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Movies

EL CRIMEN PERFECTO ★★★

DIRECTED BY ALEX DE LA IGLESIA

WRITTEN BY IGLESIA AND JORGE GUERRICACHEVARRIA

WITH GUILLERMO TOLEDO, MONICA CERVERA, LUIS VARELA, FERNANDO TEJERO, KIRA MIRO, AND ENRIQUE VILLERI

RATINGS

★★★★ MASTERPIECE

★★★ A MUST SEE

★★ WORTH SEEING

★ HAS REDEEMING FACET

● WORTHLESS

The Fat, the Odd, and the Ugly

Spanish director Alex de la Iglesia has won a cult following by celebrating society's losers—and punishing the winners.

By J.R. Jones

Alex de la Iglesia isn't much to look at, and he knows it. The director of such cult favorites as *The Day of the Beast* and *Common Wealth* appeared at the Gene Siskel Film Center last weekend to introduce *El crimen perfecto*, his latest film and the first to get a commercial release in Chicago. A mountainous Spaniard with a full black beard, dressed in two layers of dingy black T-shirt, he explained that the Spanish release title was *El crimen ferpecto*, a spelling error that's key to the film. "Everything in life was a mistake," he explained. "Even my movies. My movies are a mistake. I am a mistake. I am not perfect, obviously. You know, I am a fucking fat guy."

Like any good maker of black comedy, Iglesia measures his humor in deviations from the norm. His debut feature, *Mutant Action* (1993), was a grungy sci-fi adventure about a group of deformed gonzo who carry out terrorist missions against beautiful celebrities and the culture of personal attractiveness. In his much-loved *The Day of the Beast* (1995), a trio of oddballs—a Basque priest, a slick TV mystic, and a thuggish black-metal fan—team up to hunt down and kill the Antichrist. And his wonderful Hitchcock homage *Common Wealth* (2000), a *Rear Window*-type story about a real estate agent who finds a pile of money in a dead man's apartment, features a rogues' gallery of neighbors that includes a balding geek

who lives with his mother and dresses up as Darth Vader.

El crimen perfecto is Iglesia's most interesting examination of human oddity yet, revisiting the theme with the fervor of *Mutant Action* but expanding it into a satire of advertising and consumer culture—and all the while unreeling a tale of sex, lies, and homicide that recalls the classic noirs of the late 40s. Guillermo Toledo is fascinating as the repulsive hero, Rafael, a dapper ladies' wear salesman in a Madrid department store. Bearded and handsome, Rafael lives a life of consumerist splendor, parading around in the latest fashions and bedding his sensationally beautiful clerks in the furniture department, but when he loses a big promotion to his dreaded rival in menswear, Don Antonio (Luis Varela)—a portly man with lumpy features and a bad toupee—their mutual antipathy boils over into a scuffle in the dressing rooms and Antonio winds up accidentally impaled on a wall hook, hanging there from the back of his skull like a human overcoat.

Rafael gets one of the flashiest introductions Iglesia has ever afforded a character: as a catchy funk tune plays on the sound track, the camera pans over a table of half-empty liquor bottles and motivational paperbacks (*Machiavelli, ese hombre* reads one), then over a naked woman lying in bed and clothes scattered across the floor. Rafael steps out of the shower and dresses, explaining himself to the camera:



El crimen perfecto

"I'm just an elegant man who wants to live in an elegant world. Is that asking too much?" Walking to work through busy Madrid streets, he argues that life is for the taking, and to prove his point, he grabs a stunning woman in the middle of a busy crosswalk and they spin around kissing as startled pedestrians pass this way and that. Arriving at the store, where he's worked for years, he drinks in the glamour: "Welcome to my world, where everything's

perfect. The light, the music, the colors . . . the aroma. . . I'm the priest in a pagan temple, surrounded by my followers."

Yet Rafael fails to recognize his most ardent follower, a homely young woman named Lourdes (presumably to evoke the sick and disabled pilgrims to the French cathedral). Played by Monica Cervera, she's a real fright, with bug eyes, frizzy black hair, and a smile so fierce she actually looks better scowling;

first seen descending on a store escalator as Rafael ascends on the adjoining one, she turns away in shame. Rafael is uniformly smug and cruel toward those less attractive than he is, but he gets a monumental comeuppance when Lourdes witnesses the death of Antonio, steals the body from the store basement (where Rafael has been trying to stuff it into a furnace), and blackmails the department store princeling into becoming her boyfriend.



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This sharp dichotomy between the beautiful and the ugly is most reminiscent of the superlow-budget *Mutant Action*. It's hardly a great film, spinning off into chaos in the second half, but it seems closer to Iglesia's heart than those of some of his later features. The terrorist group of the title counts among its members a hunchbacked dwarf, a retarded deaf-mute, and a pair of conjoined twins; as a newscaster informs us, they've spent the last decade carrying out attacks against "persons known for their physique, institutions for public health, and sperm banks." They kidnap a plastic surgeon and plant explosives at a fashion show. They kill the president of a body-building federation and his attractive lover, leaving her to soak in a burst heart-shaped water bed as the theme from *Mission: Impossible* plays on the sound track. During a TV exercise show they storm the soundstage, mow down the lithe host and her students, and hoist a MUTANT ACTION banner for the camera.

Six features into his career, Iglesia may not be quite that angry anymore, and he celebrates beauty as well as ugliness, introducing Rafael's stable of sexually willing clerks in a series of gauzy slo-mo shots. But after the killing he sticks mostly with Rafael, the increasingly possessive Lourdes (whose family includes a horribly angry mother, a narcoleptic father, and a noxious eight-year-old daughter who claims to have AIDS), and a walleyed but diligent police detective (Enrique Villeri, an Iglesia regular), who slowly unravels Antonio's mysterious disappearance. By the end of the film, Rafael's trials have driven him to a bitter insight that may not be entirely credible coming from his lips but certainly reflects the director's resignation: "You're ugly, Lourdes," he shouts as the two wrestle on the floor. "It's not your fault, but it's not mine either. It's the world we live in that makes me hate you. People, magazines, TV. We're raised to, whether we like it or not."

El crimen perfecto is actually more pungent in its commentary than *Mutant Action* because of the cosmic joke visited on its protagonist. Early in the film, when Rafael is locked in a battle to outsell Antonio, he flatters an overweight middle-aged woman into buying a fur coat, but after her check bounces he cruelly berates her, finding exactly the right place to turn the knife. For his meanness he winds up in the romantic clutches of Lourdes, who uses Antonio's corpse as the ultimate charge card. By the time she surprises Rafael in a wedding gown, accompanied by the crew of a TV reality show, he's become something of a fur coat himself, a beauty accessory bought to prop up a seriously damaged ego. Only then does he seem to realize that he'd be better off like Antonio, literally hanging from a hook. ■

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