

¡Cuba Si, Almendros No!

by Tomas Gutierrez Alea (*The Village Voice*, October 2, 1984)

HAVANA—A few months ago, I saw the documentary *Improper Conduct* by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez. Richard Goldstein wanted to know my opinions about this film to publish them in *The Village Voice*. We met for an interview and some of my views were published in a long article titled “Cuba Si, Macho No!” (*Voice*, July 24). On August 14, a response by Nestor Almendros appeared in this publication which obliges me to clear up some things.

The first thing Almendros says is that I was obliged to attack the film “officially.” Frankly, I don’t understand the term. It is true that I felt obliged to attack the film, but only because of those principles for which I have been and am capable of giving my life. Perhaps this will be difficult for people like Almendros to understand, and for so many others who long ago disengaged themselves from those principles which once seemed to sustain their lives.

Improper Conduct is part of an official current of the U.S. policy toward Cuba. The film feeds that current of opinion, which is well orchestrated and well backed by the official media.

I find out, through Almendros, that “Comandante Castro did not approve of [my] last film,—Hasta cierto punto. It seems that Almendros is very well informed about what happens at the highest levels in Cuba. However, he also says that “following Castro’s lead, the Cuban critics had to attack Alea and this film, even though the film had won the first prize at the last Latin American Film Festival in Havana.” This is not completely true, for some critics attacked it and some defended it. Perhaps the latter did not find out about Castro’s opinion in time. Who knows...

No less puerile and ill-intentioned is his insistence that he can say, without fear of any kind, that he “very much admire(s) two or three of Alea’s films under Castro. On the other hand, Alea cannot say or write in Cuba that he liked the film *El Super*.” However, I have said so on more than one occasion. I have on hand a copy of an interview in Puerto Rico in which I say, among other things: “*El Super* seemed to me a very good movie; I would call it extraordinary, very revealing and very interesting ...” (*VIVA, El Reportero*, September 21, 1983).

This seems an appropriate occasion to explain that *El Super* is interesting because it offers a revealing picture of the Cuban exile community in New York: one of those Cuban families that abandoned their country after the triumph of the Revolution, taking advantage of the offer the U.S. government made to receive them “with open arms.” The parents don’t even manage to learn English, and they have to use their daughter as interpreter. It’s a pathetic case of loss of identity in which the parents try to save something by traveling to Miami, nearer to Cuba and more populated with Cubans. Presumably, the daughter’s fate will be to become a North American, but a fifth-class one.

When I met with Leon Ichaso in New York to see his other film, yet unfinished, with Rubén Blades as its protagonist, I realized that the hope one could see in *El Super* of a cinema that would authentically reflect the world of the U.S. Latins had been frustrated. *Crossover* is a melodrama that follows a worn pattern and that tries to use Blades’s songs as a hook.

Leon Ichaso told me that after they made *El Super* many people labeled them as procommunists and that because of this they had to be careful not to follow that road. The story is lamentable, but revealing.

And what can we say about the allusion Almendros makes to *The Last Supper*? That film has what *Improper Conduct* lacks: a historical focus on our reality. *The Last Supper* sheds light on the present because it's a parable about hypocrisy and the utilization of the noblest principles to exploit one's neighbor. *Improper Conduct* attempts to be a document through which one can get an "authentic" image of our reality here and now. But its lack of a sense of history and a social context determines its superficiality and turns the film into a revealing document about the human misery of its authors.

How can Almendros speak of Cuba "deploy(ing) its military forces around the world"? Can Cuba really carry out a policy of aggression towards other countries? Doesn't this sound a bit exaggerated? If Almendros is so worried about the deployment of military forces, why hasn't he protested against U.S. military intervention in so many other countries? Did he protest the recent intervention in Grenada? Has he said anything about the arms race unleashed by the current U.S. administration?

Why has Almendros, after so many years (he emigrated in 1961) and after traveling a road full of professional successes, lent himself to a dirty game of such dimensions? It's significant that at this very moment, coinciding with an aggressive policy by the U.S. administration toward our country, some intellectuals (and some who can barely boast of this distinction) have thrown themselves into a "cultural" offensive against Cuba, in which great economic resources of strange origin come into play. It's obvious that most of these people have nothing better to sell and that they try to make a career out of their anti-Cubanism. This is not exactly Almendros's case—he already made a career and is legitimately well-placed in that world. However, in his film, almost all these characters are gathered, this time focusing their attacks against Cuba on the theme of homosexuality. Everything very well prepared. And very opportune for satisfying the needs of the master who has received them "with open arms" but who, at the same time, demands fidelity in exchange for a good reward.

Almendros knows very well that with half-truths one can fabricate the most infamous lies. He knows, for example, that the UMAP, the work camps where a great many homosexuals went to fulfill their military service, were an error and became a scandal that fortunately culminated in their disappearance and in a policy of rectification. The UMAP lasted from 1965 to 1967 (not from 1964 to 1969 as Almendros says). That is, their disappearance dates from 17 years ago. However, in *Improper Conduct*, the UMAP is talked about as if it were something that happened yesterday or something that is still in force. Almendros knows this isn't true.

The image of our country that he offers us through a series of anecdotes which one must believe because they come backed by his prestige, is monstrously ridiculous. Almendros manipulates the best known clichés about Cuba, the most enormous lies, which from being repeated so often threaten to become the truth, as old Goebbels understood. The emotional impact and level of credibility transmitted by some of these testimonies are disturbing for those who, outside of Cuba, receive them without the information needed to be able to assess certain situations accurately. The lack of information about the socio-historical context in which a revolutionary process must be located is what allows Almendros to hit what is known in boxing as a "low blow," and what moves us to judge his document as basically dishonest.

Any North American who has been to Cuba can give the lie to the ex-tourist guide who appears in this film and introduces himself as a kind of “shepherd” leading his flock of tourists only through those places they were allowed to observe. Unfortunately, it’s the American government that imposes obstacles so North Americans won’t travel to Cuba and see our reality with their own eyes. They, better than anyone, could say if their freedom of movement is limited here. They could confirm with their own eyes if it’s true that men with long hair or who walk a certain way are kept from moving about our streets. They would finally find an answer to many of the troubling questions the film provokes.

Is the so-called “homophobia” an invention of the Revolution? Doesn’t it exist in greater or lesser degree in the rest of the world, especially among Latin Americans? Incidentally, a great proportion of Miami’s Cuban community rejected Almendros’s film because they felt it suggested that the great majority of Cuban exiles are homosexuals. They felt their “manhood” was being questioned. But, how does one fight against such an injustice? In Cuba five years ago, the Ministry of Culture published a book called *Man and Woman in Intimacy*. Its author, Siegfried Schnabl, is a scientist, sexologist, clinical psychologist, and director of the Center for Sexual and Marriage Counseling of the Karl-Marx-Stadt (Democratic Republic of Germany). In this book, there’s a chapter devoted to homosexuality in which one can read the following:

“We have not included homosexuality among the perversions, since it does not exclude the community that reciprocally enriches and physically and psychologically satisfies two people. Besides, among homosexuals one can also find authentic love.”

“In terms of the affective life, homosexual relations are no different from relations between men and women.”

“The conventional arguments raised in support of the need to apply laws against homosexuals have been refuted by research for their lack of solidity.”

“Neither are justified such penalties and emotional prejudices that use high-sounding slogans like ‘vice against nature’ and ‘against the sensitivities of the people. What two adult persons do in private by mutual consent does not injure the moral norms of society and there can be no reason to proceed against it.’”

“Homosexuals, like all citizens, have a right to be valued and recognized by their objective achievements and by their behavior.”

It’s important to point out that the above-cited opinions appear in a book published by the Cuban state with educational purposes. Which does not mean, of course, that the publication of a book, no matter how “official,” automatically makes a social phenomenon disappear which we have been carrying around for centuries and which has deep roots in our Catholic, Spanish past. But a book like this one, where the most advanced scientific opinions about homosexuality are expressed, constitutes a valuable fighting tool which the Cuban state places in the hands of those whose cause is that of the discriminated against, the marginal, those who suffer any kind of prejudice or oppression.

At one point in Richard Goldstein’s Voice interview I said that “in the middle of a battle, you cannot discuss aesthetics or homosexuality or anything.” That is, anything that does not have to do with the immediate need to defend yourself and attack the enemy. I hold that in the order of priorities the need to survive comes first. And for us, a small and poor country, this means an obvious need to arm and

organize ourselves militarily to face the constant threat of a rich and powerful country that also happens to be one of our closest neighbors. This, obviously, sets limits on our capacity to solve other problems, which does not mean they're not important or that we won't face them within the measure of our strength.

We also discuss homosexuality and aesthetics and women's issues and everything that affects and limits the full realization of a human being. But these are not problems that can be solved overnight. A perfectly just society, in which all human beings can fully realize themselves is not within our immediate reach. A communist society, paradise on earth, will be inhabited by better men and women than we in every sense. But it's we, here and now, with all our defects; it's us who are slowly building that more just society. There are no shortcuts in history. We are conscious that we have a long road to travel, a prolonged period of struggle against a powerful enemy and the traitors it shelters and nourishes.

When I read Almendros's response to my interview, I can't help feeling a certain sadness over those who left, those who abandoned the struggle because they lacked faith in our own resources for transforming this country, those who let themselves be seduced by the wealth and comfort that the old master offered them "with open arms." Perhaps Almendros and people like him have not realized that their tired anti-Communist rhetoric is not going to afford them the moral alibi they need.

This is not the place to recount everything achieved in these 25 years of the Revolution, but I think there's an exemplary statistic, revealing a true concern for human beings: in 1958, a year prior to the revolutionary victory, -child mortality was higher than 70 deaths per 1000 live births. In 1982, the figure came down to 17.3, the lowest in Latin America. Life expectancy went from 58 in 1958 to 73.5 in 1982. If we take into consideration the fact that half our doctors migrated to the U.S., along with a great many professionals and qualified technicians of every kind, leaving the country in a truly critical condition, it's clear that we have taken a gigantic leap. This is certainly not the situation in other Latin American countries. I remember that the very day I saw *Improper Conduct*, the newspapers told of violent disturbances in the Dominican Republic, provoked by hungry masses who were raiding the markets. There have been similar reports from Brazil. In this context, Almendros's film seems to me increasingly irrelevant—not to mention ridiculous.

*Translated from the Spanish.