SECOND CULTURAL EVENT

STRAWBERRY AND CHOCOLATE

Directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío
Written by Senel Paz
Produced by Cuba, Mexico, and Spain
Miramax Films
Released 1994
117 minutes

LOCKWOOD: There has been an organized effort by your government to deal firmly with homosexuals. It seems that a naively conceived effort was under way to stamp out homosexuality.

CASTRO: We will never believe that homosexuals can embody the conditions and behavioral requirements that would allow us to consider them true revolutionaries, true communist militants. A deviation of that nature clashes with our idea of what a militant communist must be.


No homosexual represents the Revolution, which is a matter for men of fists and not of feathers, of courage and not of trembling, of certainty and not of intrigue, of creative valor and not of sweet surprises.

BORGE: What do you think about homosexuality, lesbianism, and free love?

CASTRO: I won't deny that at a certain moment *machismo* influenced how we viewed homosexuality. I am not homophobic. I have never endorsed, promoted, or supported policies against homosexuals. That was a certain stage associated with *machismo's* heritage.


Marriage is a union voluntarily agreed by a man and a woman who can legally join their lives.

- Cuban Constitution, Chapter III, Article 35
  Ratified in 1976 (My translation)

http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portal/constituciones/constituciones.shtml

Being homosexual, bisexual, transgender or travesty is not a disease; it is neither a perversity nor a crime. They are not due to being seduced at any age, to contagion, to defects in education or to bad examples in the family. They are, as heterosexuality, ways to express sexual diversity. (My translation).

- (Cuban) National Center for Sexual Education
  Mariela Castro Espín, Raul Castro's daughter, runs this government-controlled Center.

We have to abolish discrimination against those persons. We are trying to see how to do that, whether through marriage or civil unions. Socialism should be a society that does not exclude anyone.

Few films have *Strawberry and Chocolate*’s impact and success. It won the Gramado, an important Latin American cinematographic prize, and the Goya, a prize equivalent to the Oscar in Spanish speaking countries. It was the first Cuban film nominated for an Oscar in the United States. Critics in Berlin awarded it the Silver Bear. The Organización Católica Internacional del Cine (International Catholic Cinematographic Organization) surprised everyone when it described the film as exceptional. Due to the church’s homophobic beliefs, many think the film’s defense of religious freedom led to that praise. Also, less visible to the public, the film has generated a lot of scholarship.

In Cuba, criticizing the government or defending human rights can bring serious problems with the repressive apparatus of state security. For that reason, it is remarkable this motion picture was filmed in Cuba during the Special Period, the economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet block. It is also surprising that the public jammed cinemas and spoke freely about a film that criticizes the government and its injustices against sexual minorities. Even Castro welcomed the actors in a private audience. It was as if censorship stopped for a few days. In this film and in the story that inspires it1 Paz criticizes the Revolution by saying that Cuban nationalism and socialism must integrate L/G/B/T people.

As all works that expose the injustices of dominant ideologies, *Strawberry and Chocolate* controls the drama so its criticism of those ideologies does not exceed the limits of the permissible. We never see Diego with a companion, we do not even know if he has one. We see Germán, his platonic friend, also without a companion. Does this mean that those who made the film do not allow us to glimpse at the sex lives of the two gay men? We know both desire sexual partners; can they not find them?

In the written story, Diego tells David how he lost his virginity at age twelve; on the screen David gets up and leaves when Diego starts narrating the story. In the written account, Diego asks David to narrate his first sexual experience and his

---

fantasies; David changes the topic, so we are left ignorant about them.

But in the film David's sexuality shines, as do Nancy's and Vivian's. Nancy does not appear in the printed story and Vivian gets two insignificant mentions. Safeguarding David's heterosexuality is the cinematographic purpose of Nancy's and Vivian's roles, some critics think. Without them, an average theater goer might question David's sexual orientation. This view assumes people who read short stories do not need these assurances.

Others see in the film's ending another effort to make the drama acceptable to the mainstream. Jobless, Diego must emigrate alone when David and Nancy start their relation. But this interpretation ignores that Miguel is maneuvering to expel David from the university; moreover, many will question David's heterosexuality as Miguel spreads his poison. Emigrating will be difficult for David and Nancy, so their future in Cuba is uncertain.

Because in Latin America a man can have sex with another man and preserve his heterosexuality if he penetrates but is not penetrated (that is, if he is "active" but not "passive"), some wonder why neither the written story nor the film narrates a sexual relation between David and Diego. According to Paz, his purpose in both works was to expose the injustices toward homosexuals in Cuba. Achieving his goal was easier with David as a heterosexual revolutionary without sexual relations with Diego than with David as a heterosexual revolutionary in intimate relations with Diego. In addition, adds Paz, if David and Diego had sex, Cuban authorities would have not approved the film and the Cuban public would have not welcomed it.

But the film criticizes the machista idea that men in "passive" positions during sexual acts are homosexual because they place themselves as women having sex with men. When Vivian goes to the bathroom in the inn, David watches through the hole in the wall when he hears a woman vocalizing her pleasure. What does he see? A woman thrusting on top and a man laying down passively on the

---

2 For expediency's sake we may translate machismo (the noun from which the adjective or adverb machista derives) as the Latin American version of male chauvinism. Comparing Latin American and Cuban machismo with Anglo-American male chauvinism is inadequate but a full explanation is beyond this scope of this document. One of the groups will explain machismo to the class.
Positions in sexual acts have nothing to do with gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

The Dark Side of the Moon reached the cutting edge Strawberry and Chocolate did not dare. The latter was a film one had to go to the theater to watch, the former was a soap opera broadcasted on national television in 2006. As we said before, we never see if Diego or Germán have companions; but the leading character in the soap opera was a married man who in his relation with another man confronts his homoerotic feelings. Because the state controls and owns all mass media in Cuba, government approval was necessary to air the novel. Despite competing with the transmission of baseball games and despite an intense controversy Strawberry and Chocolate did not generate, the Dark Side of the Moon had the highest ratings of any program in the history of Cuban television. The soap opera was so daring because Strawberry and Chocolate had laid the foundations. Apparently, reactions to Strawberry and Chocolate and to The Dark Side of the Moon suggest that Cuban society can criticize its homophobia.

---

Translating this phrase is tricky. El Otro Lado de la Luna is the title in Spanish. The Other Side of the Moon is the literal translation. "El otro lado de la luna" and "el lado oculto de la luna" (the occult side of the moon) denote the side of the moon we do not see from Earth. English uses "the dark side . . ." to name the same thing, so The Dark Side of the Moon is a correct translation but not the best. The soap opera's title obliquely refers to the leading character's sexual orientation, unknown to him till he met another man. "Bad" or "evil" are two meanings of "dark;" hence, because some people view homosexuality as a moral flaw, The Dark Side of the Moon can convey a meaning not present in the original. I have to use The Dark Side of the Moon because that is the translation everywhere.

Strawberry and Chocolate's drama occurs in Havana in 1979. We can infer this from the newscast reporting that Nicaraguan dictator Anastacio Somoza left his country. Somoza left Nicaragua on July 17, 1979. We hear the news when David and Miguel meet at what looks like a movie theater at the university.

CHARACTERS

DAVID - University student. He suppresses his interest in art and literature because he must study things he thinks are useful to the motherland. This obligation arises, according to him, from his debt to the Revolution that made it possible for him, a son of peasants, to receive an education. He cannot reciprocate Diego's sexual desire but his interest in Diego's forbidden knowledges opens his mind to new ideas and creates their friendship. His homophobia disappeared as he got to know Diego, especially after Diego's effort to save Nancy's life when she attempted suicide. David undermines Latin machismo: A virgin at age twenty-two, he loves art and literature, his best friend is a religious homosexual and he has the courage to take the risks these feats involve.

As you saw in footnote one, the title of the story that inspired the film refers to "the new man". Creating this new man was an important revolutionary goal. Committed to communism, this man would not respond to capitalist incentives, be morally flawless, incorruptible, atheist, heterosexual, and resolute. David is a product of the system geared to produce this man. He is a new man when the film ends but he owes his transformation to a gay friend, not to the homophobic government. His moral and psychological growth led David to abandon homophobia and to challenge other prejudices. For example, his relation with Nancy shows he has also overcome biases about intergenerational sex, educational differences, and class. His example is a lesson for all.

5 Used in a generic sense in the 1960s, "hombre" ("man" in English) meant "humanity." To avoid sexist biases today we prefer "humanity" or "humankind."
DIEGO - Homosexuals have strawberry, heterosexuals have chocolate. David verified Diego's homosexuality when Diego ordered strawberry though chocolate was available in the ice cream parlor. Diego feels an intense sexual attraction toward David. Because David does not reciprocate it, the desire becomes a friendship. As a platonic friend, Diego attracts David by exposing him to things the Revolution censors: Mario Vargas Llosas' books; the works of José Lezama Lima, specially *Paradiso*, and the works of Severo Sarduy. He also introduces David to John Donne, an English author; to Maria Callas, the famous soprano; to treatises about Havana's architecture, and to Johnny Walker Red, the enemy's drink. Until now brainwashed by the Revolution, naive David begins to enjoy forbidden fruits.

During a conversation between David and Diego, the classic Cuban song *Las Ilusiones Perdidas* (Lost Illusions) playing in the background means two things: Diego's revolutionary past and his accepting that David will not be his sexual partner. Diego supported the Revolution during its first years. He taught peasants to read and planned to be a teacher, but homophobia and refusing indoctrination did not allow him to reach that goal. He was in prison during the UMAP years. Toward the end of the film, Diego is fired from his job and blocked from future employment in cultural affairs. This is the punishment for sending a letter to the government protesting the censorship of German's work. Leaving Cuba is Diego's only alternative.

NANCY - Diego's neighbor and his best friend. A person of many contradictions. She is religious (in the Afro-Cuban sense) but spies on her neighbors for an atheist government. She taught Diego that raising the volume of the radio allows him to speak against the Revolution without the neighbors listening. She does not work in a country that punishes idleness; instead, she sells contraband merchandise for dollars. To have dollars in the Cuba of 1970s was a serious crime. She had been a prostitute.

Nancy does not appear in the written story. What is her function in the film? Assuring David's heterosexuality could be one, as we saw before. Exposing the government's corruption could be another, as the previous paragraph suggests. David and Diego cement their friendship contributing to Nancy's recovery after her suicidal attempt. Perhaps Nancy represents Cuba. Due to their friendship despite their differences, David and Diego show that only a mutual effort between its diverse citizens can save the country.
GERMÁN - Diego's platonic friend. The government pressed him to modify his sculptures to allow him to exhibit them in Mexico. The sculptures mix Catholic and Marxist themes. One shows Christ with a sickle and a hammer, the symbols of communism. German yields to pressures, which creates friction with Diego. In a rage, German shatters his work to pieces.

MIGUEL - David's roommate at the university. He encourages David to spy on Diego because, according to Miguel, homosexuals threaten the Revolution. Without Miguel's urgings, David might have not gone back to Diego's apartment; thus, without intending it Miguel contributed to David's transformation. Miguel blackmailed Diego to sign documents to expel David from the university. Diego refused.

VIVIAN - Apparently David's first girlfriend. She leaves him to marry a diplomat who can offer her the luxuries only the governmental elite enjoys. She wants to continue her liaison with David, but he refuses.
As with Water, after watching the film I will divide the class into six groups. Each group will: (1) Select one of the following topics (two groups cannot work on the same topic); (2) Give a class presentation; (3) Write a paper. Each group's class presentation and paper will be on the group's topic.

To compile its report, all groups will search bibliographic databases, encyclopedias, card catalogs at several libraries, Research Navigator, the Internet and others. I will not accept bibliographies listing Internet URLs unless the URLs come from reliable sources. If you list URLs, they will be a few in a bibliography where scholarly sources predominate. As with Water, Strawberry and Chocolate's content influenced my selection of topics.

THE SIX GROUPS


GROUP (1) WILL NOT ENGAGE IN BIOGRAPHIES. JUST EXPLAIN WHAT PEOPLE DID, NOT THE STORIES OF THEIR LIVES.

(3) **KEY PERSONS IN CUBA'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY:** José Martí, Fulgencio Batista, and Ernesto (Che) Guevara. UNLIKE GROUP (1), THIS GROUP WILL ENGAGE IN BIOGRAPHIES.

I am leaving out many important persons because we do not have time for all of them.
(4) **FIDEL CASTRO**: Due to Castro's important role, a group will focus only on his life. Infancy, adolescence, youth, middle age and mature years. His personality, wives and other women, children and grandchildren. His entry into Cuban politics and his ideological formation. Was he a communist from the start or a nationalist forced by American policies into Soviet arms? Assess the failures and successes of his Revolution.

(5) **CUBAN SOCIETY**: Focus on religion, gender, and race (including the Afro-Cuban rebellion of 1912). Explain why the Catholic Church's influence on Cuba has been less than in other Latin American countries. Afro-Cuban religions and La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre. As you present Afro-Cuban religions and Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, show those moments in Strawberry and Chocolate when these appear. Besides explaining relations between men and women, as part of its explanation of machismo this group must deal with the Cuban and Latin American view that a man having sex with another man does not make him a maricón. A maricón is a man with effeminate behavior who is anally penetrated by another man. The penetrator retains his macho status. Explain the concepts of maricón, loca (why was Diego called "la loca roja" - the red queer), entendido, and bugarrón. This Latin American view, so foreign to Americans, is related to male domination and to women's inferior social position. Discussions about gender relations ignoring it are incomplete.
CUBAN MUSIC: Because music has been one of Cuba's most influential contributions, this group will focus on music. Lacking time to play full songs, play to the class representative parts of key songs. These songs will have sounds illustrating points you want to make. For example, as you explain the African and Spanish elements of Cuban music, consider playing a song exhibiting those influences with a South American song with Indian and Spanish influences. On the popular side, discuss bolero, rumba, son, danzón, zapateo, conga, mambo, nueva troba, cha cha cha and more recent styles. Time allowing, include singers as Benny Moré (you heard him in the film), Celia Cruz, Gloria Stephan and others. On the classical side, discuss the two great Cuban zarzuelas (Gonzalo Roig's Cecilia Valdés and Ernesto Lecuona's María la O) as musical masterpieces and as narrators of gender and race relations. We heard Lecuona's piano in the film, so consider including it in your presentation.
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following sources helped me prepare this assignment. I recommend them as starting points but you have to consult others. Your group paper's bibliography must list peer reviewed sources not listed below.

Read your group's assignment first, then read this bibliography to locate those sources relevant to your group's topic.

Separating fact from propaganda is not easy when learning about Cuba. Exercise your critical abilities.

PRINTED MEDIA


Argote-Frere, Frank. Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strong Man. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Written by a Kean professor, this is probably the best Batista biography. Chapter 4 (Machadato) and Chapter 5 (Sergeants' Revolt) explain Batista's rise to power. Other chapters outline his early years and explain how in public life Batista dealt with his race and humble origins.

Ayorinde, Christine. Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004. An analysis of Afro-Cuban religions from colonial times to the present. Chapter 1 argues the importation of slaves from different parts of Africa explains the diversity of Afro-Cuban religions. Spiritism, very popular in the island, is not of African origin. Chapters 4 and 5 survey the relation between the Revolution and Afro-Cuban religions. Chapter 4 lists the categories of persons sent to the UMAP camps, which included gay men and religious people. Read with Benítez-Rojo, Cros Sandoval, Helg, Michelle Gonzalez, and Sawyer. Also read with parts of Lumsden's Chapter 2 and Appendix A, also in his book.


Bunck, Julie. *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in Cuba*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994. The author's assessments of the successes and failures of the Revolution in gender equality, shaping young people's minds, and sports as a political tool. Read her comments on gender equality with Lumsden's Chapters 1 (pp. 20 ff.), 6, and 9.


Gonzalez, Michelle. Afro-Cuban Theology: Religion, Race, Culture, and Identity. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. An explanation of how African beliefs and Roman Catholicism mix in Cuba. Chapter 5 explains the history of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, began in the seventeenth century as a local devotion among slaves. After her trajectory through the wars of independence, in 1916 Pope Benedict XV proclaimed her Cuba's patron saint. The virgin is related to Ohún, a Nigerian goddess. You see this virgin several times in Strawberry and Chocolate. Other chapters deal with Yemayá (Virgen de Regla), Changó (Saint Barbara), Babalu Ayé sometimes spelled Babalú Ayé (Saint Lazarus), and Orunmía (Saint Francis of Assisi). Read with other sources about Cuban religions.


Henken, Ted. "From Son to Salsa: The Roots and Fruits of Cuban Music." Latin American Research Review 41.3 (2006): 185-200. A review of several books about Cuban music. The information in this article, in the books it reviews and the data the group on Cuban music can find eliminates the need to add to this bibliography more sources about this topic.

Hodge, G. Derrick. "Sex Workers in Havana: The Lure of Things." NACLA Report on the Americas 38.4 (2005): 12-15. Sex tourism and prostitution in today's Cuba. The contrast between pingüeros (male prostitutes) and jineteras (female prostitutes) on the one hand and penetrating man and penetrated man on the other exposes the social construction of gender and sexuality. The emergence during the Special Period of an ideology of individualism and consumption. The emergence during the Special Period of an ideology of individualism and consumption. Read with Argüelles, Part I and with Young. See Wonders et. al. Also Lumsden's Chapter 2.
"Colonization of the Cuban Body: The Growth of Male Sex Prostitution in Havana." NACLA Report on the Americas 34.5 (2001): 1-12. This article paved the way for the one by the same author cited above. Hodge argues that pingüeros transformed the old concepts of bugarrón and maricón (penetrator and penetrated) adjusting them to the emerging capitalist economy. Pingüeros are more acceptable than female prostitutes because pingüeros "represent the strength of the powerful Cuban phallus conquering the bodies of foreigners." Read with Wonders et. al.


Maher, Michael, "The Lost Sheep: Experiences of Religious Gay Men in Havana, Cuba." Journal of Religion and Society 9 (2007): 1-15. Diego in Strawberry and Chocolate is gay and religious, so this paper is very relevant. Maher interviewed ten religious gay men in Cuba. Santería seems to be the religion most accepting of gays. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, the ten men lacked supporting communities, so personal reflection and prayer were their only means of reconciling religion and sexuality. Despite a present easing, the Revolution has suppressed both religion and homosexuality. Read with other entries about religions in Cuba.


Mitchell, Mozella, G. Crucial Issues in Caribbean Religions. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. Chapter 4 compares Cuban santería with similar practices in Haiti, Brazil, and Trinidad. Table 1 in that chapter charts the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian deities and their corresponding Catholic saints. According to Mitchell, the Yoruba belief system absorbed and syncretized Catholic beliefs contributing to the creation of Afro-Latin American religions. Chapter 7 examines santería in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The book also discusses Espiritismo and La Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Cobre). Read with Cros Sandoval, Michelle Gonzalez and other sources about Afro-Cuban religions.


Olson, James S. and Judith E. Olson. *Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995. Though focused on Cuban Americans, chapters one and three have excellent summaries of Cuban history and culture. The historical reviews emphasize how class and race influenced events. Read Pérez, Thomas, and Sawyer.

Pérez, Jr. Louis, A. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. An excellent source now in its third edition, this book is a history of Cuba from precolonial times to the mid 1990s, including the Special Period. It ends with one of the most extensive bibliographies anywhere. Chapter 4's closing pages and Chapter 5's first half explain why some Cubans' desire to maintain the slave plantation economy in the nineteenth century led them to seek annexation to the United States. Read these chapters with Thomas's Chapter VII. Chapter 9 outlines the rise of nationalism in the 1920s. Scattered throughout the book you will find references to Partido Independiente de Color and the Afro-Cuban revolt of 1912. A complement to Thomas's.


Sawyer, Mark. *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Examines race relations in Cuba since the Revolution. The Revolution has not been racist but it has not eliminated racial inequality, which increased during the Special Period. Black Cubans have benefitted from access to education and health care. The exile community's equation of the struggle for racial justice with communism is out of touch with present Cuba. Read with Ayorinde, Benítez-Rojo, Cros-Sandoval, Helg, Edward Gonzalez et. al., and Olson.


Staff Report. "A Barrier for Cuba's Blacks." *Miami Herald.* June 20, 2007. One of a series of articles on race relations in the Caribbean, this article is focused on Afro-Cuban.


AUDIOVISUALS

All in English or with English titles


Gay Cuba. Dir. Sonja de Vries. Frameline, 1995. VHS. Shows L/G/B/T people marching in the streets with the gay flag and same-sex couples in public openly expressing their mutual affection. The homophobic horrors of the 1960s and 1970s no longer exist but de Vries's report seems too rosy to be true.


WEB SOURCES

As with all websites, use them cautiously.
I cannot assure you they are reliable.
Some are overtly political, others conceal their agendas.

(1) http://www.msu.edu/~colmeiro/alea.html

(2) http://afrocubaweb.com
Many links to information about Afro-Cubans and Afro-Cuban culture

(3) http://www.angelfire.com/planet/islas/index/html
Quarterly Journal of Afro-Cuban Issues

(4) http://www.cucad.org
Center for the Understanding of Cubans of African Descent

(5) http://www.cubaupdate.org
New York City-based Center for Cuban Studies

(6) http://www6.miami.edu/iccas/
Institute for Cuban and Cuba-American Studies

(7) http://www.cubagob.cu/
Official site of the Cuban government

(8) http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/
Granma newspaper site. Granma is Cuba's Communist Party newspaper

(9) http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/granma/index.html
Granma archives index

(10) http://www.cubasi.cu/
Wide coverage, with sound and video. Cuban government runs the site
CONCLUDING REMARK

In this assignment I use "L/G/B/T" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), "Afro-Cuba" and "Afro-Cuban." These terms are common in the United States, not necessarily in Cuba. Cubans use "gay" and "lesbiana" but these words for them do not evoke the identity and political consciousness of their American counterparts. Likewise, Black Cubans refer to themselves as "negros," which we might translate as "Negroes," a word no longer used in the United States. Mixed-race Cubans use "mulatos" to refer to themselves.

Though mindful of these shortcomings in my usage, I wrote this assignment to American college students taking a course where we cannot study these complexities.