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Film

Revolutionary Gays

by Michael Lassell

In the brisk New England autumn of 1969, just months after the Stonewall Riots changed the meaning of being gay in America, I met a man named Guy (a nickname he later abandoned for reasons of feminist exactitude, reverting to the less sexist Jay). I was a graduate student and a member of the Yale Homosexuality Discussion Group, as quaint and curious a confederation of self-proclaimed artists and scholars as ever passed up a rope — or, perhaps, a braided velvet bell-pull. As much a product of the suburban middle class as I was, Jay had already been to Cuba to cut cane with Castro and had lost faith in the island revolution when confronted by the arbitrary incarceration in forced labor camps of Cuban gays ("Work will make you straight" having replaced "Truth will set you free" as an unofficial national motto).

It was Jay who first brought to my attention the relationships among homosexuality as a state of being, homophobia as an illogically applied social formula related to capitalist imperialism, and radical consciousness as a means of overcoming self-hatred and organized oppression. Which is to say: Gay Is Good, Off the Fig, Viva la Revolution!

With Jay as our mentor, we neophyte "Freaking Fig Revolutionaries," as our lavender buttons proclaimed us, ventured to meetings of New York's Gay Liberation Front, raised our individual consciousness in groups of trusting fellows, and reshaped our perceptions about being gay.

In 1970, we marched in the first Christopher Street parade and attended screenings of the Yale Film Society hand-in-hand to assert the legitimacy of our partnerships — and to take advantage of ticket discounts for couples. We picketed the film version of *The Boys in the Band*, which was, to our consensus way of thinking, an unacceptably reactionary work of internalized oppression. Being unhappy (the *raison d'être* of the "Boys" and, I thought, the privilege of all Bohemian academics) was somehow suddenly politically incorrect, as was my own highly public liaison with a lesbian Medievalist from Vassar. It was the best and worst of highly confusing times.

In the real world, the Cambodian invasion had heated anti-war sentiment to a fever, a national student strike was in effect, and the Black Panther Party's information chief, Bobby Seale, was on trial for murder in the Greek-revival courthouse at the well-trimmed edge of our very own postcard-perfect town square. It was with Jay and our brothers 'n' sisters that I wept for joy when Huey Newton — at the urging of radical homosexual Jean Genet (in the country illegally and staying down the block from my own ghetto flat) — wrote in the Panther newspaper that gay men and lesbians were, in fact, an oppressed class, at the forefront of the revolution if they chose solidarity with other minority-status groups.

Fifteen years after those heady post-Stonewall days, differing views of the basic nature and political ramifications of the gay/revolutionary alliance are offered in two new documentary films: *Improper Conduct* and *The Times of Harvey Milk*.



The first openly gay elected official in California left his mark on San Francisco and on the hearts of many who still mourn him.

Two new documentaries examine the relationship between homosexuality and the politics of oppression

Improper Conduct

In 1980, after 20 years of anti-gay persecution, Castro opened the port of Mariel for the flicker of an eye, and 125,000 Cubans boarded any vessel that would float for the 90-mile voyage to Florida. Apparently it came as a shock to American newscasters as well as the INS that the wretched refuse of Cuba's teeming shores included disproportionately large numbers of gay men and women. Castro's failure to accommodate sexual

minorities or any behavioral or attitudinal diversity was disappointing, but hardly an historic anomaly. In fact, the highly vaunted post-1776 age of political enlightenment has not improved the situation for homosexuals in any appreciable way. For one brief moment, under Lenin, the Soviet Union was a liberal paradise without laws restricting sexual expression. But Russia became the 20th-century archetype for anti-gay genocide when the revolution fell under the control of purgahappy Papa Joe Stalin.

According to Cuban witnesses, the first round-up of gays began in Cuba as early as 1960, shortly after Castro's victory over the right-wing military dictatorship of American-backed Fulgencio Batista. In 1966, ten male dancers with the Cuban National Ballet on tour in France applied for political asylum. From 1965 to 1967 (or until 1969, depending on who is to be believed), gays were routinely herded up and sent to labor camps in the Cuban interior. These camps, "Military Units to Aid Production," were disbanded due to internal and international protest, but they were followed by a series of repressive and rigid "vagrancy" laws in 1971. The persecution of gay people apparently continues unabated.

What is most interesting about Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez-Leal's documentary on oppression in post-revolutionary Cuba is the blurred distinction in the minds of the Castroist government between being gay and being a pro-Western dissident (in exactly the same way Joe McCarthy asserted a causal link between homosexuality and Communist sympathy). It is a crime against the Cuban state to fail to conform to social dictates, including that of life-long, monogamous, heterosexual coupling.

What is new, but hardly shocking, information in this brilliant, dizzying film is that the laws against homosexuality are not enforced unilaterally, but selectively, targeting poor gays, effeminate men, and non-whites far out of proportion to the Cuban population, i.e., hypocritical, moralistic effluvia masks essential racism, sexism and class oppression in diametrical opposition to the founding principles of Marxism. This film, which has already won several international prizes (both for cinema and for its human-rights message) and which has been denounced as right-wing propaganda, is a decisive slap in one of Castro's several bearded faces, and the cheeks of Castro clones everywhere are smarting from the blow.

A French production, *Improper Conduct* (*Mauvaise Conduite*) was written and directed by Almendros and Jimenez-Leal, who first worked together in Cuba in 1961. Jimenez-Leal, Cuban-born, and Almendros, who emigrated from Spain to Cuba in 1948, both left their country for the last time in 1962. Since then, Jimenez-Leal's documentary and feature films have won awards at Mannheim, Biarritz and Venice. As a cinematographer, Almendros has won extraordinary praise for his work with Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Robert Benton and Alan Pakula, and an Oscar in 1978 for photographing Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*.

Improper Conduct consists primarily of (subtitled) interviews in Spanish and French with exiled Cubans, some of them obviously gay and some perhaps not; the distinction is never explicit. Forgoing elaborate camera work, Almendros and Jimenez-Leal let the witnesses speak for themselves. Among the notable subjects are Carlos Franqui, former director of the official party newspaper; Guillermo Cabrera-Infante, novelist and former cultural attache for Castro in Belgium; Martha Frayde, Castro's ex-ambassador to UNESCO; and Fidel himself (in intercut newsreel footage and an excerpt from

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television interview). Among the non-famous are a hairdresser in Times Square, a former Havana tour guide, and a New York transvestite entertainer named Caracol, who was deported involuntarily during the Mariel exodus. The irrepressible human drive for freedom of expression is aptly summarized by Caracol's story of making dresses out of bedsheet while serving a prison term for homosexuality.

No one yet seems to have suggested that Castro himself is homosexual, but the conclusion can easily be drawn from the film. As Carlos Franqui claims to have told Castro after the arrest of gay writer Virgilio Pinera, the severest oppressors of gay people are often themselves closeted, repressed or latent homosexuals. The circumstantial evidence makes a tantalizing and psychologically commonplace case. Castro has never been married. Raul Castro is obsessed with ridding the country of homosexuality on his brother's behalf. It is alleged by insiders that many of Castro's top advisers and aides are closeted gays, including many police officials who tolerate, and some say control, male and female prostitution in Cuba. Castro's intensely exaggerated masculinity, from his full beard and ever-present cigar to his jack boots and fatigue uniforms, barely disguise what are clearly effeminate mannerisms of his own, evidenced here in the television interview.

Improper Conduct, following *El Diputado*, is not the first film to deal with homosexuality and the myth of machismo. But it is, perhaps, the first documentary to raise the oppression of gay men and women to the level of an urgent international human-rights issue. Castro now stands accused in the world arena of the very excesses his own forces sought to overthrow in the corrupt, oligarchical dictatorship of Batista. It is now up to the international leftist community, long remiss in its failure to condemn institutionalized homophobia in Cuba and elsewhere, to address the issue.

The Times of Harvey Milk

Until now, the best American film about homosexuals has been *Word Is Out*, a documentary by six filmmakers that looked into the lives of 26 gay men and lesbians who had "come out." One of those filmmakers, Robert Epstein, has now directed what is probably the best film in any genre ever made about an individual gay person, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Harvey Milk was elected in 1977 to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, making him the first openly gay elected official in California. He held his post only 11 months before his assassination.

The Times of Harvey Milk does what is most rare in the history of gays in film. It tells the truth. It begins movingly, tragically, with Diane Feinstein's shocked announcement to the press that San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk have been shot and killed. Their executioner was Dan White, who was, until days before, an extremely conservative member of the Board of Supervisors.

The night of the murder, 45,000 people stood in a mute candlelight vigil in front of City Hall in honor of the Mayor who signed the city's Gay Rights ordinance and the camera-store owner who wrote it. Harvey Milk was not just a Jewish kid from Long Island who made good, he was a symbol of the growing respect with which gay men and women treated themselves and each other, and were beginning to demand from non-gays as well.



Exiled Cuban filmmakers Nestor Almendros (left) and Orlando Jimenez-Lost.

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Harvey didn't apologize. Harvey didn't beg. He lived, he laughed a lot. He told bad jokes and worked his buns off for anyone who needed help.

Epstein has taken an essentially chronological approach to Milk's life, tracing his early days in New York (first as a stockbroker, then as an avant-garde theatrical producer), his relocation to San Francisco where he became one of the first gay merchants on Castro Street, and his three unsuccessful bids for public office from 1973 to 1977. Epstein manages a great deal of tricky political exposition in a deft, concise narration by an uncommonly subdued Harvey Fierstein.

By intercutting stock footage with interviews of only eight people (called from 75 "pre-interviews"), Epstein makes his points economically. Focusing on people who knew Harvey professionally as well as personally, the director simultaneously presents both the details of Milk's public life and the great love felt by those who knew him. Several of those interviewed break down in tears — six years after his death — just recounting what a joyous, loving and energetic man Harvey was.

But the interviews and the narration also tell of Harvey's reputation as a grassroots coalitionist, a reputation insufficiently known outside of San Francisco. White did not just "kill a queer for Anita Bryant," he pumped five bullets into his progressive arch-rival. Even in the Castro, Milk could not have been elected without support from the old-timers who lived there even before the influx of gays. In city hall, he formed alliances not with the rich developers who were treating the neighborhoods like fiefdoms of Dunn & Bradstreet, but with other disenfranchised

minority representatives. His first day on the job he opposed the election of Feinstein as president of the board because he thought her too identified with the past.

Henry Der, executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action, was surprised by Milk's apparently deep conviction that all minority people must work together to win common goals and that inter-tribal jealousies and bigotry among blacks, Latinos, Asians and gays would have to be dropped in order to establish social justice. Der notes that Harvey didn't have to ask what kind of voting machine would be best for the Asian community in San Francisco; Harvey knew. Machinist and union official Jim Elliot, who thought of gays as "kooks and fruits," came to trust Harvey so much that Jim Elliot's union endorsed Harvey Milk for his supervisory seat. Gay or not, Harvey Milk was a man of the people.

The Times of Harvey Milk, which is being released in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles on November 2 (it will play here at the Vista), is obviously judicious, though it makes an attempt to be fair. Epstein sticks to Milk's political life, which is probably appropriate but perhaps a little safe, since Milk's personal life was problematic and might have added another dimension to this fairly simple profile. But the film is one of the best political biographies I've ever seen, certainly one that comes from the heart, and certainly one of the most passionate documentaries ever made. It will educate those who do not already know how important Harvey Milk's message was to everyone, not just to gays. And it will remind gay people how fully life can be lived when it is not lived greedily or in fear. ■

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