

Point of View

Improper Conduct

Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal

The makers of a documentary on Cuba charge that the film's attackers aren't playing fair.

Last February in Paris, we had the first screening of a work print of *Improper Conduct*. Among the many guests who attended was Jorge Semprun, screenwriter of Constantin Costa-Gavras's *Z* and Alain Resnais's *La Guerre est finie*. Semprun, who had been a Communist Party activist since his early youth, until he renounced just a few years ago, made a comment of particular interest: "This is a tough cookie. I'll bet you that they [meaning Communists and friends] will not utter a word." Semprun continued predicting: "... unless your film makes a lot of noise, in which case they will launch a campaign of disinformation through party members or through sympathizers, professional or innocent. ..."

Well, *Improper Conduct* opened in Paris last March with impressive full-page reviews in every major newspaper there from the independent leftist *Liberation* to the traditional conservative *Le Figaro*. Only *L'Humanité* (the French Communist Party paper) ignored it—not one line, not one word. The first part of Semprun's prophecy came true. Our film was then invited to international film festivals and won several awards, the Human Rights Grand Prix in Strasbourg being the dearest to us.

Shortly thereafter, a one-hour television version of *Improper Conduct* was aired by our coproducer Antenne 2 in France, on May 24. It was seen by almost two million French television viewers, the highest rating yet for a documentary program. The popularity of the telecast must have made someone nervous up there at the Central Committee, because the second phase of Semprun's prophecy is already coming to pass.

The silence was first broken on the occasion of the New York "New Directors/New Films" opening: J. Hoberman's review in the *Village Voice*, then the attack



Marielito refugee Luis Lazo, from *Improper Conduct*.

by B. Ruby Rich in *American Film*, proved that our film has made enough of an impact prior to national release to elicit their response. Cervantes wrote: "Sancho, they bark at us because we are galloping."

Ms. Rich's piece contains exactly four lines of actual film criticism. The rest is redundant political rhetoric. That is why we are forced to respond in political terms, unfortunate and inappropriate for a film magazine. *Improper Conduct* was not modeled on Leni Riefenstahl and her "stirring montage" technique. Our film is precisely antimontage. In other words, we reject the Pudovkin-Balász school and are closer to that of Jean Rouch or Marcel Ophüls. In fact, *Improper Conduct* mocks old-fashioned political cinema by including an excerpt of a recent Cuban documentary on the Peruvian embassy affair with lots of stirring montage effects, musical tremolos, and exclamatory titles.

The defamatory piece by B. Ruby Rich, run under the offensive title "Bay of Pix," is notable for its hysteria, deliberate misinformation, and innumerable falsehoods.

Here is our response, step by step.

Ms. Rich starts by reproaching us for having arranged private screenings of *Improper Conduct* for Mayor Ed Koch and William F. Buckley, Jr. We did indeed comply with their requests for screenings, as we have done with many others, including a Cuban government representative, director T. Gutiérrez Alea. Aren't films made to be seen by as many people as possible? In fact, were we allowed to do so, we would be delighted to arrange screenings of our film throughout the island of Cuba and even for the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party.

At least Ms. Rich admits that the UMAP concentration camps that existed in the mid-sixties in Cuba were a "misguided, brutal, and deplorable chapter of Cuba's history." To acknowledge past "mistakes" is a well-known, timeworn technique used to create the illusion of a "new fairness" and to validate and reaffirm the more recent assertion that "things have certainly changed for homosexuals." She also admits that the 1980 Mariel exodus "included many homosexuals, largely male." But if "the quality of life for homosexual men or lesbians" in Cuba has improved so vastly, even prior to the Mariel exodus, as Ms. Rich assures us, why then did Cuban homosexuals leave from the Port of Mariel in such disproportionate numbers?

Ms. Rich proceeds with her "analysis," complaining that "the film never treats the early years of the Cuban revolution (1959–1965), nor the period between the UMAP camps and the Mariel exodus (1967–1979), nor the years since the Mariel." Ms. Rich should see our film again. Does she have wax in her ears, impaired vision—or are all her senses blocked? *Improper*

Continued on page 70

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IMPROPER CONDUCT

from page 18

Conduct focuses at length on the pre-UMAP period. Several testimonies (including those of G. Cabrera Infante and Carlos Franqui) refer to "Operation P," also known as "the Night of the Three P's," in which prostitutes, pimps, and pederasts were brutally rounded up and, as early as the winter of 1961, sent to the first Cuban forced-labor camps located on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

It was then that one of the heroes of our film, the great writer Virgilio Piñera, was arrested and imprisoned because of his effeminate mannerisms. Fortunately, he was soon freed by influential friends. G. Cabrera Infante comments in the film, "Not everybody had his chance, not everybody has friends well placed in government," and thousands of unprotected, innocent people without the right connections ended up in these camps.

Carlos Franqui, the former editor of the Cuban newspaper *Revolucion*, brings it more into focus: "Just as UMAP had its precedent in Operation P, it also had its follow-up after 1971 with the vagrancy laws and many other arbitrary forms of persecution." Our cameras pan quickly over excerpts of the laws that appeared after 1971. Quickly, because we did not want to bore our audiences and because our film is mainly about faces and voices, about the individual human experience.

We suggest that Ms. Rich, on her next weekend in Havana, check these incredible Stalinist post-UMAP laws in the *Gaceta Oficial* of the Republic of Cuba (March 1, 1979): laws about premeditated behavior (articles 76–80, 83, 84), laws against homosexuality as public scandal (article 359), or laws against the abnormal development of the family (article 360).

Our narration establishes that although UMAP camps were disbanded in 1969 after four years of existence (not just two years, as Ms. Rich asserts) because of protests from outside and inside Cuba (by people like Franqui, who had problems of his own later on), new camps under different names were soon created; this occurred after the Congress of Education and Culture of 1971. Our film then talks about raids in public places and the new labor camps. The drawings of painter Jaime Belleschasse stand as testimony of this period.

No footage of these camps? How could it be otherwise? No foreign inspection by neutral institutions (Amnesty Interna-

tional, Red Cross, and so on) has been allowed in Cuba. If the Axis had not been defeated, there wouldn't be any footage of Auschwitz either.

Who inspired and enforced these repressive laws in Cuba? Ms. Rich and those like her tend to put the blame on the prevalent machismo throughout Latin America for which, she implies, Castro and his government cannot be held responsible, but in an exchange between Castro and journalist Lee Lockwood in *Castro's Cuba*, there is evidence to the contrary. (This text can be checked against the transcript of the tapes deposited at the Oral History Collection at Columbia University.)

Lockwood: Is your position that if one is homosexual one cannot be a revolutionary?

Castro: Nothing prevents a homosexual from professing revolutionary ideology and, consequently, exhibiting a correct political position. In this case he should not be considered politically negative. And yet we would never come to believe that a homosexual could embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true revolutionary, a true Communist militant. A deviation of that nature clashes with the concept we have of what a militant Communist should be. . . . I will be frank and say that homosexuals should not be allowed in positions where they are able to exert influence upon young people. In the conditions under which we live, because of the problems which our country is facing, we must inculcate our youth with the spirit of discipline, of struggle, of work.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? But Castro's homophobia is a hybrid of three very resilient species: Jesuit upbringing, Latin American machismo, and Stalinist terror.

Homophobia has not yet disappeared from Cuba, as B. Ruby Rich suggests. Nor have the repressive laws been abolished. She claims that she recently saw "a flamboyant crowd that regularly pack the ballet" in Havana. This may only indicate that new raids are about to come. The story of "antisocial behavior" in Cuba has been a series of freezes and thaws. The many articles written by Reinaldo Arenas about the repression of gays in Cuba that have appeared in these last few years in the Western press, as

well as our film (the existence of which the Cuban government has been aware since its inception), might actually be making life in Cuba provisionally tolerable. If B. Ruby Rich and her kind were really friends of the Cuban people and the Cuban gays and lesbians and not of the Cuban government, they would sustain a more firm and critical attitude. We do agree with Ms. Rich, though, that for gays in Cuba, "there is a world of parties and networks that exists outside any bar scene." We are sure the same applies to Solidarity in Poland. We bet Ms. Rich was not wandering the streets of Havana in search of gay dissidents.

Castro's thoughts about the gay "problem" have not changed—only, perhaps, his strategy. Quite recently, one of the best Latin-American films of the last decade, Hector Babenco's *Pixote*, with its constant allusions to homosexuality, was turned down when it was proposed for inclusion in Havana's Latin-American Film Festival. Another example: Cuban television sometimes broadcasts pirated tapes of recent American movies. Alan Parker's *Fame* was aired a few months ago, and censors expurgated scene by scene the homosexual character, without which the story made little sense.

What Ms. Rich fails to see is that the main issue of our film is not the persecution of gays in itself, which has often been an excuse to arrest potential enemies, but that this is only an aspect, perhaps the most absurd, of a greater repression. The recent liberation through the Reverend Jesse Jackson of twenty-six political prisoners has alerted world opinion to the forgotten thousands still rotting away in Cuban prisons, and of the incredible length of the sentences they serve (the longest sentences in the Communist bloc).

B. Ruby Rich maintains that *Improper Conduct* ignores "the advances in standard of living, education, health, and access to culture" in Castro's Cuba. The supposed gains of Cuban people have been extremely overrated and constitute one of the greatest fallacies perpetrated by the country's propaganda system. The statistics are supplied by the Cuban government, which does not allow any oppositional group inside the country to check them. The truth is that Cuba, which held third place in the fifties among the Latin-American nations in per-capita income, now, twenty-five years later, holds fifteenth place. The Cuban people have gone through strict and stringent rationing since 1962, relying heavily on the black market to supplement their food supply; education has become synonymous

with indoctrination; medicines are expensive when available at all; and "access to culture" is some kind of a joke, since some of the best Cuban writers (Infante, Arenas, Sarduy), as well as many foreign authors (Borges, Orwell, Koestler), cannot be found in bookstores and their names can't even be mentioned.

The demands that Ms. Rich and others make to counterbalance the exposé in our film with the "gains" of the Cuban life make us think of those who see mitigating circumstances for Mussolini as "trains were on schedule in Italy for the first time" or for Hitler as "the National Socialists built such good highways, and they ended unemployment."

Ms. Rich criticizes us for not including enough blacks in our film, but, oddly enough, doesn't seem to mind that the Cuban government, which calls itself revolutionary and antiracist, has a presidium composed almost entirely of whites, even though more than fifty percent of the population is black or mulatto.

B. Ruby Rich also claims she presented "an analysis of gay cinema at an official symposium in Havana." But the question is, how official and how open was this symposium? Allen Young tells quite a different story in his book *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution*. He writes of a trip to Havana in the seventies with a group of American sympathizers, one of the "Venceremos Brigades." A workshop on the gay question was proposed by the group, and it was held behind closed doors. Cubans were not allowed to participate.

Where Ms. Rich's attack gets to be most vicious is when she sees in our sequence on Miami's "Little Havana" an "homage" to the émigré Right and even to terrorist groups. This particular piece of slander is too ridiculous to be taken seriously by anybody; it is in this part of her article that her bad faith and blindness are most obvious. Nowhere does she mention in her piece that the film was coproduced by French Television Antenne-2 and by Les Films du Losange (Eric Rohmer and Barbet Schroeder's company). Anyone can see that this particular "Little Havana" sequence was intended as a bittersweet, humorous takeoff (funny television ads, farcical plays, useless political pleas) on a community of exiles lost in its own microcosm, new victims of a rampant consumer society, incapable of solving the great tragedy in their motherland only ninety miles to the south.

Ms. Rich does not stop here. In her venomous innuendos in another paragraph, she reports that two years ago, the proceedings of the meeting of the Committee for Intellectuals for the Freedom of Cuba in Washington "were filmed by none other than Orlando Jimenez-Leal." Indeed, this event was being shot for a television special produced by Italian television called

L'Altra Cuba (The Other Cuba). It was a job, part of the coverage by a European television station. What's wrong with this? we are entitled to ask in return. And what was B. Ruby Rich doing in Washington at that meeting of those "terrible" Cuban intellectuals that she calls terrorists? What was *her* assignment there?

Castro's supporters, B. Ruby Rich included, would love to think that his detractors are all right-wing terrorists and troglodytes, but *Improper Conduct* comes right out of left field. Ms. Rich's attempts to move it to the right are hopeless. Our

consolation is that George Orwell and Arthur Koestler were also accused in their time of being right-wingers for having criticized Stalinist methods "too early." Give B. Ruby Rich a couple of weeks in Havana and she's already an expert on the subject. One thing is for sure though: As a result of her article, Ruby will be able to spend her next winter vacation in the Pearl of the Antilles, VIP treatment guaranteed. ■

Nestor Almendros is the cinematographer of *Days of Heaven*, *The Last Metro*, *The Marquise of O*, and other films. Orlando Jimenez-Leal is the director of *El Super*.

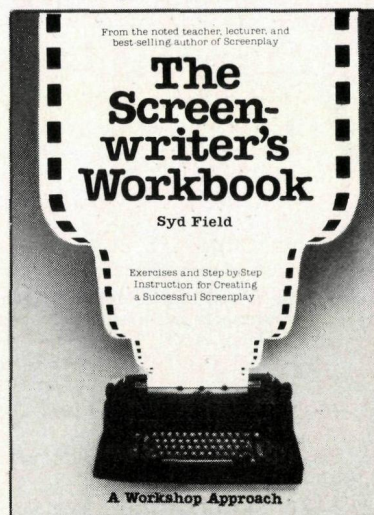
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