Cuba on film: A picture of repression

By D. SULLIVAN

New York — Recalling his unhappy experiences as an ex-hostage but despite boarding school, George Orwell, author of 1984, said, "I was not a world where it was possible for me to be good."

Improper Conduct, a film by Ernesto Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, explores the same theme in the expanded context of an entire country. Cuba under Castro. Made by and about Cubans, it provides a glimpse of a system that combines the petty tyrannies of Orwell's school days with the nightmares of 1984.

The film opens Friday at the Cinema in Coral Gables. In Castro's Cuba, any deviation from orthodoxy — from "Improper Conduct" to homosexual behavior to political dissent — is treated as a crime.

"To be different is not just forbidden," playwright Reina Arias explains in the film. "It is repressed totally. It can land you in jail."

From 'Improper Conduct': In the mid-1960s Martha Frayde, former ambassador to UNESCO, had Castro's ear. Osvaldo Dorticos (right) Castro's former president, committed suicide in Cuba last June.

Artists speak on good authority; he was imprisoned for years on the charge of writing "counterrevolutionary propaganda."

Arbitrary arrest, suppression of personal freedom and incarceration in forced labor camps are the common experiences of the famous writers, former Filibusters, homosexuals, Marcilles and others in this film who speak out against the injustices of Castro's regime. But Improper Conduct is not merely an exposé — it is a detailed portrayal of the totalitarian mentality. It attacks not only Castro's Cuba, but the mythic Cuba of utopian imagination.

Since he came to power 25 years ago, Castro has been a culture hero to some Americans who consider themselves "progressive." Improper Conduct reveals him as the enemy of the values his admirers believe in: freedom of choice, freedom of expression, freedom to be who you are. These values cannot be maintained when those who embody them — the intellectual, the artist, the homosexual — are singled out for persecution.

Since leaving Cuba in 1962, Almendros has become one of the world's leading cinematographers. Please turn to FILM/ED
Exiles' film tells Cuba's other side

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