

# The films of Bigas Luna



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SPANISH AND  
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**Book abstract/Back cover text**

*The films of Bigas Luna* is the first volume in English to cover the entire filmography of one of Spain's most renowned contemporary filmmakers, from his debut film *Tatuaje/Tattoo* (1976) to his last *DiDi Hollywood* (2010). It is also the first in any language to offer in-depth analyses of each of Bigas Luna's sixteen feature films.

Informed by theories of haptic cinema, erotic cinema, auteur, star, gender, sexuality and national identity studies, the book contextualises a close analysis of each film with a detailed discussion of production and marketing, establishing an insightful conversation with previous Bigas Luna studies in multiple languages that approached his oeuvre from a wide range of perspectives. Fouz Hernández examines a wide range of materials, including original screenplays, press cuttings, marketing materials, and his interviews with cast members and prominent professionals in the Spanish film industry who worked in these films.

Organised into five chapters that focus on issues such as genre, gender, Iberian and Mediterranean identities or meta-filmic narratives, the book can be approached as a coherent and cohesive study of Bigas Luna's filmography, thematically by chapters or as a reference book to study a specific film or films.

The book is the culmination of over a decade of work that has included other publications, a touring Bigas Luna retrospective in thirty world cities and a sixty-episode podcast series. It is destined to become a reference volume for studying the works of one of Europe's most prominent and provocative filmmakers in recent decades.

**Book keywords:**

Bigas Luna; Spanish cinema; Catalan cinema; Haptic cinema; Mediterranean identities; Iberia; European cinema; Penélope Cruz; Javier Bardem; Erotic cinema.

## Introduction

This chapter introduces some of the key tropes in the films of Bigas Luna. It starts with references to his two posthumous films, *Segon origen/Second Origen* (2015) and the documentary *BigasxBigas* (2016), which are linked by a shared concern for ecological issues. While some audiences might find that focus surprising, the book will argue that ecology and environmental issues were underlying concerns from the beginning but were overshadowed by others, such as eroticism or national identity. The films reveal a link between ecology and technology, such as cameras, especially connected to visual culture.

Using the duality inherent in Bigas Luna's name (which combines male/female, darkness/light), the chapter explores the importance of binary oppositions in his work: food/sex, rural/urban, tradition/modernity, local/global, light/darkness, organic/processed, Iberia/Europe. The films of Bigas Luna complicate these oppositions, adding layers of visual and narrative complexities to the stories. They are also characterised by an obsessive interest in both optic and haptic ways of experiencing cinema.

Other issues considered include his screen adaptations of literary works or his reputation for launching successful acting careers, with Academy-Award winners and now real-life couple Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz as salient examples.

The book is not about Bigas Luna, the auteur and artist, but about his films. The five chapters are structured thematically, adhering as much as possible to Bigas's original projects and planned trilogies. Each film is discussed separately so that the book can be used to study any given film, a group of films (a trilogy), or his entire filmography.

### **Keywords:**

binary oppositions, ecology, eroticism, film stars, gastronomy, gender, haptic cinema, literary adaptations, national identity, optic, technology.

### **Key films:**

*Segon origen/Second Origen* (2015), *BigasxBigas* (2016)

### **Key actors:**

Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz, Verónica Echegui.

### **Key references/authors:**

Barker, Canals, Espelt, Sanabria, Payán, Soler, Weinrichter.

## **Chapter 1. Visceral bodies. *Tatuaje/Tattoo* (1976), *Reborn/ Renacer* (1981) and *Angustia/Anguish* (1987)**

Using Linda Williams's (1991) concept of the 'body genre', this chapter examines Bigas Luna's fascination with the human body in three of his early films.

His debut film, the recently restored *Tatuaje* (1976), starts when a dead body is found floating on a Barcelona beach, barely recognisable other than through a tattoo on his arm. It's also his first literary adaptation, in this case, Vázquez Montalbán's novel about the first adventure of Galician detective Pepe Carvalho. Carvalho's profession justifies an obsessive fixation with the body of the deceased man, which facilitates queer readings of the film, while his origin brings an unexpectedly Iberian flavour that would characterise much of Bigas's filmography.

In *Reborn* (1981), the only Bigas Luna film shot in the USA and his only 'religious thriller', an Italian woman appropriately called Maria is believed to have special powers connected to her virginal blood, manifested in bleeding stigmata. Spotted by an American televangelist, she travels to the USA to become the star of a 'miracle tour'. Her spiritual, geographical and metaphorical journeys introduce motifs such as stardom, the contrast between appearances and reality or the organic/technological binary.

*Angustia* (1987) was written in the USA but shot in Barcelona with late US stars Zelda Rubinstein and Michael Lerner. His only horror film is his clearest example of meta cinema, another recurring trope. Despite an undeniable focus on the act of looking/gazing, *Anguish* is a brilliant example of haptic cinema and of some of his most significant influences: Buñuel and Hitchcock.

### **Keywords:**

body genres, blood, censorship, exorcism, globalisation, homosexual panic, horror film, metacinema, televangelists, Francoism, skin, virgin/whore.

### **Key places:**

Holland, Spain, the USA. Amsterdam, Barcelona, Houston TX, Los Angeles CA.

### **Key films:**

*Tatuaje/Tattoo* (1976), *Reborn/ Renacer* (1981) and *Angustia/Anguish* (1987).

### **Key actors/names:**

Buñuel, Carlos Ballesteros, Hitchcock, Josep Cuxart, Dennis Hopper, Michael Lerner, Antonella Murgia, Francisco Rabal, Zelda Rubinstein.

### **Key references/authors:**

Balló, Cameron, Creed, Diffrient, Doane, Dyer, Espelt and Llorente, Man Ray, Marks, Mulvey, Ordóñez, Pavés, Pérez, Riambau, Sánchez, Sobchack, Vázquez Montalbán, Rubió, Williams.

## **Chapter 2. Erotic passions. *Bilbao* (1978), *Caniche/Poodle* (1979), *Lola* (1986), *Las edades de Lulú/Ages of Lulu* (1990).**

This chapter explores an essential aspect of the Bigas Luna brand: eroticism. It brings together four films that some critics have studied in pairs before and his obscure erotic shorts.

*Bilbao* and *Caniche*, two of his earliest, darkest and most controversial features share elements of style (darkness), cast and production team.

*Lola* and *Las edades de Lulú* are much lighter and closer aesthetically and thematically to the films that followed in the 1990s.

They all share a focus on the female body as an object of desire for obsessive male voyeurs: Leo, Bernardo (both played by the late Àngel Jové), Mario (Féodor Atkine) or Pablo (Óscar Ladoire) anticipate the toxic masculinities at the heart of the 'Iberian Portraits' trilogy, while *Bilbao* (Isabel Pisano), *Eloisa* (Consol Tura), *Lola* (Àngela Molina) or *Lulú* (Francesca Neri) are part of a continuum of Mediterranean/Latino women central to later work.

The chapter examines the connections of eroticism with, on the one hand, technology (photographic and video cameras, radio, asynchronous sound, voiceovers) and, on the other, food, delving into the idea of 'gastronomic eroticism' as key to understanding the hapticity of these films.

It also analyses the influence of art (from Goya to Hockney), extra-diegetic music or the human/non-human animal binary opposition at the heart of these narratives. Taboo subjects such as bestiality, incest, intergenerational relationships or sadomasochism are also discussed.

The backdrop of the democratic transition and increasing socio-cultural influences from Europe and the USA provides a thought-provoking context for the films studied.

### **Keywords:**

animal studies, anthropomorphism, eroticism, gastronomic eroticism, milk, porn, taboo, transition, urban studies, viscosity.

### **Key places:**

France, Spain. Barcelona, Catalonia, Paris, Madrid.

### **Key films:**

*Bilbao* (1978), *Caniche/Poodle* (1979), *Lola* (1986), *Las edades de Lulú/Ages of Lulu* (1990).

### **Key actors:**

Féodor Atkine, María Barranco, Dani (the dog), Àngel Jové, Oscar Ladorie, María Martín, Àngela Molina, Francesca Neri, Isabel Pisano, Asumpta Serna, Consol Tura.

### **Key references/authors:**

Aguado, Camí-Vela, Espelt, Goya, Harraway, Hockney, Kinder, Krzywinska, Lázaro-Reboll, Marks, Melero, Rubió, Sanabria, Soler, Weinrichter, Williams.

### **Chapter 3. Iberian masculinities. *Jamón jamón* (1992), *Huevos de oro/Golden Balls* (1993), *La teta y la luna/The Tit and the Moon* (1994).**

This chapter is an in-depth study of what most critics regard as Bigas Luna's masterpiece, the 'Iberian Portraits' trilogy. This trio of impactful films was conceived as a single project from the start and executed by the same team. Cuca Canals co-wrote the screenplays with Bigas Luna, Nicola Piovani the soundtrack, and José Luis Alcaine, an Almodóvar regular, was the cinematographer for all three films. It focuses on two key aspects of the trilogy: masculinities and national identity, at a time of flux in post-Franco Spain.

*Jamón jamón* (1992), released in the Fifth Centenary year, when Spain hosted the Olympics in Barcelona, the Expo in Seville and European Capital of Culture in Madrid. It toyed provocatively with this socio-historical context by looking simultaneously at the rural, Imperial, *pegajoso* past and the sanitised, commodified and Europeanised/global future.

*Huevos de oro* (1993) anticipated the 'brick crisis' through a caricaturesque depiction of a narcissistic land speculator with clear colonial implications that the film sees as part of a problematic continuum linked to toxic masculinities.

*La teta y la luna* (1994) turned the attention to Catalonia, offering a *mestiza* and diverse vision of Bigas's autonomous region encapsulated by the unifying *castell*. *Teta* makes Piaff compatible with flamenco, just like *Jamón* mixed traditional Spanish gastronomy and global brands, from Coca-Cola to Yamaha.

The chapter also analyses Javier Bardem and Penélope Cruz as examples of Bigas's talent in discovering stars and Bardem as evidence of his visual investment on male bodies as the object of the gaze.

#### **Keywords:**

Bardem, Catalonia, Europe, gastronomy, Iberia, *macho ibérico*, masculinities, milk, national identity, postmodernism.

#### **Key places:**

North Africa, Spain, the USA. Barcelona, Barceloneta, Benidorm, Melilla, Miami, Los Monegros, Tarragona, The Moon.

#### **Key films:**

*Jamón jamón* (1992), *Huevos de oro/Golden Balls* (1993), *La teta y la luna/The Tit and the Moon* (1994).

#### **Key actors:**

Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz, Benicio del Toro, Juan Diego, Biel Durán, Abel Folk, Anna Galiena, Alessandro Gassmann, Mathilda May, Maria de Medeiros, Jordi Mollà, Miguel Poveda, Stefanía Sandrelli, Maribel Verdú.

#### **Key references/authors:**

Alcaine, Barturen, Berthier, Canals, Dalí, D'Lugo, Deleyto, Eleftheriotis, Evans, Font, Fouz-Hernández, Goya, Jordan, Loxham, Morgan-Tamosunas, Piovani, Preciado, Pujol, Labanyi, Martínez-Expósito, Noble, Sanabria, Sedgwick, Smith, Warhol.

**Chapter 4. Mediterranean femininities. *Bámbola* (1996), *La camarera del Titanic/The Chambermaid on the Titanic* (1997), *Volavérunt* (1999) and *Son de mar/Sound of the Sea* (2001).**

In the second half of the nineties, Bigas Luna set out to make a 'European/Mediterranean' trilogy that would use the successful formula of the 'Iberian portraits' (national stereotypes, gastronomic eroticism, love triangles) but with a focus on female characters.

The clearest example is the poorly received *Bámbola*, starring Italian television celebrity and erotic icon Valeria Marini and Cuban actor Jorge Perugorria at the centre of a torrid affair that included sexual violence, crime and generous helpings of pasta and pizza. The other three films included here are literary adaptations of prestigious novels. Although each film is distinct, they share an interest in strong and mysterious women.

In *La camarera del Titanic*, docker-turned-storyteller Horthy falls in love with the romanticised idea of a chambermaid called Marie he briefly met on the Titanic during a work trip and before the boat's doomed departure. His only photograph of Marie becomes the centre of his ever-evolving stories about their encounter.

A similar sense of mystery surrounds the identity of Goya's 'naked maja' paintings in *Volavérunt*: is it the Duchess of Alba? Is it the exotic Other Pepita Tudó or a mixture of both?

*Son de mar* is an allegoric love story (part erotic thriller) heavily influenced by Greco-Roman mythology.

The chapter studies the role of art, storytelling, and sex in the construction of a male-centred understanding of 'the ideal woman'. Mediterranean identities, sexuality, and the haptic touch (of the photograph, paintings, or old books) are also central to the argument, which finds a sharp contrast in water and other fluids (including paint) with the phallic imagery seen in Chapter 3.

**Keywords:**

Art, cinesexuality, Europe, femininities, Goya, period drama, literary adaptation, Mediterranean identities, sex, water.

**Key places:**

France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom. Aragón, Castilla, Denia, Mediterranean Sea, Po Valley, Southampton.

**Key films:**

*Bámbola* (1996), *La camarera del Titanic/The Chambermaid on the Titanic* (1997), *Volavérunt* (1999) and *Son de mar/Sound of the Sea* (2001).

**Key actors:**

Manuel Bandera, Penélope Cruz, Stefano Dionisi, Eduard Fernández, Valeria Marini, Olivier Martínez, Jordi Mollà, Jorge Perugorria, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón, Stefania Sandrelli, Leonor Watling.

**Key references/authors:**

Barthes, Davies, D'Lugo, Hunt, Kinder, Fantoni Minnella, Junkerjürgen, Loxham, MacCormack, Martínez-Expósito, Lehman, Merlo.

## **Chapter 5. Women and success *Yo soy la Juani/My Name is Juani* (2006) and *DiDi Hollywood* (2010).**

This chapter starts with a discussion of some of the key Bigas Luna projects in the five-year period since the previous film. In addition to his artistic production, his main works in the first half of the 2000s included the 'Bigas Luna Film Workshop' (Taller Bigas Luna) and his ambitious adaptation of Valle-Inclán's *Barbaric Comedies* (2003). These projects fed into the unfinished trilogy about 'women and success' discussed here, mostly because many young professionals who trained in the Taller then became part of the creative team producing the films.

The unfinished trilogy was meant to track an aspiring actress' journey from her suburb in Catalonia to Madrid (*Yo soy La Juani*) and then Hollywood (*DiDi Hollywood*) through to his decline (in the never-completed *Las Divas también lloran/Divas Cry Too*). The storyline was in part inspired by Spanish stars who made it in Hollywood and the inevitability of eventually being forgotten.

The chapter studies the increasingly important role of modern and digital technologies in the films of Bigas Luna, by now heavily influenced by music video and gaming aesthetics – with the help of young collaborators. Importantly, the films recapture key tropes in his filmography, such as stardom, love triangles or the appearances/reality dichotomy, often associated with US culture.

*La Juani* and *DiDi* belong to a continuum of *chicas* Bigas Luna who have become increasingly confident but also ever more vulnerable to male predators in the film industry, not too distant from the obsessive and male chauvinistic men seen in previous chapters.

### **Keywords:**

affect, digital technology, haptic image, Hollywood, #metoo, sexual violence, sorority, stardom, Taller Bigas Luna, viscosity (butcher eroticism).

### **Key places:**

Spain, USA. Barcelona, Los Angeles, Madrid, Miami, Sagunto, Tarragona.

**Key films:** *Yo soy la Juani/My Name is Juani* (2006) and *DiDi Hollywood* (2010).

### **Key actors:**

Peter Coyote, Verónica Echegui, Luis Hacha, Laya Martí, Dani Martín, Sara Montiel, Elsa Pataki, Rosalía, Paul Sculfor, Giovanna Zacarías.

### **Key references/authors:**

Chaves, Jagose, Harguindey, Loxham, Noble, Pavés, Ross, Shaviro.



## Conclusion

The Conclusion reflects on the themes and formal issues that characterise the films of Bigas Luna, as studied throughout the book. It highlights the consistency of key thematic concerns (gastronomy, gender inequality, national identity, sex, stardom, storytelling) and a formal evolution that went from the darkness and enclosed spaces of his early work in the 1970s and 1980s to the light and open spaces of his work in the 1990s and 2000s. Despite an easily recognisable style and recurring thematic and visual tropes, the films resist easy classification. The book's structure partly responds to chronology and conceptual and formal issues such as genre.

This final chapter highlights the impact that Bigas's background in furniture design and his work as a multidisciplinary artist had on his ability to create impactful images. It also discusses his interest in animals, ecology or rural spaces and their relationship to food or modern technology.

The films are rich in references to classic Spanish and international artists, from Dali or Goya to Hockney or Warhol. The narratives also reflect on the history of Spain, its traditions, but also the colonial past and its connections to present-day concerns such as gender violence or territorialism.

The conclusion claims that the films of Bigas Luna are an excellent case study to discuss recent Spanish history and Spanish film history, from censorship (his debut film was released the year after dictator Franco died) to European integration, globalisation, or the Hollywood film industry.

### **Keywords:**

auteur, celebrity, ecology, Europe, gender, Iberia, national identity, postcolonialism, rural/urban, visual tropes.

### **Key places:**

Europe, Iberia, USA.

### **Key films:**

*Tatuaje, Bilbao, Caniche, Reborn, Lola, Angustia, Las edades de Lulú, Jamón jamón, Huevos de oro, La teta y la luna, Bambola, La camarera del Titanic, Volavérunt, Son de mar, Yo soy La Juani, DiDi Hollywood, Segon origen, Bigas x Bigas.*