
REPRESSION DE | *SUBLIMATION*

**FREEDOM FROM
REPRESSION AND THE
SHACKLES OF
LIBERAL OPRESSION
GAY IMAGES
ON FILM AND VIDEO'**

by Michael E. Eliot Hurst

*“Discourse transmits and produces power;
it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders
it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”
(Foucault, 1978, p. 101)*

ELOY DE LA IGLESIA'S FILM *EL DIPUTADO* (*THE DEPUTY*) abounds with the images of sexual and political mainstream power—whether that of the Franco regime, the liberal parliamentary democracy that succeeded it, “old-style” political practice of the right and left, and heterosexuality, particularly the patriarchal nuclear family. Yet it also

deconstructs most of the institutional and ideological formats they take on, and posits alternatives without ever being didactic. The film has flaws, but nonetheless is superior to most other films by or about gays and lesbians, whether narrative or “avant-garde”, because of its recognition of the need for political and sexual revolution to go hand-in-hand. At the level of the

immediate viewing of its images, the first part of Foucault's statement appears true, but repeated viewing reveals the intricacies of the text and subtexts, and how it is possible to subvert within an apparently dominant culture. This undermining has, however severe limits and few works of art are able to successfully distance themselves from hegemonic ideologies.

Both Marcuse and Foucault, amongst others, have suggested, and even labelled, how this process may occur. Marcuse uses the term "repressive desublimation" to suggest how liberation can be accompanied by continuing oppression.² In *El Diputado* both the oppression of Franco's regime and the limits of the new parliamentary system are represented by police and military actions, rallies, meetings, street demonstrations, and the legislature itself. But within this is contained a "secret apartment," a miniature "world" in which the deputy plays out his other self, the homosexual. In fact, the growing contradiction between personal sexual liberation, the limits of liberal democracy, and the failure of the new Spain to replace its restrictive patriarchal heterosexism, are acted out in a milieu adorned with pictures of Marx and Engels, left-wing slogans, and the Internationale! It's here amongst the cultural language of capitalist society at its most malleable that the freedom from Franco's political repression is most clearly drawn as a continued sexual oppression. When old authoritarian political strictures are removed, superficially at least, some of the strictures against sexual freedom are also removed, a situation in which, for example, gay people may find private space decriminalized, and perhaps ghettoes set up within which there is relative ease of movement and expression. But in fact, these very strategies are also strategies of containment and ultimate repression. Political change has not been accompanied by ideological changes. Life carries on as before, albeit in a seemingly more tolerant way. Only when our cinema and video screens are widely and freely occupied by gay and other currently repressed images, and only once what is acted out in secret apartments becomes fully public, will freedom from oppression be truly achieved. This, and other gay films, are a first step.

Foucault suggests an alternative and complementary explanation.³ "...it is in confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret." (p. 61). For many gay people, not the least the deputy, "coming out" is precisely this exhaustive expression of the individual's secret. Coming out involves unmasking and revealing the "truth" of one's sexual pref-





erence, and thus a "confession" to the dominant social order of "deviancy". "Since the Middle Ages at least, Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (p. 58). The film in question in fact ends just as the final agonizing confession is to be made to a plenum of the party; its ending in fact robs us of that particular "pleasure", we never hear the actual confession nor see the assembled party members react. Most films, and most of our culture, make much, however, of the personalized confession, and it can be used as a strategy to reveal the ideological elasticity (ie. "liberality") of capitalist-dominated societies.

"The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth... 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulate only at the price of a kind of liberation." (p. 60)

Foucault clearly identifies the inverted power structure which undermines the role of the confession. The confessor must believe in the liberating power obtained in the act of confession, although in fact, the power is on the side of oppressor. That is, if we accept the approach of Gramsci, in order for the dominant culture to continue its hegemony, it must continually obtain new information including that about those who do not hold power: subordinate classes, races, women, single parents, gay people, etc.⁴ The process of obtaining this information is set via a series of objectives (although frequently unstated), with the ultimate goal, as far as sexuality is concerned, of defining and then recuperating "illicit" sex. Those objectives are a combination of agitation (to reveal the subversive areas), confession (to reveal the underlying "truth" of the subversion), and normalization, (to bring it back into the patriarchal order). It is precisely within this circulatory movement of power that the dominant culture hegemonizes; the power of the artist is to break the circulation, or at least question it or foreground it. The power relies not so much on acts of confrontation, but rather operates through acts of interdiction. Part of the success of this overall tactic is the ability to hide its own ideological mechanisms.

Since 1974 and Christopher Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing*, the route for gay image-makers has been littered with far more disappointments than successes, including the area of avant-garde film and video. Despite the awkwardness and ideological

naivete of Larkin's effort it pointed a way which few other films have been able to follow. Hardly avant-garde, in fact its very opposite in appearance, it nonetheless dared to deal with a taboo subject. One would not equate Larkin with either Genet or Anger, nonetheless all were marginalized because of subject matter, time, and place, in a way that *Making Love* and its ilk were not, and even today their films do not receive unfettered screenings.⁵ But then, neither do the more flamboyant but decidedly avant-garde films of Curt McDowell which simply get reviewed or written up in articles like this. The relationship of these films to gay male porno readily available on video is examined by Dyer, Waugh, and Greyson in a special section of *Jump Cut #30*. Whereas one set of icons is readily consumed and even reified, the other is marginalized and analysed only in *The Front Line*: "...filled with raucous humour, virtually obsessed with sexuality, his films can't be said to lack what's commonly known as 'commercial potential'..." but nonetheless they are "ignored by the avant-academic cabal."⁶ In Foucault's terms, to which we'll return, McDowell's films are direct in their sexual terms. Iglesia takes a very different tack.

In *The Deputy* a parallel is drawn between political awakening in the years before and after Franco's death and the homosexual awakening of a social democratic politician, underscoring the connections between political and sexual repression. But as the old authoritarian strictures against both political and sexual freedoms are relaxed, the old adage that political change must be accompanied by socio-cultural change is illustrated.

Under Franco's regime a young member of the intelligentsia, but with a solidly bourgeois heritage, speaks out defiantly against facism, which although it wins some public approval, gains him a place in jail. "Hospitalized" with some lumpen-proletariat as a punishment, his latent homosexual desires are rekindled by the sight of male genitalia. One particular fellow prisoner, who turns out to be a hustler, encourages this voyeuristic stimulation and develops a cash relationship with the politician. In this process this liaison re-establishes firmly the original feelings which the politician thought he had "overcome".

Later, after the demise of Franco, the politician plays a strategic role in the re-emergence of parliamentary democracy. Just as there are "tricks" in the gay world, so too it emerges there are in this new political world. A right-wing group wishing to compromise and discredit the ascendant politician's image, learns of his secret propensity and plants another attractive

hustler in his way. Although this too is initially a hustler-customer relationship, it is transformed into a passionate emotional relationship which even the deputy's wife senses. In its turn, the "couple" becomes transformed into a "menage-a-trois" in which the politician's emotions are shared rather than competed for.

Although the boy's own proletarian family roots are revealed, he becomes increasingly ensnared in the doomed bisexual household. When the right-wing group finally collects its dues in the attempt to discredit the social democrat and his party, the teenaged lover is murdered in the deputy's secret apartment. Finally compromised but also finally revealed, the latter at the end of the film is left to explain his

porno videotapes to see how this is exploited in explicit terms; dominant cinema, whether European or North American, completes this imagery in *Midnight Cowboy* or *Day for Night*. The hustlers are young, lean, naive on the surface, lumpen or third world, phallogocentric. Pasolini and Fassbinder have perhaps pushed these images the farthest, even giving them a particular political significance. According to MacBean, "the agricultural proletariat of the Third World (and the Italian south)" was to Pasolini the forefront of a revolutionary movement which would scourge the world of all the corruptions of a compromised bourgeois civilization.⁸ To Fassbinder, this hustler sexuality is immediate, monetary and purely genital, with-

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sexual feelings, the hustler's death, etc. to a political rally which is supposed to bestow upon him the crowning achievement of rank, "secretary-general." Knowing the general homophobia of Spanish society and its macho culture, which includes the political left, one is left in no doubt as to the outcome. It is possible to argue that this undercuts many of the poignant and telling scenes of masculine passion, growing sexual awareness, and attempted heterosexual accommodation, but I would argue it strengthens them. It is not just more subtle than *The Conversation's* final disintegration or, in Tom Waugh's words, *The Music Lover's* demise "through cholera-induced convulsions in a vomit-laced tub of boiling bath water";⁷ but different. Although one anticipates Spanish social democratic reaction at that rally, the film's open-endedness suggests that what is needed is socio-cultural and political revolution occurring simultaneously. Until that point there will be many more "secret apartments," compromises, and ultimate repression.

Of interest too is the imagery of the young hustler, an image that by now has a very particular place in capitalist iconography. One only has to view a few gay

out any wider sensuality. In his films it often revolves around discussion of penis size, in which it is assumed that, say, North Africans or street people have larger genitals; both Fassbinder and Pasolini seem fascinated with such sexual stereotypes.

Iglesia frames the prison hospital encounter in the same way; the politician's stare is transfixed by the physique and penis of the hustler, and indeed the iconography is emphasized as the scene continues in a latrine as they urinate together. At this point Pasolini's own dictum comes to mind, "...the last bastion of authenticity seems to be the 'innocent' bodies of the Third World and the violence—archaic, obscene, and vital—of their sex organs."⁹ The first hustler images in *The Deputy* have exactly that feeling to them: an unknown but desirable icon of well-hung violence. The politician is reminded of his homosexual youth, secretly performed to well-thumbed magazine photographs.

But with the introduction of the second hustler, Iglesia attempts to deconstruct that gay filmic icon which historically has been built around appearance, image, and secrecy.

"We must not expect the discourse on sex to tell us above all what strategy it

derives from...or what ideology—dominant or dominated—it represents; rather we question it on the two levels of its tactical productivity...what reciprocal effect of knowledge and power it ensures...and its strategical integration.” (Foucault, p. 102)

The hustler image which has been cultivated in the narrative cinemas of Fassbinder, Pasolini and others, reproduces particular power/ideology relationships in capitalist society, and integrates them, almost “normalizes” them. In *The Deputy* the second hustler comes from the now-expected “underprivileged” background, but there is not the anticipated emphasis on sexual career, penis size, or physique. Slowly we are exposed to the notion that a

to a degree, subservient. The latter is not surprising, given the context of a society dominated by the patriarchal family. But most importantly, we do know which ideological well this springs from; her sexuality is not dismissed or excluded, and there is an attempt to suggest an alternative bisexual route. The woman’s sexuality might offer, we are being told, an alternative “co-equal” route to sexual liberation and fulfillment. The nuclear family is merely one amongst many family forms; sex with a woman might offer, either for a man or for a woman, the real strategy although there is no suggestion of a lesbian alternative in the film. The deputy himself falters as he seemingly balances in his mind male-male, male-female pairing, and the

mate moments. The feedback effects of this are, “. . .the logic of the consumer society, invading even the innermost recesses of our sexuality, making us chronically dissatisfied with what we’ve got, urging us always to seek out something else, especially the latest models held up by the media as the glamorous ideal of beauty and youth...”¹⁰ Iglesia and a few other filmmakers, gay and non-gay men and women, have managed to identify ideology and strategy and recontextualize sexual strategems outside the main discourse; but as Marcuse and Foucault both argue, without at the same time change in society as a whole, in the last instance they cannot help but be recuperated into the mainstream.

“. . .it’s *Colt* magazine, it’s Christopher Street cruising, all that macho-identified male culture, and it’s without irony. I actually feel oppressed by the film; it’s telling me that I ought to do that. If I don’t do that, I’m pathetic, weedy, effeminate.” (Dyer’s comments on *Taxi Zum Klo*.)¹¹

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genuine and realistic relationship can emerge: it’s no overnight Hollywood affair, it is built on payment and secret meetings, but it is also, above all, based on warmth and love. Iglesia does attempt to reveal what strategy it derives from—which neither Pasolini nor Fassbinder does—that is, the possibility of humanity, passion, and love in an ultimately unfettered, but caring, world. All this within the bounds of cinematic realism! We are not duped, of course, but for the first time we are told a man, despite all the inequalities of class, power and money (and the privileged knowledge that we the viewers have of the hustler’s place in another’s conspiracy) has achieved a warm sexual relationship with another man, and that despite our expectations of “knowledge...power...strategical integrating,” it’s increasingly one of equality. That would be idealistic were not the tranquility quickly shattered.

Iglesia also deviates from many makers of gay films by being much more sympathetic to the female character, although here there are some more obvious limitations. The misogyny, deliberate or otherwise, of Fassbinder or Pasolini, is less marked here. Certainly the central female character is wealthy, well-connected, and,

menage-a-trois, albeit all three placed in the context of a general heterosexual milieu. But male homosexuality is certainly not presented to us as the only authentic sexual experience, nor does it have to be the unequal partnership of dominance and passivity which so many gay filmmakers depict, from *Taxi Zum Klo* to *Fox and His Friends*.

Returning to the notions of repression under the guise of liberality and the way in which that ideology of, in effect, power in a heterosexual society is integrated into the visual domain in order to oppress minorities, it can be noted that most films and videos by or about gay men subscribe to rather than distance themselves from hegemonic and subdominant ideologies. They support by failing to question; they exist because of tolerance. The new-found license to purvey certain kinds of icons in male porno videos, and in narrative and avant-garde cinemas, is simply encompassed by the elastic margins of what McBean calls “the compulsive consumption syndrome of ‘consumer society’”. Images and icons are traded as part of the everyday barrage of commodities, commodities which include the reification of the male body and the trivializing of the most inti-

FOOTNOTES

1. Portions of this article originally appeared in *Angles*, July 1985. I would also like to thank Alex Tam for drawing my attention to the relationship between Foucault and some aspects of ‘the gay sensibility’.
 2. H. Marcuse (with R.P. Wolff and Barrington Moore), *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967.
 3. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, New York, Pantheon, 1978.
 4. See for example, Carl Boggs, *Gramsci’s Marxism*, London, Pluto Press, 1976, or Roger Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1982.
 5. It is of course possible to identify gay and lesbian characters, subtexts, references, etc. in many narrative films. Two contrasting approaches are Vito Russo’s purely descriptive and discursive, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York, Harper and Row, 1981) and Richard Dyer’s more analytical set of essays *Gays and Film* (London, British Film Institute, 1977).
 6. David Ehrenstein, *The Front Line*, 1984, Denver, Arden Press, 1984, p. 107.
 7. Tom Waugh, “Men’s Pornography: gay versus straight”, *Jump Cut*, #30, 1985, pp. 30-35.
 8. J.R. MacBean, “Between Kitsch and Fascism: Notes on Fassbinder, Pasolini, (homo)sexual politics, the exotic, the erotic, and other consuming passions”, *Cineaste*, Vol. XIII, 4, 1984, pp. 12-19.
 9. Pasolini, quoted in E. Siciliano, *Pasolini: A Biography*, (translated by J. Shepley), New York, Random House, 1982, p. 128.
 10. MacBean, *op cit*, p. 19.
 11. Richard Dyer, as reported in the September 1982 *American Film*, from a symposium organized by Al LaValley; MacBean, *op cit*, pp. 13 and 19.
- The Deputy* is distributed in Canada and the United States by Award Films of Los Angeles in both 35 mm and videotape formats.