

# Bigas Luna's *Huevos de oro*: Regional Art, Global Commerce

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Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art—  
Andy Warhol<sup>1</sup>

*Huevos de oro* (1993), Bigas Luna's ninth feature-length film, is as much an effort to capitalize on the huge commercial success of his previous *Jamón Jamón* (1992), as to expand his scrutiny of a series of subjects and characters introduced in that film. *Huevos* fixes on two interconnected themes: the transformation of national cultural identity that has accompanied Spain's aggressive entrance into European and global markets in recent decades, and the particular image of the Iberian macho as a symptomatic reflection of the shifting parameters between local and global cultures. Like *Jamón*, *Huevos* is a self-referential film, affirming and yet interrogating its own condition as the product of transnational cultural production, principally through an intense focus on a specific male stereotype, the *chorizo* or small-time punk. Through this formula, Bigas once again restages within his film the double imperative of his work in general: to address film audiences outside of Spain by "folklorizing" certain clichés and stereotypes of Spanish culture and to engage national audiences in the self-reflection of their own status.

What makes *Huevos* distinctive, and not merely the clever exploitation of an earlier commercial success, is the way Bigas constructs a highly

original reciprocal narrative. Contemporary Spanish identity politics is made to illuminate the symptomatic condition of individuals formed in the shadow of globalization. Bigas's own condition as film *auteur* becomes self-consciously implicated in this ironic structure as the figure of the individual, understood as a manifestation of the authorial, poses questions about national culture. Through this narrative mirroring, *Huevos* plays allegories of authorship and of national identity against one other.

This textual dualism that blends individual and collective narratives into a single ironic text reflects Bigas's own self-definition as a liminal figure: a Catalan filmmaker whose career has insistently challenged the assumption of a Castilian-based national cinema by playing the margins of Spanish culture against the center; a self-styled *auteur* who has consciously positioned himself both within and against the territorial ideology of Castilianized Spain, as he did in *Jamón*, reaffirming the vitality of the very clichés of Spanishness he otherwise rejects. Bigas's approach to filmmaking may be productively viewed as a variation of what Hamid Naficy has called transnational auteurism (Naficy 123), with his work embodying a dialectical vision within and beyond national spaces, similar to that of filmmakers such as Raúl Ruiz (Chile) or Fernando Solanas (Argentina). Those directors, however, shaped their transnational aesthetic through difficult periods of political exile, while Bigas derived his sense of identity as a transnational filmmaker from his own precocious awareness of the commercial and artistic limits of both Catalan and Spanish cinemas. His career began in the immediate aftermath of the Franco dictatorship, when, in films such as *Bilbao* (1978) and *Caniche* (1979) he was drawn toward sensationalist themes intended to shock audiences while establishing his own identity as a film *auteur*. In such films, Bigas clearly repudiated the parochialism of Francoist cultural mores and fiercely affirmed the consumerist culture that was taking shape during the early years of transition.

Like Andy Warhol, whose career as a graphic artist turned filmmaker suggests certain illuminating parallels with his own, Bigas fashioned himself an entrepreneurial *auteur*. Promoting himself became a way of promoting his films and vice versa, thereby blurring the distinction between filmic art, celebrity, and commerce. By cultivating his own celebrity persona through a combination of highlighted personal idiosyncracies (always appearing in public dressed in black, for instance) and the seemingly scandalous nature of some of his films, he self-consciously sought to construct the perception of himself and his cinema as continuing the line of Spain's best known international filmmaker of resistance to dominant Spanish culture, Luis Buñuel.<sup>2</sup>

Almost from the start of his filmmaking career, the same entrepreneurial logic that guided Bigas's self-packaging began to shape the content of his films, principally through persistent themes of commerce, specifically the way consumption seemed to reshape Spaniards's social identity and defined their relation to society. Out of such a conception, Bigas came to conceptualize his aesthetic vision of Spain and Spaniards around a growing sensitivity to a transnational marketing imaginary, that is, the way "political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (local) levels of everyday existence" (Wilson and Dessanayake 6).

Bigas's entrepreneurial aesthetic is two-tiered: first, representing the patterns of shift away from the territorial ideology that had defined Spain (and Catalonia) by emphasizing Spain's relation to Europe, as embodied in economic modernization; at the same time, exploiting the marketing imaginary by foregrounding certain recognizable images of typical Spanish culture (bullfighting, eroticism, extravagant machismo) that have come to emblemize Spain to the outside world, especially in commercial markets.

If there is a prototypical Spain in his cinema it is, as in his 1985 hit, *Lola*, a community in the throes of social transformation spurred less by politics than by the force of global economic imperatives. Here, for instance, Catalonia is imaged as an intermediary space mediating the extremes of Iberian traditionalism and European modernity (Balló et al 304). In such a configuration, however, Catalan space, repeatedly characterized as the site of commerce, becomes the catalyst that transforms tradition-laden Spain into social and economic modernity. The characters who populate that space, like the title character of *Lola*, Angela Molina, are largely cultural stereotypes who meet the specific manipulative ends that define the film as a commodity within a transnational market.<sup>3</sup>

Bigas, ever the entrepreneurial author, self-consciously positions his work in that same slip-zone between local and global markets. It is therefore no coincidence that his cinema works as a cogent demonstration of the hispanizing of what Thomas Elsaesser described a decade ago as a cultural mode of production of national cinema; that is, a strategy of film production and promotion that looked to the market rather than to art to shape film as a cultural product (Elsaesser 40-42). At the core of Elsaesser's reading of national cinema was a notion of culture as capital and film authorship as a privileged site for its production. He observed the formulation of state-subsidized film production in the German Federal Republic around the packaging of the works of directors whose artis-

tic vision, though clearly idiosyncratic and highly personal, was used to represent a national culture in its projection primarily into international markets: “[It] furnished the criteria which validated filmmaking as ‘art.’ The ideology of self-expression, institutionalized, became a surrogate economic category. By being accepted as an ‘author’ a filmmaker found access to the subsidy system and could command a certain legal and financial power within it” (44).

As a logical outgrowth of the cultural mode of production, the aura of authorship shifted from a decoding of the strategies of individual artistic expression to an *a priori* strategy for organizing audience reception, in much the same way as a designer label informs the consumer of the status and quality of the product it adorns. In this way, national culture was marketed around the figure of the author, and the author became the agency through which international audiences came to understand even as fragmented and self-alienated a nation as West Germany as somehow aesthetically “whole.”<sup>4</sup>

While Bigas’s cinema generally reflects the deft exploitation of the cultural mode of production, with a variety of international producers replacing the role formerly played by a single state-subsidy apparatus, he has, over the course of his development, frequently focused his attention on the ways the forces of commerce have deformed aesthetic and cultural values. In *Huevos de oro*, he self-consciously turns his attention to the concept of authorship as the seeming origin of that process of deformation. He shapes an ironic narrative around a single character, Benito González, who is both the product of the Spanish entrepreneurial culture Bigas satirizes and an oddly duplicative figure, mirroring in certain fundamental ways the market conditions that have allowed for Bigas’s own exploitation as entrepreneurial author.<sup>5</sup>

Benito González

“Todo español lleva un Benito González dentro”<sup>6</sup>

Bigas places this seemingly timeless cliché of the predatory Spanish male within the precise historical time-frame of aggressive Spanish commercial expansion of the 1980s; he uses Benito González mockingly to describe this expansion as an extension of Spanish machismo. More telling, however, is the way the Iberian macho mentality that characterizes that aggressive economic development exposes the atavistic nature of Spain’s self-deluding image of its own modernity. Bigas describes his conception as primarily allegorical:

Es un macho ibérico, el símbolo del país. Con Cuca Canals, la guionista, hacemos la broma de descubrir en los demás ese pequeño—o gran—Benito González que todos los hombres llevamos dentro .... Benito González no deja de ser un ser humano marcado ... por el estigma de todos los hombres, ser el número uno, el mejor, triunfar, construir....Y por eso necesita a las mujeres que, afortunadamente, tienen más serenidad, están en más contacto con la tierra....El paisaje que nos rodea, Benidorm, es un monumento a los Benito González del mundo....Penes erectos hacia el cielo, el poder y el sexo. (Llopart 44)

The plotline of *Huevos* involves Benito (Javier Bardem), a *chorizo*, a young Spanish stud doing military service in Melilla. His narrowly-defined world is shaped by his love for Rita, a local dancer, and his driving ambition to become a real estate developer and build a huge skyscraper named after himself. When Rita betrays Benito with his best friend, he becomes a hardened businessman. In Benidorm Benito appears to achieve his dream by exploiting two women: his lover, Claudia (Maribel Verdú), and Marta (María de Medeiros), the daughter of an influential banker he marries to secure her father's financial support.

Claudia is killed in a car accident that leaves Benito partially paralyzed, and when his building, made of cheap materials, fails, Benito is ruined financially. He runs off to Miami with Ana, an explosive Puerto Rican woman he had met in Benidorm. In Miami, Benito is humiliated by Ana, who takes a more virile lover, Bob, their gardener. In order to remain with Ana, Benito must now become part of a new *menage-à-trois*.

The narrative design of *Huevos de oro* suggests a pivotal thematic duality: the correlation between the modern Spaniard's personal and collective destinies. On one level, this is simply the story of an aberrant social type obsessed with money, sex, and power. "Con dos mujeres, dos rólexes," as Benito frequently describes his status. Eventually this dream of power and possessions ensnares the protagonist in sexual impotence and commercial failure. On a broader level, the script insistently situates Benito in symbolic spaces of Spanish commercial history, transforming him from a mere *chorizo* into an allegorical figure whose fortunes recapitulate the history of the Spanish commercial dream of empire.

Coming on the heels of *Jamón Jamón*, Bigas and Cuca Canals's script for *Huevos* acknowledges the transnational appeal of the macho

stereotype as a way of marketing a Spanish film in international contexts (Weinrichter 90). The film's notorious promotional ad, for instance, showing Javier Bardem grabbing his crotch in an act of defiance, was intended to add a certain comic notoriety to the image of the Iberian macho as well as to Bigas's own authorial signature. But it also underscored the premise of the film and its promotion as demonstrations of the belief that the commercial exploitation of social stereotypes in cinema forms an essential and even natural bond between commerce and culture. Indeed, much of the principal action of *Huevos* underscores the way Benito's commodity fetishism has reduced women to the status of negotiable objects, just as sexuality is itself aligned with business.

After the loss of Rita, Benito's sense of love is one of a possession barely distinguishable from that of a Dalí painting or a Rolex watch. In an early sequence that sets up this crucial equation, we see crystallized the process of Benito's thinking. The scene begins as Benito is painting drawers on Claudia's breasts in explicit imitation of Dalí's "Venus with Drawers," a reproduction of which is positioned on a table near his bedside. Fancying himself an artist as well as a businessman, he tells her that for him "sexo es arte, fantasía." A few moments later, Benito performs cunilingus on Claudia, telling her that he needs her for a plan to make them both very rich. To intensify her immediate sexual pleasure, she should think about money and America. Claudia reaches orgasm as she repeatedly sighs "Miami, Miami." Thus, in an almost comic-strip way, the scene underscores sex, art, and business, three interchangeable elements that effectively describe Benito's "national" mentality wherein art and sex become equivalent terms within a system of commercial exploitation.

The film makes clear that Benito is not merely some bizarre and deviant individual. His outward appearance may be that of an age-old stereotype, but his actions and motivation are seen as the result of his having absorbed certain cultural fictions that arise out of Spain's economic modernization. These range from the myths that conflate machismo with business acumen, to the particular personae of two "local heroes" mythified within contemporary Spanish culture: Salvador Dalí and Julio Iglesias. Benito may fashion himself an artist, but, importantly, he is an artist in an age in which the force of mass-cultural production and consumption have destabilized the distinction between high and low art, so that even a *chorizo* may imagine himself a creator. In this context, Benito has conceived his greatest creation as a twin-tower phallic office building in Benidorm that Bigas suggests comically is a projection of himself and of the social mentality that has nurtured him. Implicitly, the coherence to his view of business as art derives from his admiration of

Dalí for whom, as Bigas asserts, art was indeed business. Not only does Benito collect Dalí reproductions, dressing himself up in Dalí's marketed clothes, but when he has a premonitory nightmare of his own business failure, he even dreams in the Dalí style.

Benito's identification with Julio Iglesias is less conspicuous, yet even more pervasive. At various moments in his life, he identifies with the Iglesias ballad, "Por el amor de una mujer," eventually mouthing it on a huge karaoke machine. In turn, the sound-track echoes the ballad at crucial points, thus raising the connection to a discursive level. The particular ballad seems only incidental to the narrative, a popular cultural artifact used by the director to externalize the hero's sense of loss for the one true love of his life.

But Iglesias, like Dalí, is shown to be more than merely an isolated cultural icon that the hero has appropriated. He is used textually as emblematic of certain cultural ambitions of Spaniards, which Benito can only at best seek to imitate, namely renown as a lover and an achiever of international artistic celebrity. Bigas says: "Julio Iglesias es otro símbolo, un símbolo contemporáneo del país. Es el hombre triunfador, que se ha hecho de sí mismo, y ha llegado a representar una determinada pasión nuestra desde la canción ligera" (Sigfrid 31).

Benito's affection for and embrace of Dalí and Iglesias as inspirational icons functions both as a way of underscoring a national mythology of Spain's illusion of international triumph and success, and as a critique of the self-exploitation of these particular personae. It is ultimately the cultural formation symptomatically embodied in the figures of Dalí and Iglesias that reveals Benito to be merely the victim of commercial exploitation: the hero as the consumer of crass commercial icons. Notably, in the final moments of the film, when he comes to realize the failure of his sexual and commercial dreams, Benito sits and sobs on the edge of his bed in his Miami bungalow. His close-up image is framed within the screen by the border of a Dalí print, "The Persistence of Memory," he has hung above his bed. With a freeze-frame, the final credits scroll to the repetition of the Julio Iglesias ballad. Thus, the two Spanish icons of success become recast for the spectator in these final moments as the signifiers of the persistent memory of loss and failure.

The symptomatic nature of Benito's story is not that he has been misled by the false cultural idols of Dalí and Iglesias, but, more importantly, that illusion of personal authorship is revealed as part of the pervasive system of commodity fetishism that describes Benito's world. That commodification of cultural icons is brilliantly underscored in one climactic moment in the film when Benito has thrown a party at his

Mediterranean villa with the goal of showing off his achievements. As the party gets out of control, Benito becomes jealous when an American actor starts singing to Claudia, Benito's mistress, with the microphone from the karaoke machine. Benito, dressed in a bright red *barretina*, the Catalan skullcap Dalí designed as part of his signature image, grabs the microphone from the American, and begins to intone the Julio Iglesias ballad. Thinking he is affirming his own prowess, and symbolically the presumption of Spanish superiority over the Americans, Benito fails to understand that these identities, which he dons as though putting on new garments, are mere simulations and that indeed, his very embrace of them crystallizes a larger, transparent system of commodifications. The underlying dynamic here is the character's misrecognition of his circumstance, which he continually misconstrues as authentic and individual. What he imagines to be his authorial status, the creative force of his life and the affirmation of his own business power is ironically only the confirmation of his true status as the ultimate consumer. As Robert Hughes notes about the nature of modern mass culture, "the products of the machine aesthetic flatter consumers that they have something in common with artists" (348). It is precisely his condition of a consumer misrecognizing himself as artist that gives particular poignancy to Benito's circumstance.

If, as Michel Foucault argued, what distinguishes the authorial discourse from others is the name of the author (Foucault 123), in the sphere of transnational commerce, that name has been refigured as a mere brand label, recirculating as commodity. By shifting the meaning of the romantic author from the locus of the creative impulse to one that roughly equates with consumerism, Bigas reveals authorship to be only a figurative subject position defined in relation to consumption.

Ensnared in the historical myths of Spanish machismo and the self-deluding notion of his own power and virility, Benito comes ultimately to embody the threats that this new commodification of cultural identity imposes on the Spaniard. As the narrative shows, his tragedy is that eventually the illusion must reveal itself as such. The cheaply fabricated building that he imagines will assure his success begins to crumble due to the shoddy materials he uses, thus causing the death of his closest male friend, and signalling his own ultimate demise, both physical and commercial.

#### A Geopolitical Aesthetic

[Ethnicity] is located in a place, in a specific history. It could not speak except out of a place, out of those histories. It is located in relation to a whole set of notions about territory, about

where is home, and where is overseas, what is close to us and what is far away. (Hall 22)

On the surface, Benito González appears to have been simply a useful social stereotype, recycled to exploit the commercial success of an earlier film. Indeed, Bigas uses the same actor in *Huevos* to parody that same *macho ibérico* he first described in *Jamón*. In *Huevos*, however, Bigas gives decidedly more prominence to the ideology of the global commercial culture that feeds the macho's and presumably the nation's unbridled entrepreneurial spirit. Benito's narrative is staged against the larger backdrop of transnational capitalism and globalization that have deformed the contemporary Spanish social landscape. That pairing of national and transnational narratives helps to establish a special kind of allegory in the film as though it were "a conceptual instrument for enabling [Spaniards] to grasp the implications of their new being-in-the-world" (Jameson 3). Within this allegory, geography and the very spaces of Benito's itinerary become the signifiers of the process of cultural deformation. The principal spatial coordinates of the narrative—setting, *mise-en-scène*, geography—mirror this thematic in unmistakable ways by reinscribing the history of Spain's commercial empire-building as the backdrop of Benito's story. That story begins, for instance, with his activities stealing bidets while completing his military service in Melilla,<sup>7</sup> and ends when, as a broken man in his garish bungalow in Miami, he recalls the itinerary that brought him to this impasse.

Allegorically, the four women around whom the film narrative turns function as historical coordinates within the reinscription of Spanish commercial empire-building: Rita, Benito's first love, betrayed in Melilla with his best friend, represents the Arab contact, with Melilla recalling the last vestiges of Spain's overseas empire. Claudia, the savvy and sensuous woman Benito seduces in Benidorm, symbolizes Spanish Mediterranean culture. Marta, the banker's daughter, whom he marries to assure his bank investment, is the European pragmatist who, nonetheless, is blinded by the *arribista's* charm. Finally, Ana, the brash American woman, is able to seduce Benito, but ultimately tames and humiliates him. "Ellas son como los cuatro puntos cardinales que, representadas como cuatro bolas, suelen figurar siempre en los monolitos dedicados a Colón" (Llopart 44). This intricate allegorical geography thus leads the audience to see Benito as not merely acting out a personal destiny of failure, but, moreover, reliving a misconstrued national past as the false myth of triumph.

Of the film's geographic coordinates, Benidorm serves as the most prominent and legible space. It is from here that Spaniards are able to view both their past and their future. This is the place where Benito's dreams of business power becomes confused with sexual power, and where, ultimately, his business failure becomes the sign of his loss of virility, leading him to an American space in which he, as the symbolic Spanish male, encounters the shape of his future. The Costa Brava resort city is a levantine space that appears to derive from Bigas's earlier characterization of Catalonia as the mediation between European modernity and Spanish traditionalism. For Bigas in the 1990s, it has been transformed into the site of deception and disillusion. Looking across the Mediterranean to Africa, a part of Spain's ethnic origins, Benidorm was once the seductive site of European investment beginning in the 1960s. By the 1980s, however, as the film shows, Benidorm had become the place of grotesque commercial development embodied in the high-rise office building Benito is constructing, the phallic, twin-towered Torres González.

This anthropomorphization of the building as phallic motif plays with the series of associations that align Benito with Dalí as entrepreneurial artist of pop sexual images. It is Benidorm of which Benito first dreams as the site of his business success when he is in Melilla, as it will be Miami, for Bigas the grotesque twin of Benidorm, about which Benito will fantasize as he aspires to a larger success.

Bigas has insisted to interviewers that when he made *Huevos* he was unaware that Benidorm and Miami actually were commercially linked as sister cities. Within the narrative design of the film, Miami indeed functions as a prolongation and intensification of the distorted illusions that are embodied in Benidorm. It appears to be the center of a new Hispanic macro-region, and a sort of "new frontier" for Spanish international business development. The shift of locale to Miami, transcending an ocean and national borders, however, is at first barely noted. For this space is a hyper version of the same commercial space of Benidorm, deformed by the commercialism of American rather than Spanish culture. In this way the geography of *Huevos* suggests the very conspiratorial nature of the allure of Benito's presumably "authentic" American dream. The final space of the film reveals a sense of the cultural community dissolved by the very achievement of its own goal: economic modernization.

As Fredric Jameson notes when he speaks of a geopolitical unconscious, these landscapes in general function as "a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall" (5). In the context of that geopolitical unconscious, Jameson argues that such allegorical geographies serve in films as "a con-

spiratorial text, which, whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, but collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in the late twentieth century" (3).

What in another context might simply be the epic of Spain's re-birth as a commercial power is here indeed transformed into a cautionary tale of the conspiracy of the allure of modernity and the price of economic and cultural modernization. What we come to see through the intricate weaving of Benito's narrative through this spatial itinerary is the questioning of the dream of economic revitalization as it seems to lead ultimately to the fetishization of individuals and of an entire culture as mere commodity. Bigas's playful shaping of this national theme around his own self-referential status as one of those transnational self-made authors, reminds his audience that Spaniards need to begin the process of recognizing the multiple histories—social, economic, as well as personal—that traverse the landscapes of an all too alluring modernity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As cited in James (58).

<sup>2</sup>The intertextual citations of Buñuel's films have been frequently noted throughout Bigas's career. Kinder observes, for instance, the prominent influences of Buñuel's *El* and *L'Age d'Or* as key intertextual forces in the shaping of the sexual pathology of Bigas's protagonist, Leo, in *Bilbao* (264-65). Espelt notes various cinematic citations of the eye-cutting scene in a number of Bigas's films. In interviews for the opening of *Huevos de oro*, Bigas even claimed that the film's title was inspired by *L'Age d'Or* (Castro 38). To these critics have added comments on the obvious Buñuelian inspiration for the dream sequences in *Jamón Jamón*.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the ways in which micro-regional cinema operates generally in terms of Catalan culture, see Kinder 394-401; for a specific discussion of the ways this process operates in Bigas's cinema see D'Lugo.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the commercialization of the concept of the film author generally, see Corrigan 101-36.

<sup>5</sup>Bigas openly acknowledges some of his own identification with the character of Benito González in his interviews with Llopart. "En mi caso es un personaje que intelectualmente odio profundamente. El típico tipo que habla fuerte, que somete y tiraniza ... lo odio intelectualmente pero no puedo dejar de pensar que me gustaría ser Benito González, el macho ibérico, durante al menos 24 horas. Tiene algo de fascinante, como la misma Península Ibérica" (44).

<sup>6</sup>Sigfrid 30.

<sup>7</sup>The bidet in Bigas's allegory comes to symbolize a complex scenario within which the sexual, the commercial, and even the dynamics of cultural identity are mixed together: "... para mí el bidet es el símbolo cultural europeo más importante que existe. En América no hay bidets. Por eso resulta tan patética la imagen de Benito, hundido, intentando arrancar el bidet que se ha instalado en su cochambroso apartamento de Miami. El hecho de que haya bidet significa muchas cosas, desde normas lúdicas hasta higiénicas" (Sigfrid 32).

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