

## Cuban heel on the rights of men

**IMPROPER CONDUCT**, which I saw at its first private screening in Paris the day before leaving for Rotterdam was better than anything I've seen at the Rotterdam Film Festival in its first few days. A French co-production of the second television channel (Antenne 2) and Eric Rohmer's film production company, Les Films du Losange, Improper Conduct was co-directed by two Cubans, Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal. The latter is known, in America, at least, as the director of a comedy about Cubans in New York called El Super.

Nestor Almendros, on the other hand, is one of the five or six best known cameramen in the world today. He has made almost all of Truffaut's films since The Wild Child in 1970, five of Eric Rohmer's films, Idi Amin (Dada (by Barbet Schroeder)), and he is one of the few foreigners non-resident in America to win the Oscar for best photography (Terence Malick's Days in Heaven). He has directed short films before, but this is his first feature. Almendros is actually not Cuban by birth. His father, a Spanish republican, was forced into exile by Franco's victory, and the family soon followed him to Cuba, where Almendros was brought up and educated. During the Batista dictatorship, he left for Europe to study film-making. When Castro came to power he returned, and began to make his first documentaries. Before long however, he felt obliged to leave Cuba. And this film, an indictment of the regime's treatment of minorities, indirectly tells us why.

Who were these minorities? Blacks, "hippies," long-haired men, anyone guilty of what the Castro regime called "improper conduct", but most of all homosexuals, particularly male ones. Why? Jean-Paul Sartre has suggested that since there weren't enough Jews in Cuba, some other group had to be found to play the same role the Nazis assigned to the Jews — the "others." A Cuban exile, the writer Heberto Padilla suggests that the government was against all dissidents, but since they, like many socialist governments remained resolutely bourgeois in their attitudes towards sex and the family, homosexuals were an ideal target. Besides, in Cuba, they were easily identifiable because of their extravagant clothes and flamboyant manner. And indeed, as in all countries where machismo reigns, those men who find themselves unwilling or unable to be macho, often exaggerate their femininity. The film is made up of interviews with 20-odd Cuban exiles in London, Paris, Rome, and Madrid; but it also uses, as counterpoint, clips from Cuban TV — and interviews with Castro that were made for French television.

Some of these witnesses are famous: the writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante who chose political exile in Britain with his wife Miriam Gomez in Madrid we see an even more famous Cuban, poet Armando Valladares, the author of the Poems From My Wheelchair, who was jailed by the government for 22 years, and was released through the direct intervention last year of Francois Mitterrand. The French President had succeeded where the Pope and Amnesty had failed. The stories these witnesses have to tell is terrifying.

Better than any "adaptation" of Orwell's 1984, the film reveals a system which has far too many parallels with the world described by Orwell. The most frightening of all is the law (the text of which we see) which made "predisposition to crime" a crime itself. But there are many other examples.

When the "moral purges" began in the Universities, the authorities were not content with denouncing homo-


**Richard Roud on a cameraman with his sights on Castro's indiscretions**

sexuals; their friends had to get up and insult them themselves or else risk being branded homosexual, too. Then there were the prisons with names like New Order, Rainbow and New Dawn. They created the UMAP camps — Military Units for Aid to Production. Here homosexuals were used as forced labour, and over the entrance was emblazoned the slogan "Work will Make Men of You" — a phrase which all too closely resembles the Arbeit Macht Frei (Work brings freedom) that the Nazis used.

The international Left, Susan Sontag (who also appears in the film) reminds us, were slow to react against these developments of the Castro regime, but react they did, eventually. And thanks to the protests of Jean-Paul Sartre and the Italian Communist publisher Feltrinelli, the UMAP's were closed in 1968. As a result, however, not only were Sartre's books banned, but it was forbidden to mention his name.

The film is very simply made, as befits the subject-matter. Almendros did not photograph the film — that was done by Olivier Merin — but he did do the lighting whenever there was any. Almendros is famous for his Vermeer lighting, preferring the light from a window to artificial light.

The film runs for almost two hours, but French television plans only to show it in an hour-long version. Whether the film will receive regular commercial distribution is uncertain, but so powerful is it that I am sure that it will. Certainly in America, where in Miami alone live 500,000 Cuban exiles, just about half the number that have fled Cuba (one million people, says Almendros, or 10 per cent of the population). And this exodus was only halted by an agreement between Carter and Castro. Indeed, the first public screening of the film will be at the Miami Film Festival in March.



Nestor Almendros filming Improper Conduct