

**Ensnared Between Pleasure and Politics:  
Looking for *Chicas* Bigas Luna, Re-viewing *Bambola*.**

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Reading through a selection of press cuttings, interviews and other visual and printed materials related to the release of Bigas Luna's fifteen feature films spanning over thirty years, one can easily identify a relatively short list of key terms that keep recurring in interviews, press conferences, position articles and film reviews, particularly since the release his second film, *Bilbao*, in 1978. These include: *machismo*, eroticism, pornography, exploitation, masculinity, femininity, the body, excess, food, Mediterranean (sea, countries, culture, stereotypes). Of all his works, the trilogy of 'Iberian Portraits' released in the first half of the 1990s and, in particular the film *Jamón, jamón* (1992), has attracted the most academic attention to date. The director's emphasis on his leading actresses during the promotion of these films contrasts with the focus of reviews on the trilogy's playful staging of Iberian masculinities. With some exceptions (see, for example, Deleyto (1999) or Evans (2004)), academic articles and studies devoted to *Jamón, jamón* have also largely focused on men and masculinities. As a result of this, the 'Iberian Portraits' Trilogy (Bigas Luna and Cuca Canals, 1994) is now widely known as the 'masculine trilogy' and, what was meant to be a follow-up 'Latin' trilogy – at the request of French producer Daniel Toscan du Plantier (Caballero, 1996) – with films set in Italy (*Bambola*, 1996); France (*Le Femme de chambre du Titanic/The Chambermaid on the Titanic*, 1997) and Spain (*Carmen*, which was eventually replaced by *Volaverunt*, 1999) has become known as the 'feminine trilogy'.<sup>i</sup> Notably, beyond these three films, at least half of

Bigas Luna's films to date have a woman figure for the title.<sup>ii</sup> For all the discussion about the so-called '*chicas* Almodóvar', the same term has not been applied to actresses that have worked for Bigas Luna, despite the fact that he gave career-making, milestone roles to actresses that thereafter achieved international fame, including Francesca Neri, Penélope Cruz, Leonor Watling or, more recently, Verónica Echegui.

This essay will examine two key aspects of the contentious relationship between Bigas Luna and women. I will first explore the director's public discourse with regard to women and femininity, as well as his tempestuous relationships with his leading actresses, with the aim of assessing the oft-made accusations of misogyny and exploitation of women. The chapter will then turn to a close textual analysis and, using the rarely discussed but highly controversial *Bambola* as a case study, it will consider the extent to which these claims about Bigas Luna's gender politics and his attitudes to women are the consequence not of any misogyny per se but of an ambiguous political orientation towards gender and power. One of the main issues at stake in this essay is the question of whether the films of Bigas Luna can potentially provide any kind of pleasurable and positive viewing experience for non-hegemonic spectators. With this aim in mind, in my analysis of *Bambola* I will turn to recent and more visceral theories of spectatorship that work through the kinds of incitement enacted by the image onto the human sensorium typical in the films of this director. But first, I will turn my attention to the search for the *chica* Bigas Luna.

### ***Chicas Bigas Luna: from Bilbao to DiDi (or from Pisano to Pataky).***

In the Spring of 2009, various Spanish national newspapers covered the news that Verónica Echegui, the young actress discovered by Bigas Luna in 2005 after a year-long nation-wide open casting for the protagonist role in a trilogy about 'women and success', had been surprisingly replaced by Elsa Pataky for the second instalment of the trilogy (*DiDi Hollywood*, 2010). Echegui's performance in Bigas Luna's *Yo soy la Juani* (2006) as Juani was met with wide acclaim and earned her a Goya Award nomination for best new actress. Since then, she went on to star in a number of fairly important films in Spain and abroad. Pataky (who is seven years older than Echegui) started her acting career in television and went on to become a major celebrity in Spain, due partly to her romantic involvement with Academy Award-winner Adrian Brody, and partly for her modest but much talked about 'break' into Hollywood (including some fairly prominent roles in blockbusters such as *Snakes on a Plane* – dirs. Ellis and Halaby, 2006). Importantly, in Spain she is now widely regarded as 'the most desirable Spanish actress' and one of the most talked-about 'sex-symbols' of the 2000s (Harguindey, 2009).<sup>iii</sup> If the film's headline plot is anything to go by, *DiDi Hollywood* is indeed well-suited to her: it tells the story of an emerging Spanish actress (Diana Díaz – hence the DiDi of the title, an homage to Brigitte Bardot, who was known by her initials BB) who, like the real-life Pataky, tries her luck in Hollywood with varying success. The replacement of the original actress (who, after all, had been cast for the entire trilogy and would have added an extra layer of consistency to it) despite her Goya-nominated performance in *Yo soy la Juani*,

might be seen as revealing of a putatively tense relationship between the director and his leading ladies, that goes back to his very early films.<sup>iv</sup>

In her book *Sombras de Bigas, Luces de Luna*, Isabel Pisano, who had been the protagonist of Bigas Luna's second film *Bilbao* (1978), writes unreservedly about her own memories of the film and her (mixed and intense) feelings towards the director. *Bilbao* received an 'S' (R) rating in Spain by the then still active Censorship Board and was advertised as 'la película más morbosa de la historia del cine español' ('the kinkiest film in the history of Spanish cinema'),<sup>v</sup> contributing since then, as Soler argues, to the expectation that a Bigas Luna film will include a 'kinky' or sexually controversial element of some sort (Soler, 2002, p. 16). As Pisano amply explains in the book, it seems that, in order to attract that kind of attention, the director had to push her to the limits in the role of a street prostitute who is abducted, tortured and eventually killed by a sadistic loner. Yet, despite the commercial and critical success of the film, and of her performance in particular, she was not called for the next film. 'I felt hurt', she writes, 'our film had had a clamorous success: it was invited to be screened at Cannes, it stayed thirteen months in the cinema [in central Madrid], it received the Ministry [of Culture]'s award' (Pisano, 2001, p. 35). She goes on to explain how she became typecast as a low-life as a result of her role in the film and was never offered a decent role since then, despite doing everything she could to disassociate herself from the film and the director for years, ultimately being unable to resurrect her short acting career.<sup>vi</sup> Instead, Bigas Luna cast his then wife (Consol Tura) for the protagonist female role of that next film, *Caniche/Poodle* (1978), which became

even more controversial than *Bilbao*. The most talked-about scenes of *Bilbao* (in which a semi-unconscious and naked prostitute is suspended from the bathroom ceiling held by cables for her abductor to ritually shave her genital area) had an equivalent in *Caniche* with the polemic bestiality scenes – including one instance in which Tura’s character invites her poodle to lick honey out of her vagina. Retrospectively, as the director confesses to Pisano in their interview, *Caniche* was as hard an experience for Tura (it is suggested that it indirectly caused their divorce) as *Bilbao* was for Pisano (Pisano, 2001, p. 106). This story seems to repeat itself in almost every film. Leaving aside for now the most famous of the director-actress disputes (*Bambola*, our main case study), it will be relevant here to briefly turn our attention to another notorious case. The role of Lulú in the also highly controversial *Las edades de Lulú/Ages of Lulu* (1990) was turned down by at least six well-known Spanish actresses including Maribel Verdú, Ana Álvarez, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón and Emma Suárez. Ángela Molina, who had already worked with Bigas Luna for the title role of *Lola* (1985), originally accepted the role and signed the contract, but pulled out when she read the final script. The role went to a then practically unknown Francesca Neri, despite the director’s earlier claim that ‘Molina is so fundamental for this film that I would not direct it without her’ (Muñoz, 1990). There was a very public dispute between Molina and producer Andrés Vicente Gómez, who published a letter in national newspapers accusing the actress of breaking the contract and warning her of a 250 million pesetas lawsuit and ‘serious consequences’ for her acting career. Molina responded with another published letter, describing the producer as a bully, the film as ‘pornographic’ and arguing that there was a clause in the contract that entitled her to withdraw if she did not approve of the final script.<sup>vii</sup>

Pisano's book omits the Molina episode, but it is full of anecdotes of this kind. Perhaps seeking personal closure or just revenge for her own past problems with the director, throughout the various interviews done in preparation for the book Pisano confronts Bigas Luna about almost every leading actress that he has worked with. Problems are abundant, even with those who worked with him more than once, often due to disagreements in the inclusion of certain controversial scenes involving specific nude shots or 'unusual' sex scenes. He admits to have gone through 'an uncomfortable period' with Penélope Cruz between *Jamón, jamón* and *Volaverunt* 'due to some sequences in the film [*Jamón, jamón*]' (Pisano, 2001, p. 154). His 'gastronomic' and outrageously objectifying description of some of these actresses is telling in itself:

Ángela Molina [...] is a peach, whilst Francesca Neri is a prawn. Penélope, a *tocinillo de cielo* (egg yolk and syrup pudding) with cream. Aitana is more about oil and pasta, she is a very delicate thing. You [Pisano] are the *jamón*, and Sandrelli is soft, like a thin bull stake, Marini is a *mortadella di Bologna* (p. 172).

Later, he goes on to confess a fetishistic obsession with Aitana Sánchez Gijón's foot (she was barefoot when they first met), as a result of which he decided not to show her foot at all in *La camarera del Titanic* 'in order to preserve *my* desire to see it again, perhaps in another film' (emphasis mine). The desire was to be fully satisfied with the famous foot-worshipping scene in their next collaboration, *Volaverunt* (Pisano, 2001, p. 257). To give a final, anecdotal but significant, example, in his conversation with Pisano the director remembers that when Leonor Watling told her mother that she had been offered a role in a

Bigas Luna film – for *Son de mar/Sound of the Sea* (2001), the mother's response was: 'and will you have to show your pussy, my child?' (Pisano, 2001, p. 263).

## Sex-ism

With the evidence discussed so far, it would seem that accusations of *machismo* and exploitation do have a factual basis. One could deduce from all this that Bigas Luna treats his actresses as his personal possessions. Like some of the characters in his films, he gets obsessed with them, objectifies them, uses them and then disposes of them, ready for the next one. Yet, in those same interviews and press conferences, the director seems adamant in wanting to highlight a genuine empathy with women and also his 'feminine side'. 'I regard myself as a man *with an important feminine part*', he tells Pisano (2001, p. 97 – emphasis mine). In a different interview, published around the same time in a national newspaper, he had this to say in response to the question of whether the type of *macho* embodied by Bardem in *Jamón, jamón* and *Huevos de oro* in the early 1990s was now an 'obsolete concept':

We live at a time when the concepts of femininity triumph over those of virility. All the successful men that I know are men with *an important feminine part*. Today, a high-flying executive is someone sensitive, seductive; I mean, with *an important feminine part*. The difference between *macho* and virile is a very fine line that I define as follows: the *macho* carries a knife in his pocket, whereas the virile man does not. The *macho* is capable of killing if someone insults him in the street, whereas the virile guy is capable of pretending that he has not heard it, even at the risk of being called a coward. The difference is in the knife (Muñoz, 2001 – emphasis mine).<sup>viii</sup>

These words are echoed in a number of interviews for various publications after the Iberian Trilogy. When discussing *machismo* in *Bambola* he says:

I detest *machismo* but I am attracted to the idea of virility. They are two very different things. The *machista* is a loser: when he loses something or does not get what he desires, he kills or dies which, when you think about it, is the same thing. Men today are pathetic [...] Women, on the other hand, have their feet on the ground and for this reason they are able to fly (Calleja, 1996).

And a year later, with regards *La camarera del Titanic*: 'This time I am the one who got naked [...] people get it wrong. The fact is that, with the exception of *Lulú*, actors do not get naked that often in my films. It seems more than it actually is' (*El Dominical de El Periódico*, 1997, p. 30). Even years earlier, during the pre-production of what was to be his first literary adaptation (the already mentioned *Las edades de Lulú*, based on Almudena Grandes's best-selling erotic novel), he seemed keen on highlighting his intention to respect the female perspective of the original text: 'It is the story of a woman told by a woman and I will have to use my *feminine part*, which I have one-hundred-percent. It will not be a *machista* film' (Muñoz, 1990). Nevertheless, for all his efforts, the film was read as *machista* by most critics and those who have studied it, due, in no small part, to the changed ending. For Ballesteros, 'the point of view, the feminine voyeurism in the novel has been given to the other protagonists/spectators in the film' and even the 'generous male nudity' in the homosexual S&M scenes is 'conventional and full of clichés in the scenes between Pablo and Lulú', to the extent that Lulú ends up as 'a sex toy at the hands of all the male protagonists' (2001, p. 194). Ballesteros acknowledges that the moralistic ending was already part of the original novel, but was exacerbated in the film with the addition of the



words 'Help me, I need you', that a broken Lulú utters to her husband, after he rescues her from a strong S&M scenario that could have ended in fatality (p. 195). Pisano threw the exact same accusation to the director: 'Bigas [you must] change the ending. Get rid of Lulú's line 'I need you' when she hugs Pablo. Make Lulú grow up once and for all and live alone. Solitude is a privilege of the gods, not a disability' (2001, p. 179). Ironically, the director used the moralizing ending as a defense strategy against those who accused him of making a pornographic film: 'deep inside Lulú is a woman who loves just one man and she keeps looking for him in others only to devote herself completely to him', adding that, 'with the exception of the S&M sequences, which I portray as the world of the baddies, I think I have made a deeply moralizing film' (*El País*, 1990). For all his 'important feminine part', then, in the light of his public statements at least, Bigas Luna's approach to, and understanding of, femininity seems to be inconsistent at best and regressive and plainly offensive at worst. Indeed, far from offering a potentially liberating experience to the desiring female subject that was present in Grandes's novel, in Bigas Luna's adaptation, S&M practices become some sort of punitive learning experience that, as Ballesteros argues (2001, p. 194), serves to reaffirm the female character's subjugation and dependence on her husband. Nonetheless, one of the aims of this essay will be to test the extent to which we might be able, however problematically, to make a case for a recuperative reading of Bigas Luna's films, where, as we shall see, all is not quite as clear as it seems.

### **Gastronomic Eroticism. A Cinesexual Approach**

The much talked-about relationship between food and sex in the films of Bigas Luna is perhaps most noticeable in films such as *Jamón, jamón* or *Bambola*, where the national gastronomies of Spain and Italy respectively can be said to have a role of their own and are intrinsically and, in some cases, quite literally, linked to sex and sexuality. Indeed, this is apparent in most of his films to date, and has earned them the generic label of 'gastronomic eroticism'. The director proactively promotes this aspect of his work, often describing the smell or the flavour of his films (garlic and olive oil seemingly the most popular ingredients). He also shows an unusual awareness of the *carnality* inherent to cinema: 'In my first films [up until *Lola*] I was going for the spectator's head, rather than their stomach, or their skin' (Mendizábal, 2001) – which suggests that his films since 1985 have been concerned with the spectator's sensorium.

Word of mouth, advertising and other public discourses around a certain film or a director's public persona can pre-condition our experience of film. As potential mass-market products, a popular film is often targeted at specific sectors of the paying public, be it young, female, adult, gay or working-class audiences, for example. What if one, as a gay man, or heterosexual woman, to mention but two possibilities, were to find some aspects of the films of Bigas Luna pleasurable, even appealing? Should one not take issue with the reductive representation of gay men in films like *Las edades de Lulú* or *Bambola*? Should one not be offended by the objectification of women, the sexual and psychological violence, the abundant clichés and stereotyping of gender, sexuality and/or national

identities, the repetitive Freudian imagery, the crass jokes, the vulgarity and senselessness of some of the stories? As a man, I do not feel I can even attempt to read how these films may affect female spectators, nor indeed any other group of spectators regardless of whether they may share my sex and sexual orientation. Whilst I would not support a simple 'doing away with' the kind of binary oppositions that have dominated film studies for the last four decades or so (around categories including gender, sexuality, class or race), I see in Patricia MacCormack's theorisations of what she terms cinesexuality, and more specifically, her concept of 'cinemasochism', an intriguing alternative to prescriptive ways of reading that emphasize positional categories. 'Contrary to much spectatorship theory that posits the gaze as powerful, cinema primarily requires the viewer to submit to the image', she writes (2008, p. 36), adding: 'psychoanalysis emphasizes the masochistic positioning of the female spectator but in the face of the cinematic image all spectators lose themselves' (p. 36). MacCormack explicitly acknowledges the potential dangers of a 'future beyond dualisms' that 'risks forgetting histories and ignoring memories of suffering and oppression, as well as the acts of power, experienced and expressed by individuals and groups of subjects' (p. 36), but, drawing on Guattari's idea of asemiotic bodies, she proposes that

the cinesexual emphasizes cinematic pleasure as asignified, pleasure beyond signification that then challenges how genders, and individuals as their own collective of disparate modalities, desire cinema. Rethinking cinema can alter the way women have been both denied a specific gaze and defined as gazing either masochistically or transvestitically, while acknowledging that spectators desire cinema in excess of the meaning of images and their deferral to established sexualities (p. 31).

She goes on to explain that 'there is power in submission to assigned desire' and that 'submission to assignment is a step rather than the taking up of a marginal position, which questions the politics and value of desiring positions of power' (p. 37). Here and elsewhere in her densely theorised book, MacCormack's ideas echo aspects of the work of Linda Williams (1999), Laura Marks (2000) and Vivian Sobchack (2004) on embodiment and cinema viewing. Speaking of haptic visuality and erotics, Marks writes: 'by interacting up close with an image, close enough that figure and ground commingle, the viewer relinquishes her own sense of separateness from the image – not to know it, but to give herself up to her desire for it' (2000, p. 183). Her definition of haptic visuality coincides with MacCormack's cinexuality in so far as 'haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterises optical viewing' (Marks, 2000, p. 185). Sobchack also argues that 'we need to alter the binary and bifurcated structures of the film experience suggested by previous formulations and, instead, posit the film viewer's lived body as a "carnal third term" that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image' (2004, p. 60). One of the aspects that these important writings have in common is the call for new ways of experiencing cinema, especially with regards those cases where, as MacCormack puts it, 'many of the images directly affront the spectator to dislike them' (2008, p. 40). Going a step further, these writers convincingly challenge the very notion that certain films, images or sexual practices that may be regarded as perverse or even degrading (to women, to homosexuals) are recuperable as pleasurable and desirable for spectators belonging to those groups.

In her ground-breaking study of so-called hardcore pornography, Linda Williams helpfully and succinctly spells out the rationale behind, on the one hand, anti-pornography and, on the other, anti-censorship feminists (Williams, 1999, 16-33), arguing that 'the central fallacy of all the anti-porn feminist positions [is] that a single, whole sexuality exists opposed to the supposed deviations and abnormalities of somebody else's fragmentation' (p. 23) – her point being that 'a whole truth of sexuality [...] outside of language, discourse, and power' cannot exist (pp. 22-23). We have already seen how many of Bigas Luna's films have been described by the Spanish press as 'kinky', 'scandalous', 'perverse', or even 'pornographic' and how many actresses have taken issue with the ways in which the director shot certain scenes or manipulated certain images that made them feel used and exploited. In the films themselves, the succession of sequences clearly meant to provoke a strong reaction in the spectator (instances of S&M in *Bilbao* or *Las edades de Lulú*; bestiality in *Caniche*; ménage-à-trois in a number of films – most famously perhaps in *Las edades de Lulú* and *Huevos de oro/Golden Balls* (1993) –; foot-fetishism in *Volaverunt*, sexual violence in *Bambola* and so on) would seem to add to this effect. With their open celebration of excess and abandonment to carnal and culinary pleasures, do these films encourage more physical ways of engagement with the images on the flat screen? Are we meant to smell the garlic or taste the olive oil as well as see and hear what is in front of us? To what extent and in what ways can we touch and feel touched by these images?

## **Desperately Seeking Pleasure in *Bambola***

*Bambola* seems an appropriate case study to answer some of these questions in the context of what has been discussed so far. Not only did the film provoke perhaps the most famous and most public row between Bigas Luna and one of his lead actresses, in this case Italian television personality Valeria Marini (who played the leading role of Mina), but like *Bilbao* and *Las edades de Lulú*, it was also announced as 'Bigas Luna's most provocative film' – this time on the promotional poster itself.<sup>ix</sup> It is worth pointing out that the PR fiasco orchestrated by Marini and the media focus on those aspects of the film perceived as 'scandalous' did not help the critical reception of the film. It is partly due to the poor critical reception of the film that *Bambola* has not received much academic attention to date. After a disastrous opening at the Venice Film Festival (where an unfinished version of the film was screened and received with boos), the film was universally panned. On reviewing the film that followed, the very well received *La camarera del titanic*, the late and highly respected critic Ángel Fernández Santos described *Bambola* as 'verging on the ridiculous', a 'dark well' from which, as in other notorious flops (referring to *Las edades de Lulú* and *Huevos de oro*), he was able to re-emerge triumphant with a career-saving follow-up (Fernández Santos, 1997). Yet, Bigas Luna has described *Bambola* as the 'freest' film of his career (Bonet Mojica, 1996), one which celebrates 'Italian passion, noise, music and food' and is meant 'to make the spectator smile', 'to reaffirm the will to live intensively' (Calleja, 1996).

Ironically, Marini had personally chosen Bigas Luna to film her in a television advertisement for motor oil, and he then photographed her for the cover of the architecture magazine *Domus* (Bonet Mojica, 1996). As happened with other actresses, the director-actress relationship seemed a very harmonious one... until the actress saw the final cut of the film. In this case, Bigas Luna argues, Marini was unhappy with the way she looked in some scenes, whereas she claims that it was the shocking intensity of the quasi-animalistic sexual encounters with the appropriately named Furio (played by Cuban actor Jorge Perugorría) that had prompted her to ask first for the cuts and then, following the director's refusal to cut but one of the frames, to boycott the promotion of the film (Echagüe, 2001, pp. 10-12). As ever, Bigas Luna threw all sorts of contradictory statements in a plethora of interviews published in national newspapers to promote the film, saying to *El Periódico*: 'amongst many other things, women are sexual objects' (*El Periódico*, 1996) but then insisting that he was not a *machista* elsewhere. Discussing the film with Payán years later, he argued: 'Honestly, I am not *machista*. I love women, I live surrounded by women who adore me and whom I respect', but then confused the situation further by adding straight away: 'I am not a *machista* but I would like to be one. When I see the kind of thug that enters a bar and steals my table and then takes the best-looking woman in the room, I am jealous. I hate him but I envy him (Payán, 2001, 78).

The Spanish poster of the film shows an item of black lingerie with a label that reads 'Valeria Marini's little knickers' against a white background, further highlighting the objectification of the film's female star. The trailer opened with a

black background, with the title of the film superimposed in large, bright red font, followed by the text 'a film by Bigas Luna' and the names of the main actors in white, in a way that is reminiscent of the opening credits of *Jamón, jamón* (in that case the text was superimposed on the black surface of an Osborne bull). All text apart from the word *Bambola* then disappears as we hear the screams of Mina in one of the most vigorous sex scenes of the film, metonymically represented by her goat being bounced up and down on the bed due to the (off-screen) movements of the two main characters. The goat appears five times in this two-minute trailer, only to reveal the actual sex scene at the very end. The trailer is packed with extracts from some of the most psychologically brutal scenes of the film, some of which will be analyzed later in this essay. It also highlights the key symbolic imagery, which, as one has come to expect from a Bigas Luna film, consists mainly of highly sexualized animals and food.

To say that these factors do not predispose the feminist or queer spectator to read the film in a positive light is an understatement. The story itself does not help either. The far from idyllic setting (a run-down trattoria by the delta of the river Po and a nearby prison are the main scenarios) is for Italy what Los Monegros was for Spain in *Jamón, jamón*: it certainly focuses our attention on the characters and the story. *Bambola* and *Jamón, jamón* are also very similar in their basic plotline: against all odds, the beast temporarily seduces the beauty, but that animalistic masculine force inevitably leads to tragedy. The similarities go further: where in *Jamón, jamón* we had Silvia (Penélope Cruz) constantly preparing paella and tortillas for a family business, in *Bambola* Mina prepares their Italian equivalent: pasta and pizza... and where we had phallic ham bones



we now have phallic *mortadella di bologna* and eels.

In order to develop an analytical trajectory that takes account both of the cinesexual and the sexual political, the essay will now focus on those moments in the film that are particularly violent and unpleasant – the violent sex scenes between Mina and Furio and the rape of Settimio (Manuel Bandera) in prison. First, let us go back to the trailer briefly. Bearing in mind MacCormack's explanation of cinesexuality and, judging from the way in which the trailer is edited, the film would be appealing to cinesexuals and open to a cinesexual reading. 'Cinesexuals are always in constant want of cinema [...] We seek to look before anything can be seen', writes MacCormack (2008, p. 53). Despite being unusually packed with plot-spoilers, the trailer for *Bambola* cleverly incites high levels of expectancy by withholding some of the visual information. During the repeatedly shown goat-bouncing scene the spectator may wonder whether the off-screen screams are the result of an assault or a violent sexual act, even a rape. Is the woman whose screams overwhelm the soundtrack trying to fight off a rapist or are her screams the result of an intensively pleasurable consensual sexual experience? The trailer insistently cuts back and forth to this same scene, interspersed with shots from other key scenes, such as the moments prior to Settimio's brutal rape and Mina's accidental first encounters with Furio in prison (including the moment when he is taken away by security staff while he screams her name, declaring his love). We see Mina sensually introducing some spaghetti in her mouth (her head tilted backwards as she swallows it) and Furio squeezing a raw eel with his dirty hands, close to Mina's body, then threatening to make a stew with her pet goat if she disobeys him. Other footage from the prison shows

Furio desperately begging Mina to bring him her used knickers, then carving her name on his cell's wall with a knife. In the midst of all this visual and dramatic intensity, there is talk of pasta, tomato sauce and cooked eels. Despite the message of incongruity and crudeness that the story, as previewed in the trailer, may have sent to the spectators, the rapid succession of highly sexualized images would have most certainly appealed to their senses, encouraging some sort of involvement with them. Applying Lyotard's concept of 'passibility' from fine art to cinema, MacCormack writes: 'the simple idea of taking pleasure in what we would not presume is pleasurable is an impasse that is possibility' [...] 'coming to these images with disinterest rather than extreme expectation of unpleasure [...] will correlate with our openness of thought' (2008, p. 57).

It is with this 'openness of thought' that we approach the first sexual encounter between Mina and Furio here. Mina is persuaded by her gay brother Flavio (Stefano Dionisi) to visit Furio in prison and calm him down so that he leaves his Settimio alone (despite Settimio's presumed heterosexuality – he had a short fling with Mina – Flavio is in love with him). The prison warder leads her to a meeting place he had arranged with Furio. It is a long and distressing path through a semi-derelict prison building, suggesting that they will be completely isolated. The walk to the meeting place creates an uneasy feeling that will characterize each of their sexual encounters, resulting in a disquieting mixture of fear and excited anticipation every time. When Mina eventually reaches the room, it becomes clear that it is not only an isolated part of the building, it is also an insulated, padded cell. As she looks around the unfamiliar, empty and frightening space, POV shots from her perspective on a hand-held camera add to

the feeling of unease and disorientation, are further emphasized by her falling on to the floor when one of her high heels catches in a small gap between the floor panels, giving the impression of entrapment (the first of several times she is symbolically 'hunted-down' and ensnared) and emphasizing what will be a submissive sexual role in the relationship that she is about to initiate with Furio. This image of the hunted-down, vulnerable, precious prey is repeated throughout the film, strengthening her association with her pet goat Lilli (which Furio constantly man-handles and threatens to cook and eat). Far from reassuring, the arrival of Furio into the scene will only heighten the sense of danger. He is naked under a semi-open, stained bathrobe – the main garment he wears throughout the film – revealing a very hairy torso that emphasizes his beastly side. He turns the light off and locks the door behind him as soon as he enters the room, using an intimidating torch to point directly at her face first, then at his arm, to show her the word BAMBOLA carved into his arm, still scabbed over. During the rest of the scene, he aims the torch at different parts of her body, a common S&M practice meant as the ultimate objectification of the human body: the light is directed at those single body parts (usually orifices) that need to be 'used' at different times. Regardless of the coincidental sadomasochistic content of this scene, the point of interest for us resides in that the visual dissection and objectification of the body, not the depicted S&M practice, here creates the kind of dehumanizing effect that MacCormack describes in her explanation of cinemasochism (2008, pp. 47-48).<sup>x</sup> Importantly for a cinema spectator, the darkness of the room where the action is taking place, evokes the darkness of the cinema. The potent light of the torch directed at Mina in the middle of all this darkness also affects our sight – dormant as a result of

the darkness of the cinema and of this scene in particular. This effect enables an easier *sensorial* identification with her; her sight, like ours, is disturbed by the strong light in the darkness, whilst Furio's face is further animalized by the indirect lighting coming from the back of the torch. Mina's heavy breathing (the soundtrack is intensified in this insulated environment) and Furio's dialogue add to this effect: 'Do you know where we are?' he asks, explaining that this was an isolation cell for prisoners with serious mental health problems: 'if they became unruly, they were locked away here so that nobody could hear them. Nobody will hear you either'. He demands she get up and get undressed, the torchlight following her around the room as she runs, pointlessly attempting to escape. The first surprise comes when she gets undressed and reveals that she is wearing the pair of used underpants that he had sent her. This will be the first of many apparently inconsistent events that will characterize this relationship: one moment she appears to detest him and runs away, the next she wants him. Importantly, beyond the obvious fetishism, the exchange of used underwear will come to symbolize the 'primal', animalistic aspect of their sexual attraction to each other, one that is ruled by the senses, one may even say, by their basic instincts; and one that is meant to appeal to the same instinct in the spectator. As he kisses her (a more appropriate way of describing it would be 'devours her'), close up shots of their mouths and tongues intensify the action in ways that, as Marks has argued in the context of video, underscores the 'tactile' quality of the image (2000: 170-76). Furio finally drops the torch, indicating that the power balance has tilted slightly as a result of her acknowledgement of *her* desire for him –no longer a hapless victim. The primal aspect of this sexual encounter is further emphasized by his furious and audible smelling of her neck ('you smell so

good') before licking her body. Beyond the visual, the senses of touch, smell and taste are heightened for the cinesexual spectator. Furthermore, Mina's screams can be heard after the camera leaves the prison, during a transitional travelling shot that leads us away from the prison and, along the river, into the trattoria in the early hours of the morning, perhaps suggesting the extraordinary length of the sexual encounter, but also disjoining image from sound in a way that, as we have seen in the analysis of the trailer, incites further curiosity in those images that we do not see.

In the first conversation with brother Flavio, she says that he did not force her but he did hurt her: 'he is a beast' (...) 'I am scared, I am confused because I liked it'. This 'confusion', that will characterize their violent relationship, could suggest a negative stereotypisation of the female character, but it is also revealing in other ways. Mina seems trapped in a gender economy that dictates that she should love 'a man with a soul' as she tells Furio in her second visit. Hence, when discussing their relationship with her brother she often utters the words 'I love him' and she asks Furio to kiss her (although the kisses always turn into more aggressive biting). Furio pointedly confuses soul and body, offering his sex to her while exclaiming: 'This is my soul, take it'. The usual lingerie ripping and forceful penetration follows, to the soundtrack of Mina's hard-to-read screams. In this second visit Mina wanted to tell him that she was pregnant. Instead, in view of Furio's response, she keeps quiet about it, and, in tears, swears to herself that he will never know. If in the first visit her secretly wearing his underwear had affected the power balance, here the secret knowledge of her pregnancy augments this effect. After the event, she gives him that piece of underwear he

had been asking for.

The structure of the first two sexual encounters is characteristic of the other four that will follow. After his early release from prison (due to 'good behaviour'), Furio turns up at the trattoria and within minutes he is demanding that she kneel down and practice fellatio on him. She pushes him away (into the river) and escapes. The scene that follows, and its accompanying music soundtrack, is a classic cinematic chase. Once again, Mina is the prey, hopelessly trying to escape from the (now armed) hunter, running through a field of flowers. Once again she falls, once again, she gives in to his sexual advances. Again, he rips her underwear apart and, again, he takes her from behind, on a very rough silty surface by the riverbank. She holds on to the soil while he penetrates her, her hands and her face dirty with silt. The screams, the close-up shots of her hands and face covered with silt, once again appeal to the spectator's sensorium beyond the screen. In all the scenes, sex takes place on rough floor surfaces. The bed is 'too soft' for Furio, who insists that everything about him will be 'hard'. Back home and, as in the other instances, Mina initially resists. Yet, she has another surprise in store that, once again, momentarily reverts the power balance. Despite the initial resistance, when he initiates the sexual contact she asks: 'Aren't you going to rip my knickers?' The scene that follows is the one showed repeatedly in the trailer, where the goat is made to bounce up and down on the bed with the couple's strenuous movements, while we hear Mina screaming off camera. The notorious eel scene follows, with Mina's confusion deepening further. She first confesses to her brother that she loves Furio, then tells Furio that she is unhappy because he wants to fuck and she wants to make

love. When he asks her to show him how to make love, however, they focus on passionate kissing to start with, but the sex that follows is no different from before. She calls her a whore and rubs an eel against her body. He wraps the wet fish around her legs and then his, going all the way up to her breasts, ending by wrapping it around her neck. Close up shots of his dirty nails as his hands hold and rub the eel, of their sweaty bodies, or of his dirty, worn-out underwear would seem designed to provoke abjection in the spectator. For the cinesexual, however, the visual emphasis on touching, the inferred smell and touch of the fish against the bodies, or the graphic tasting of each other's skin will only heighten the sensorial experience and draw one further in, for one last time. This will be their final encounter. Having tried to kill Flavio, Furio attempts to forcefully have sex with Mina again, but this last chase will end up with him dead, shot from behind by Flavio.

Throughout the film, it is suggested that Furio sees Mina's homosexual brother Flavio as a threat. Not only does he have to share Mina's love and attention with him, as her brother, Flavio will stand up for her and, in his case, there is no danger of 'confusion' with sex, even though Furio makes the point of showing him his penis just after having a shower, perhaps as a way of provoking him or reinstating his own masculinity before the queer threat. Furio will then try to literally exterminate him, first by chasing him with a gun, then by setting fire to the boat where he is hiding from him. In prison, Furio had arranged for the brutal rape of Settimio by some other prison mates, mainly to 'make' Settimio forget Mina and, through Flavio, to get her attention (her first few visits to prison were to visit Settimio). In some ways, Settimio's rape scene visually anticipates

the violence that Mina will experience at the hands of Furio, except here, Flavio has no desire for these men and no way of reverting the power imbalance. In the prison kitchen, while peeling potatoes, three other inmates attack him, first forcefully dunking his head into a bucket full of water. He is then furiously raped by one of them, while the other two pin him down to a table, demanding that he recites out loud a pasta recipe and force-feeding him full heads of garlic, putting a picture of Flavio holding Lilli (the goat) right in front of his face and commenting how they would cook the goat and how tasty it would be. The goat and the pasta (as well as Flavio's picture) emphasize the link between this rape and Furio's future sexual relationship with Mina. The parallelism is visually emphasized with the way in which the rape is shot, especially the darkness of some of the shots, which, as we have already seen, will also dominate Furio and Mina's first sexual encounter shortly afterwards and, in my reading, are a direct reflection of the darkness in the cinema. Shots of Furio voyeuristically looking on, crouching in a corner (smiling and licking his fingers with excitement) also highlight his cruelty, as well as his pansexual appetite.

The emphasis on food during this scene (the recipe, the discussion of tomato sauce, the garlic) may well enhance our sense of taste and smell, the dramatic close-up shots of the faces of the rapists and their victim may well enhance our sense of touch, encouraging us to adopt a cinemasochistic position here. Yet, even with an 'openness of thought', the psychological violence of these images brings representational politics back into the frame and the cinesexual position goes out of the window. Although there is no room here to discuss the representation of homosexuality in Bigas Luna's films, it is perhaps enough to



point out here that the other well-known example of homosexual representation in his filmography is contained in the S&M sequences in *Las edades de Lulú* (famous for being Javier Bardem's first acting role), which are also dominated by extreme brutality and pain, sexual abuse, forceful penetration and psychological violence. The problem is made worse in *Bambola* with the suggestion that the rape somehow managed to switch Settimios's sexual orientation, 'turning' him gay: 'Prison is a very strange place: murky issues often become clear and what one may have thought was clear may become murky', Furio says to Mina following the rape, adding that 'things are in the process of becoming clearer for Settimio right now'. To make things worse, when Settimio tells Flavio what happened, Flavio finds it amusing that the rapists forced him to recite a pasta recipe while they raped him and downplays the act by laughing and asking which recipe was it. The problematic representational politics do not end there. Flavio tells Settimio not to worry because, as a child, he was also raped: 'Still, I am happy...', he says. This is followed by an uncomfortably long pause before adding '... [I am] happy to have found my sexuality'. The last scene of the film, set at the train station (the setting of Flavio's childhood abuses) suggests that Flavio and Settimio end up together as a couple, running the trattoria and keeping Lilli the goat as a stand-in daughter. Mina leaves on a train to give birth and bring up her baby elsewhere and start a new life.

To suggest that someone can somehow 'turn' homosexual or discover their sexuality as a result of rape is as suspect as the suggestion that Mina discovered real sexual pleasure in the abusive relationship with Furio, and here lies the difficulty with the cinesexual approach: the spectator may try to become

‘emancipated’ and find alternative ways to enjoy asigned images, ‘foresaking the power to look for submission to the affect produced by what is seen’ (MacCormack, 2008, p. 44), but one really would have to become inhuman to reach the level of abstraction required to find these images pleasurable.

Yet, beyond the highly problematic gender and sexual politics, *Bambola* may have a redeeming element in Mina’s motherhood and the promise of a new life as an independent single mother, away from the domesticity implied in her old job at the trattoria. When discussing sexism in the films of Bigas Luna, Pisano writes: ‘masters like [him] know [...] that only we women are capable of being really free, that life is in our hands and therefore our ability to transmit [men’s] genetic codes. In the worst cases, man, incapable of giving life by himself, executes his power by killing’ (2001, p. 179, n 23). Her words echo those of Adrienne Rich (1976) and many other feminists who, since the 1970s, have been discussing the empowering value of motherhood. These words are also reminiscent of Bigas Luna’s own argument when discussing the concept of the macho, as seen earlier in this essay. One could read *Bambola* as another attack on *machismo*. In the end, Furio ends up dead whilst Mina is not only about to start a new life for herself, but also to create one by giving birth. Furio’s excessive masculinity and physicality is not too far apart from other arguably demeaning representations of the macho in Bigas Luna’s filmography (the closest perhaps are the characters played by Bardem in *Jamón, jamón* and *Huevos de oro*). The phallic imagery is equally laughable here: at his worst moments, Furio walks around with a gun in his hand, pathetically trying to impose his will on Mina or Flavio, but his handling of the gun proves highly ineffective and it is a gunshot that ends up killing him

off. He is the hunter turned hunted. For all his emphasis on phallic sexuality, his penis is never seen and, as happened in those two earlier films, the phallic symbol *par excellence* is pointedly destroyed, symbolizing the threat of castration for which the character has the need to overcompensate (if, in *Huevos de oro*, the all-important skyscraper collapses before our eyes, here the eel is vigorously chopped up by Mina just before her last sexual contact with Furio).

As shown in this essay, female representation in the films of Bigas Luna and public discourses around them are highly ambiguous and problematic. Through their symbolic excess and an intense and constant appeal to the senses, the films do encourage a visceral reading that may transcend conventional approaches to film. The claims of cinesexuality are that images take us up and possess us in ways that conventional readings have yet to come to terms with. Put another way, conventional readings are not able to take account of our submission to those images, and have instead placed too much emphasis on the Cartesian visual frame. We could describe this move towards cinesexuality as part of a broader tendency that Patricia Clough (2007) calls 'the affective turn', that is, the tendency to reinsert the human sensorium into the critical frame. However, what this new tendency has not been fully able to account for, despite reassurances to the contrary, is the extent to which pleasure is always already political. Like Mina/Bambola in the film, we as spectators are ensnared in the filmic machine between the political and the pleasurable, precisely at that place where these two elements cannot be made whole. This chapter has tried to maintain this incompleteness, since to foreclose the argument too early (towards the political or towards the pleasurable) will always curtail the radical potential of the filmic

idiom itself.

As we have seen, hovering around this incomplete dualism of politics and pleasure are a set of public discourses connected to the figure of Bigas Luna himself, which enriches and problematises further any attempt to experience the images in isolation. From his very earliest films, partly due to his own public utterances and the way the films were promoted, questions have always been asked about Bigas Luna's sexual politics, his attitude to women, his relationships with female actors and the intention behind the violent sex scenes that dominate his films. In other words, in this case, the figure of the director/auteur haunts these films in a way that affects the pleasure/political dualism quite explicitly. His recent films, however, have been less ambiguously favourable towards women. Bigas Luna has described the protagonist of *Yo soy la Juani* – a 'poligonera' who escapes the limitations of her life in the periphery of the city to become a star – as 'the princess of the twenty-first century, no longer the victim of the *macho ibérico*' (Bigas Luna 2006).<sup>xi</sup> This suggests that the representation of female friendship, female sexuality and independence signals perhaps not so much a change in the director's politics of representation, but in the society that his films have strived to represent. One could see in La Juani – who, like Mina, ends the film alone in a train, leaving her past behind – a much more liberated version of previous female characters in Bigas Luna's films. Signs of this liberation were arguably always there, but prior to *Yo soy la Juani*, the films can be read as portraying older social models which prevented earlier heroines from confronting their male counterparts in the manner in which Juani famously does: 'I love it when you get all jealous, but do not push it, mate, I am free. Don't you

ever forget that’.

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<sup>i</sup> *Carmen* was eventually directed by Vicente Aranda and released in 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> I am referring to *Bilbao* (1978); *Lola* (1985); *Las edades de Lulú* (1990); *Bambola* (1996); *La camarera del Titanic* (1997), *Yo soy la Juani* (2006) and *DiDi Hollywood* (2010). In so far as *Volaverunt* (1999) is the title of a drawing of the Duquesa de Alba made by Goya (the film is also known as *La maja desnuda*) and that *La teta i la lluna/The Tit and The Moon* (1994) refers in part to the female body, suggests that all but six of his films to date do not have a female element in the title.

<sup>iii</sup> In June 2009, *El País Semanal* published a photo spread of Pataky photographed by Bigas Luna in various iconic poses. The article states that, Pataky's profile on the popular website famosas.biz (famous women) had registered nearly one million visits in the first 5 months of 2009, almost half of these on March 20<sup>th</sup> alone (Harguindey, 2009). That day, a set of 'stolen' nude pictures had been published in *Interviú* magazine.

<sup>iv</sup> If *Yo soy la Juani* was about a young, anonymous girl who dreamed about making it in the Spanish film industry, *DiDi Hollywood* – originally *La Juani en Hollywood* – is about the next step to international fame.

<sup>v</sup> All translations from Spanish in this essay are my own.

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<sup>vi</sup> In the immediate years that followed the film, she had intense feelings for Bigas Luna but turned him down when he tried to seduce her while in Rome in 1980 (Pisano, 2001, pp. 36-37). In her interview, Pisano asks Bigas Luna directly whether he felt attracted to her during the filming of *Bilbao*. His response was that he felt sexually attracted to the character (p. 94), although he later contradicts himself by saying 'the character was over by then' (...) 'it was you [that I invited to my room]' (pp. 157-58).

<sup>vii</sup> On of the headlines published on the *ABC* newspaper about this story gives us a good idea of this controversy: 'Ángela Molina not worried about porn film producer's threats' (Arenas 1990).

<sup>viii</sup> In both cases he uses exactly the same expression in Spanish, which I have italicised and loosely translated as 'an important feminine part'. The original Spanish is 'una carga de feminidad importante'.

<sup>ix</sup> Everyone in the film calls Mina Bambola, but I will refer to her throughout as Mina.

<sup>x</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere, the same 'torch' technique is used in the cave scene in *Huevos de oro*, although the objectification there affects both male and female characters (Fouz-Hernández, 1999, pp. 54-55).

<sup>xi</sup> A *poligonera/o* is a young person, of working-class origins and very specific look, who lives in a housing project at the distant margins of the city.