

**“¡Cuba Sí, Macho No! Persecution of Gays in a Leftist Land
By Richard Goldstein (The Village Voice, July 24, 1984)**

Improper Conduct, the new film by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, is unlikely to usurp the box-office hegemony of Gremlins and Ghostbusters, but its impact within certain circles has been immense. Intentionally or not, it pits political progressives and gay liberationists against each other. The issue is sexual politics, and the battleground is Cuba.

Are homosexuals treated so differently in Cuba from the way they are in the United States?, a skeptical progressive at the media screening of *Improper Conduct* wanted to know. Before the filmmakers could respond, a man rose from the audience. “I am a Cuban homosexual,” he declared. “In Cuba, I cannot say it publicly. That is the difference.”



Marielitos in Florida: huddled “missies” yearning to breathe free

For gay Latinos and Latinas—that most silent minority—*Improper Conduct* is the cinematic equivalent of a thunderclap. It proclaims not only the existence of a Hispanic gay community, but its systematic persecution in a society once regarded as the great hope of humanistic socialism. From 1965 to 1967, the Cuban government engaged in what can only be called an antigay pogrom. While we were dancing around with flowers in our hair, they were rounding up *locas*—loosely, “queens”—for confinement in labor camps, alongside drug users, religious sectarians (especially Jehovah’s Witnesses), hippies, and artists suspected of subversive activities. The camps, known euphemistically as Military Units to

Augment Production (UMAP), were supposed to rehabilitate their inmates, whose offenses could be summed up in the phrase from the Cuban penal code from which this film gets its name. Long hair, makeup, public lasciviousness—for men, this constituted “improper conduct,” a punishable offense.

It was a time of crisis in Cuban life, following hard on the Bay of Pigs invasion and a destabilization campaign by the CIA whose details—from the little we know about them—seem brutally surreal. And it lasted only two years. But even after Castro closed the UMAP camps in 1967 (following protests in Western Europe and in Cuba itself), the policy of incarcerating gays persisted. Discrimination was officially sanctioned by the National Congress on Education and Culture, which called in 1971 for the expulsion of “notorious” homosexuals from education and the arts. Open gays were purged from Cuban culture, where they had previously played a pervasive role. They were expelled from the universities and drummed out of the Party, since, as Fidel himself had declared (in a 1965 interview), “a deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant communist should be.”

Cuba’s obsession with homosexuality has haunted American progressives; gay and straight, ever since veterans of the Venceremos Brigade discovered that, though they were free to pick sugar cane, they were expected to remain silent about repression. So persistent were the entreaties of gay radicals that, in 1972, the brigade issued a directive calling homosexuality “a pathology which reflects leftover bourgeois decadence” and requiring Brigadistas to refrain from “imposing North American gay culture on the Cubans.”

These chestnuts are preserved in Allen Young’s book, *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution*, which may well have served as a blueprint for *Improper Conduct* (though it’s nowhere credited). Young was a gay Brigadista who started out “a full-fledged Cubaphile,” thrilled to be seen wearing the military uniform he’d received as a gift. He became estranged from Marxism in the process of coming out. The liberationist politics he’s embraced has its limitations, but it’s been invaluable in keeping alive the debate over Cuba’s values that has raged for nearly a decade in the radical American press. From *Jump Cut to Win*, leftists have painfully weighed the persecution of homosexuals against the evils of cultural imperialism, the latter offered—it so often is—as a smokescreen for any third world policy that looks barbaric to Western eyes.

But in 1980, the question of cultural imperialism became academic. That year, between 10,000 and 20,000 homosexuals left Cuba for these shores. Perhaps 15 per cent of those who took part in the Mariel flotilla were gay—the first time homosexuals as a self-conscious group chose emigration to achieve personal freedom. They were received ambivalently; most still live on permanent parole, since no acknowledged homosexual may be granted resident status or become an American citizen. But the fiercely articulated testimony of so many gay Cubans has made what was once an arcane dispute on the left into front-page news.

Improper Conduct is bound to do even more than that, for it presents the persecution of Cuba’s homosexuals as an emblem of communism’s failure. It’s an unprecedented emblem, one the contras of Miami would never have chosen to represent their fate. The last time the good citizens of Little Havana were asked to express themselves on the issue of gay rights, they backed Anita Bryant to the hilt. There are plenty of Cubans in this country who will allow that Castro did one good thing: he got rid of the homosexuals.

But *Improper Conduct* isn't meant to stir a right-wing audience. It is aimed at progressives, and it makes its case in terms no humanist can dismiss. We've been educated by our own gay rights movement, and by historic connections between that movement and the European left, to regard homosexuals as members of the noble fraternity of pariah groups. "There are no Jews in Cuba, but there are homosexuals," Sartre once observed, and we understand exactly the signal he is sending. We have come to judge the worth of democratic societies by the fate of their minorities.

It's a fair standard, and the basis of my own understanding of what it means to be gay. Despite Norman Podhoretz's contention that sexual deviance is a marker for political subversion (we're just so many swishing saboteurs to him), homosexuality has tempered my politics and altered my allegiances on the left. I began this piece with the image of a Cuban homosexual standing up to declare himself a symbol of the distinction between free and repressed societies because I feel myself implicated in that moment, much as I felt involved in this film.

Improper Conduct arouses that empathy the way left-wing documentaries always have. It personalizes history—even at the expense of objectivity—by heightening identification between the viewer and the victims of oppression. Almendros and Leal use this tradition to mount a critique of the left. Their film consists, for the most part, of passionate personal testimonies, warmly lit and intimately framed. The Sorrow and the Pity springs to mind, but *Improper Conduct* aspires to be something else. Ophüls's film examines the impact of occupation on an entire French community; its moral dilemma involves the response of individuals to a repression visited on everyone. But *Improper Conduct* shows us people singled out by the state because elements of their identity are regarded *prima facie* as dangerous.

You can dismiss some of the suffering the film brings before us as the crocodile tears of a disenfranchised bourgeoisie; you can argue that some of these people were counterrevolutionaries, even CIA agents; but the evidence of persecution adds up to something damning because you can sense its systematic nature. For all that homosexuals have suffered on the silver screen, *Improper Conduct* is the first film to present gay people as social victims. For that reason, it's a giant step toward our legitimization.

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But there's another agenda in this film, perhaps more central than its liberationist aims and surely more problematic. That agenda involves the delegitimization of the present Cuban government, a prospect we may well be forced to contend with if Reagan is reelected. To progressives in North America, who might be expected to oppose any overt or covert assault on the Cuban state, a film like *Improper Conduct* could be a powerful deterrent. It makes personal and "progressive" what right-wingers always say about Communist societies: that in the name of social justice, individual freedom ceases to exist. What right-wingers choose to ignore is the effect of this constriction on sexual identity. For Almendros and Leal, the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba is as significant as the suppression of Solidarity in Poland, and as revealing of communism's monolithic face.

They offer us a politics of homophobia in which militarism is the prime mover, and they identify its emergence in Cuba as the cause of unremitting enmity between the government and its gay citizens. "I think we're seeing an evolution in Communist culture toward a military ideal," says Susan Sontag, in an interview that ties this film to its ideological moorings. "If homosexuals in such countries are identified with women, i.e., as weak elements, and the country's ideology is focused on strength, and strength is

associated with virility, then male homosexuals are viewed as a subversive element.” (Pace, Mr. Podhoretz.)

It’s an elegant explanation, but like most temptations of the flesh, it reduces the complexity of a cultural response to fantasy. The fantasy here is that there is a single explanation for homophobia, a unified field theory that will unravel the mystery of what is—like sexism itself—a phenomenon with divergent and contradictory roots. Any society straining to unify its people behind a single standard of behavior or system of belief will soon become obsessed with sexual heresies, not to mention political or religious ones. That doesn’t mean every authoritarian culture is homophobic or every homophobic culture authoritarian. The mechanisms of repression vary from society to society, and depend as much on cultural tradition as on political exigency. The “militarization of culture” in the Philippines has not produced the response it did in Cuba; gay life flourishes in Manila, and, for that matter, it survives unmolested in Johannesburg, where the traditions of Western democracy are applied quite selectively.

Perhaps Sontag would explain away these exceptions to her rule by invoking the odious distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian states. But what about East Germany, an orthodox Communist society where gay bars operate freely and sodomy laws were stricken from the books in 1968? Why are there no camps for homosexuals in Nicaragua? When Almendros was asked this question by the *New York Native*, he replied, in high Cuban style, that the Sandinistas “can’t go as fast as Cuba did because they don’t have men in power as smart as Castro.”

This is not to deny the trend toward sexual pluralism in capitalist societies or the tradition of compulsory heterosexuality in Communist states. It is only to insist that change is possible in either case, that homophobia is a dynamic element in many political systems, that democrats as well as dictators may be guilty of harboring murderous intentions toward queers. We would do well to remember the sex-panic of the ‘50s, when several thousand gay Americans were purged from the civil service. There were no labor camps, but tens of thousands served time for improper conduct, American style. Much has changed, to be sure; but not irrevocably. This nation, which holds out such potential for personal freedom, also harbors a passion for control.

In the West, gay people typically find themselves torn between contradictory perceptions: they are simultaneously regarded as a sort of ethnic group, with fundamental rights of privacy and association, and as a renegade element that threatens the family and state. In Communist cultures, where the well-run state and the stable family have historically been synonymous with human rights, the idea of a tension between sexual and social imperatives seems subversive, alien. For Sontag, such cultural conditioning is beside the point. Ideology makes the state, and Marxist ideology is puritanical at the core. “I think one of the left’s weaknesses has been a difficulty in dealing with questions bearing on the moral and political aspects of sex,” she tells Almendros and Leal. “It’s a heritage, in a way, a ‘puritan’ one, that is deeply imbedded in the morals of the left. The discovery that homosexuals were being persecuted in Cuba shows, I think, how much the left needs to evolve.”

The left, the right, and the center, anyone who’s openly gay in America might observe. But Sontag has a specific ideological target in mind, and an agenda that must be met even at the expense of history. In fact, the gay rights movement is part of the legacy of left-wing politics. German Marxists of the early 20th century were the first to demand legislation to redress gay oppression. The founder of America’s first gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society, was a member of the Communist Party named Harry Hay.

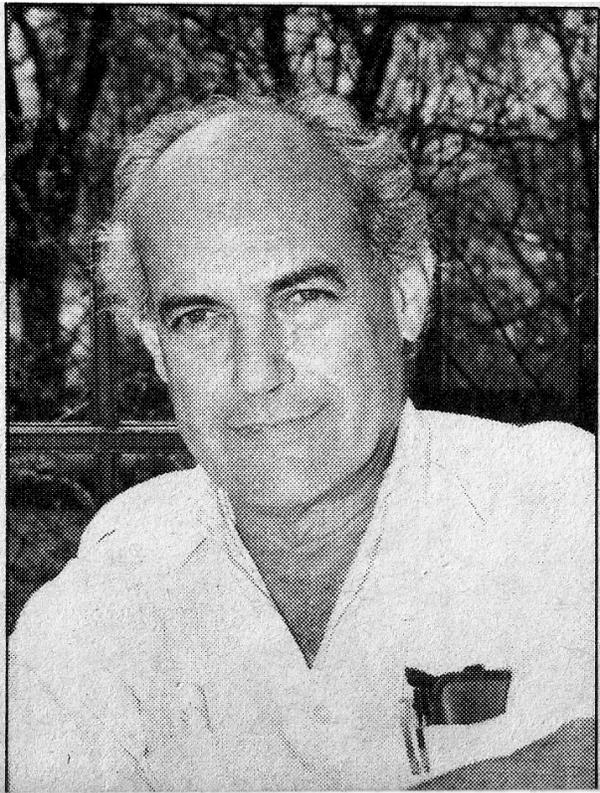
To acknowledge that this liberationist tradition did not become ingrained in “scientific socialism” is one thing. One can trace the Communist rationale for homophobia back to Stalinist slanders about “the fascist perversion” and even further back to utterly loony assertions by old man Marx himself about “men of the rear” usurping power from “we men of the front end.” (Marx was referring obliquely to certain socialists of his time who were heterodox—and gay.) But to insist that the left is inherently, immutably homophobic is to sacrifice reality to realpolitic.

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Is there another, less serviceable explanation for Cuba’s antigay pogrom? Why did Castro choose the Bulgarian solution of concentration camps and not the East German model of official tolerance? Several explanations have been advanced by defenders of the revolution who, while not seeking to excuse the UMAP camps, do attempt to place what happened during those years in the context of traditional Cuban culture. B. Ruby Rich, a film scholar who has traveled to Havana twice, points to the distinction in Caribbean societies between “private (expressive) and public (repressive) space.” The former, she argues, is broader and more permissive than in the United States, while the latter is narrower and more rigid. After the Bay of Pigs, Rich contends, the old system of “*se dice nada, se hace todo*” (“say nothing, do everything”) broke down. “In this climate of postinvasion paranoia, private space was invaded as never before.”



RED W. McDARRAH



NET ROBERTS

Nestor Almendros (left), Tomas Gutierrez Alea (right)

But Rich goes further to suggest a material basis for the persecution of homosexuals. In a monograph with Lourdes Arguelles, published this summer in the feminist journal *Signs*, she asserts that the CIA actively tried to organize a fifth column within the mob-dominated gay underground of Havana. “Young

homosexuals seeking contact with 'the community' in the bars and famous cruising areas of La Rampa were thus introduced to a counterrevolutionary ideology and practice.... " After the 1961 invasion, "realistic fears gave rise to paranoia, and (as in the McCarthy years here) anyone who was 'different' fell under suspicion. Homosexual bars and cruising areas were perceived, in some cases correctly, as centers of counterrevolutionary activities and began to be systematically treated as such."

This begins to sound like the, language conservative revisionists resort to when justifying the excesses of the McCarthy years: we really were confronted by an international Communist conspiracy, some of the people we ruined really were traitors, and in any case, those willing to forgo their association with the left were safe. Rich is on firmer ground when she describes the dolce vita of old Havana. Her observations are a devastating critique of everything we've read and heard. Here, for example, is Allen Young's apotheosis of those days: "There were the prostitutes, both male and female, flourishing their licenses, government-issued and carefully administered.... It was not unusual to be approached at gangplank by a young, sultry Latin whispering, '*Exhibicione! Exhibicione?* Ah, yes! Those were the dear gone days of 'Superman,' who gave several nightly exhibitions, 100 per cent sexual.... Prior to his 'mounting,' he would strut around the room allowing his audience to touch him—for a fee. 11 July, Cuba had a roaring economy in those days."

In speaking of that picturesque milieu, Rich notes: "This sector was mostly controlled by American organized crime and members of an indigenous bourgeoisie directly linked to Batista's political apparatus. It employed more than two hundred thousand workers.... If legal sanctions and official harassment were rare, this tolerance was due less to social acceptance than to overriding considerations of profit and the economic interests of the underworld.... "

Rich hasn't hesitated to make her sexual politics known to the Cubans. On her most recent trip to Havana to participate in a Latin American film festival last December, she delivered a paper called "The Aesthetics of Self-Determination," which focused on North American gay cinema. The festival had already refused to screen a documentary about gay life in North America, and her frankly progay stance drew an ambivalent response. "The embarrassment was evident," another critic who attended the festival recalls; several delegates walked out and there was no discussion afterward. (On the other hand, the Cuban press reported the speech.)

But in this country, Rich has chosen to place her solidarity with the Cuban revolution above gay politics. She asserts that many homosexuals who remain in Cuba have chosen patria over personal identity. "The revolution might not speak to the homosexual in them," Rich writes, "but it continued to address other vital aspects of their being. They, in response, put the revolution—and Cuba—first, and put off sexual politics until later."

Were Americans asked to defer their sexuality on patriotic grounds, progressives like Rich would be among the first to point out that such choices are painful and unnecessary; one can be a loyalist and a liberationist. But in a revolutionary society, Rich seems to say, the closet is an honorable retreat. "The absence of a gay public space [in Cuba today] means there are no lesbian or gay bars; yet there is a flourishing homosexual social scene.... This rich 'salon' society is particularly well suited to the expansive private sphere required by homosexuals...Some, such as Jorge, an artist, even contend that 'for all the repression, there is more true sexuality for gays in Cuba.' "

Sex in the shadows may, indeed, be hot; but life in the shadows is something else again. Rich acknowledges the problem without advancing its solution. It takes a lapsed Marxist like Young to state in no uncertain terms that “Cuba denies its gay citizens the freedom of association and community.” Therein, camps or no, lies its ongoing shame.

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So far, the Cuban government has offered only the most oblique response to *Improper Conduct*. Referring to “the incredible charge that the Cuban government represses homosexuals,” *Granma*, the Communist Party newspaper, remarked on June 11, “the lies are so grotesque that decorum prevents us from accepting that they be debated.”

But the allegations continue to sully Cuba’s reputation, especially in cultural circles. Just last week, Armando Hart, Cuba’s minister of culture, was confronted by a French journalist who had come to Havana for a festival of the visual arts. Hart reacted with consternation when asked how Cubans feel today about the era of UMAP camps. According to one writer who was present, he replied that Cuba’s enemies focus on “individual cases” in order to avoid acknowledging the revolution’s cultural achievements: its museums and galleries, its publishing and literacy campaigns. Hart said homosexuality was a social issue, not a political one; and he insisted that official discrimination did not exist in Cuba today.

So the silence persists, with *Granma* asserting that “the writers and artists of this country are not prepared to become ensnared in a gross controversy promoted and encouraged by the United States.” But last month, Cuba’s greatest resident filmmaker, Tomas Gutierrez Alea, was passing through New York, and we asked for his response. Alea’s most renowned film, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, poses some of the same questions that *Improper Conduct* does about individual alienation in a revolutionary society. For Alea, such alienation is at heart an aspect of class privilege, but at least he acknowledges the tension between self-consciousness and social solidarity.

Alea is hardly a surrogate for Fidel Castro. In agreeing to answer questions about *Improper Conduct*, he may have been taking a risk, professionally and personally. The personal seemed to weigh on his mind as he approached the tape recorder. Almendros had been a friend in Cuba; now they are politically estranged. And Alea has a daughter living in exile in New York. We watch him reenter that broken circle in order to comprehend the pain that persists in Cuban intellectual life.

“I can tell you, honestly, I think this is a very superficial film,” Alea began. “It is a type of propaganda based on testimonies that might be proven to a point. I can make maybe 10 or 20 films like that, but if you don’t put them in a context, you are distorting reality because reality is much more complex.”

The context in which Alea placed Cuba’s antigay pogrom is a cultural one. He spoke of a historical tradition that predates the revolution by many centuries and has hardly been budged by it. “Cuba is a Catholic, traditional culture, still. You know, the Inquisition was very soft in Cuba. Only about six people were murdered, and you know why? Not because they were witches, but because they were homosexuals.”

Alea acknowledges that, at a certain point, the Cuban revolution “exploded as a reaction against homosexuals, very hard.” But he insists, “At this moment, there is no official repression. You don’t have to be a heterosexual to represent the country, to be an intellectual, to have public recognition. There is

discrimination, and it can be very hard, but that is something you can fight against.” Alea claims he did fight, along with other revolutionary loyalists, against the UMAP camps of the ’60s and the antigay purges of the early ’70s. “We fought against that and it Boas overcame. And I feel it is ridiculous to come now with this film when the things it shows occurred 15 years ago.”

Why then, I asked, did so many gay people elect to leave in 1980, after the worst excesses of homophobia had supposedly been laid to rest? There are other Catholic cultures in the Caribbean, I pointed out, where homosexuals are evidently content to remain. Alea replied by citing special immigration waivers designed to encourage immigration from Cuba. “If the United States said that to other countries, even developed countries such as Italy, they would empty them.” As for Latin America, “It would not exist any more. It would be a desert.”

“This is a very rich country, very, very rich really. You show your wealth in your films, and they are everywhere. So the image of the United States is paradise for many people. In Cuba, it is difficult to resist, because we are very poor. Really very poor.” For gay people, Alea suggests, the temptation to emigrate was especially strong because “there is a cultural situation that makes things difficult. It is not an official tenet, but many people discriminate against them. They hear there is, in San Francisco, a whole neighborhood of homosexuals, so they feel this is paradise for them.”

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I wondered what Alea would make of the Marielito my lover and his roommates sponsored so he could be released from an internment camp in Florida. He called himself a “missy,” and there was no doubt about it. His sexuality transcended any distinction between public and private space; like the star of *La Cage aux Folles*, he was what he was. But he certainly was a Cuban, given to bouts of romantic melancholy and confusion about his reasons for being here. He was more than a little baffled by American gay life, with its lack of polarities. When his friends came to our parties, they didn’t know who to pick up: there were no machos or missies, and every butch threatened to become a femme.

He would pore over gay newspapers and magazines, not just to eyeball the hunks, but to gaze at treatises about gay rights, at pictures of Young Gay Professionals, at the very word “gay.” He would point it out in an article, and we would have to translate the whole thing, along with the day’s Bloomie’s ads. There was more than material lust behind this little ritual; there was something any American could respond to—an incarnation of the old rhetoric about huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I have not forgotten that rhetoric, and so I found myself engaged in a kind of futile debate with Alea, in which neither side seemed capable of conceding—or entirely denying—the other’s rectitude.

“You are judging us from here,” he said, “but you have to judge us in relation to other Latin American countries. I don’t want to talk like a propagandist, but these things are obvious. We have no problem of children without shoes, we have no problem of hungry people, we have no problem of education or health. And it is ridiculous to look at the problem of homosexuals, which I feel is a problem you have to fight against, and to put that in the first place. Because the first right you have to fight for is to exist.”

Why does it always seem that there are trade-offs between economic justice and personal freedom in a revolutionary society, I asked? Why can’t they co-exist?

“But I think there is another aspect to the problem that we cannot forget. We are militarized, I should say we would like to be, 100 per cent. Why? Nobody wants to be military, nobody wants to have that discipline, but we have no choice. If we did not militarize, you would swallow us in two or three hours.”

But this rationale is one any nation could use, and many have, to justify the worst barbarities. I suggest we look at the fate of homosexuals in Cuba as a symbol of what can happen to any alienated group in a revolutionary society.

“It is a symbol, but it is not the first issue. First you have to exist, and for that, you have to fight. In the middle of a battle, you cannot discuss aesthetics or homosexuality or anything. You have to pick up the gun and receive orders. It’s alienating to everything you want, but at certain moments, you have to eliminate one part of yourself to overcome a situation that is more important.”

Some things are inalienable.

“Yes, we can discuss that, but I think it is important to understand that we are threatened every day. And in this situation, our revolution is a miracle.”

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Alea was speaking as a Marxist in the strongbox of international capitalism, a Cuban in the North American sphere of influence, a man who feared and probably envied the power of that empire. But there was a sense in which I feared and envied his power—as a heterosexual. This mutual perception of disadvantage gave us a kind of equity, but it didn’t help us understand each other’s priorities. For Alea, sexual freedom is a secondary issue, something that must bow to the need for material security. But for me, as a homosexual, sexual freedom is material security since it is the key to living an unencumbered life.

The fate of Cuba’s gay people—those who remain behind and those who might wish to return—is mired in that same perception gap. It is not just a cultural problem or an ideological one, but a political issue that can only be resolved, as part of a general settlement with the United States. Pvo decades of ostracism have taken their toll on Cuba. Defensive macho—with its cornered response to homosexuality—may have less to do with any 400- year-old tradition than with the anguish of contemporary politics. Improper Conduct hardly promotes the process of normalization that must accompany any meaningful critique. On the contrary, it feeds our most bellicose intentions and inflames the paranoia that prevents Cuba from coming to terms with its past and risking change.