

Improper Conduct

Written and directed by Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal; produced by Margaret Menegoz, Barbet Schroeder and Michel Thoulouze; cinematography by Dominique Merlin; edited by Michel Plon. Featuring interviews with Reinaldo Arenas, Susan Sontag, Heberto Padilla, Caracol, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Armando Valladares, Fidel Castro, Ana Maria Simo, Carlos Franqui and Martha Frayde. Color, 110 minutes. A Cinevista release.

Improper Conduct, a documentary made by two Cuban exiles, Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, uses the oppression of male homosexuals in Cuba during the mid 1960s as the lead card in an all out attack on the Castro government. In various interviews concerning the film, the filmmakers have stated their work "comes out of left field" and that their politics are comparable to those of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler. They hope *Improper Conduct* will serve as an intellectual platform for the nonrightist anti-Castro movement.

To advance this ideological agenda, the filmmakers present twenty-eight interviews with emigrés (many of them individuals prominent in the arts) intercut with newsreel clips of Castro, the Mariel exodus of 1980, and two interviews with nonCuban intellectuals. Allowing full measure for the personal suffering of most of the witnesses, the film's general strategy can only be described as hyperbolic grapeshot in which not a single achievement of the revolution is to be acknowledged and in which the filmmakers do not even make a pretense of pressing for clarification, elaboration or third party verification for the most outlandish emigré statements. As a consequence, *Improper Conduct* is destined to be most persuasive among those who know the least about Cuba, past and present, and those willing to believe the worst about any system calling itself socialist.

A reasonable method of evaluating the worth of any oral history can be borrowed from legal practice. If part of a courtroom testimony is found to be deliberately false or recalled with gross inaccuracy, all parts of that particular testimony become suspect. One can extrapolate that if filmmakers present testimony they know to be false, misleading, or specious, then all the testimony assembled becomes questionable. Judged by such a criterion, rather than taking on the Orwellian mantle of blunt honesty, *Improper Conduct* swerves perilous-

ly close to Newspeak and the conscious disinformation of the Big Lie told boldly.

There is, for example, the testimony of Felix Hernandez, a former Cuban tour guide. He is contemptuous of foreign tourists and states that the model farm to which he took Italian visitors was a complete phony staffed by party cadre acting out the role of happy peasants. He further asserts that tourists are allowed to see "only well-kept streets" and that 200 yards beyond their gaze are disaster areas. He concludes by asserting that tourists are urged to use cabs calling at hotel entrances, because the cabbies report back to the police.

That tourists are shown model projects is hardly a secret. Nor should it be a secret that Cuban officials preface such visits by stating that the sites are not necessarily typical of the Cuba that is but of the Cuba they are building. Among the most famous of these are the Lenin School and Mazorra, the National Hospital for the Mentally Ill, both of which have been utilized by thousands of Cubans over the course of many years. There is extensive and continuous professional documentation concerning other model projects and their offspring. An allegation of fraud by one person about one site cannot be taken as serious evidence of massive and systematic deception.

Hernandez's own veracity is dubious given that any tourists who want to confront the "real" Havana are free to stroll out the door of their hotels to take public transportation or simply walk for hours in any direction. What Hernandez terms disaster areas would be considered upgraded housing by the inhabitants of America's slums. As for cabbies keeping passenger logs which may be consulted by the police, this is required in every major city in the United States.

The real thrust of Hernandez's testimony is to discredit the intelligence of those who visit Cuba to determine for themselves what the revolution has and has not accomplished. This notion that all such tourists are gullible dupes is in line with the American policies which attempt to halt travel to Cuba. After all, the fewer visitors allowed, the fewer counterwitnesses to testimony of this kind. A natural political rejoinder is that visitors to Cuba who find something positive to report are equatable to the enthusiastic visitors to the U.S.S.R. of the 1930s. Such argument by analogy is dramatic, but in terms of logic, always invalid and sophistic.

The same caliber of testimony is offered by a hairdresser who relates that she has been told that Cuban of-



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ficials provide gifts and privileges to a group of women in exchange for sexual favors accorded to government cadres and foreign diplomats. One would have to be extremely naive to imagine the oldest profession in the world has ceased to exist in Cuba or that no one in government ever gave a gift to a sexual partner or that secret services do not employ prostitutes. What is more to the political point is that, before the revolution, Havana was proudly billed as the whorehouse of the Caribbean and much of the Cuban economy was based on the needs of foreign thrill seekers. All of that culture has been abolished by the revolution and Cubans associated with the old life who chose to remain in Cuba have received substantial educational and financial aid in redirecting their lives. Whatever the truth about the existence of a call girl elite corps, the contrast between the old and new Cuba in regard to the culture of prostitution is self-evident and fundamental.

One might add, as the film does not, that among the remaining public visages of the old system are the sexist floor shows in nightclubs and hotels. Attempts by some elements in the revolution to transform the nature of these shows have been stymied by stubborn public resistance. A more telling and long term assault on sexism has been the unprecedented guarantees for women written into the legal code, the greatly enhanced medical services for women, and the ideological attack on machismo evidenced in numerous

Cuban films (e.g., *Lucia, Portrait of Teresa, One Way Or Another*). The impact of such efforts on Cuban life is debatable, but sexist proclivities are not easily altered even within the ranks of conscious revolutionaries. (We must note in this regard that Nestor Almendros's own cinematic credits include *Maitresse*, a film showing the routines of a prostitute who services sadomasochistic clients. One scene filmed in an actual brothel shows a man's scrotum being nailed to a wooden block.)

Serving up another kind of fantasy is Martha Frayde, Castro's former ambassador to UNESCO. While describing the terrible conditions of Cuban jails, Frayde states that within a few weeks a score or so of dark-skinned mulatto women with whom she was incarcerated turned white from fear and anguish. The filmmakers should be embarrassed to expose such racist apocrypha to public exhibition, but presumably because Frayde once held an important post, her testimony is used without comment.

Yet another sequence confuses oral history with gossip. Without citing any source, a witness states that he had heard that during a visit to Shanghai, a prominent Cuban minister asked how homosexuals had been dealt with. The response was that Shanghai's homosexuals used to gather annually for a revelry on an island in the river. One year, armed with clubs, party cadre attended the function and put an end to the problem once and for all, letting the river carry away the evi-

dence of their deeds. The filmmakers offer no statement from any human rights group anywhere that there is any basis to this horror story.

Keeping to the same level is the film's exposition of Cuban racism. A group of four very light-skinned youths are interviewed on a Miami beach. After lauding the personal freedom all have found in the United States, they speak about repression in Cuba, emphasizing the special oppression of blacks. They state that Cuban police routinely harass blacks walking in the street. Anyone who has ever wandered about Havana will know this is nonsense. The filmmakers certainly know it, and they know, or should know, that the very beach they filmed on has until very recently been barred to American blacks. Our witnesses to Cuban racist behavior are mute concerning the charges Miami blacks have made about the racist attitudes of the Miami Cuban community the film praises. And if the racial policies of the U.S. are to be compared with those of Cuba, as the film insists, there is simply no contest.

During the 1960s, when Cuba was initiating vigorous anti-racist measures from the top down, the U.S. was experiencing massive civil unrest in efforts to eliminate the institutionalized racism at every level of government. In the 1970s, as the United States drifted rightward in a process culminating in the election of a president who asserts that for most of his life he didn't know racism existed, the Cuban government increased support for black cultural expression, addressed the problem of racism in major motion pictures, and had its leader speak of Africa as one of the Cuban motherlands. To be sure, racism has not been completely eradicated in Cuba, but to imply that racism is the official or unofficial national policy is a contemptuous slander.

What is more interesting about these four youths is that they were born at the time of the revolution. They point this out themselves and state that, if they are the "social debris" the government asserts they are, then the government has failed to correctly mold the first generation it had a chance to educate. The viewer would like to hear about the substantive grievances of these individuals, but they are never allowed time to move beyond chatty and superficial comments about length of hair, dress styles, and rock music, an interchange designed to evoke the spectre of a gray communism that is not at all applicable to daily life in Cuba.

Surfacing throughout many testimonies are references to the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), neighborhood block associations described as local thought police. Untold to the viewer is that the Committees have been instrumental in ending a reign of sabotage by counterrevolutionaries and have been the basic units of elective local government. One can certainly believe that overly zealous cadres and greedy individuals have sometimes abused the power of the CDRs. The film avoids any context, however, which would enable a viewer to judge whether these committees are omnipresent listening posts for totalitarian control, as the film asserts, or the incipient communal self-management claimed by the revolution.

A shared characteristic of many of the film's principals is that at one time they were supporters of the revolution. The film trades heavily on the knowledge that Stalin used charges of treason to silence, persecute and murder political and intellectual foes. That reality need not obscure the fact that every successful revolution breeds many shades of genuine treason (Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr), that famous artists can have repulsive politics (Ezra Pound and Louis Ferdinand Celine), or that former leftists can become rightists (Jay Lovestone and John Dos Passos). What we need to know about these witnesses, especially those of the stature of Carlos Franqui and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and what we never get to hear, is what kind of non-Castro Cuba they envisage. Did any of them, in fact, conspire against Castro? If so, with what kind of groups? If not, and they are revolutionaries "betrayed," why not? Such political discourse is avoided in favor of recitation of artistic awards and tales of persecution without any reference to the political circumstances of the period or the individual.

Even when the focus is on the oppression of gays, *Improper Conduct* cannot resist the low road. There is no reference to homophobia preceding the revolution, no comparison of Cuban attitudes with those in other contemporary Latin cultures, and no indication of any changes in official policy. The film focuses on the early phase of the revolution when the Cuban view was that homosexuality was a disease that should be treated through methods such as behavior modification. Given that perspective, the public display of homosexual sensibility, improper conduct, was actively discouraged. Since the 1970s, under the influence of East German sexologists, Cuban text-

books no longer describe homosexuality as a disease. This does not mean that official Cuban attitudes are now parallel to those in the gay rights movement. They are not, being more in the spirit of tolerance than acceptance.

Greatly complicating official Cuban policy is the legacy of the sexual underworld dating back to the Batista era when there was considerable contact between homosexuals of vastly different political persuasions and social backgrounds. Aware of that heritage, early in the 1960s the CIA launched a campaign to use gay males for purposes of espionage and even to carry out at least one major assassination plot on the life of Fidel Castro (for details and documentation consult Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience: Part I," *Signs*, Spring 1984, pp. 683-699). These American intrigues do not in any way justify the anti-homosexual campaign that culminated in the work camps known as UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production), but they do indicate that the Cuban actions were motivated by more than maniacal and mindless homophobia.

Far too much is made of Sartre's comment that since Cuba had so few Jews, homosexuals had to serve as cultural scapegoats. The UMAP camps of 1965-1967 may indeed have been as harsh as described in the film, but comparisons to Hitler's death camps and Pinochet's stadium massacres are gratuitous and only serve to close off reasonable analysis. The Cuban government may not be about to embrace the politics of gay liberation, but it has admitted its anti-homosexual campaign was wrong, and a considerable number of homosexuals enjoy prominent posts in the government and in the arts.

To the film's credit, when dealing with gay oppression, Caracol, a professional female impersonator, and Luis Lazo, a street person given to wearing face powder, are included among the witnesses. Of course, the filmmakers insist on retaining Lazo's statement that the garb he wears in the film would be unacceptable in Cuba, a facile exaggeration easily refuted by looking at any recent Cuban film set in contemporary times. A number of other gay speakers indulge in humorous putdowns such as the comparison of Fidel to a touring Grand Duchess and the remark that he is always followed by two truckloads of chickens. But what appears to be a relatively sophisticated

sensibility turns ugly when the film informs us that the oppression of gays is due less to the paranoia of heterosexual machos than to 'manly' homosexuals in government who derive sexual solace from the oppression of fellow gays.

A further indication that gay rights are just a Trojan horse for purposes of ideological calumny is the disinterest in the situation of Cuban lesbians. This may stem from an unconscious admission that lesbians have always been more acceptable in Cuban culture than gay men, and that Cuban lesbians have shared in the increased opportunities for all women. The only explanation in *Improper Conduct* for the more permissive attitude toward lesbians is that the macho leaders enjoy watching women make love to one another.

Certainly the strongest argument in the film that the revolution is in deep trouble is the Mariel flotilla of 125,000 Cubans. While Mariel was no feather in the revolutionary cap, there is not a word that the economic hardships so many Marielitos complain about might be due in some measure to the economic embargo and political pressure of the United States. Americans must also keep in mind that the terms of immigration were extraordinary: free passage, promise of swift naturalization, institutional support for relocation, and interim federal financial assistance. How many Mexicans, Haitians, or Jamaicans would respond to such terms? What would have been the exodus rate if the host country were other than the United States? Even the interviews in the film indicate that the decision to leave was often impulsive or motivated by a desire to be reunited with family members already in exile. Rather than explore any complexities of this sort, *Improper Conduct* opts for the nightly news approach: see them leave horrible Cuba for wonderful U.S. of A. One indication that the new land didn't turn out to be exactly as expected can be found in the 1983 Canadian-Cuban coproduction, *Marielitos*.

The Cuban revolution certainly has many areas open to substantial criticism. If, as claimed, the filmmakers desire genuine dialog with supporters of the revolution, one would expect to see such persons confronted with some of the charges raised and given an opportunity to respond on film. In addition to any number of Latin American intellectuals who might be selected, there are Americans such as Margaret Randall (*Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later*), Saul Landau (*Fidel*), and Sandra Levinson (*The Center for Cuban*

Studies), to name only three persons who have made repeated visits to Cuba or lived in Cuba for years at a time. And what about Cubans in the U.S., many of them children of first wave exiles, who have been working for an accommodation between the two nations?

The filmmakers prefer to call on Susan Sontag who obliges with humanistic concern about the militarization of Cuba and the left's traditional weakness on issues of sexual liberation. Sontag does not deal with how her own government played a major role in forcing Cuba's military buildup. Perhaps she has forgotten the Bay of Pigs invasion, the counter-revolutionaries who murdered literacy workers, the saboteurs who mined harbors, the terrorists who bombed civilian aircraft, and the assassins hired to murder major leaders. Rather than chastise imperfect radicals, Sontag might remind the filmmakers that the contemporary gay rights and feminist movements did not emerge from the environment of the right, and, that in regard to the oppression of gays in Cuba, leftist intellectuals have been the ones who have spoken out most often and most loudly. The only purpose served by Sontag's appearance is to attempt to provide a feminist, intellectual and leftist veneer on a film that otherwise avoids ideological discourse.

What is more surprising about *Improper Conduct* than its cavalier handling of history is its lackluster technical level. Almendros is the acclaimed cinematographer of films such as *Sophie's Choice* and Leal codirected the well-made low budget feature film, *El Super*. In the present work, however, they settle for ponderous talking head sequences often complete with heavy-handed reaction shots of the interviewer so that the audience will be properly cued as to when to laugh, sneer or hold back tears. Location filming of an anti-Castro play in Miami and a New York nightclub performance by Caracol are amateurish in the worst sense. Finally, Almendros and Leal can think of no more imaginative ending than the now tired device of the freeze frame close-up. The final line of their published film script can serve as an epitaph for the entire work: "(René) Ariza grows silent, a lost look on his face."

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