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OBSERVER REVIEW

ARTS & BOOKS

Tarnished vision

CÉZANNE said that Monet was 'only an eye, but my God, what an eye.' Some people may feel the same about the great cinematographer Nestor Almendros, lighting cameraman on a number of the best-looking French and American films of the past 20 years. But they'll realise he's more than that when they see **Improper Conduct** (ICA), the riveting documentary on the suppression of dissidents and minorities in Castro's Cuba that Almendros has co-directed with another Cuban emigré film-maker, Orlando Jimenez Leal.

Almendros and Leal begin with newsreel of the defection of 10 leading Cuban dancers during a visit to Paris in 1966, an event that attracted less attention in Western liberal circles than it should have. They then interview some 20 of the one million Cubans (roughly 10 per cent of the island's population) who have left since the fall of Batista in 1959.

Most of the articulate exiles they talk to are intellectuals and artists like the poet Herbert Padilla, the novelist Cabrera Infante and the editor Carlos Franqui, the cultural cream of Cuba, nearly all of whom have done time in Castro's jails (22 years in the case of the poet Armando Valladares). But their witnesses also include a hairdresser, some small businessmen and a transvestite nightclub performer.

All started out favourably disposed towards the Revolution and the majority retain an extraordinary balance and an ironic humour as they describe a systematic and vindictive persecution of critics, the individualists and non-conformists by kangaroo courts, arbitrary justice and the widespread use of torture. Early on there were the 'moral purges' in universities and the

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setting up of forced-labour camps that bore the ominous slogan, 'Work Will Make You Men.'

The death penalty was reinstated, as well as a category of offence called 'improper conduct' that could cover anything. Intellectuals were suspect *per se*; recognisable homosexuals, whose existence challenged Latin machismo, were by definition enemies of the state. Castro's emissaries abroad made a particular point of studying the way the Bulgarians and Chinese dealt with gays. The Cubans in turn contributed to the international arsenal of totalitarian techniques the use of flood-lit sports stadiums as places of temporary detention.

Interwoven with this quiet, persuasive testimony are extracts from a recent interview Castro himself gave to French TV. As lovable, warm and fatherly as Joe Stalin' once seemed, Fidel assures us that 'the Revolution cannot be accused of killing one citizen, or having tortured one prisoner. Tell me any other examples of this in history.'

Almendros and Leal also interview two distinguished foreign ex-supporters of the regime — the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo and Susan Sonntag, whose scholarly introduction to the 1970 book, 'The Art of Revolution: Posters from Cuba', ended with the cry 'Viva Fidel!' She expatiates most illuminatingly on the bourgeois character of revolutions, both left and right. She might as usefully have explained why, for so long, she and so many other non-communist intellectuals thought Castro's Cuba a vision of the future that works.

This film has a lot to tell us, and I hope it will be widely

shown — on, for example, Channel 4, whose commissioning editor for the arts concluded a 1967 essay in *Sight and Sound* with the statement, 'Meanwhile in England we are still seeking our Cubist/Cuban Revolution.'

The destruction of democracy is the subject of Alain Jessua's **Les Chiens** (Minema, 15), a six-year-old allegorical thriller given fresh topicality by the heated debate surrounding New York's subway vigilante, Bernhard Goetz. A doctor, played by plump Victor Lanoux, arrives in a soulless French New Town to discover that all his patients are buying ferocious guard-dogs from a fanatical local trainer (beefy Gérard Depardieu) to protect themselves against muggers and rapists. Lanoux first tries to reason with Depardieu, then challenges him, and finally finds himself siding with the local blacks and teenage canophobes when his girlfriend joins the fascistic kennel club.

Jessua, a New Wave director from whom we've heard too little, develops a nice edge of hysteria and paranoia while keeping laughter at bay; his gripping, if somewhat bald, fable is like a cross between 'Bad Day at Black Rock', 'Invasion of the Body-snatchers' and 'Rhinoceros'.

The converse of 'Les Chiens', James Cameron's **The Terminator** (General Release, 18) turns on an attempt to restore decent democratic life in the post-holocaust world of AD 2029, where surviving humans do continuous battle with monstrous machines. The latter dispatch a super-android (Arnold Schwarzenegger) back through time to murder a waitress in a present-day Los Angeles fast-food joint. She's the future mother of the guerrilla leader rallying the opposition against them. Through the same time-machine goes a tough future freedom fighter determined to save her life.



Foul-mouthed apostle of free-enterprise: Harry Dean Stanton in 'Repo Man.'

A similar story was developed with more ingenuity and far less violence in 'Star Trek.' But this one is told with great gusto, high-tech resourcefulness and a bizarre wit.

The other two American pictures are both picaresque comedies feeding on what they perceive as the madness of contemporary life, one directed by an established middle-aged American based in Britain, Richard Lester, the other a first film by a young British writer-director resident in Hollywood, Alex Cox.

In Lester's **Finders Keepers** (Plaza, 15) a Californian heiress (Pamela Stephenson) and a professional crook (Ed Lauter) steal \$5 million of unslaughtered money from her father's safe and head east by train. The time is 1973, with Watergate rumbling in the background, and there are enough bad-taste jokes about gays, priests, milit-

ary deserters, the war-dead, widows and senility to supply the raw materials for a classic Joe Orton play. But this is more 'Carry On' than carion. Whether it is underwater fella-tio, kicks in the gonads or a dentist's drill accidentally plunging into a patient's groin, the picture grabs for the nearest crutch whenever it starts limping. Which is only too often. There are funny and inventive moments, but this isn't prime Lester.

Far more interesting is Cox's **Repo Man** (Chelsea Cinema, Camden Plaza, 18), whose laid-back 18-year-old hero Otto (Emilio Estevez, the handsome son of Martin Sheen) loses his dead-end job and his girl on the same day and drifts into the marginal pursuit of repossessing cars from defaulting hire-purchase owners under the tutelage of a crazy, foul-mouthed apostle of free-

enterprise, brilliantly played by Harry Dean Stanton.

A 1960s Chevy containing a neutron bomb from Los Alamos in its boot attracts the competing attention of the repo men, the CIA, a gang of punks, a flying-saucer freak and some Hispanic car-thieves. The gullible heroine works for a firm called United Fruitcake Outlet; everyone swills beer from cans marked simply 'Drink'; the hero's seedy parents have given his nest-egg to a TV preacher to buy Bibles for San Salvador.

In the end 'Repo Man', for all its energy, doesn't come off. But Cox is a film-maker of style and promise whose next film we await with interest. Robby Muller's photography of Los Angeles and environs is marvellous — just the images Brecht would have liked to illustrate his Hollywood elegies. Many, I'm sure, will relish the American new wave music on the soundtrack.

WHAT'S ON