



Iglesia, Eloy de la (1944-2006)

by Linda Rapp

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Eloy de la Iglesia was among the first Spanish directors to make films with homosexual themes. Although he enjoyed commercial success, critics dismissed his work as sensational, melodramatic, and violent. More recently, however, film scholars have begun to re-evaluate his work, in particular his depictions of socially and politically marginalized groups.

De la Iglesia was born in Larautz in the Basque region of Spain on January 1, 1944. As a young man, he hoped to enter the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía, but, not being old enough, began working in the Teatro Popular Infantil ("popular youth theater") instead. He remained interested in directing, however, and in 1966 made his first film, *Fantasía . . . 3*. The 85-minute film is a collection of three stories for children.

De la Iglesia's major body of work consists of twenty films made between 1968 and 1986. His movies are very much a product of and reaction to his place and time.

During the Franco regime Spanish cinema was dominated by films with religious or historical themes and low-budget comedies. The state, heavily influenced by the Catholic church, exercised strict censorship over what Spanish audiences were allowed to see. Political views inimical to the government were not permitted. Representation of sexual relationships outside of marriage were relatively rare, and the few that were allowed invariably involved heterosexual couples.

The political climate was repressive to homosexuals, especially men. *La Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación* ("The Social Danger and Rehabilitation Law") made homosexual acts illegal, allowed police to arrest men suspected to be homosexual, and imposed penalties of up to three years in prison.

In the latter years of the Franco regime, which ended in 1975, as the dictator's power ebbed, filmmakers began taking more risks and found slightly greater latitude than before. Nevertheless, when de la Iglesia made his first feature film, *Algo amargo en la boca*, in 1968, he encountered problems with the censors even though the film dealt with heterosexual attraction.

De la Iglesia's first international success came in 1972 with *La semana del asesino* (*The Week of the Murderer*), which included an element of homosexual attraction. Like many of his films, particularly the earlier ones, it contained an amount of violence that many viewers found disturbing.

With the death of Franco in 1975 came new freedom for Spanish filmmakers. During the period known as the transition, approximately 1975 to 1978, many moved away from the former norms of Spanish cinema. Whereas the family had previously been the central unit in the filmic narrative, focus now shifted to the couple, including homosexual couples.

Two of de la Iglesia's best-known films, *Los placeres ocultos* (*Hidden Pleasures*, 1976) and *El diputado*



Top: Eloy de la Iglesia.
Above: The cover of the video edition of Eloy de la Iglesia's *Bulgarian Lovers* (2003).
Image of the cover of *Bulgarian Lovers*
Courtesy TLA Releasing.

(*Confessions of a Congressman*, 1978), date from this time.

The first, initially banned by the censors, is the story of a closeted banker attracted to a poor youth who is heterosexual. The banker attempts to create a new model of the family by spending time with the young man and his fiancée. He takes on a traditional paternal function by giving the youth a job in the bank and improving his education, but his true wish is for the two of them to be a couple.

Because of personal, social and economic tensions that arise, it appears that he may fail in both roles. The end of the film, however, has the banker smiling as he answers a doorbell rung by an unseen person, leading spectators to believe that he has at least the possibility of achieving happiness as part of a homosexual couple.

In *El diputado* de la Iglesia also creates an atypical family: a gay Socialist congressman, his wife, and the young man (again, poor) with whom he is in love. The congressman plays the roles of both fatherly mentor and lover to the youth. In this film the love affair ends tragically.

De la Iglesia's films deal with those who have been marginalized by society for various reasons--sexual orientation, politics, economics, ethnicity, and participation in the drug culture.

In one of his later films--and his greatest commercial success--*El pico* (*The Shoot*, 1983), de la Iglesia treats three such marginalized groups, homosexuals, heroin users, and the Basque minority in Spain.

De la Iglesia's films were long either ignored by serious critics or condemned as "sensationalistic and commercial" as well as frequently violent (for example, *Una gota de sangre para morir amando* [*A Drop of Blood to Die Loving*, 1973] and *Navajeros* [*Knife Fighters*, 1980]). In recent years, however, commentators have begun to re-examine his work and its relationship to the social and historical context in which it was produced.

While making *El pico*, de la Iglesia began using heroin, to which he became addicted. After an almost decade-long absence from the public, he re-emerged at the 1996 San Sebastián film festival, which featured a tribute to his work.

In 2001 he made his first film for television, an adaptation of Albert Camus' *Caligula*, which was broadcast on Spain's TVE-1 network. He also began collaborating with Fernando Guillén Cuervo on a screenplay based on *Los novios búlgaros*, a novel by Eduardo Mendicutti.

Released in 2003, *The Bulgarian Lovers* is characteristic of de la Iglesia's work in that it deals with a story of homosexual love set in the context of a marginalized group, in this case eastern European immigrants in Spain. In the film, a middle-aged attorney falls in love with a macho Bulgarian hustler who draws him into a world of shady business dealings.

De la Iglesia died on March 23, 2006 in Madrid following surgery for renal cancer.

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