

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF CUBAN CINEMA

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Fresa y chocolate

Strawberry and Chocolate

Cuba–Mexico–Spain, 1993, 110', colour

Dirs Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1928–1996) and Juan Carlos Tabío (b. 1943) *Scr* Senel Paz, from his short story of the same title (1991) *Asst dir* Mayra Segura *Prod* Georgina Balzaretta, Frank Cabrera, Nacho Cobo, Juan Muñoz and Carlos Vives *Cinematog* Mario García Joya *Mus* José María Vitier *Prod design* Fernando Pérez O'Reilly *Sound* Germinal Hernandez *Edit* Osvaldo Donatién, Rolando Martínez and Miriam Talavera *Act* Jorge Perugorria (Diego), Vladimir Cruz (David), Mirta Ibarra (Nancy), Francisco Gattorno (Miguel), Joel Angelino (German), Marilyn Solaya (Vivian), Andrés Cortina (Santería priest), Antonio Carmona (boyfriend)

Cuba's most acclaimed filmmaker and one of the subtlest critics of the country's revolutionary process, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea combined a sharp eye for social conflicts with an aesthetic that shifted our perception of them. Through aesthetic experiments, his films frequently addressed what he felt to be the most problematic aspects of Cuban society: complacency, corruption and bureaucracy. His approach is explicit in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*, 1968, *q.v.*) a critical landmark in the history of New Latin American Cinema and Cuban cinema. In *Strawberry and Chocolate*, the first film produced in Cuba under the auspices of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos to deal with homosexuality, Alea takes up the topic of the revolution's homophobic culture through a love story with deep emotional textures. Moving away from the earlier predilection for formal experimentation (*Memories and Muerte de un burócrata* [*Death of a Bureaucrat*, 1966, *q.v.*]), surreal extremes (*Los sobrevivientes* [*The Survivors*, 1979] and *Una pelea*

cubana contra los demonios [*A Cuban Tussle with Demons*, 1972]) and lacerating postcolonial critiques (*La última cena* [*The Last Supper*, 1977]), Alea's next-to-last film turns to melodrama and relies on a realist mise en scène.

Strawberry and Chocolate was co-directed by one of Alea's protégés, Cuban filmmaker Juan Carlos Tabío (*Plaff!*, 1988, *q.v.*), when Alea was diagnosed with lung cancer as production got underway. It was also the last time Alea teamed up with noted Cuban cinematographer and frequent collaborator Mario García Joya, who soon after emigrated to the United States. A social comedy, the film is set in the late 1970s and reflects on a troubling moment of the revolution when gays were sent to work camps to be converted into men worthy of the revolution's utopian ideals. Given the catastrophic environment of post-Soviet Cuba, Alea's challenge was to critique the nature of intolerant thinking in Cuba amidst the usual calls for unity by a beleaguered political leadership. At a distance from the height of this leadership's homophobic attacks and with a view to reconciliation, the film safely locates the mistakes of the country's leaders and their bureaucratic henchmen in the past.

For Alea, political culture constrained gay subjectivity and rendered sexual difference diseased. The film tells the story of an evolving friendship between Diego, a homosexual artist-writer, David, a straight Communist Party card-carrying university student, and Nancy, a black marketer and Diego's best friend, centring on Diego's intellectual seduction of David. A committed revolutionary and sexual ingénue, David's strict ideological training has made him uncultivated in most matters of life. What attracts him to Diego is the possibility of exposing him. Encouraged by a hard-liner at the University, Miguel, David feigns friendship and accepts an invitation to Diego's lair to gather needed evidence. There, he meets Nancy, who is deceptively presented to him as an informant for the government. When instead of exposing Diego David forms a friendship with him, the hyper heterosexual Miguel threatens to denounce Diego to the authorities. Meanwhile, Nancy, David and Diego form a fulfilling friendship that throws David into deep ideological conflict. The more cosmopolitan Diego passionately shares his love of Cuban culture, but increasingly risks political retribution. Finally, Diego is

less interested in sex than in the education of David, pushing him instead to sexual initiation with Nancy. Diego's final decision to leave Cuba brings emotions to a climax between the two men.

In Cuba, the film expanded the territory of what was permissible in public debate, confronting what had become institutionalized homophobia at a time when Cuban cinema had begun to explore a post-revolutionary individual identity. Alea and Tabío's film would be credited with, among other things, opening the space for public dialogue about personal freedom, predictably generating heated and liberating public debates and becoming a box-office hit during an eight-month run at the Yara theatre in Havana's La Rampa entertainment district.¹

Appealing to tolerance, the film does not also expand the realm of gay sexual representation. Its classical visual language and melodramatic story line addressed conflict over sexuality only as it pertained to injustice and self-expression, not representation. Sexuality itself remained focused on the heterosexual couple, and some critics denounced as tepid the film's attempt to explore, let alone indict, crimes against homosexuality.² The film links representation directly to sexuality and repression through an editing style that emphasizes vision by repeatedly cutting on the exchange of looks. This relationship between seeing and gay sexuality thus privileges readings of the film's visual register. Nevertheless, the film carves an impassioned drama out of the multiple layers of Cuban and world culture it invokes: the literature of José Lezama Lima, the music of Ernesto Lecuona, Ignacio Cervantes and Maria Callas, nostalgic boleros and danzones and African orishas, attempting to prove that emotional awareness does not have to clash with revolutionary consciousness. The film's melodramatic language, its recourse to nostalgia and the social space containing these emotions and interrogations suggest that other sensory and allegorical strategies of the cinematic experience are as prominent as the visual. While the film makes visible that which has been obscured, it uses an appeal to the emotive terrain of geography, architecture, temporality and cultural spaces to raise the question of intolerance and ultimately the failure of socialist democracy. It calls for restoring affective experience, including the invisible terrain of sex that doesn't appear in the film. If the crumbling cityscapes of Italy had once

ignited Gutiérrez Alea's imagination and lead him to make the connection between Italian neo-realism and an emerging Cuban cinema in the 1950s, the landscape of ruin in post-Cold War Cuba provided the backdrop to a re-inscription of neo-realism—melodrama and all—thirty-five years later.

Strawberry and Chocolate inaugurated a new era in Cuban society and film production, with social acceptance of new forms of Cuban identity appearing alongside new generations of Cuban filmmakers working in new, more portable media and in international co-productions, which kept ICAIC alive throughout the 1990s. It was the first Cuban film to be nominated for an Academy Award and to be commercially distributed in the United States—by Miramax—since the early 1970s. Tabío also co-directed Alea's final film, *Guantanamera* (1995), a contemporary road comedy set in the upheaval of post-Soviet economic and social collapse in Cuba and spanning the length of the country.

Awards: Teddy and Silver Bear, Berlin, 1993; Grand Coral, Havana, 1993; Goya for the Best Foreign Film, Spain, 1994; Special Jury Award, Sundance, 1994; nominated, Academy Award, 1995.

¹ José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 143–44.

² Paul Julian Smith, *Vision Machines: Cinema, Literature and Sexuality in Spain and Cuba, 1983–1993*. New York and London: Verso, 1996, 81–98.