

Goya – or the Hard Way to Enlightenment

East Germany | 1971 | 136 minutes

Credits

Director	Konrad Wolf
Screenplay	Angel Vagenshtain, Konrad Wolf (novel by Lion Feuchtwanger)
Music	Werner Bergmann, Konstantin Ryzhov
Photography	Faradzh Karayev, Kara Karayev

Cast

Goya	Donatas Banionis
The Duchess of Alba	Olivera Katarina
Esteve	Fred Düren
Queen Maria Luisa	Tatyana Lolova

In Brief

As a painter in the court of King Carlos IV, Goya has attained wealth and reputation. He believes in King and Church, but also dearly loves the Spanish people, a combination that puts him in an awkward position. Based on the biography by Lion Feuchtwanger.



Goya, an East German bio-pic about the Spanish painter Francisco Goya y Lucientes, hits all the standard points of its genre: a portrait of the artist deep into his materials, a conflict with authority and/or a misunderstanding public, a love affair, and finally, an artistic struggle and epiphany accompanied by madness or affliction.

The film's secondary title, *The Hard Way to Enlightenment*, gives a fair idea of the treatment. Picking up in Goya's life when he has already gained considerable success in the court of King Carlos IV, and is deep into an affair with a beautiful duchess, the film portrays Goya's struggle to retain his position as the Court's First Painter amidst the turmoil not only of his personal life, but the complex culture as a whole. Looming over the considerable atmosphere of the film is the presence of the Holy Roman Church, its lethal arm the Inquisition, and the impending French Revolution.

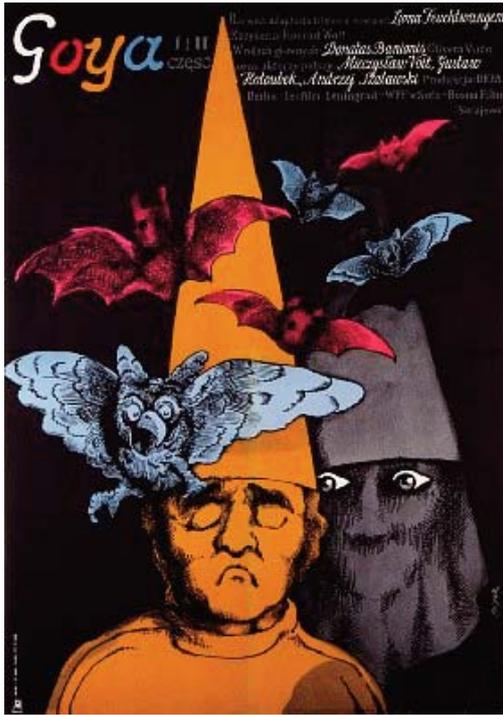
Lithuanian actor Donatas Banionis portrays Goya, and does a great job at projecting the kind of slovenly charisma of the artist at his earthiest. Puffy and unshaven, he's a drunken sexual scoundrel who, one moment, prowls manically around his sloppy studio, and next is seen in the royal palace, squeezed into his official livery, still looking dirty. At one point, he falls asleep in his paint-smear'd rags as a burning candle on his hat brim drips hot wax.

Covered in mounds of old candle wax, this greasy hat serves as perfect emblem for all the mad, mystical hours spent with paint. It's a romantic idea, to be sure, yet one with a fair amount of truth to it, if the paintings are any indication. As the film alternates between the cramped studio and the vast palace halls, Banionis embodies the artist's anxiety in both. Just as his Goya is down and dirty, he is also, like most Catholics then and now, haunted by guilt and highly superstitious. In 17th century Spain, these feelings were compounded tenfold by the threat of the Inquisition, where one's faith was literally a matter of life or death.

Visually, the film is most impressive in its depictions of the Holy Roman Church and the Inquisition. The gritty locations lend the Catholic pomp a kind of grim shabbiness, as when hooded penitents march over dirt roads in dreary processions with severe-faced cardinals in dusty Santa Claus robes. The conical dunce hats worn by suspected heretics are peculiarly creepy—somewhat similar, symbolically, to Nazi-enforced Star of David armbands, with that same sense of moral humiliation and shame.

The inquisition scenes themselves, but for a few random jump- and cross-cuts meant to build tension, otherwise plainly and powerfully depict the ugly, bogus legality of the whole enterprise, and how its hypocrisies compelled Goya to paint some of his strongest, and thus most dangerous, images. His highly-charged compositions of inquisition and torture victims, with their eerily murky expressions and extremely varied figural arrangements, are like the dream sketches of a court trial. In the film, they are enough to incite the interest of the Church, which, without condemning Goya outright, punishes him in a much more insidious manner. The paintings, too inflammatory to be shown, are to be locked up. The actor's expression as his paintings are carted away is perfectly bereft: Off go his children!

We not only get to see the impetus, as it were, of his Inquisition paintings, but his other masterpieces, as well. To become First Court Painter, he must prove himself with a royal family portrait, and so we see the inception of the famous Family of Carlos IV. The film's casting of the royal family is weirdly accurate. Tatyana Lolova, as Queen Maria Luisa, seems almost plucked from the paintings, with the same pinched, sourpuss face and deep close-set eyes that somehow convey the contrary impression of keen stupidity.



Carlos IV (Rolf Hoppe), historically mediocre, is here portrayed like a simple-minded farmer, ordering Goya to retrieve his toy boat before challenging him to a wrestling match. In fact, the film portrays the king's entire family as somewhat dim, spoiled inbreeds—royal hicks. In preparing the family for its portrait, Goya slyly manipulates them by first bunching them into one configuration, then having them rush across the room en masse for another, then back again.

Goya's intentions regarding the portrait have long remained in question: did he mean to satirize the family by making them look insipid and pale, or did he merely paint them as they were? In his excellent 2004 book *Goya*, art critic Robert Hughes downplays any seriously subversive intent on Goya's part, doubting whether the artist would jeopardize his livelihood, or his life, by toying with such an important commission. The film and its actors imply a more playfully sinister side, and it's easy to imagine the truth as somewhere in between.

The film is most melodramatic in its treatment of Goya's supposed affair with Maria Teresa Cayetana de Silva, the Duchess of Alba. By all historical accounts, the Duchess was worth the trouble. According to Hughes, she was one of the most beautiful women in Spain. Yet the true nature of Goya's relationship with the Duchess has remained historically uncertain, and the so-called affair was unlikely given Goya's social position, and the cultural realities of his time. While the film does well in re-creating these realities—the dank, shining stone streets of Madrid, the chaos and uncertainty of a society headed for revolution—in terms of Goya's sex life, it sticks to the long-held assumptions, playing the suspected Alba affair for all its worth.

The Duchess (Olivera Vugo) becomes Goya's witch and muse, blamed one moment for the death of his child, the next posing naked for what, only with the later completion of its clothed companion, could be called the Naked Maja (another legend discredited by Hughes). She cuckolds him, and he exacts revenge by painting an image of her treading over men like so much water. She slashes it, storms out—and next is shown tossing her black veil over his Virgin icon, a repeated signal for sex.

At times the film feels like a kind of *Goya in Love*, a romantic historical melodrama less about the artist and his art than the artist's illicit inspiration. Eventually, Alba's betrayals send Goya into a frenzy, allowing for a crazy dream sequence with inevitable jump cuts, angled shots, and visions of the demon figures from Goya's own *Caprichos*. So that's where they came from—Alba the Witch! She even seems to be the cause of his eventual deafness.

Yet despite its obvious dramatizations, the film deals well with Goya's physical affliction, which, ultimately, serves as his greatest asset. In a nice leisurely-paced sequence, Goya travels the countryside on a hired mule with a guide he calls Sancho Panza, extolling in voice-over the advantages, for a painter, of deafness, like how the eye is forced to see more in less time and deeper. This sequence is the last time the film has any real breathing space, for just as Goya's ears close up, the world implodes with revolution and war.

Baninois deserves a lot of credit for portraying not only a deaf man, but a man going deaf, an artist coming to terms with his deafness just as his culture becomes increasingly loud. For both actors and artists, eyes are everything, and Banionis is good enough an actor to recognize that any change in Goya's biology or psychology would be visible in his eyes.

At first his gaze, however accommodating of the material world, is almost entirely inward, the look of a libertine with a guilty conscience. Yet as he's continually drawn out by the Church's interrogations concerning his work, a new light enters his eyes. The less he hears, the more he sees, is able to see. Ultimately, as Goya's deafness increases, this gaze is forced outward enough to allow for the empathy required for, and so evident in, the *Caprichos* and *Disasters of War* series', works which, tragically and inevitably, lead to a lot of trouble.

By the film's end, he is secreted away in his home, rushing with his brushes from wall to wall, fusing an inward and outward vision into those private hells that resonate universally, the so-called Black Paintings. So in his own way, the artist always wins. Just to drive the point home, the film ends with a close-up on the Inquisitor's face, banishing Goya to eternal oblivion, until the painter's name fills the screen like so much red paint.

Whether the film is historically accurate is beside the point. In reality, it seems a painter's life is a day-to-day struggle with materials, which doesn't always make for great viewing. So artist bio-pics are forced to follow the pattern of Incident produces Inspiration begets Masterpiece and Madness. It's what is done with this equation that makes all the difference and, ultimately, Goya adds up to a pretty impressive spectacle. For the pomp, I recommend it. For the circumstances, read Robert Hughes.

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