

**FRESA Y CHOCOLATE:
THE RHETORIC OF CUBAN
RECONCILIATION**

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FRESA Y CHOCOLATE: THE RHETORIC OF CUBAN RECONCILIATION

By Enrico Mario Santí*

In memory of four Brothers:**Armando Alejandro, Jr., Carlos Costa, Carlos de la Peña and Pablo Morales**

Ever since the 1993 release of the popular Cuban film Fresa y Chocolate, by directors Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío and with a script by Senel Paz, a lively debate about its content and significance has taken place. This was in itself predictable, given both the subject of the film--the sentimental education of two Cuban men, one gay the other straight--and the specific circumstance in which the film was produced--the so-called Cuban "special period," following the collapse of Real Socialism in Europe and thus in the middle of the worst crisis the Castro regime has faced in its thirty-eight year history. Whereas outside of Cuba the film was hailed as further evidence that perestroika had reached the island and the Castro brothers were finally releasing their grip on dissidence, within the Cuban community, both in the island and among exiles, the film sparked conflicting opinions. Some viewed it as an unwitting critique of long-standing official policy regarding gays, while others saw it as manipulative, further proof of the regime's ongoing deception about its actual policies, particularly at a moment when it attempts to win over allies abroad in order to resolve an unprecedented economic and political crisis. The debate appeared to reach a climax when the film was bought up by Miramax for U.S. distribution and nominated for the Oscar for best foreign film. And it appeared to resolve itself when the film lost out to no less than Russia's entry in the same contest.

One can of course only praise that a film would be capable of sparking discussion on such vital civic topics, even if the debate should have been based most often on previous political positions rather than on close readings. Indeed, contribution to civic discussion was the

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substance of the directors' ultimate defense of their film. Yet despite their best wishes, the equivocal nature of the debate has been especially glaring, I think, precisely among members of the Cuban community, both in and out of the island. For us the film poses not just a limited statement about the status of gays in Cuba, but, according to what the directors themselves claimed, a general plea for tolerance, and thus presumably and by extension, a plea for the co-existence of contesting political philosophies, such as one-party socialism and multi-party liberalism; capitalism and state-directed economy, within the same national ethos.¹ All references are of course to Fresa y chocolate, a film by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío. A production of the Cuban Institute of the Arts and Films Industry (ICAIC), co-produced by IMCINE and Tabasco Films-Mexico, Telemadrid and SGAE-Spain; 104 minutes. If we agree that in the film Diego is not just a gay man but a Cuban nationalist and, in the end, a future exile, and further, that David is not just a straight man but a reformed or newly-enlightened young Communist, then it is clear that under the banner of a strong nationalism the film proposes the eventual reconciliation of the two political halves of the Cuban nation, torn asunder for almost four decades by the Communist regime. In one of the film's final scenes, when the two friends are taking a view of Havana harbor, Diego laments that he is enjoying that view for the last time, to which David responds by questioning whether in fact it would be his last. Barring the possibility that here David is referring ironically to Diego's future reconversion to revolutionary zeal, his question suggests that Diego will indeed return to Havana after the disappearance of the regime's historic intolerance, perhaps even the disappearance of the regime itself.

That reconciliation should be the ultimate ethical horizon of Fresa y Chocolate should not surprise us, therefore, if we view the film within the context of the Cuban government's recent attempts to pursue that precise policy with respect to Cuban exiles. Under the general rubric of diálogo, Havana has encouraged and at times sponsored sustained contacts with sympathetic groups of Cuban emigrés since at least the late 1970's. Under this policy, family reunification, money remissions, guided tours and participation in youth camps, all under state supervision,

have occurred at a sustained pace. With the onset of the special period in 1989, and the government's increased need for hard currency, these contacts, now formally organized as state enterprises, have increased still. To be sure, the ideology that sustains these contacts is reconciliation, stated in principle as a policy of mutual tolerance of differing political views and the consequent strengthening of national identity. In practice, however, reconciliation has rather come to mean acquiescence to policy interests of the Cuban State, particularly opposition to the U.S. embargo, a cease-fire of exile hostility against the regime and a consequent preservation of the status quo. On this particular issue, one should add, the Cuban Catholic Church, which at times has been a severe critic of the regime, has played a role that, while certainly active, has not always known how to articulate its own interests apart from the state's own.

The Cuban film institute (ICAIC) has at various times adopted the treatment of the theme of reconciliation, as in films like Jesús Díaz's 1985 melodrama Lejanía and the more recent Vidas paralelas by Pastor Vega. But Fresa y chocolate is certainly the best dramatic articulation of the policy. My own reading of this film takes as a point of departure this political debate, which I consider somewhat broader, though not necessarily more privileged, than the debate over gay rights in Cuba on which discussion of the film has focused most often. Paul Julian Smith has done more than anyone I know to focus on that aspect of the film, but I shall not pursue that reading.² My own limited interest lies, briefly put, in analyzing the terms of political reconciliation that the film sets out for its reader. In order to pursue this reading I shall first review some of the facts known about Fresa y chocolate in its different media versions. Second, I shall go on to consider two key moments of the film on which these terms of reconciliation appear to rest. In this section I attempt to understand the film's language as best I can, though I should warn that my knowledge of film theory is minimal and my interest, as I have said, is largely thematic. I shall close this analytical section by sharing passages from a unpublished text that lends support to my reading, and shall end my essay with some remarks regarding the film's rhetoric of reconciliation, which I regard to be a far cry from the reality of reconciliation, a

worthy if still unrealized goal in today's Cuba.

First, some circumstantial facts, some of them well-known. In 1990, Senel Paz, a Cuban fiction writer (b. Fomento, 1950) finished writing a short story "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" in Havana. The story was a monologue told by a certain David about his relationship with whom he himself calls "un maricón amigo mío," the travails between these two Havana residents, and the sad outcome of their friendship. That same year the story won the International "Juan Rulfo Prize," sponsored annually by Radio-France, the Mexican Cultural Institute and the Maison d'Amérique Latine in Paris. The story was published the following year in both Mexico and in Cuba and was widely translated. Previous to this story Senel Paz had published relatively little: El niño aquel, a 1980 book of short stories, won a literary prize in Cuba followed three years later by a novel, Un rey en el jardín. Parallel to his fiction were Paz's screenplays: Una novia para David (which provides the first dramatic rendering of the protagonist of Fresa y chocolate) became a 1985 movie directed by Gerardo Chijona. More successful, or at least better known, was his second film Adorables mentiras (Adorable Lies), directed by Rolando Rojas, which among other characters included Nancy, the former prostitute who reappears in Fresa y chocolate.

It was only after Paz's story won the "Juan Rulfo Prize" abroad that it became well-known in Cuba, though it appears that at least at first its circulation was made scarce for reasons that are not entirely clear.³ Be that as it may, what does appear certain is that in order to overcome that seeming attempt at censorship, a number of dramatic versions of the story began to proliferate in Havana's little theatres. Between 1991 and 1993 no less than four different versions of these plays were staged in Havana, sometimes simultaneously. One of them, the most popular by all accounts, retitled "La catedral del helado" (The Ice Cream Cathedral), held over several months in the avant-garde Teatro del sótano, was a one-man show for a single actor and two characters.⁴ In a 1994 interview published in Spain, Senel Paz elevates the number of such

play versions to eight, not counting the one he himself was then writing for a festival in Germany.⁵ Like the textual history of El beso de la mujer araña, a text to which the Senel Paz story is often compared, the narrative of Fresa y chocolate was first a play before becoming a film.

One cannot underestimate the importance of these dramatic versions of the Paz story. By 1991 Cuba was already undergoing the so-called "special period", which placed undue restraints on all cultural activity, presumably for economic reasons. It is therefore plausible that the Paz story was slowly becoming the implicit protest symbol of this period-- much as the jineteras would do for Cuba's sexual tourism and the balseros, or rafters, for the regime's moral and economic failures. It is likely that this stage popularity is what must have caught the attention of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, the legendary film Cuban director and member of Cuba's nomenklatura, though it was not until Senel Paz's tenth attempt at a commissioned script that Gutiérrez Alea finally approved the film project. This tenth and final script version-- whose first title was Enemigo rumor (Rumor Enemy), after Lezama Lima's first book of poems-- dates between 1991 and 1992. It was the basis for the final film product, though upon comparison with the published script it is clear that the film changed much of it.⁶ Production of the actual film took place throughout 1992 and 93, though it was halted briefly at one point because of Gutiérrez Alea's illness and in order to accommodate co-direction with Juan Carlos Tabío, a younger colleague. Release of the film came in late 1993, in time for Havana's 15th Latinamerican Film Festival, where it won several prizes, including Best Picture. After that it went on to play to record crowds. Predictably, and like the play versions that preceded it, the film became a barometer of the times. In 1994, Fresa y chocolate won Best Picture at both the Berlin and Gramado Festivals. After Miramax Pictures and Robert Redford bought the rights for U.S. distribution, it was nominated for Best Foreign Film. In April 1995, after a long battle with cancer, Gutiérrez Alea himself passed away in Havana. Before his death, he completed a last film, Guantanamera, which is widely regarded as his swan song, both his work's and the Cuban Revolution's.

It was not the first time that a Cuban film was based on a homosexual theme, and particularly homosexual repression under the present regime. In 1983 Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal had released Conducta impropia, a scathing documentary on that very topic and based on a series of interviews with a number of former inmates, some of them gay, in the UMAP work camps. The UMAP work camps, as is well known, were part of a vast web set up throughout the island by the Castro regime between 1965 and 1969 in order to confine and presumably rehabilitate various types of dissidents, varying from the religious to the sexual, among the Cuban population. While a full account of the UMAP camps has never been made, it is likely that homosexuals were the largest and most oppressed among the various inmate groups held there.⁷ Conducta impropia documented other incidents of homosexual repression and diaspora throughout the history of the regime, such as the Mariel exodus, but clearly the UMAP camps were its focus and what damaged most the regime's image.

So much so, in fact, that soon after Conducta Impropia was released, Gutiérrez Alea began a polemic with Almendros in The Village Voice, lasting between August and October 1984, in which he denounced the film as "a document through which one can arrive at an "authentic" image of our reality here and now. But its lack of historical sense and social context determines its superficiality and turns the film into a document that reveals instead the human misery of its authors." In the same text Gutiérrez Alea mentioned the UMAP camps; he did not deny their existence, to be sure, but rather minimized their importance, claiming that they were merely camps where "many homosexuals performed their military service." But he also admitted that the camps had been a mistake and "created a scandal that fortunately resolved itself in their disappearance and a rectifying policy." Finally, Gutiérrez Alea complained that Conducta impropia had referred to the UMAP work camps "as if they had taken place yesterday or might still be taking place," when in fact they had disappeared seventeen years before. In his response, Néstor Almendros seized on this very point, among others, to counter that it was hardly absurd to

discuss events on film that had occurred barely fifteen years when one considers that the plot of Gutiérrez Alea's then-latest film, The Last Supper, took place more than a century before.⁸

I mention the details of this particular polemic between Gutiérrez Alea and Almendros not only to show that in the treatment of the homosexual theme Fresa y chocolate had an important precedent in Conducta impropia, but also to identify it as its likely dialectical origin. Indeed, in several interviews after the release of Fresa y chocolate Gutiérrez Alea admitted that he would have liked Almendros to have seen his film, thus invoking him, as Paul Julian Smith avers, as an "ideal addressee." Indeed, in an article published in The Miami Herald in April 1994, Gutiérrez Alea went so far as remembering Almendros fondly--"No puedo olvidar que Néstor y yo fuimos amigos durante muchos años y sobre todo en esa etapa de la adolescencia en que se desarrolla la personalidad y en la que los afectos son decisivos." He also disclosed that he would have wished Fresa y chocolate to have been "una respuesta a aquella vieja polémica y quizás un buen motivo para reanudar un diálogo roto desde hace algún tiempo. No hay que olvidar que se trata de un filme que aboga por la tolerancia y por la comprensión del que es diferente."⁹

With the added benefit of hindsight, one can only wonder how Fresa y chocolate, a fictional film whose storyline takes place in 1979, a full fourteen years after the UMAP policies were put into place, could possibly have supplied the "lack of historical sense and social context" that Gutiérrez Alea had once denounced in Conducta impropia. Suffice it to mention this as a revealing instance of misreading. But one need only invoke a minimum dose of common sense to realize that it was not necessary for Néstor Almendros to expire to have Gutiérrez Alea think of him and their earlier debate throughout the production of Fresa y chocolate. Besides the explicit thematic link between the two films, there is the more crucial issue of the family romance between these two filmmakers, an issue which makes their personal relationship, and particularly their political differences, overflow the purely professional realm. It is almost as if in invoking

the memory of their common adolescence--"en la que los afectos son decisivos"--Gutiérrez Alea himself were suggesting we read Fresa y chocolate, in addition, as an allegory of the relationship between the two men, and perhaps even view Diego and David as symbolic stand-ins for Almendros and himself, respectively. There is no reason to speculate, finally, whether Gutiérrez Alea and Almendros were actual lovers. And yet one need go that far to view Gutiérrez Alea's testimony as a possible structural, perhaps unconscious, model of the relationship between the two films as texts. Within that model, Fresa y chocolate would appear to be a guilt-ridden response to Conducta impropia.

By a guilt-ridden response I mean that in Fresa y chocolate we find a ritual of repentance towards Conducta impropia. I caution the concept of ritual, however, because the film does not involve an actual retraction, at least on the part of David (the institutional character), due to the fact that it lacks one essential element. The ritual is evident in, among other things, Gutiérrez Alea's frequent defense of his own film not so much in terms of a gay thematic per se as in those of intolerance in general, a move which ends up short-circuiting any possible sustained comparison with Conducta impropia. What therefore turns Fresa y chocolate into a ritual is the ultimate lack of ethical recognition of an Other, an Other, I might add, that could easily be made present by invoking two simple words of repentance: forgive me. I am of course speaking about the film qua film. But it should be noted, in addition, that Gutiérrez Alea never did, either as a representative of the Cuban government policy or as a friend, ask forgiveness from Almendros. Indeed, Almendros (and, by extension, Conducta impropia) are wholly absent from his film, except perhaps in the cryptic, masked symbol of Diego, the gay character who is virtually expelled from the island. In that sense, Gutiérrez Alea's film, not unlike his 1994 Miami Herald article, represses an ethical dimension of repentance and replaces it with a symbolic ritual. It is precisely that ritual of repentance what dramatizes what I referred to earlier as the "terms of reconciliation" that the film offers as a cure to a sundered Cuban national identity.

How that ritual of repentance, that guilt-ridden response, is dramatized in the narrative of Fresa y chocolate will make the substance of my reading of two crucial scenes, or series of scenes, both at the beginning and end of the film and which essentially make up its narrative frame. We begin by examining one particular thematic structure, the film's principal tale: the friendship between Diego and David. It is a relationship that takes place in 1979, a year before the infamous Mariel exodus. After overcoming a series of obstacles, that relationship reaches a climax, from all appearances at least, with a vindication of friendship above and beyond personal differences. In the case of the two main characters, their differences lie not only in sexual preference but in ideology, or at least in their differing positions vis a vis the Cuban regime. Diego is gay, religious and a nationalist, while David is straight, an atheist and a communist. Their relationship is flawed, in addition, by jealousies, both mutual and contextual. Diego, urged on by Germán, tries to seduce David; whereas David, urged on by Miguel, tries to entrap Diego in illegal activity. In addition, Nancy, at first suspicious of David, who at the beginning of the film is portrayed as a government type, changes in the end to become jealous of Diego's amorous interest in David.

These are not the only symmetries, to be sure. Paul Julian Smith has remarked how the two main characters embody other differences: "not just straight and gay but also provincial and metropolitan, domestic and cosmopolitan, atheist and religious."¹⁰ What is important is that, structurally, these overt differences sustain two separate and mutual betrayals: Diego pretends he is David's friend the better to seduce him; David pretends he is Diego's friend the better to denounce him before the authorities. But if it is true that neither Diego nor David succeeds in betraying the other because both end up becoming the other's real friend, or so it seems, the problem that remains is how the film actually sets out to represent their mutual disclosures of such failures. My view is that this is precisely where a break in the symmetry occurs. In the process what becomes betrayed is not only the friendship between the two characters but the film's interested ideology.

In order to understand the terms of that representation we must begin by establishing that David, and not Diego, is the true subject (in the sense of focus) of the narrative. If David's point of view is the one that prevails in the film, then we can certainly go on to confirm which is the ideology (in the basic sense of the object of focalization) that controls the narrative. The first scene is eloquent in this regard.

If David's point of view is the one that prevails and focalizes FROM THE OUTSET, this makes him logically the film's narrative subject. It is a point of view that the film reinforces not only by focusing on him from the beginning, but also, and above all, showing him as a spectator, or at least as a voyeur. David's gaze, a gaze that is both sexually straight and revolutionary, is therefore the one that controls narrative content both because of what it makes present and what it makes absent: what it leaves in and leaves out. During the initial scene, David unveils two viewing gates, so to speak: first, a curtain that opens to an outside window and through which he identifies a red neon sign proclaiming the all-seeing eye of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the block-by-block watchdogs of revolutionary zeal. The second gate is the hole in the wall through which he sees next door a naked woman on top enjoying sex with a man. By opening and closing both of these gates, successively, David is thus placed in firm visual control of his environment, his posada kingdom, so to speak, uncontaminated by either snitching, the sordid side of Revolution, or fucking, the physical aspects of Eros. David's gaze is thus made to appear as innocent as the subsequent slow pan of Vivian's smooth back and his offer to put off consummation until after marriage, an offer that comes much to Vivian's surprise, and of course bitter disappointment.

David's point of view predominates throughout the film by other means. We often see him alone, and his is the only actual voice-over. At the end of the film, the last image we see is in fact David's face, embracing Diego and crying; it is he who has, if not the last word, certainly the

last tear. This is radically different from the way Diego, the clear object to David's subject, appears to us. Seldom do we see Diego by himself, and when we do see him he appears either as the object of David's look or as the object of the camera's overt editorializing, as in a scene where Diego appears in front of a mailbox dropping the letter that will seal his fate in Cuba and afterward the camera slides to focus on a quotation from José Martí written on a nearby wall. Diego appears most frequently accompanied either by the subject's look or by the look of other characters, like Nancy, Germán or Miguel.

What is the effect of this particular objectification? When in separate interviews both Senel Paz and Gutiérrez Alea have said, in several interviews, that Fresa y chocolate was not a homosexual film, they were not straying from the truth. Fresa y chocolate cannot possibly be a homosexual film because its point of view takes the homosexual as its object, not its subject. The film addresses homosexuality well enough, but it does so strictly from a heterosexual point of view. It is not so much a homosexual as a homosexualist film, in the same way that, for example, an indigenista can never actually be an indígena. Both the homosexual and the indígena are subjects; but both the homosexualist and the indigenista do pretend to speak in their names. They cannot constitute such subjectivity but they can certainly appropriate their representation; whether their objects like it or not, each speaks in the name of their Other.

Beyond the politics of representation that is contained in this formula, I am interested in examining some of its consequences. All points of view entail limits, of course, and this is no exception, particularly if we wish to understand the relationship between Diego and David; or to be more precise, if we wish to understand the limits of David's representation of his relationship with Diego. But to illustrate this we must refer to a series of scenes at the end of the film which makes up its dramatic climax.

We begin with Miguel, who is bothered because of his own apparent lack of influence over David's snitching skills, and who decides to go to Diego's personally in order to incriminate both. Indeed, Miguel, who is what in Cuba we call a cuadrado, an orthodox Communist militant next to whom David appears looks like an ideological whimp, is important in terms of establishing David's focalizing reliability. But what plays out in this series of scenes, to the end of the film, seems to me revealing.

The first chosen scene in this final series refers to the moment Diego opens the door to find Miguel. In the published script, this scene is actually much longer (pp. 102-107) and involves nothing less than the attempted seduction of Diego by Miguel, who has come to offer himself as a print model. In the actual film, however, the scene is simplified and therefore made dramatically awkward by making Miguel seek Diego's complicity in expelling David from school because of an alleged affair. In the published script the seduction scene between Diego and Miguel is interrupted by Nancy and David, who enter Diego's apartment unannounced as Diego is about to go down on Miguel. After the ensuing fight between David and Miguel, the stage directions read as follows: "Diego está sumamente avergonzado, no se atreve a mirar de frente a David." (105) Diego is then heard saying: "David, perdona. ¿Cómo iba a imaginarme que era una trampa?" (106) A brief dialogue among the three characters follows.

In the actual film, however, we slide from the fight among Miguel, Diego and David to the next immediate scene where David catches Diego getting off an embassy car, an action that leads him to suspect that Diego has returned to his old ways of illicit activity behind his back. He bursts into Diego's apartment asking: "Ven acá, chico, ¿no quedamos en que las cosas iban a quedar claras entre nosotros?" David appears to refer to a conversation that has presumably taken place between the two after the last fight scene and this one. In that conversation David has presumably revealed to Diego the part he played in betraying him, but this is not at all certain. From all signs, this should be the most important moment in David's relationship with Diego.

Dramatically, it is the anagnorisis, the moment of honesty and disclosure whose pointed parallel will come in the final scene, where Diego discloses to David his own plot to seduce him. The film, however, treats the whole matter elliptically. Despite the explicitness with which the film treats Diego's confession at the end, to the point of making it the absolute dramatic climax, by contrast it treats David's own confession elliptically, to the point that we cannot tell unambiguously whether any disclosure and apology on his part has occurred at all. In the published script, the rain scene, David's spying on Diego, and Diego's explanation to David are all identical to the film; but there also Diego asks David to forgive him at least twice, perhaps three times--first, inexplicably, because he did not know that Miguel was setting him up (105); twice, implicitly, because he feels bad about being found out by David that he was leaving the country (107); and a third time, in the final scene, because he had plotted to seduce David (115). Indeed, Diego's question at the end was also supposed to be the film's final words: "¿Me perdonas?" (116). No such equivalent appears on the part of David.

To have had David explain to Diego his own relationship to Miguel would have forced him to reveal Miguel's motivation in going to see Diego, thereby confirming the suspicion that David had once formulated about himself at the beginning of the film and of his relationship with Diego: he has indeed become an hijo de puta. Diego asks for David's forgiveness-- twice successively, according to the published script--, reveals to him his personal desires and his plans for a future exile. At no point, however, does David reciprocate by disclosing his own betrayal, never tells Diego he was spying on him. He fails to do this even in the climactic scene when both men are catching a view of Havana. All he reveals then is the relatively minor fact that he bedded Nancy in Diego's bed, which of course Diego knew all about since he had it set up himself. That scene takes place, as anyone familiar enough with this terrain knows, at the foot of El Cristo de La Habana, a gigantic Christ figure erected in Casablanca, at the entrance of Havana harbor. But not even the Christian allure of this site, which suggests the sacrament of confession, is enough to move David to open up to Diego in the same way that Diego had opened up to him.

Instead, Diego's further confession will take place in the following scene, which takes place back at Diego's, or at least in the ruins of his guarida, which he is in the process of dismantling because of his imminent departure. It is then that Diego confesses to David, without any reciprocation on David's part, about his frustrated seduction. The film frames the point of view of this sequence with a low front shot of David's open legs, as if underscoring Diego's final humbling before David, a kind of camera fellatio. In this last scene both men embrace for the last time and we see them crying their heads off. But it is important to note that this embrace, which has so moved Cubans in the island and in exile alike, takes place at Diego's request, in the context of his confession, and as a further gesture to beg David's forgiveness. In asking for a hug, Diego remarks: "pensaba que al abrazarte me iba a sentir más limpio," words that echo pointedly Nancy's earlier statement before the santero about her own planned disclosure to David regarding her own past as a prostitute: "Dentro de mí hay una cosa limpia que nadie ha podido ensuciar."

In contrast with David's moral hygiene--a fact established as early as the first scene--both Nancy and Diego are implicitly "dirty"-- escoria, scum of the earth, the epithet that was used by the regime to denigrate the so-called anti-social elements who sought to emigrate during the Mariel exodus. Diego himself is about to become something else: a gusano, a worm, an exile. If David never gets to disclose any of his own betrayals, and if the film pointedly avoids representing them, it is because making such revelations would unravel not only the character's personal ethical dimension but also expose the politics of the system in which he is inscribed and in which he presumably will spend the rest of his life. The film thus remains very much "inside the Revolution," definitely far from being "against it" though it pretends to be so. Such are, then, the ideologically-determined limits of David's (the film's) point of view, and such the stated terms of reconciliation. One need not be unduly demonic, in fact, to view David's tears in that final scene as an ironic emblem of the film's guilt-ridden conscience, a conscience that chooses a

symbolic ritual over asking for the very forgiveness that his friend has repeatedly begged.

Comparing the Senel Paz story "El bosque, el lobo y el hombre nuevo" and Fresa y chocolate, we find as well and perhaps even more clearly, the presence of bad faith on the part of David, the principal narrator, over Diego's remarks. After all, we are dealing with a dramatic monologue, which rhetorically disallows any ethical reciprocity through the narrator's filtering of all of Diego's remarks. What is most remarkable, however, is that the exact opposite situation occurs in "El cordero, la lluvia y el hombre desnudo," the unpublished parody of this story by the Cuban exiled writer Roger Salas.¹¹ Salas's story, which inverts terms and makes the gay character the speaking subject, portrays the character of David (now renamed Abel, a clear echo of Senel) as a government snitch in search of material on Cuban gays in order to satisfy government demands for a compromising story. Whether or not Salas' story is a conte a clef that provides an insight into the historical origins of Senel Paz's tale, it does contain a pointed response to Fresa y chocolate and, by extension, a rejection of its terms of reconciliation. At its very climax, the following dialogue takes place: "Me han pedido que te vigile--me dijo pegando sus gruesos y duros labios a mi oreja... Lo sabía, lo sé--yo no podía dejar de temblar. Cállate, maricón. No lo puedes saber todo, no eres advivino. Lo supe siempre, darling... muchacho. Y lo harás, eres uno de ellos... pero espero, por tu bien, que un día te olviden. Y te dejen vivir". This brief dialogue may yet be the most lucid explication of Fresa y chocolate, and a capsule summary of my own reading.

What makes Fresa y chocolate work ultimately, if not as an ethical exemplum, then at least as an entertaining film, is its deft manipulation of the rhetoric of melodrama. It is the same rhetoric that reinforces the film's interested ideology. Smith has remarked, in addition to the two main characters' manichean differences, the film's "overemphasis and demonstrativity" as signs of its "aesthetic impoverishment." He states: "Fresa y chocolate does not simply show (montre), it demonstrates (démontre) heavily gesticulating with its directorial hand." In this, accordingly,

Gutiérrez Alea's film appears to retrograde to an earlier, pre-Rosellinian aesthetic that attempts to preserve the illusion of the studio in order to conceal a somber historical reality, which Smith himself describes darkly: "behind the seductive spectacle and public displays of the nazis and the Soviets lay another scene which could not be described and which would come to haunt later imaginations: the death camps;" and so, "while Diego is allowed to invoke the UMAP camps, David can simply dismiss them as an 'error' of the Revolution."¹²

Would it surprise us to learn, in this context, that Melodrama as a genre began with the French Revolution and its aftermath? This is the moment that marks, as Peter Brooks has explained, "the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms--tragedy, comedy of manners--that depended on such a society. Melodrama does not simply represent," Brooks adds, "a 'fall' from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate daily, political concern."¹³

As a symptom of Cuba's special period, following the collapse of Real Socialism in Europe, Fresa y chocolate resorts to melodrama in order to represent the loss of the tragic vision that was the trademark of the epic struggle for anti-imperialist liberation during the early years of the Revolution. But in the urge to resacralize national identity its storyline cannot help but be faithful to the melodramatic rhetoric it adopts, stopping short of being self-critical and ultimately pressing a moral universe that is very similar to the one it attempts to replace. "The ritual of melodrama," says Brooks, "involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them. It can offer no terminal reconciliation, for there is no longer a clear transcendent value to be reconciled to. There is, rather, a social order to be purged, a set of

ethical imperatives to be made clear." (17) Thus in its rush to press the inevitability of Diego's expulsion the film resorts neither to heightened dramatic enactment nor to lyrical language but rather to music--the haunting pieces of Ignacio Cervantes and Lecuona, Benny Moré boleros, the framing devices of José María Vitier--as a way of suggesting that which cannot be stated outrightly but which nevertheless must take place. "The melos of melodrama," Caryl Flynn writes, "picks up where something else leaves off, veering in the direction of what might appear to be pure surfeit or excess... music indeed does take over for melodrama's linguistic deficiencies."¹⁴

In Spanish at least, reconciliarse, to reconcile oneself has two dictionary meanings. The first is social: reconciliation means to be friends again with those who have stopped being so. The second is theological: to return a heretic to the bosom of the Church; to make a light confession, as if to take communion. In the most recent discussions concerning the reconciliation of the Cuban nation, as supported by both the Cuban State and the Catholic Church, the meaning that appears to prevail is the second: the need for the heretic's return, the return hinted at in David's response to Diego's final farewell to Havana at the foot of El Cristo, and in Diego's glowing face upon receiving David's guilt-ridden forgiveness. Beyond whatever margin for interpretation individual religious beliefs may grant us, the question for this reader remains, on the issue of Cuban reconciliation, whether the second definition of reconciliation will ever include the first, whereby old friends can become so again. I confess, in this regard, to prefer to have true friends, new and old, even if that choice should mean that they and I remain exiled from the Cathedral of Ice Cream.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a sampling of the debate and various interviews with the two directors, see the following: "Una película contra la hipocresía castrista gana el festival de La Habana", El País (December 12, 1993), p. 40; "Flirtation Across the Borders of Cuban Ideology," The New York Times (September 24, 1994), p. 8; "I Scream, You Scream: Lawrence Chua Talks with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea," Art Forum 33, 4 (1994), pp. 62-64; Nedda G. Anhalt, "Erótica, exótica y estrambótica," Voces y reflejos, 3, 9 (1994), pp. 51-56; Stephanie Davies, "A Rainbow Revolution", Gay Times (March 1995), pp. 13-16; Dennis West, "Strawberry and Chocolate, Ice Cream and Tolerance. Interviews with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío," Cinéaste, 21, 1-2, (1995), pp. 16-20; José Yglesias, "Strawberry and Chocolate," Cuba Update (November/December 1994), pp. 33-35; Roberto Cazorla, "'En Cuba existe la represión, pero la gente lucha activamente'," Diario Las Américas (June 12, 1994), p. 11-B; Michael Z. Wise, "In Totalitarian Cuba, Ice Cream and Understanding," The New York Times (January 22, 1995), p. 26-H; Kenneth Freed, "Artists and Homosexuals: 'Non-Persons' in Castro's Cuba," Los Angeles Times (February 7, 1995), p. H-4; Patrick Pacheco, "Cause Célebre or Just Propaganda?," Los Angeles Times (January 27, 1995), F-10; José María Espinasa, "Fresa y chocolate: un cuento de hadas," Nitrato de Plata, 20 (1995), pp. 49-52; "Fresa, chocolate y algún humor político," La Nación (Buenos Aires), (October 1, 1994), 3-1; "Cultural Revolution," The Washington Blade (February 10, 1995), pp. 49-51; María Cristina, "Un triunfo para Cuba: Fresa y chocolate," Claridad (San Juan, P.R.) (March 24-30, 1995), pp. 27-28; Gina Montaner, "De fresas y chocolates," El Nuevo Herald (March 13, 1994), p. 15; Luis Rumbaut, "Fresa y chocolate tiene un tercer sabor: la censura," El Diario de la Nación (February 24, 1995), pp., 11, 12; Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Barquet, "Fresa y chocolate," Fe de erratas (Chicago), 10 (May 1995), pp. 82-86; Roberto Madrigal, "¿Un Oscar para el cine cubano?" El Nuevo Herald (February 24, 1995), p. 16; Belkis Cuza Malé, "Ni fresita ni chocolate," El Nuevo Herald (April 9, 1995), p. 17. Echoes of the Cuban government's view of the film can be heard in the following: Ann Louise Bardach, "Conversations with Castro," Vanity Fair (March 1994), pp. 130-35, 166-70, and particularly 135; Sandra Levinson, "New Cuban Film Breaks Taboo, Sweeps Awards at the Havana Film festival," Cuba Update (February 1994), pp. 23-24, Reynaldo González, "Meditation for a Debate, or Cuban Culture with the Taste of Strawberry and Chocolate," tr. William Rose, Cuba Update (May 1994), pp. 14-19. For an interesting discussion of the film from the point of view of Catholic orthodoxy, see Carlos M. de Céspedes, "Fresa y Chocolate en Adviento," Palabra Nueva (Havana), II, 20 (1993), pp. 6-7.

² See his "The Language of Strawberry", in Sight and Sound, 12 (1994), pp. 30-33; and also the chapter "Fresa y chocolate (Strawberry and Chocolate): Cinema as Guided Tour," in his Vision Machines. Cinema, Literature and Sexuality in Spain and Cuba, 1983-93 (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 81-100. On the general subject of homosexuality in Cuba, the best known works are: Allen Young, Gays Under the Cuban Revolution (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981); Marvin Leiner, Sexual Politics in Cuba: Machismo, Homosexuality and AIDS (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1994), and Ian Lumsden, Machos, Maricones and Gays. Cuba and Homosexuality (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). To these one should add the following lesser known documents: the dossier on Cuban homosexuality compiled by the editors of Mariel, "Los

cubanos y el homosexualismo," Maribel, II, 5 (1984), pp. 9-15; Gail Reed, "AIDS, Sexuality and the New Man (sic)," Cuba Update (May 1994), pp. 21-22; Chris Bull and Jorge Morales, "Crisis in Cuba," The Advocate (January 24, 1995), pp. 48-50; and the ongoing research by Sonja de Vries, among which see, "Thoughts in Flight," Cuba Update (February/March 1993), pp. 19-20 and "Homosexuality, Socialism and the Cuban Revolution," Cuba Update (May 1994), pp. 11-13.

³ The story was, however, published in Unión (Edición Continental), I (1991), pp. 25-35. For contrasting readings of the story see Emilio bejel, "Senel Paz: homosexualidad, nacionalismo y utopía," Plural, 269 (February 1994), pp. 58-65; and Eduardo González, "La rama dorada y el árbol deshojado: Reflexiones sobre Fresa y chocolate y sus antecedentes," Foro hispánico, 10 (May 1996), pp. 65-78.

⁴ I owe this information to my friends Mario García Joya ("Mayito"), the cameraman of Fresa y chocolate, his wife, Cuban actress Yvonne López Arenal, and Cuban actor Jorge Folgueira.

⁵ See "Conversando con Senel Paz," Viridiana 7 (1994), p. 157. But see also Gilda Santana's "Fresa y chocolate, el largo camino de la literatura al cine," pp. 133-142, which describes the various drafts of the film. There is an English translation of the Toledo interview in Sight and Sound, 12 (1994), pp. 32-35. The Viridiana issue contains the film's published script, as distinct from the transcript of the actual film, which to date is still unpublished. (Henceforward references to the published script will be to this edition.) The script was also published in Cuba in a small, private press: (Matanzas: Ediciones Vigía, 1994).

⁶ See "Conversando con Senel Paz," passim.

⁷ See Conducta Impropia, ed. Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1984), which includes excerpts from interviews not used in the final cut. For a reading of the film, see Smith, Vision Machines, pp. 59-81. Former victims of the UMAP's have been slow in offering their testimony, but recently have organized as a group in Miami. For an unusual record, see Nelson Noa, UMAP: Cuatro letras y un motivo, destruirnos (Miami: Senda Publishing, 1993).

⁸ See Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, "Cuba sí, Macho No!" The Village Voice (July 24, 1984); Néstor Almendros, "'An Illusion of Fairness': Almendros Replies to Alea," The Village Voice (August 14, 1984); "¡Cuba sí, Almendros no!," The Village Voice (October 2, 1984).

⁹ See Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, "'Fresa y chocolate' y una aclaración," El Nuevo Herald (April 27, 1994), p. 14A.

¹⁰ Vision machines, p. 87.

¹¹ The manuscript of this story was brought to my attention by my friend, the Cuban film director Roberto Fandiño.

¹² Vision machines, pp. 87-88.

¹³ Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 14-15. All references to this edition.

¹⁴ Caryl Flynn, Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), p. 108. For Smith, the film's constant resort to music is part and parcel of its rhetoric of overemphasis, which reinforces "particular shots or plot points which are then in the redoubling characteristic of cultural tourism alluded to explicitly in the dialogue." Cf. Vision Machines, p. 95.