of Catalonia is closely interwoven with queer memory.

The story establishes a clear comparison between bisexual David’s yet-unborn baby (his girlfriend is pregnant) and Jaume’s yet-unpublished essay, which is symbolically contained in a floppy disk. A carefully edited sequence suggests that David destroys the first of two existing floppy disks at the same time as his girlfriend Alba (Irene Montalà) discusses with her mother the possibility of abortion. Jaume’s impending death is also closely linked to David’s future fatherhood: news of the professor’s terminal illness and grim prognosis are directly followed by news about the pregnancy. Jaume’s excitement about David’s work, and especially his assertion that it breathes new life to “el cadàver antediluvà” (“the antediluvian corpse”) [00:09:06] – referring to Llull – not only queers and eroticizes the religious imagery of the original text but also establishes a continuum between Llull and Jaume’s work through David’s interest in both. Importantly, this continuum now includes Benet i Jornet’s original text and Pons’ film, contributing to his own legacy as a key figure of contemporary Catalan culture.

Amic/Amat is a film of great relevance here due to the way in which desire and the gaze are constructed. There are abundant point-of-view shots from the older man’s perspective that establish his agency and his gaze as a desiring subject, but he is also the object the David’s and his friend Pere’s gaze. In the first part of the film Jaume takes the initiative of giving David a lift home, asks to be invited to his apartment and expresses admiration for his work. At that point David’s position as a sex worker has not yet been disclosed and the relationship between the two characters is visually constructed as harmonious. The predominance of the two-shot (especially in the car, but also later at David’s apartment) adds to this impression of proximity and parity. They share the central space of the frame proportionally. The exchange of gazes between them creates a visual match that further enhances their closeness. Later, when Jaume hires a sex worker over the phone (David, but unbeknown to Jaume at this point) he makes it clear that they will have sex only if he fancies the young man. He then prepares for the encounter, trying to look attractive for the sex worker, removing his glasses, unbuttoning his shirt, and fixing his receding hair in the mirror (Figure 1). The act that he is anticipating is a transaction, but he maintains the fantasy that both men choose to be with each other, thus also preserving his subjectivity and his dignity, temporarily disregarding the considerable age gap, and presenting his aging body as worthy of attention by a much younger, attractive man.



Figure 1. Jaume (Josep Maria Pou) prepares for a visitor in *Amic/Amat*. Els Films de la Rambla. [00:36:29]

In the sequence that follows once David is revealed as the sex worker that Jaume had hired, David makes a point of turning the tables on his professor, physically taking control of the space, sitting on his desk chair, marking the territory, explicitly reminding him that now he is not his professor, but his client. In contrast with the previous sequence, the camera now sets them apart from each other with a predominance of long shot-reverse-shots. Jaume shows his vulnerability by confessing he is in love with him, David responds by telling him that he is pathetic, and nobody will ever fall in love with him, that he is disgusted by his body and that he will always have to pay for sex if he wants the company of attractive, younger men.

By all accounts the sequence would seem cruel and utterly humiliating to Jaume, underscoring the feared stereotype of the sad and lonely old gay man, who has no choice but paying for sex, what Oscar Guasch referred to as the “*carroza*” type (“the old geezer”) in his anthropological study about the Spanish gay scene in the 1990s. The *carroza*, typically in his fifties or sixties, can no longer aspire to have casual sex since he has lost “uno de los bienes más preciados: la juventud” (“one of [the scene’s] most valued assets: youth”), meaning that he will only be able to hook up with other old men or, alternatively, hung out with rent boys (Guasch 141). Indeed, David refers to Jaume as “*tietà*” (“auntie”) [00:38:26], thus emasculating him and highlighting the age difference. Yet, despite the violent fight that ensues, leaving Jaume badly injured, David seems to bask in the professor’s compliments about his intellect and his looks. As Bota has noted, Jaume is also a threat and a rival for David, aspects that question the sense of fragility that we may have been tempted to associate with this or any older character (736). In a follow-up meeting Jaume re-establishes his position by reminding him of his superior social, financial and intellectual status: “Jo, professor universitari. Tu, dependent d’una botiga de calçotets. La diferència entre el meu present i el teu futur” (“Me: university professor; you: underwear-shop attendant. That’s the difference between my present and your future”) [00:49:20 and 00:49:55]. In their last encounter, now with the knowledge that Jaume does not have long to live, David’s attitude changes, quietly admitting to being fond of him and apologizing for the fight, thus in part restoring some the harmony of the beginning, despite destroying the very last floppy disk containing his professor’s manuscript. Their closeness is reinstated despite their differences, as shown by the return of the two-shot and medium close ups during their last conversation.

The fight sequence follows directly after Jaume's meeting and deep conversation with his close friend and colleague Pere (Mario Gas). The two-shot also predominates in this sequence, establishing a clear parallelism with the first encounter between Jaume and David. Jaume reveals to Pere that he had been in love with him when they were younger and that he finds his company and the conversation sexually arousing. It is implied that this was the reason why Jaume sought the services of a sex worker, to release the sexual frustration experienced with the unrequited love of his friend, who reminds him that he loves his wife and "l'amistat és una altra cosa" ("friendship is something else") [00:32:30]. Jaume's projection of his desire for Pere onto the younger man is later confirmed when he makes a new proposal to David: he would pay for his studies if he quit prostitution and persuades his girlfriend (Pere's daughter) to keep their baby. Closing the circle, Jaume returns to Pere's home, who lovingly heals his wounds. More confessions will follow: Jaume admits that the reason why he'd love Pere's daughter to keep David's baby is that the baby would be a sort of heir for him as the offspring of his beloved friend's daughter and the man he loves now. In their last meeting, Jaume tells David that he is like a son for him, and the unpublished essay is his inheritance; that he is as fond of him as David was of his dad (David's dad committed suicide). Importantly, despite the sexual tension that characterizes their encounters, they never have sex. The fight is their way of sublimating their desire physically. Thus, while *Amic/Amat* insists on the idea of the older gay man as a father figure in intergenerational relationships much more clearly than other films by Pons, there is a line that is never quite crossed.⁶

Late Style (A Fragmented Map)

Amir Cohen-Shalev applies the concept of "late style" based on Said's essay on the late-life work of composers, artists, and writers to filmmakers. The main cause of rebellion here is old age itself (Cohen-Shalev 130). Late style, Cohen-Shalev argues, synthesizes the rebellious spirit of younger artists combined with the maturity and perspective that come with the experience (15). "Late style films" tend to be ambiguous (16) and open-ended and characterised by simplicity and minimalism, often marking a departure from the filmmakers' previous work. Narratives might be fragmented, open-ended and full of contradictions (132). While issues of auteurism are not the focus of this article, there is value in exploring the evolution of Pons' style in later life and its impact on the depiction of older characters and on stories that make increasingly more room for them. Let us turn our attention to five films that Pons directed in his sixties, in the period 2007-2010, with the aim of identifying old and new patterns of representation of gay and queer men.

Pons' films have always been characterized by a certain fragmentation. This is dictated in part by the structure of some of the plays and works that he adapted for the screen. The fragmentation of his narratives is undoubtedly influenced by his background as a theatre director who is used to working in Acts. This is perhaps most obvious in adaptations of plays and collections of short stories such as *El perquè de tot plegat* (1994), *Carícies*, *Morir o no* (1999), *Animals Ferits* (2005) or *Mil cretins*, but it gradually became a defining characteristic of his style. This way of structuring the story allows Pons to question any authority given to a single or dominant narrative voice, thus permitting a diverse set of voices and stories, mixing and matching characters of different backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and, I would add, different generations and ages. Importantly, the stories are usually tightly intertwined, making audiences reflect about, and question, hierarchies. Whose stories matter most? Who is in charge of the narrative?

Starting with *Barcelona (un mapa)* (2007), an adaptation of Lluís Cunillé's play *Barcelona, mapa d'ombres*, we once again find an aging gay man (Santi, played by Jordi Bosch) engaging in a transactional sex act with a younger man. Although his role is brief and very marginal, Santi and the young rent boy (and their encounter) are part of the continuum identified in the first section of this essay and that started with Pons' first feature film. At the end of the film, we find

out that Santi's role in the narrative is greater than audiences may have guessed to start with. Importantly for this essay, older married couple played by Núria Espert (as Rosa) and Josep Maria Pou (as Ramon, in another terminally ill role), enjoy cross-dressing. For Rosa this is in part strategic: in passing for a man, she plans to cheat the system and continue to cash in her husband's pension after his death, impersonating him. We later learn that this is not the only reason why she cross-dresses. She and her brother Santi used to cross-dress regularly for the thrill of it.

Intergenerational (heterosexual) relationships are also at the center of this story. Rosa and Ramon also have separate lengthy and erotically charged scenes with much younger lodgers of the opposite-sex to discuss the termination of their tenancy contracts, given a major change of circumstances caused by Ramon's looming death. The setting of these scenes (very small and dimly light bedrooms) adds erotic weight to the episodes.⁷ In that sense, the revelation that Argentinian barmaid and tenant Violeta (María Botto) is pregnant with Ramon's child does not come as a complete surprise. The potentially heterosexualizing tone of the scene between her and Ramon, however, is neutralized with dialogue about Ramon's penchant for cross-dressing and, I would argue, also intertextually through the memory of Pou's Jaume in *Amic/Amat* (is this the legacy that his previous character sought?). The dramatic scene culminates with Violeta painting Ramon's lips red with her own lipstick, in one of the most memorable images of the film and of Pons' filmography. At the end of the film traumatic family memories revealed in Anna's diary add plot relevance to queer brother Santi. These family secrets are disclosed in parallel with other surprises about the history of Barcelona's most iconic theatre, the Liceu.

In *A la deriva*, adapted from Lluís-Antón Baulenas' novel *Àrea de Servei*, middle-aged male nurse Carducci (Albert Pérez) has a passionate relationship with an older male bisexual patient in the isolated luxury health center where he works. Co-worker and friend Anna (Maria Molins) is also involved with a young male patient, their encounters and relationships once again intensified by an oppressive setting, in this case the secluded building and healthcare facilities. The film establishes a very clear contrast between the fervent sexual encounters of the young heterosexual couple, shot in warm lighting and short camera distance in a style reminiscent of the erotic thriller, and the older men, seen in the far distance, on low resolution long shots in black-and-white mediated by a security camera. It is through those cameras that we see in an uncharacteristically intimate moment the two men kiss in the dining room (Figure 2), then (in long shot) engage in full penetrative anal sex in the patient's bedroom. The scenes are seen through Anna's point-of-view shots on the security monitors, further mediating the action and adding an eerie sense of scrutinization and policing of queer sex that is already implicit in the security camera.

Regardless of Anna's indifference about this, who calls her friend gerontophilic only as a joke [00:54:48], the camerawork would seem to fit the pattern identified by Susanna Paasonen in her research on Finnish audiences' response to aging bodies in pornography. As sites of disgust, old naked bodies must be observed from a distance. As mentioned, there is a noticeable contrast with the way in which the sex scenes between the young heterosexual couple are shot. Anna and Giró's (Roger Coma) intimacy is equally illicit, arguably more, given that, beyond Anna's unprofessionalism and the age gap, the young patient Giró is a dangerous criminal who should be under constant observation. Their sexual encounters are not seen through a security camera but instead witnessed by Giró's roommate Arcadi (Fernando Gillén – then in his late seventies and in one of his very last roles before passing away four years later). As a silent witness (unable to speak due to his illness) Arcadi offers another example of an unmediated older male gaze whose humanity is presented as a sharp contrast with the security camera that conveys the same-sex intergenerational intimate acts involving Carducci.

When considering the patterns identified in previous films, one can read the juxtaposition of the erotic scenes between the two co-workers and the patients of different generations as an invitation to reflect on those differences. How often do we see young, heterosexual couples with



Figure 2. Nurse Carducci (Albert Pérez) and male patient kiss in *A la deriva*. Els Films de la Rambla. [00:21:21]

attractive bodies having sex in cozy environments and how often do we see two men, especially older men, in similar contexts? This question is already problematized by the fact that despite being partially disabled and hurt when he arrives at the clinic, young Giró's sexual vigor is clearly unaffected. The sexual encounter between the two older men in an institutional context could also be read as a reference to the medicalization of homosexuality or the policing of sexual encounters between men in institutional settings and Foucauldian readings of the panopticon.

The film favors the queer perspective in other ways, however. Firstly, with the cameo role of famous queer icon, Venezuelan writer Boris Izaguirre, a television personality in Spain since the 1990s. Izaguirre plays, in part, himself, "a famous writer", but here is also an assessor and investor in a new initiative to provide luxury care homes for wealthy residents, his presence only justified as an attempt to queer and subvert pre-conceptions about old age: he is offering a life of extravagance for older people, as long as they can afford it.

Secondly, Carducci tells Anna that the old caravan that he is about to lend her to use as a temporary home after separating from her partner, used to be a mobile massage parlor that he had set up near the Port Olímpic during the transformative 1992 Barcelona Summer Games. He nostalgically remembers that he used to hand out flyers in the gay scene and that he ended up having intimate contact with a lot of his clients in the caravan. One day a heterosexual client that he describes as a "brute" caught him having sex with an Olympic flag-bearer. The "brute" could not handle the idea of having been groped by a gay man, so he beat him up and destroyed the caravan. Here we have another space, then, that works as a site of queer memory that is tightly intertwined with an important moment in the history of Catalonia. It provides shelter for Anna and, like the diary in *Barcelona (un mapa)* gains symbolic narrative traction in the film's resolution, since Giró and Arcadi steal the van to escape the facility.

At this point it seems very clear that sickness in old age and death are major themes in all the films discussed so far. We could also argue that their looming death does not devoid the older characters of sexual desire. Characters prepare for death, but don't let it get in the way of living and of making the most of the time left. The film that followed, *Mil cretins*, is perhaps the clearest example in Pons' filmography, alongside *Forasters* (2008), where we find characters suffering from ill health and facing death who openly and constantly complain about pain, loneliness, regret, and fear. In that sense, these two films mark a change in Pons' approach to older



Figure 3. Albert (Aleix Albareda) helps his father, Mr Beneset (Joan Crosas), dress up in *Mil cretins*. Els Films de la Rambla.

characters, since old age now becomes a defining feature. Despite the absence of visibly gay male characters of any age, in *Mil cretins* we find another older man who cross-dresses. The film queers the trope of the father-son relationship further and in ways that we had not seen since the bath scene in *Carícies*.

The first vignette of *Mil cretins* (another Quim Monzó adaptation) takes place in a care home. Albert (Aleix Albareda) pays a visit to his father Mr Beneset (Joan Crosas – then in his early sixties), accidentally surprising him while he was trying to get dressed, barely managing to put on some lingerie in front of the mirror, supporting himself on a walking frame. Beneset complains about this intrusion of privacy, but also welcomes the presence of his son, who seems fully accustomed to this cross-dressing routine and is now helping him with his bra (Figure 3). The sight of this old man with a beard, thick eyebrows, greying hair, and a hairy chest painting his lips red adds dramatic visual effect. Constant references to his large penis and his desire for some of the female nurses further queer the narrative in ways that are reminiscent of the Ocaña's genderfuck performance in *Las Ramblas*. Later he is seen carefully painting his nails. The vignette offers another enduring queer image in Pons' filmography that insists on a queering of the traditional family unit, and of father figures in particular, a strong visual continuum and narrative trope that insists on visual memories of earlier films – *Barcelona (un mapa)* – and that would continue into the future with *Ignasi M.*

Strangers ... In the Night

I have saved *Forasters* for last, in part because the film usefully condenses and expands some of the issues discussed in this article. The film's tagline "melodrama familiar entre dos segles" ("a family melodrama across two centuries") sums up the key elements of interest here: generations, trauma, and memory. Based in the homonymous 2004 play by Sergi Belbel the narrative is, once again, fragmented, this time not by space but by time. This fragmentation is marked visually with the use of sepia for the 1960s and full color for the present day.

Most of the action takes place in the family home, another enduring symbol of inheritance and history since it is the only asset the family did not sell after the war, passing from one

generation to the next. Indeed, three different generations share the apartment in the first part of the film, thus further dramatizing both the passing of time and the evolution of social and family values. The strangers of the title refer to the upstairs neighbors, synecdoche for migrant waves from the South of Spain in the 1960s and from North Africa in the 2000s. As I will argue later, the title could also be read as a reference to gay cruising. New and future generations of Catalans are represented symbolically by Andalusian Manuel (Roger Príncep as a boy, Santi Pons as an adult) and Moroccans Ahmed (Xevi Camps) and little boy Ali (Daniel Dantas). They are indeed symbols of migration, but also of an of increasingly diverse and welcoming Barcelona. Matching shots of different characters occupying the same spaces decades later underscore the passing of time and how different generations of the same family, and different waves of migrants are, as Resina has argued in relation to this film (34), part of a cyclic process of constant renewal.

A crucial scene almost exactly in the middle of the film places the queer son Josep (Dafnis Balduz as a young man, Manel Barceló in the present-day) also at the center of the narrative. Interestingly he is the one chosen to protect and carry forward the family's legacy, symbolized by the home. Here we find another example of a queer son helping an aging and ailing parent, in this case his dying mother Emma (Ana Lizaran) in the bath. She is constantly complaining about the pain caused by her terminal cancer, but also about the Andalusian neighbors and regrets of the past. Despite seemingly being her main carer, Josep bears the brunt of his mother's uninged resentment. "Poca força que tens fill meu" ("You are so weak, son"), she says [00:55:48], demanding that he sponges her back more vigorously. She is clearly trying to emasculate him, in preparation for the homophobic speech that would follow. After revealing that she knows exactly "com ets" ("what you are") [00:58:27] she advises him to stop fantasizing about his friend (who happens to be dating his sister, probably to be closer to him, she reckons), and adds:

Hi ha moltes nenes riques disposades a casar-se amb un bon noi com tu. Tria la més bleda i la més lletja i casa-t'hi. Fes-li un fill. No et costarà gaire: apaga el llum i fes volar la imaginació, com fas cada nit al teu quarto pensant en el teu amic [...] No és amb aquest noi amb qui has de fer les marranades que somies cada nit. No és amb ell. Ho entens? [...] Un cop casat, la dona et deixarà sortir amb els amigots. Aleshores és quan has de fer-ho. I amb homes desconeguts. I si són estrangers, no gentussa com els d'aquí dalt, i els has de donar diners a canvi, millor, així no et comprometran a res.

(Many rich girls would marry a boy like you. Pick the silliest and ugliest one and marry her. Give her a child. It won't be hard. Turn off the light and use your imagination as you do every night in your room thinking about your friend [...] It is not with him that you need to do the dirty things you dream of, do you understand? [...] when you are married your wife will let you go out with your friends. That is when you have to do it. Only with strangers, and if they are foreigners or scum like the ones upstairs, and if you have to pay for it, even better. That way there is no commitment) [00:58:32-01:59:55].

She explains that the reason for this advice is that, despite not being very bright and despite his "tara gravíssima" ("big flaw", referring to his homosexuality), he could be successful in life if he works very hard and hides this side of him from everyone else [01:00:19-01:00:26]. Showing little sympathy for his son, who is now in tears, she asks him to stop crying because he "sembles una bleda. És el que ets" ("you look like a sissy [...] which is exactly what you are") [01:00:43-01:00:53]. Finally, she threatens to "come back from her grave to haunt him down and castrate him if he dares selling the family home: "Et tallaré els ous i el pitu i et cosiré el forat del cul, mariconàs. I llavors sí que se t'haurà acabat la vida" ("I will cut off your balls and dick and sew your asshole, you faggot, and then your life will be over") [01:00:04-01:04:17].

Josep won't exactly follow his mother's ill advice, except for the part about meeting "strangers" or "outsiders" which, in my reading, is a way of reclaiming the film's title and adding centrality to the queer character with pride. The editing suggests that Josep decides to go cruising, gets into a young male stranger's car and has sex with him just as his mother takes her last breaths. The editing also enables a comparison between the scene of Emma's death and that of Josep's sister Anna's own death, also of cancer, years later in the very same bed. The fact that mother and daughter are played by the same actress (the late Anna Lizaran, who would also die of cancer

only five years later) enhances the visual match characteristic of the film's narrative. There is an important difference here, however: a now middle-aged Josep is holding his sister's hand, occupying the place of his dad (on the opposite side of the frame). This, and the fact that Josep oversees the completion of the family home's sale to no other than Manuel, the Andalucian boy – now a middle-aged man – is a way of closing a circle where Josep reclaims his subjectivity in older age, disobeying his mother's wishes with the house sale and seems to live happily with a man. It is possible to interpret that his partner is the same man he met that fateful rainy night given that the editing has accustomed us to expect matching shots of the same characters in different epochs, the main difference being the color palette and their age, and we are seen arriving (past) and leaving (present) in a car – albeit in opposite directions (Figure 4).

The story also reverses the concept of the “chosen family” so often used by LGBTQ+ people directly or indirectly expelled from the family unit for no other reason than their sexual orientation.⁸ As a little boy, Manuel had taken Emma's fancy, telling him that she wished to have a son like him. In that sense, as Joan Ramon Resina has argued in his illuminating essay about this film (and *Amic/Amat*), in accepting the inheritance (by purchasing the house), Manuel is also accepting “la responsabilidad de la memoria” (“the responsibility of memory”) (33). And as he fulfils his role as the chosen (heterosexual) heir, he also frees Josep to get on with his life with his own chosen family.⁹

In his inspiring essay about aging queer men in Galician Literature, Danny Barreto argues that care work provides an opportunity for gay men in later life to reinsert themselves into their birth families, in what he calls a “coming back” after the “coming out” that in so many cases involve a distancing from the heteronormative family unit. Caring for older relatives, he adds, not only offers “a queer sense of generativity or the possibility of projecting oneself into the future, situating oneself in a longer genealogy” (713), it is also a form of healing “from the traumas associated with ‘coming out’ suffered in their youth and adolescence” (724). In some of the examples discussed in this article, like Santi in *Barcelona (un mapa)* or Josep in *Forasters*, gay sons return to the family and have a crucial role in unlocking the traumas of the past. Josep, who cared tirelessly for his ailing mother in his youth, returns years later to look after his dying sister, and yet, like Santi, he liberates himself from past family traumas and constraining, repressive patterns. In other examples discussed, such as *Amic/amat* or *A la deriva*, older gay men are presented as sexually



Figure 4. Josep (Manel Barceló) with his partner in *Forasters*. Els Films de la Rambla. [1:41:46]

active, living their own lives despite the ordinary restrictions caused by illness or old age. Other older men, such as Mr Beneset in *Mil cretins* or Ramon in *Barcelona (un mapa)*, whose actions suggest an attraction to the opposite sex, defy heteronormativity in other ways, notably cross-dressing, but also breaking boundaries of what may be considerable accept or “age appropriate” in their dialogue and behavior.

While the frequent presence of older characters, queer or not, in Pons’ films is in itself remarkable, there are three aspects that stand out in the examples discussed here with regards to older gay and queer men. Firstly, unlike the pattern identified by Richardson in his study, age is not “their master identity and the main source of tension within the narrative” (210), it is not their reason to be. These are complex characters getting on with their lives with the limitations that are to be expected at their age. They are not celebrated as heroic examples of “successful aging”, to use Rowe and Kahn’s term, nor are they victimized or side-lined for being old. Their bodies are shown as they are and in a casual way. The camera is not interested in turning them into a spectacle of decrepitude or pity, as protagonists of a decline narrative (Gullete), nor does it hide the signs of aging, they just happen to be old. Secondly, the films defy stereotypes associated with older gay men as sad and lonely or obsessed with, but failing to attract, younger men, also reversing the pattern identified by Goltz: old age in these characters is not depicted as miserable, nor as a punishment for their sexuality (49). As shown in this essay, while older gay men in Pons’ films are often involved in intergenerational relationships, the older men are presented in a dignified manner, concerned about the intellectual connection, and not obsessed with younger flesh (examples include *Amic/Amat* but also *Food of Love*). Thirdly, and this is where Pons’ example is particularly important, the films make a point about (re)inscribing gay and queer men into the cultural memory of the nation. The centrality of Ramon Llull in *Amic/Amat*, the Liceu in *Barcelona (un mapa)*, the Barcelona Olympics in *A la deriva* or the symbolic house in *Forasters* in connection with these characters is undeniable.

Most importantly, however, while illness and death are topics impossible to ignore in any of these films and many others like *Ignasi M*, the fact that these older gay and queer men stay alive while other characters pass away is unusual. In the final observations about representations of older gay relationships in American cinema, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie conclude that “one evident step in that progress will occur when both lovers are still alive at the end of the movie” (168). One of the most influential book-length studies about “homosexuality in the movies”, the pioneering *The Celluloid Closet* by Vito Russo, first published in 1981, famously concludes with a long “Necrology” where he lists the causes of death of most of the gay male characters discussed in the book. Heartbreakingly, it comes as no surprise that most died by suicide, murder, or execution, and only one of “old age”. As this article has shown, Pons’ films are significant, among other things, for the way in which they afford gay and queer characters the possibility of living complex lives with intensity into their old age, not only adding visibility and diversity with their mere presence, but actively underscoring the importance of their role in the family, society, and history. In turn, these characters invite younger generations of LGBTQ+ people to see themselves as part of a continuum of gay and queer men that contributed to shape the past and will now undoubtedly have a role in creating the future.

Notes

1. As Armengol and Medina explain (565), the term “affirmative aging”, coined by Linn Sandberg, is a welcome alternative to “successful aging” that addresses some of the problematic implications of Rowe and Kahn’s term.
2. I had the opportunity to discuss this topic with Pons in a series of interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic (two of which are condensed in Fouz Hernández “Tablas”). In those interviews Pons originally denied any political or didactic intention in his stories about older people. There was no premeditated plan to give them a voice in a world that tends to silence and ignore them, he insisted: “a mí lo que me

interesa y me motiva es la historia” [...] “si la historia es buena, no importa la edad de los personajes” (“what interests me and motivates me is the story” [...] “if the story is good, the age of the characters is irrelevant”) (145). When pushed, he admitted that “es verdad que los personajes mayores tienen más experiencia y más que decir, en principio y, por tanto, una historia contada por mayores podría resultarme más interesante. Y al público también. O debería” (“it is true that older characters come with more life experience and a story narrated by them might be more interesting for me, and hopefully for the audiences too. It should” (145). After some reflection, he would eventually agree that “el valor de la edad [en un personaje], de nuevo, es la experiencia, la memoria” (“the value of age [in a character], again, is about their experience and memory”) (154 – my translations).

3. Earlier examples of this model include Almodóvar’s own *La mala educación* (2004) and Antonio Hernández’s *En la ciudad sin límites* (2002). On aspects of aging and queer memory in the later film see Fouz-Hernández “Identity”.
4. Retrospectively, as Pons reluctantly admitted in one of our interviews, the attention paid to the older male spectator in his first film might not have been completely anecdotal (Fouz Hernández “Tablas” 160).
5. This does apply to *Food of Love*, but not to the main characters.
6. The pattern discussed in this section is also relevant for two of the stories of *Carícies*, released the year before *Amic/Amat*, and it would recur in future films, including *Food of Love*, *El virus de la por* (2015) and, to some extent, in *Ignasi M*. It is worth noting the “older” men in these stories were still rather young. Even in *Amic/Amat* both Pou and Gas were in their fifties and, while their bodies are marked as aging and contrasted with the younger males, they are both appear nude from behind and are presented as very much sexually active.
7. There is also a scene with Ramon and an older tenant, a private teacher of French played by Rosa Maria Sardà but lacking the sexual tension of the other two. The characters are separated by distance, mise-en-scène, and lighting.
8. The opposite happens in Antonio Hernández’s *En la ciudad sin límites* where Víctor (Leonardo Sbaraglia) implicitly picks Rancel (Alfredo Alcón), partner of his aging father Max (Fernando Fernán Gómez), as his father of sorts when, in response to an attack by his blood mother Marie (Geraldine Chaplin), he says that he must have inherited some features of Rancel’s personality. See Fouz-Hernández “Identity”.
9. *Forasters* makes it clear that society has evolved, but some old attitudes are also passed from one generation to the next. Josep’s nephew complains that his dying mother had emotionally blackmailed him to stay home and look after her. He also makes homophobic remarks about Josep, having sex in his old age, and mocks the family arrangement he has with his ex-wife, their daughter, and his boyfriend. Josep’s daughter, Rosa (Georgina Latre), in contrast, seems to accept the situation with complete normality. The scene where the two young cousins talk is important because they represent the younger generations. It is later suggested that Rosa may be repeating his aunt Emma’s life choices by getting involved with the upstairs neighbor Ahmed.

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