Repressive
DE SUBLIMINATION

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 pos its 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 desublimination" to suggest how liberation can be accompanied by continuing oppression. In *El Di- pusiado* 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 stric- tures are removed, superficially at least, some of the stric- tures against sexual freedom are also removed, a situation in which, for example, gay people may find private space decriminalized, and perhaps ghettos 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 re- oppression. 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 complemental explanation. "...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-
Despite the awkwardness, the area disappointments than makers own ideological mechanisms. This overall tactic is acts Very frontation, power relies least question of the dominant order.ization, (to reveal the national "truth" concerned, ultimate (although frequently unstated), "illicit" information people, classes, races, those new its order for we believe of the confession. power weighs a constraint face; to longer that so layed that dominated personalization, "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. 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
In The Depute 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 intelligensia, but with a solidly bourgeois heritage, talks 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 is 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, phallocentric. 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. To Fassbinder, this hustler sexuality is immediate, monetary and purely genital, with-

Political change has not been accompanied before, albeit in a seemingly more tolerant world, and the secret apartments becomes fully public, with sexual feelings, the hustler's death, etc. to a political rally which is supposed to bewail 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 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 as subtle as the Conversation's final disintegration or, in Tom Waugh's words, The Music Lover's demise "through cholera-induced convulsions in a votum-laced tub of boiling bath water," but different. Although one anticipates Spanish social democratic reaction at this 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. Pasolini 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." The first hustler images in The Depute 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
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, 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 “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 something else, especially the latest models held up by the media as the glamourous ideal of beauty and youth...” Iglesia and a few other filmmakers, gay and non-gay men and women, have managed to identify ideology and strategy and reconceptualize 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 Kilo.)

FOOTNOTES
1. Portions of this article originally appeared in Angel, July 1983. I would also like to thank Alex Tom for drawing my attention to the relationship between Foucault and some aspects of “the gay sensibility”.
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 partly descriptive and discursive, The Celluloid Closet (New York, Harper and Row, 1981) and Richard Dyer’s more analytical study of essays Gay and Film (London, British Film Institute, 1977).
12. The Deposit is distributed in Canada and the United States by Award Films of Los Angeles in both 35 mm and videotape formats.