

FILM

Macho Men

By J. Hoberman

IMPROPER CONDUCT. Written and directed by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal. Produced by Margaret Menegoz, Barbet Schroeder, and Michel Thoulouze for Les Films du Louange and Antenne 2. At the 57th Street Playhouse, April 11 and 12.

GESTURES AND FRAGMENTS. A film by Alberto Seixas Santos. Produced by Grupo Zero. At the Public Theater, April 14.

TORTURED DUST. A film by Stan Brakhage. At the Collective for Living Cinema, April 13.

When it comes to Cuba there seems to be no middle ground. The island is either a social paradise or hell on earth. *Improper Conduct*, which closes out this year's "New Directors" (and has proved the series' hottest ticket) takes the latter position with a vengeance. Made by two Cuban exiles—the world-famous cinematographer Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal (co-director of *El Super*)—the film has neither a word to say in favor of the revolution nor any comment on the conditions that inspired it; *Seeing Red* notwithstanding, *Improper Conduct* could be the most contested political documentary of the year.

Among the many brilliant observations made by Hugh Thomas in his monumental history *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* is a characterization of the Cuban Revolution as "perhaps more menacing to North than to South America, for it was to begin with a reproach to the greed of affluence and the standards of North America." For some American leftists, support for Cuba is an article of faith; in their eyes, Cuba has a significance similar to that of Israel for many American Jews. It's a country whose mere existence demonstrates that miracles can happen. If nothing else, Cuba shows that a revolutionary regime can be sustained under the very beak of the American eagle, and consequently almost anything can be rationalized in its name.

Improper Conduct, among other things, proves that documentaries needn't look raw. The film is beautifully shot, exquisitely lit, and sensitively miked. The images of Marielito kids lounging around Miami Beach are as glamorous as any out of *Pauline à la Plage*, but make no mistake, *Improper Conduct* is strong stuff. Keeping the Israel analogy, it could be subtitled after Edward Said, "Castroism from the Standpoint of Its Victims"—the victims, in this case, being hippies, ultraleftists, former Fidelistas, dissident writers, and others accused of "improper conduct," most importantly, homosexuals. The film's all-exile cast is made up mainly of writers—Reinaldo Arenas, Herberto Padilla, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Carlos Franqui, Armando Valladares, Ana Maria Simo, René Ariza—with one ex-deputy minister and a female impersonator for good measure. Everyone is extremely articulate in describing their experiences of the notorious UMAP forced labor camps, explaining the humiliating protocols of impersonation, or condemning the enforcement system of block associations known as Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.

Damning as much of it is, you don't have to be an apologist for Castro to realize that the deck is stacked. The filmmakers' Cuba exists in a virtual vacuum; the only historical cross-reference interviewer Jiménez-Leal will permit is Nazi Germany. The interviewees in *Improper Conduct* are overwhelmingly white and middle class—one reason, perhaps, that the movie can so handily ignore whatever advances Cuba has made in social equality since the revolution. (The charge of continuing racism would be more con-



No Middle Ground: Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal

vincing, for example, if it came from a black Cuban.) Further, there is a difference between Herberto Padilla, who was imprisoned for writing a poem, and Armando Valladares, who was imprisoned for his role in the Batista regime and subsequent counterrevolutionary activities. And there is a difference between the critiques of former Fidelistas and the exaggerations of a onetime tourguide. (There may well be "model" factories and farms created especially for visiting foreigners, but it simply isn't true that once you stray from the prescribed tourist route—which in my experience didn't exist—you discover that Havana is "a horror." The city is poor, but it's not the South Bronx.)

Almendros and Jiménez-Leal homogenize all points of view, and many statements are unfortunately abbreviated. Thus, a sensational account of the "new prostitution"—restricted to members of the diplomatic corps and visiting VIPs—is cut short, as is a description of those mysterious free-lancers who can be had by tourists for two packs of cigarettes. Similarly, when Susan Sontag (interviewed with a copy of Gramsci ostensibly protruding from her bookcase) decries "the evolution of Communist culture towards a military ideal," you don't get a chance to find out if she's going to make the obvious point that Cuba, like Israel, has legitimate reasons to mistrust its neighbor(s).

Improper Conduct's strongest point is Cuba's barbaic persecution of homosexuals. But even this is more complicated than the film lets on. According to an article on Cuban homophobia in the forthcoming issue of the feminist journal *Signs*, "The CIA targeted the homosexual intelligentsia and worked to persuade its members to defect, promising generous academic grants and publishing contracts. The more cost-effective ploy of blackmail was also used.... Carlos Alberto Montaner, a Madrid-based anti-Castro writer, for example, published two full pages listing names of homosexuals inside Cuba in an attempt to discredit them and to encourage them to migrate." Cuban homophobia was not created by the Fidelistas however much, in their revolutionary puritanism, they have exploited it. The Cuban problem with homosexuality is not something the film is inclined to go deeply into (much as it might figure into a Freudian theory of Cuban paranoia). Still, it's something that gets unconsciously reproduced, as various exiles announce with satisfaction that "many Cuban leaders are mainly homosexuals, especially the police."

Calling the cops *maricones* seems a du-

bious way to discredit the regime. Similarly, when Fidel is shown playing basketball with a group of women or described touring a UMAP camp like "a grand duchess inspecting her serfs," it's less an attack on his politics than a voodoo assault on his *cojones*. Thomas calls Cuba "a country where politics, magic, and religion are neighboring provinces, sometimes without boundary lines," and inasmuch as Almendros and Jiménez-Leal opt for ahistoricity, *Improper Conduct* is a work which blurs the boundaries yet again.

Speaking of revolutions, it was 10 years ago this month that the Portuguese army overthrew the moribund dictatorship that had ruled that country since 1928. This "Revolution of the Red Carnations" is the subject of Alberto Seixas Santos's *Gestures and Fragments*, screening Saturday as part of a Portuguese mini-series at the Public Theater. Puzzling over the contradictions of a revolution made by the army, Seixas Santos juxtaposes documentary interviews with staged scenes. Historian Eduardo Lourenço reads from his book *The Military and the Power*; Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, the leftist major who masterminded the revolution (then found himself accused of participating in an abortive coup a year later), gives his account of events; while American filmmaker Robert Kramer plays a kind of dogged investigative journalist, trying and failing to put the story together. The film's method has been compared to that of Dusan Makavejev but is actually closer to the dourly abstract universe of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Neutral landscapes are punctuated by bits of Beethoven; each new set-up is given enormous importance; and dramatic interest is regularly sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.

Also included in the Public's "Discovering Portuguese Cinema" are the 1982 *Ana*, a poetic treatment of childhood by António Reis and Margarida Cordeiro; João César Monteiro's 1981 *Silvestre*, which stages two traditional folktales in the stylized manner of Eric Rohmer's *Perceba*; and Paulo Rocha's *Island of Love*, concerning a Portuguese poet-diplomat in late 19th century Japan. João Botelho's *Conversa Acabada* (1981) has the best word of mouth—it's the story of two poets in fin-de-siècle Paris, making elaborate use of Syberberg-style rear screen projection. In addition, the series includes four "classic" Portuguese films from the '30s and '40s, three by the redoubtable José Leitão de Barros and one starring Amália Rodrigues, the greatest

fado singer in Portugal until the revolution of the white sportscoat and the pink carnation.

Tortured Dust brings to a close the monumental work Stan Brakhage began 17 years ago. By calling it the final chapter of *The Book of the Film*, Brakhage conjures up a single, nine-and-a-half-hour metamovie which not only subsumes his *Scenes from Under Childhood*, but all eight parts of the autobiographical *Sincerity & Duplicity*, and half a dozen other films as well. Brakhage's solipsism is a given, but despite flashbacks to his youth (and detours through his dreams), this epic is the story of his family—the filmmaker, his wife, and their children as he perceived their lives in the Colorado woods.

That *Tortured Dust* is beautiful goes without saying. Brakhage observes his family in Jan Steen groupings or focuses on individuals in hazy cameos. Alternately faded and pastel or darkly chiaroscuro, his images are characterized by a pervasive sense of distance. Although the Brakhage family had surely long since learned to ignore their resident Boswell as he filmed them, one is haunted by the studied impassivity on their faces. To a certain degree *Tortured Dust* seems to be about father as outsider. Everything is mediated by windows, mirrors, or frames within the frames. Brakhage uses plastic window insulation to create a kind of shadow play while house plants become a natural mask, with the householder peering out from behind the foliage.

Tortured Dust is dedicated to Marguerite Young—an artist with whom Brakhage might well identify. (She is, he has said, the only living writer "who seeks to extend the realm" of James Joyce, "a statement that applies to his own stream-of-consciousness methodology as well.) The film takes its title from Young's *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling*: "Why should she give birth, though she had worked in a pottery, to an urn, to a stone angel, to the face of a cracked sundial? Why should she be, she screamed, this tortured dust?"

Divided into four parts, all of them set in and around the Brakhage family cabin, *Tortured Dust*'s 90 minutes focus mainly on Brakhage's two teenage sons, providing the proceedings with a backbeat of macho anxiety. The opening movement introduces the major imagery, not all of it subtle. (Domestic animals and a bird cage figure as prominent visual metaphors.) In the second, Brakhage introduces himself as the bemused filmmaker-spectator. In the third—and for me, most confusing—section, he appears to resign himself to surrendering control over the family he's been documenting. His sons are shown sleeping, inhabiting a realm where he can't follow, while, in what looks like re-filmed home-movies, one of his daughters seems to be getting married. The fourth makes this clear: Brakhage celebrates the visit of his first grandchild by intercutting the baby's image with a long burst of color strobes. Perhaps meant to be ecstatic, the final section is rather jarringly mawkish. When Brakhage premiered the final sections of *Sincerity & Duplicity* at the Collective three years ago, he remarked that they were "what home movies could be if all sentimentality were stripped from them." Grandpaternal feelings notwithstanding, it's rather anticlimactic when, after 17 years, sentimentality creeps back in.

The death of Hollis Frampton at age 48, of cancer, last week deprived American film culture of one of its most energetic theorists and practitioners. Frampton leaves an oeuvre which has yet to be assimilated and a reputation which will surely grow more distinguished. Endlessly prolific, he is said to have completed some 60 films before his untimely death. To mention only two: *Palindrome* and *Poetic Justice* are films I saw as an undergraduate, and they altered the way I have looked at movies ever since.