



## Queer Literature in Spain: Pathways to Normalisation

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**ABSTRACT:** More than any other, the idea of normalisation has provoked deep divisions within queer activism both at a philosophical and also at a political level. At the root of these divisions lies the irreconcilable divergence between an agenda for social change, which advocates the need for society to accept all sexual behaviours and identities as normal, and an approach of radical resistance against some social structures that can only offer a bourgeois and conformist normalisation. Literary fiction and homo-gay-queer themed cinema have explored these and other sides of the idea of normalisation and have thus contributed to the taking of decisive steps: from the poetics of transgression towards the poetics of celebration and social transformation. In this paper we examine two of these literary normalisation strategies: the use of humour and the proliferation of discursive perspectives both in the cinema and in narrative fiction during the last decades.

**KEYWORDS:** LGBT visibility; Queer humour; Queer rhetoric; Gay writing; Gay narrative

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**RESUMEN:** *Literatura Queer en España. Caminos de la normalización.*- Más quizá que ninguna otra, la idea de normalización ha provocado profundas divisiones en el seno del activismo *queer*, tanto a nivel filosófico/conceptual como a nivel de estrategia política. En el origen de estas divisiones se encuentra la irreconcilable divergencia entre una agenda de cambio social, que propugna la necesidad de que la sociedad acepte como normales todas las conductas e identidades sexuales, y un planteamiento de resistencia radical ante unas estructuras sociales que sólo pueden ofrecer una normalización burguesa y acomodaticia. La literatura de ficción y el cine de temática homo-gay-*queer* han explorado éstas y otras facetas de la idea de normalización, contribuyendo así a dar pasos decisivos desde las poéticas de la transgresión hacia poéticas de la celebración y transformación social. En esta presentación se exploran dos de estas estrategias de normalización literaria: el uso del humor y la proliferación de perspectivas discursivas en el cine y la narrativa de ficción de las últimas décadas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Visibilidad; Humor; Retórica Queer; Escritura Gay; Narrativa Gay

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### NORMALISATION

In the last thirty years Spain has been characterised by a general movement, in all cultural spheres, towards normalisation: a linguistic normalisation, normalisation of gender relations and of the LGBT

community, of differences, of the audio-visual cultural exception ... We could even think that the country itself has embarked on a long process of normalisation, overcoming the period when Spain "was different".<sup>1</sup> The emphasis placed by Spanish society on normalising a very wide range of phenomena of

different types highlights the situation of exceptionality or abnormality experienced during Franco's dictatorship. In fact, the current processes of normalisation make explicit reference to the past situation of exceptionality, which serve to justify the need for *normalisation* understood as *normality*: stability, habit, natural situation. Thus, the urge to recover the historical memory comes together with a discourse with countervailing positions: the forgotten (enforced and unjust, thus an abnormal situation) and the memory (which requires a process of normalisation to achieve normality). However, it would be wrong to consider the dictatorship period as just a mere parenthesis of abnormality: a quick glance at the cultural policies during the dictatorship reveal a special preoccupation to purge, homogenise and indoctrinate, to declare that the former Second Republic regime had come to destabilize the natural order of things and as a result of that, the new Francoist national state had to take charge of their normalisation. Obviously, the terminology employed by the dictatorship and democracy agents is different, along with their fundamental ideologies basis and their political praxis. But from the perspective of the power relations it is evident that in both cases social and cultural control mechanisms have been orchestrated in order to create or secure certain *habits* instead of others (Bourdieu: subjectivization of structures).

Any process of normalisation is necessarily carried out from a position of power- either the power exercised by the protagonists themselves concerning the situation that is to be normalised (Spanish people, people suffering physical disabilities, the LGBT community, ethnic minorities ...), or the power exercised against other people (ethnic cleansing, the normalisation of Czechoslovakia past 1969). When we refer to normalisation we should not forget the perlocutionary and coercive aspect inherent in every social interaction when produced from a status of power. Normalising primarily means to restore normality to something that had lost it or to turn into normal something that still is not; but in a second definition it means to subject to a rule (to regulate, to dictate). The first definition refers to the ideas of habituation and naturalisation; the second one, to the ideas of ordering and legislation.

Given that for thousands of years any type of sexuality beyond heterosexist patriarchy was considered as inherently abnormal, deviant and unnatural, the processes of the normalisation of homosexuality currently follow winding and unpredictable paths. The normalisation of homosexuality in Spain, one of the most successful in the world from a legal point of view, has travelled those four paths of habituation, naturalisation, ordering and legislation. We have succeeded in making society used to the presence of LGBT people and their lifestyles, in viewing homosexuality as a natural act pertaining to our species and society, in providing some sense

of categorial and taxonomic order to what was previously a confusing amalgam of terms and concepts<sup>2</sup> and also in replacing a legislation that criminalised with an anti-discriminatory one. With all this positive normalisation, we have also managed to build a cultural, social and legal edifice perfectly integrated into the structures of the state with the blessing and consent from social agents, with the protection and guarantee given by the institutions and with a robust protection against homophobic attacks (which the new orthodoxy pushes to the margins of the system). LGBT people have moved from the darkness, stigmatization, silencing, the unmentionable and the taboo to be an integral part of the system.

Literature shows us the humane, private and personal side of these big cultural operations. LGBT people live the normalisation of these great categories in a very different way. From the problems and worries of everyday life it is often difficult to grasp the connection between the real lived experience and the tectonic movements of the great plates of abstract concepts. To politicians and activists normalisation may mean the gaining of social rights or their legal recognition, but to a person suffering because of his/her sexuality, or the discourses constructed around it, it can simply mean the desire to be normal. Literature captures this personal and private dimension far better than theory. In her recent book about shame the queer theorist Sally Munt introduces her own position confessing the shame she felt as a young person, the cause being what she perceived as inadequacy, her lesbian affectation, her country origins and her different accent, etc.: "some people find their social disparity a source of delight and distinction, but if truth be told I longed to be normal" (Munt, 2008: 1).

The wish to be normal is one of the basic impulses of the human condition. To be normal in terms of sexual, linguistic, racial and physical characteristics means not feeling inferior simply because one is gay, because one does not speak the dominant language, because one does not belong to the dominant race, or because one has a physical disability. To be normal is usually a mere aspiration for those belonging to these minorities: to become normal. But it is precisely here, at this personal level, where the politics of normalisation finds its principal contradiction: who is authorised to define normality, and to what extent is it legitimate to impose their definition on others either by means of force or persuasion? All the policies aimed at normalising physical disabilities have only been made possible once other conditions traditionally labelled as abnormal have claimed their right to normality. The processes of the normalisation of the female condition and non-white races provided the foundations for other processes of normalisation of every type of minority group (also called "liberation").

Another inherent contradiction in the logic of normalisation is the creation of new orthodoxies and heterodoxies inside the normalised groups. Or in other words, the creation of new power structures that dictate what is acceptable and what is not. The existence of these structures has been fully documented in workers' liberation movements, the feminist movement, the black power movement in the US, in the platforms for the defense of minority languages and ultimately, in any kind of association pursuing normality (that is, that seeks to be sanctioned as, or by, the structures of the state). And of course it also exists in the LGBT movement where power structures have been generated, with the inevitable heterodoxies, dissents and exclusions. In the early days of Queer Theory (QT), when within the academic circles there still persisted some confusion on the difference between "gay and lesbian" and "queer", comments about that contradiction abounded. According to Ruth Goldman:

[E]xisting queer theory, despite attempts to avoid normativity, harbors a normative discourse around race, sexuality and class. Those of us who fall outside of this normativity are thus rendered *queer* queers and must position ourselves and our work in opposition to it (Goldman, 1996: 179).

Now, given that the dialectics of normalisation is essentially the construction of power structures that aim to join the state structures and if, by definition, any normalisation entails the creation of new discrimination/dissent, how can we reconcile the concept of normalisation with a queerness that represents ideas of resistance, nonconformity, slippage, indeterminacy, interstice, with the elusive, displaced, and mutable ...? What can the stabilizing agendas of normalisation have in common with the radically destabilizing, anti-categorical, performative but never essentialist philosophy of QT? If QT had given in to the temptation to confine its strategy to the boundaries of normalisation, would it not imply that homophobia is a heterosexism's tool for normalisation supported by moral and "scientific" discourses, thus losing the opportunity to identify unambiguously its totalitarian and repressive character based on the use of physical violence? Since Spanish law now makes same-sex marriage possible it might be appropriate to emphasize once again the distance separating normal from queer. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner, one of the QT founders and coiner of the concept of "heteronormativity" argues that gay marriage (and generally any normalising tactic) is ultimately detrimental for the LGBT community and society as a whole (Warner, 1999). He adds that the reason is that QT and all queer ethics, as a radically alter perspective existing outside the system, serve the purpose of criticising not only heterosexuality and heterosexism,

but all social and economic structures. Meanwhile, in his latest book, Lee Edelman emphasizes the negativist and anti-social aspects of QT and defends the present-minded drive of homosexuality as an antidote to the sanctimonious obsession of patriarchy, against its anxiety about the survival of the species, etc. Queer, outside the patriarchal paradigm, has other values: the now, the self (Edelman, 2004).

The radical opposition between the politics of normalisation and queer philosophy is best understood if we substitute the word "queer" for "*strangification*" ("*extrañificación*"). "Queer" does not necessarily make reference to a bending or twisting of the structures of the state, but rather it is related to the feeling of alienation with which patriarchy perceives everything that is out of its system. As if two different worlds, the patriarchal and the queer universe look at each other from afar and fail to understand one another. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky developed the concept of *ostranenie* (or estrangement, defamiliarization or deautomatization) in art as follows:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (Shklovsky, 1965: 12)

Establishing a bridge between aesthetics and gender theory, the similarity between *ostranenie* and "queer" is useful in the re-reading of the literary canon. Read with queer eyes, national literatures that underpinned the creation of national identities in the past offer the queer reader unexpected surprises.<sup>3</sup> I would go further to suggest (perhaps as a table talk syllogism) that if nation building was symbolically forged through the creation of a national literary canon, LGBT normalisation will benefit symbolically from the resignification of "queer" in all national literatures.

LGBT themed literature (and cinema) takes part in the debate between normalisation and anti-normalisation in a much more central and decisive way than it might seem. It is not only that literature has often functioned as a laboratory or testing ground for all kinds of proposals in relation to the LGBT world (some of which have proved premonitory, indeed), nor that the culture industry has allowed the creation of a market which ultimately has its own identity and group consciousness. Nor that the same literary dynamics have generated a LGBT establishment with their icons and their demons. All this, being true, proves to be superficial compared to the ability of a story or poem to

propose possible worlds where sexuality is seen as the cessation or estrangement mentioned by Shklovski –ultimately to create *alternative* paradigms. In the ancient literary tradition concerning LGBT themes there are anti-normalising paradigms such as the coded texts, hidden keys and secret references of troubadour and minstrel poetry of the late Middle Ages, or the invention of words and images known only to initiated that proliferated during the Symbolism and Surrealism, or the tradition of self-imposed silence, the silencing of the homosexual voice that yet leaves its traces in the sublimated eroticism of epic or Hollywood melodrama. What we might call normalised heterosexuality (which is nothing but patriarchy) compels other sexualities to flourish as clandestine literature that only with the passing of time and after many generations manages to create its own tradition. Queer writing and reading embody a sometimes misunderstood and still unknown literary underworld, certainly not confined to the expressive darkness of Lorca’s theatre, for instance, but which also includes the phenomenon of reverse reading (the gay reader who interprets a deviant character in a positive light in contrast to its negative portrayal in the story), the queer look of a reader/viewer who, with or without the text’s permission, attributes a homophilic sense to a passage that for others seems innocuously hetero; the transvestism of narrative voices, etc. These possibilities granted by literary experience have helped some readers to feel a little less strange. We could even say that literary normalisation, although somewhat vicarious, set precedents for other type of normalisations of the homosexual experience that were to appear later on.

## STORIES AND PRONOUNS

[I]n recent publications related to male homosexuality in [Spanish] literature or culture, to name two areas, the past really does seem to be a ‘foreign country’, with accounts rarely touching upon the pre-Transition period. There may well be, nevertheless, good reasons for this lack of historical emphasis. The conception that homosexuality was ‘repressed’ and therefore invisible before the “transition to democracy” is a strong motif which still holds sway. The aura around famous homosexual figures, such as García Lorca, may have, paradoxically, obscured the very nature of homosexual subcultures in the 1920s and 1930s as well as their historical investigation. The fact that homosexuality is, to a considerable degree, still taboo in Spain, is a third historically potent explanation (Cleminson and Vázquez García, 2007: 2).

In Spain, gay literature today often gives the impression of having been born spontaneously, arriving with democracy: the new gay culture of the nineties, queer studies, the new social stereotypes,

and all the cultural paraphernalia associated to the new paradigm constantly refers to a contemporaneity (modernity, globalisation, cosmopolitanism) perceived by many as “being-now”, the absolute present (Martínez-Expósito, 1998 and 2004). The linguistic renewal undergone by the entire field of sexuality, and which mainly consisted in the adoption of a lexicon and a set of images and metaphors from the English language, is not perceived today as a blatant example of cultural imperialism received with joy by the colonized subject, but rather as a symptom of novelty and of belonging to the species of international queer. Sometimes, though not too often, literary studies recall the distant precedents of the twenties. But the fact is that gay literature has a very ancient tradition –a literary heritage that uncompromisingly heteronormative regimes have tried to erase in multiple ways. The feeling of radical novelty of our current LGBT literature is actually a consequence of a shift in a normalised paradigm fabricated during the transition but only implemented from the mid-eighties.

*Homografesis* (Edelman: gay writing) is in itself an openly normalising mechanism in the sense of habituation and naturalisation. Creating a social *habitus* requires, first, repetition, insistence. The explosion in numbers occurs in Spain in the seventies, when an unusual number of publications appeared on “the homosexual question.”

Although from today’s perspective those publications seem, to say the least, misguided, at the time they proved to be extremely shocking because they constituted a full-blown transgression: the *dictum* of silence established by Christian morality that conceptualised as sodomy sex between people of the same sex (*peccatum illud horribile inter christianos non nominandum*), a prohibition later naturalized through custom and civil laws. The mere act of publishing novels in which a central theme was the universe of sodomy, sexual deviance, uranism, homosexuality, intersexuality, Doric and Sapphic passions, was a real scandal –and this was despite the fact that such issues were often presented with grotesquely negative tinges and always in connection with the underworld, delinquency, depravity, crime and perversion.

Historically, the narrative of homosexual theme or intention is based on a careful crafting of characters as a prerequisite for any ideological transmission. Hence the plurality of ways of living homosexuality is presented in the literature as a plurality of more or less defined archetypes endowed with easily identifiable features. However, the Spanish literature of the last thirty years has failed to accurately reflect the reality of Spanish gay life. Perhaps the aspect where it is easier to find a reflection is not, as might be expected, in the recreation of colourful characters, but in the progressive, albeit slow, assimilation of its own discourse. Indeed, patriarchal literature

had never considered the possibility that the homosexual could speak, he was denied the use of the word even to tell his own story. When in the seventies the first serious attempts to approach the homosexual issue appear, the only coherent perspective (and the only legal –let us not forget that the censorship law forbid, among other things, the advocacy of homosexuality) is that of the heterosexual who justifies their morbid curiosity on semi-sociologic and pseudo-scientific grounds. Homosexuality is embodied in homosexuals and the latter become a collective character that begins to appear in novels, general interest texts and publications of all kinds. Homosexuality exhibited by homosexuals during the late period of Francoism is characterised by its marginality, its minority quality, though potentially dangerous, and essentially mysterious in its (hypothetical) internal structure as well as terribly plural (i.e., difficult to understand for the uninitiated). The homosexual is too human a figure, weary and worn out by life and circumstances.

The focus on homosexuality as something that affects others, save for the author's *I* and the reader's *you* that naturally are kept at a safe distance, radically changes following the end of the dictatorship and the consequent repeal of censorship laws. From that point onwards, there is no longer any legal impediment to conceive clearly individualized gay characters, whether or not as a part of a collective or homosexual group. By placing a single character in a leading role, the author's magnifying glass discovers terribly complex personal universes and thus the allusions or psychological explanations increase.

These characters often portray solitary, tormented and sick individuals who suffer an unbearable pain. Their lives are sheer hell, serving as subjects for the most melodramatic and sensationalist kind of literature. The author and the reader do not feel the dispassionate intellectual interest of the previous phase any longer, but a cathartic compassion whose tone could be formulated in the utterance *luckily, I am not like that*. We've gone from the perspective of *they* to that of *him* –although it should be noted that in many cases these narratives in the third person concealed a very different intent, and that in any case, nothing prevented the queer reader from subverting the rhetoric of those stories and giving them their own meaning.

In the early eighties, the homosexual *I* clearly appears in modern Spanish narrative, at the point when the political transition has already finished and fears caused by self-censorship begin to subside. Autobiographical or autofictional writing<sup>4</sup> emerges in the gay genre as an openly militant, combative and ideological discourse. The *I* of the declaration becomes homosexual, and this forces the reader to take an immediate stance, which in many cases is influenced by homophobia, homosexual panic, or the habit of silence. Whereas the narrative based

upon the heterosexual perspective (*they, it*) had generally not had a poor critical reception, the narrative that presents homosexuality from a homosexual perspective has often encountered fearful, uninformed or timorous critics who either avoid the issue or go about it in a painfully inexperienced manner.<sup>5</sup> However, the importance of this type of writing is crucial in our culture for several reasons: it gives voice to those who had never had one, offers the possibility of a cultural negotiation around a subject that had never before been discussed, it enriches the sphere of the autobiographical, and, above all, it legitimates a new type of social discourse, which by the mere fact of being born, changes the ideological framework that so far had ruled social discourses on sexuality. Another positive aspect of homosexual autofiction is the normalising effect that it has on heterosexual discourse: the more we know of homosexuals, the less we fear them. Consequently, gay characters of a different nature start to appear in heterosexual novels and films, not as a case of scientific curiosity, but as respectable and decent persons. Finally, the perspective of *I* has contributed to the exploration of idiolects employed by several homosexual archetypes: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (1987) gives voice to the decadent effeminate in *Los alegres muchachos de Atzavara*, Eduardo Mendicutti (1987) allows the “*loca*” (“queen”) to speak in *Siete contra Georgia*, Carlos Sanrune's (1992) rent boy in *El gladiador de Chueca*, Alvaro Pombo's (1980, 1986) shameful homosexual in *El hijo adoptivo* or *Los delitos insignificantes*, and so on.

In the nineties, a new step forward led homosexual narrative towards the recovery of the collective character, the group, this time again within the gay perspective: the *us* perspective that seeks to spread the *I* discourse and to grant it more social relevance. The idea behind this type of narrative is to make the reader participate in the vicissitudes of the characters (*you're not alone, we are many*). The ideology of gay participation originates, of course, in the protest groups of Europe and North America, which at times were in favour of full social integration with equal rights, and occasionally in favour of a kind of segregation so as to allow the recognition of its distinctive features. This type of discourse, certainly combative, has given way to a thoroughly homosexual literature where characters, settings, stories, authors, readers and the entire mechanism of the literary phenomenon is identified as gay.

The resulting sense of normalcy created today by the presence of LGBT literary institutions (publishers such as EGALES, literary awards, specialized book shops, university programs, radio and television programs on queer culture ...) is being supported by the possibility of telling anything from any point of view –as literature has always done. But we must not ignore two unfinished aspects of this normalisation process: first, the distance that seems

to exist between the sub-literature produced by and targeted at the LGBT market and that of the mainstream literature and, secondly, the distance that seems to separate, both in commercial visibility and conceptual evolution, gay-themed fiction from other forms (lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual).

## USES OF HUMOUR

The relationship between humour and homosexuality has always been particularly problematic for LGBT people due to one fundamental reason: the fact that the dominant voice in patriarchal literature, which has always been heterosexual by definition, has tended towards the representation of the homosexual as either a tragic or ridiculous figure. When the literary voice becomes homosexual, it necessarily starts out by alternating between the tragic and the ridiculous, and one could argue that the evolution, thereafter, has set about to try to overcome these strongly stereotyped patterns and to propose other alternatives. One aspect that can be used to measure the evolution of the gay voice in contemporary fiction is the gradual abandonment of literature's long tradition of the use of the tragic outcome as an ideological device. The tragic genre was used in the seventies as a *normal* and *natural* vehicle to articulate a subject matter that in real life was also severely tragic—even though it is also true that among writers of confessions and memoirs thrived a certain attitude of victimisation and self-pity which sought a psychological or moral turn of the screw, perhaps with the aim of exaggerating or inspiring pity. In the eighties, and thanks to the cinema, the first alternative to these tragedies arises: Almodóvar's melodrama *La ley del deseo* (Law of Desire), though retaining the tragic gesture it did so from a gay *us* while at the same time rejecting any display of self-pity.<sup>6</sup> In the nineties, the need for a poetics of humor began to be actively pursued as a tool for cultural normalisation of homosexual writing.<sup>7</sup> It is precisely in the first years of this decade and in highly rated, prime time TV programs that caricatures and comic characters manage to project a carefree and kind image of the homosexual person rather than to make fun of them.

There is a long popular tradition, not only in Spain, of humorous caricatures of homosexuals, which are more or less bizarre and often grotesque. That slapstick approach, which is increasingly out of place in Western societies, utilised jokes as a strategy to divert attention away from something that could not be directly faced, such as a fear of a hypothetical *homosexual contagion*:<sup>8</sup> merely symbolic but terribly effective. Jokes provide a discursive framework about homosexuality that can be described as narrow-minded and with little intellectual leeway, but tremendously accurate and effective for conveying a set of cultural values, usually those

underpinning the idea of the homosexual as inferior. Jokes about queers have been used by generations of Spanish men to exorcise fears, to transmit cultural values, to reinforce the myth of heterosexual masculinity, at the same time as the myth of the homosexual affectation (creating a stereotype that will follow us forever), to condemn the homosexual to a radical estrangement outside the society, to educate members of the group in the responses or reactions to homosexuality (scornful laughter, mocking derision and physical aggression), and to avoid any intellectual explanation whatsoever. The jokes about queers became a true genre in itself, which under the disguise of innocent laughter harbored and sustained the most bigoted kind of homophobia. Many queer characters in modern Spanish literature were designed in this comedic tradition. At times they reveal a self pitying mood like the characters of *la Fotógrafa y el Astilla* in Cela's (1951) *La colmena* (The Hive), or Mr. Braulio in *La ciudad de los prodigios* (City of Prodigies) by Eduardo Mendoza (1986). They are obviously crafted with materials from that grotesque tradition we referred to above. In relation to Cela's *San Camilo, 1936* Maria Dolores Costa has said in reference to the characters of *Pepito la Zubiela* and *Matiitas Serrano*, that both “are ridiculous, pathetic, simple-minded, puerile, and utterly devoid of political opinions, despite the social turmoil that surrounds them, as if being homosexual precluded a person from participating in any aspect of life other than the sexual” (Costa, 1995: 669).

More serious authors about the homosexual question reacted furiously against this tradition of easy and grotesque jokes, which showed a laughable caricature of the homosexual but ignored the suffering and *torment* in which they normally lived. The embittered life and martyrdom, the living hell, was one of the favourite topics of the new writers of the seventies. In contrast to the comic but false image, they tried to project the more authentic though tragic image of a homosexual suffering in a society that closes all its doors. This inversion of the comic into the tragic included the intention to create an anticlimax in order to chill the general laughter, thus showing in all its crudity the most sordid and regrettable aspects of homosexuality. And thus appeared new works describing the schizophrenia of double life, like the novel *Calle Urano* by Jesús Alviz (1981), or the films such as *Los claros motivos del deseo* (M. Picazo) and *El diputado* (Eloy de la Iglesia), and works depicting the conscious self-destruction (*L'anarquista nu*, by Lluís Fernández, 1979), the loneliness, the inability to communicate with a deafened society, etc.<sup>9</sup> Along with this, also deaths, suicides and tragic endings came forth. This strategy eventually led to a double failure: not only did it not succeed in putting an end to the comedic tradition, but moreover, it gave fresh ammunition to an even older tradition of the homosexual as being cursed.

Early on but with major difficulties, the humorous alternatives to tragedy in Spain began to break through, largely coexisting with works that continued to represent homosexuality tragically. We could distinguish provisionally three trends: first, the parody and intellectualised humour of Alberto Cardín, whose stories got published in a volume at the end of the seventies (Cardín, 1977 and 1981); this is a difficult solution, which calls for an enlightened audience to be complicit up to certain extent with the ideological position of the author. Along the same lines we find Todó's (1994) novel *El joc del mentider*, or Juan Goytisolo's (2000) *Carajicomedia*. On the other hand, we have the typical melodramatic exploitation made by Terenci Moix and Almodóvar, that despite not free of parodic intention, puts into play a *camp* sensibility that is able to turn the tragic element into a lighter and more frivolous account. And finally, Eduardo Mendicutti's suggestion that the use of a carefree and cheerful tone serves a clear pedagogic purpose of educating the reader in a moral and aesthetic sensibility (Mendicutti, 1995). Accordingly, some texts by Leopoldo Alas or Boris Izaguirre could be interpreted also in the way started by Mendicutti but also found in the much earlier work of Álvaro Retana. Despite their differences, all three trends confirm versions of the same attempt to establish a new interpretative code for the homosexual outside both the tragic domain and the simplistic coarse humour of earlier times.

The potential for humour as a normalising factor resides mainly in its ability to temporarily interrupt the reader/viewer's critical sense, to suspend their disbelief in the presence of narratives that without humour would be implausible, unshareable or unacceptable. We can find an example of this complex phenomenon in the film *No desearás al vecino del quinto*: thanks to the comic-absurd genre, the viewer is able to identify with the character of the sissy – although such a character played by Alfredo Landa is actually a fake, a trickery used by a heterosexual predator to approach women without arousing their husbands' suspicion. It is true that in this film there is no homosexual at all, and also true that too much abuse and offensive use is made of a common stereotype of the time, but the fact is that in this fiction the viewer becomes the accomplice of an entity provisionally homosexual. In such a heterosexist narrative aimed at a heterosexual audience, the sense of identification achieved between the viewer and the homosexual character is extraordinary: the most common stereotype is where the gay character does not have a leading role (thus making it impossible for the viewer to identify with them).

But along with the normalising effect, humour has another potential of an opposite nature: a subversive, destabilizing and dissolving one. As a carnivalesque and Dionysian instrument, humour can be used as a weapon against the established order,

against convention, the safe and stable. LGBT literature, written and read by those who are outside heterosexism, has used subversive humour as its emblem with varying degrees of success. Although it is impossible to generalize in this area, we might guess that in the literature aimed at the LGBT market, humour has predominantly had a normalising role based on the reader's identification with the character and the search for comic pleasure, whereas the gay-themed literature intended for the general public is frequently full of examples of this caustic and subversive sort of humour.

A common device in popular culture is to utilise humour resources (irony, satire, parody ...) with an offensive purpose, in some ways inherited from the traditions of scorn, invective and diatribe. Using humour to annoy a certain type of reader/viewer can certainly be a part of a long-term and calculated strategy (eg; *outings* celebrated in a festive atmosphere), but far from contributing to any normalising program, it usually results in the opposite.

## CONCLUSION

LGBT themed stories of the last three decades (both in literature and cinema) have contributed to the social normalisation of the non-homosexual world through a series of formal and pragmatic procedures. Among the formal procedures we could mention the use of humour and the exploration of a broad narrative polyphony, as noted in this paper, but also the wider exploration of formal genres and channels, and new subject topics or themes from homoerotic traditions, and above all, the identification of the reader/viewer with LGBT heroes presented in a positive light. Among the pragmatic procedures we shouldn't forget are the rapid adoption of LGBT authors, genres and topics for mainstream literary consumption, the expansion and sophistication of its market (no longer exclusively made up by LGBT readers) and the relative internationalisation of queer literature that in many countries (such as Spain) has had an undeniable Anglo-American influence.

We could wonder whether LGBT-themed literature, in addition to assisting to policies of normalisation and the market, is contributing effectively to the radical questioning of hegemonic heterosexist structures. Given the substantial number of novels that emphasize the need for their characters to assert their gay or lesbian identity, and the great number of films and TV series with characters immersed in a LGBT subculture, there is no doubt that we are witnessing the normalisation processes at work but we can hardly call it subversion.

We must also point out the fact that LGBT-themed literature is massively dominated by gay topics. In that sense, lesbian literature remains, at least in Spain, the story of a silence, and bisexual

and transgender literature statistically insignificant. Consequently, the literary market is no different from other sectors of commercial activity that articulates and governs the LGBT subculture.

The fact that we cannot properly speak of a queer literature does not mean that there is no queer reader. In fact, many of the book reviews published by journalists and academic commentators often have a queer interpretation of works written from and for normalisation. In this regard, the influence of philosophy and of the so-called “queer literary criticism” is having a beneficial effect of enriching LGBT literature through the queer reading it provokes. Just as Eve K. Sedgwick taught us to decipher the closets in the Victorian novel from a gay point of view, so then can we also emphasise the revolutionary, destabilizing and dissolving potential of LGBT literature.

## NOTES

1. William Chislett, collaborator with Elcano Royal Institute on the image of Spain abroad, points out that Spain is and is not “different”: “It is now a very normalised country. However, foreigners still receive an image of Spain that does not correspond with the achievements attained in the last years” (ABC, 16/3/09, p. 32. Author’s translation). <http://hemeroteca.abc.es/nav/Navigate.exe/hemeroteca/madrid/abc/2009/03/16/032.html> [accessed 25/May/2013]
2. In the indispensable book by Cleminson and Vázquez García (2007) on the origin and evolution of “homosexuality” in Spain we find a detailed examination of the lexical and conceptual heritage produced by criminology, a few branches of medicine, the hygienist movement, jurisprudence, sexology, psychology, psychiatry, arts and literature during the second part of 19th century and first quarter of 20th.
3. *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Blackmore and Hutcheson, 1999) is a paradigmatic example of this type of subversion in Spanish literature.
4. Edmund White has popularized the idea of fictionalized autobiography or autofiction as a preferred genre in gay discourse. See in this respect the studies of Ellis and Smith (Ellis, 1991–92; Smith, 1992: 14–54; White, 1994; Ellis, 1997).
5. Rictor Norton analyses the figure of the critic and censor (Norton, 1975: 193–205).
6. See the excellent analysis by Smith in *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film, 1960–1990* (Smith, 1992: 163–215). The relationship between subject and tone in Almodóvar does not go unnoticed, even in his short films during the seventies: “They were also comic films in which his main purpose was to entertain. The comic purpose, however, which is such an integral part of much of Almodóvar’s later cinema, was achieved by the use of subject matter which, in the Spain of the time, was entirely subversive: transvestitismo, gay relationships, and so on.” (Edwards, 1995: 22).
7. Mendicutti’s normalising proposal could have its source in Painter’s article “Lesbian Humor as a Normalization Device” (Painter, 1980), which discusses that same role played by humor in lesbian literature.
8. On that subject see also the illustrative article by Herrero Brasas (1993), and the book *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative* (Butler, 1997), especially the third chapter.
9. Gala says at the beginning of his tragic *Samarkand*: “A society built on radical scandals -famines, genocides, threats, prostitution and boundless inequalities- how can it be shocked by a love story, however peculiar? Wouldn’t it be better to use it as a pretext for reflection?” (Gala, 1985: 7).

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