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# The Crisis of Identity in Post-Revolutionary Cuban Film: A Sociological Analysis of Strawberry and Chocolate

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I am a senior Sociology and Spanish double major at the University of Kentucky and a member of the Kappa Alpha Delta International Sociology Honors Society. For this research project I was selected as a recipient of the 2009 A. Lee Coleman Outstanding Sociology Senior award, the highest honor bestowed on a student from the department. This project is the outcome of an ongoing research process that began as a term paper for a graduate seminar class (SOC 735) taught by my faculty mentor and close friend, Dr. Ana

Liberato. Building on the influences of major cultural studies texts that I was introduced to in her class, I later combined the theory with subject matter from film classes taught in the Department of Hispanic Studies, particularly the Latin American and Spanish Cinema courses offered by Drs. Juana Suárez and Susan Larson. After numerous conversations in offices and coffee shops with Dr. Liberato and countless edited and re-edited drafts of my paper comes the final product of my research.

My interest in reaching across disciplines from sociology to film studies, from scholarship on gender and sexuality to Latin American state politics, is exemplified in this work. Other awards and extracurricular activities during my time as an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky that have also enriched my research and scholarly interests include: spending a semester at Antonio de Nebrija University in Madrid, Spain, conducting a summer internship with the local non-profit organization; Kentucky Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (KCIRR); serving as the Vice President of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA); and receiving the 2008-2009 Arts & Sciences Dean's Endowment. It is my hope and aim to continue this type of interdisciplinary research at the graduate level, eventually leading to a doctoral degree and a professorship position. Also, I would like to remain continually committed to the causes of community action and social justice that my research and extracurricular involvement as an undergraduate here reflect.

## The Crisis of Identity in Post-Revolutionary Cuban Film: A Sociological Analysis of *Strawberry and Chocolate*

**A. Lee Coleman Award for Outstanding Sociology Senior submission**

### Abstract

This paper analyzes Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993) from the sociological perspective of film as a cultural text informed by the political, historical, and social world in which it is produced. A symbolic interactionist/cultural studies model is used as a guide for the interpretive and qualitative

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This paper is very interesting and is of sufficient quality to warrant consideration for publication in *Kaleidoscope*. In particular, there is a clearly stated focus and methodology, and the writing is quite clear, organized, and profound. The analysis shows the importance of film in consolidating myths and ideologies, and communicating social struggles and social contradictions. The treatment of gender is quite strong, as is the concept of sexuality as related to national identity. In particular, the analysis highlights the relationship between machismo, homophobia, nationalism, and identity in revolutionary Cuba, showing how the Revolution used the iconic image of Ernesto Che Guevara to create a

heterosexual and male-centered national identity.

The discussion places the 1993 film *Strawberry and Chocolate* in historical perspective, which allows for an understanding of the significance of its release just a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Cuban economy. Therefore, the reader can understand how the film served as a platform to communicate a newly conceived revolutionary identity in Cuba, one marked by tolerance and multiculturalism, although only engendered within the context of national crisis brought about by the "Special Period."



methods utilized in approaching the film. Of particular interest to the sociological analysis of the film is the changing political context of the Cuban Revolution during the “special period” of the early 1990s, the use of stereotypes in the characterization of the actors, and finally its representation of gender and sexuality as a reflection of the revolutionary discourse in Cuba. The paper concludes with reflections on the importance of film to sociological study and theory in general, using *Strawberry and Chocolate* as a salient example.

## Introduction

Cinema is a mode of cultural production that consolidates identity on many levels. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the images displayed on the silver screen play with viewers’ notions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationalism in a number of complex ways. Furthermore, if we read films as cultural texts, as narratives about the society in which they are produced, their underlying ideological messages become useful starting points for understanding and analyzing the social world they attempt to reflect and critique. Many in the area of media and cultural studies have begun to recognize the important connection between the social world and its cinematic representation. Unfortunately however, film has received significantly less attention from sociologists even though much sociological insight may be gained from critically reading films as “cultural texts [with] distinct biases, interests, and embedded values, reproducing the point of view of their producers and often the values of the dominant social groups,” (Durham and Kellner, 2001, p. 6).

This paper attempts to analyze Cuban directors Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío’s (1993) internationally acclaimed *Fresa y chocolate*, released in the United States under the title *Strawberry and Chocolate*. In examining the underlying ideology of the film as a cultural text, I argue that *Strawberry and Chocolate* serves as both a challenge to and a perpetuation of myths about Cuban national identity. However, because cinematic representations give meaning to the very concepts of “nation” and “identity” in the minds of the spectators, an examination of the normative implications about gender and sexual identity as they interact with Cuban nationality in the film is at hand.

Moreover, the paper will consider what the film’s contradictory ideological stance on Cuban national identity, gender, and sexuality says about the historical and political context of the social world in which it was produced. The ultimate aim is to demonstrate the sociological significance of film analysis using *Strawberry and Chocolate* as a poignant example. I will conclude with reflections on how this film specifically is a response to the crisis of the Cuban Revolution,

in this way showing how films always respond to the social environment in which they are produced, thus making them useful for sociological analysis.

## Methodological approach

Because this paper aims to analyze a film from a sociological perspective, traditional methodological approaches in sociology such as the interview-questionnaire or the survey do not apply for this type of analysis. Instead, I use a purely interpretive and qualitative analysis of the film using Denzin’s (1992) symbolic interactionist/cultural studies model. The three central problems in cultural studies Denzin identified will be used in the analysis of the film: “the production of cultural meanings, the textual analysis of these meanings, and the study of lived cultures and lived experiences,” (p. 34). The ultimate aim is not merely an interpretive analysis of the themes and subthemes in *Strawberry and Chocolate*, but an interpretation that is also *political*.

Such a critical and political reading of the film will be accomplished through examining both its historical context and its implicit ideologies on Cuban identity. Through repeatedly watching the film and carefully examining its explicit themes and implicit ideologies in relation to the historical information and academic literature, the film’s messages on gender and sexuality will be shown to be contradictory in that they simultaneously challenge and perpetuate a hegemonic definition of Cuban national identity. This conclusion is drawn from linking the literature to the thematic elements of the film, paying particular attention to stereotyping, characterization, and the connection between the discourse on nationality in the Cuban Revolution and its representation within the film.

## The “new man:” discourses of gender and sexuality in the Cuban Revolution

In what way does the film enlighten the spectator to the connection between its cinematic representations and the actual social environment it is attempting to represent? In order to answer this question, one must first examine the pre-existing discourse of revolutionary politics outside of the film narrative. To understand the underlying ideologies and representations of gender, sexuality, and national identity in *Strawberry and Chocolate*, an understanding of the specific discourses of gender and sexuality the Revolution uses in the construction of Cuban identity is first necessary.

According to Lumsden (1996) the revolutionary discourse combined an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist critique with gender normativity and homophobia. “At the outset of the Cuban Revolution, machismo was deeply ingrained in the fabric of Cuban society. Gender

roles were clearly identified and sharply differentiated,” (p. 55) and Fidel Castro was quoted as appealing to the masses in support of the revolutionary project saying that Cuba “needed strong men to fight wars, sportsmen, men who had no psychological weaknesses,” (p. 61). Thus, men were assigned to the roles of dominant, strong, providers and women to passive, domesticated, wives and mothers. If the Revolution was a progressive break from the dependence of prerevolutionary Cuba on American capitalism, it was at the same time a perpetuation of prerevolutionary traditional ideals regarding gender, the family, and sexual norms.

The image of the “new man” of the Revolution embodied by Ernesto Che Guevara was militant, strong, and traditionally masculine. At the inception of the Revolution there was an overriding sense of the need to cleanse the nation of all of its past ills, not just in its former dependence on the capitalist economy and the decadent culture of the United States, but also in its moral behaviors as well (Bejel, 2001). Indeed, Che Guevara himself was noted for expressing homophobic attitudes and viewing homosexuals as having no value for the purposes of the Revolution (Lumsden, 1996). The popular ideology dominating the cultural imagination of Cuba at the beginning of the Revolution claimed that homosexuality was a sickness, an “antisocial behavior,” and a counterrevolutionary defect left over from the excesses of American cultural decadence (Bejel, 2001). As Green (2001) has been careful to point out, the creation of *machismo* has roots that arose well before the start of the Revolution: “The conflation of virility, masculinity, military prowess, and anti-imperialist fervor embedded in the struggle for Cuban independence in the late nineteenth century found continuity in the guerilla ethos of Che,” (p. 651).

The dominant cultural ideology of *machismo*, as a form of both patriarchy and homophobia, began to be enacted by government policymakers into discriminatory laws in the early to mid-1960s. Homosexuals and other marginalized groups were to experience the first government-sanctioned police raid in 1961 when a mass of “pederasts, prostitutes, and pimps” were rounded up and arrested in the Colón neighborhood of Havana (Lumsden, 1996, p. 58). In 1965, institutionalized discrimination, and specifically institutionalized homophobia, would reach a new radical level with the creation of the UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) work camps where members of society, many of them religious and gay, would be sent to be “rehabilitated” and transformed into proper revolutionary subjects (Bejel, 2001). Finally, the First Congress on Culture and Education held in Cuba in 1971 would officially define homosexuality as an “antisocial behavior” in need of rehabilitation

and regulation by the new State (Green, 2001).

Furthermore, evidence of the effects of such discriminatory policies was reflected in the fact that basically only heterosexual men held positions of power in Cuban society during the Revolution. The Cuban Federation of Women (FMC) was the only women’s organization providing a space to talk about gender in Cuban society, although it has been pointed out that the ideology and political position of the organization regarding gender discrimination in social institutions was severely limited by the imperative to show alliance with the Party (Molyneux, 2000). Also, the only women in positions of power after 1959 had offices, roles, and duties “that befitted traditional expectations of women” (Lumsden, 1996, p. 60), such as secretaries and aids to their male superiors. In addition, following the 1971 Congress on Culture and Education, those officially identified as homosexuals by the State would be barred from employment in “any institution that had an influence on youth” as well as being denied jobs representing the nation abroad for fear of the “dangers of social contact” with the sickness of homosexuality (Lumsden, 1996, p. 73).

The official regulation of gender and sexuality in the nationalist project of the Revolution had to be accomplished through a number of contradictory discourses. Women could only play a minor role supporting the men who would fight for the Revolution. Gays and other marginalized groups had to either be rehabilitated and reformed to meet the conventions of the revolutionary “new man” or otherwise be expelled from the nation altogether. According to Bejel (2000), “the modern Cuban homophobic discourse emerged based on ideological precepts which saw the ‘homosexual’ as a body that endangered the body of the nation,” (p. 157). The irony of this obsessive attempt to regulate bodies and practices through *machista* cultural norms is that it inextricably linked “homosexual” identity with “national” identity: “so-called ‘national identity’ is determined to a large extent as a function of what it is not,” (Bejel, 2000, p. 155). With this background, the viewer can begin to contextualize and better understand the underlying ideologies built into the cinematic representations of *Strawberry and Chocolate*. Again, Bejel (2000) is mindful of the fact that “the questioning of the relationship between heterosexuality and citizenship in Cuban society is manifest in cultural phenomena,” (p. 167) most notably found in the example of the film.

### **Political and historical context: the “special period”**

Before examining the ideological messages in the film, a brief discussion of the political climate and historical context of Cuba during the early 1990s is necessary.

With the decline of the Soviet Union starting in 1989 and leading to its eventual collapse in 1991, Cuba entered into what Fidel Castro called the “special period in a time of peace,” marked by national economic crisis and great political change (Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 171). The sudden halt of foreign aid from the USSR coupled with the ongoing trade embargo from the United States called into question the very survival of the Cuban Revolution seemingly overnight. To give an idea of the profound effect the Soviet collapse had on Cuba’s economy in numerical terms: “between the period of 1989 and 1993, GDP declined 34.8%, consumption fell 30%, exports fell 78.9%, and imports fell 75.6% ... the ensuing food shortage decreased caloric intake by 38%,” (Benzing, 2005, p. 70).

Obviously, the hardship faced by Cuba in the years following the Soviet collapse tremendously affected the economy, but it also affected the culture, politics, and everyday lives of Cuban citizens as well. As far as film production goes, *Strawberry and Chocolate* was one of only two films produced in Cuba in 1993 due to the scarcity of resources available (Agosta and Keeton, 1994). In a country that had only officially decriminalized homosexuality a few years before the film’s release and had placed homosexuals and other “counterrevolutionaries” in work camps in the mid 60s (Lumsden, 1996, p. 66), the national success of Alea and Tabío’s collaboration seems to come as a surprise.

However, as the government had to make concessions to alleviate some of the economic blows suffered from the sudden halt of foreign aid from the former Soviet bloc (evidenced by the legalization of the US dollar in 1993, for example), it also had to make social, cultural, and ideological concessions as well. Among those were official recognition of the failure of the revolutionary State to confront inequalities based on race, gender, and sexuality (Molyneux, 2000). In order to maintain the survival of the revolutionary project, not only were economic changes necessary but also the value of racial minorities, women, and gays had to be recognized as part of a new multicultural era of Cuban history. The contributions of these marginalized groups were finally coming to the fore. In particular, *Strawberry and Chocolate* signaled a changing political climate and historical moment in which “a concession by the regime that its homophobic policies have been counterproductive,” (Lumsden, 1994, p. 194) served as a necessary response to the political and economic crisis brought on by the “special period.”

### **The film in the national and international spotlight**

*Strawberry and Chocolate* was hugely successful upon its Cuban debut in 1993 and its international release in the

following year. It was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1995, after being popularized by Robert Redford in the Sundance Film Festival. It also received several other awards from international film festivals including Berlin’s Silver Bear Award, a Goya Award in Spain, and a near sweep of awards at the Havana Film Festival in 1993 (see *International Movie Database*; and also Agosta and Keeton, 1994).

According to Agosta and Keeton (1994), the film, co-directed by one of Cuba’s “most accomplished and esteemed film directors,” not only gained national and international success, but also it became a “part of the growing critical debate about what it means to be Cuban in the context of the Revolution,” (p. 7). Indeed, the critical acclaim that the film garnered in the nation led one Cuban critic to claim that “*Fresa y chocolate* is the answer of the Revolution to the crisis,” (p. 7). Reviews in American newspapers hailed its release as a signal of a new era of greater “tolerance” and “understanding” of sexual minorities in the communist State (see for example Wise, 1995, p. H26; and West, 1995, pp. 16-21). In spite of all of the media hype over the new “gay Cuban film” that delighted liberal audiences all over the world, Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío insisted in interviews that “the central theme of their film is tolerance and that the gay subtheme is merely a *convenient illustration* of that question” (West, 1995, p. 16, emphasis added).

### **Contradictory messages: gender, sexuality, and national identity**

The film depicts the lives of two men, Diego (Jorge Perugorria) and David (Vladimir Cruz), in the year before the infamous Mariel boatlifts carried hordes of exiles (many of them gay, of course) out of the Havana harbor in 1979 (Rich and Arguelles, 1985). Diego is faithfully devoted to ideals of prerevolutionary Cuban nationalism and Catholicism, evidenced by the iconic shrine he has constructed in his upscale apartment located in Havana’s famous Vedado district. But as a religious, gay Cuban artist, Diego is disillusioned with the repressiveness of the communist State and is thus critical of its attempt to squelch differences, whether ideological, artistic, or sexual.

In contrast, David is a young student in the university, militantly committed to the ideals of the Revolution. He provides evidence of his unquestioned loyalty to the State, flashing his membership card to *La Juventud* (the youth communist league, which officially barred gays) in the scene in which Diego flirts with him at the Coppellia ice cream parlor. Despite their opposing political commitments and differences of sexual preference, the two men become unexpected acquaintances by the film’s end, serving as the allegorical “‘terms of reconciliation’ that the film offers as a cure to a

sundered Cuban national identity” (Santí, 1998, p. 416).

A closer examination of the characterization of Diego and David as mediated through the role of the film’s only substantial female presence, Nancy (Mirta Ibarra), reveals a sort of dialectical relationship that ultimately produces *cubanidad*, or a coherent cultural and national identity. First, Diego and David appear in the film as over-determined stereotypes on opposite ends of a polarized spectrum: the flamboyant *loca* (pejorative term for a gay man) and the macho, atheist “new man” of the revolution. Nancy, on the other hand, acts as a sort of liaison between these two worlds: “the logic of editing repeatedly implies at once an equation of femininity and male homosexuality and a compulsive substitution of the latter by the former” (Smith, 1996, p. 89). In other words, the film questions Diego’s masculinity through the use of “exaggerate[d] stereotypically gay mannerisms,” (Agosta and Keeton, 1994, p. 7). Thus, Nancy, like Diego, represents a threat to the *machismo* embedded in Cuban nationality (Lumsden, 1996) simply by virtue of her sex. And, at the same time, she also signifies a proper object of David’s desire, thus securing his heterosexual masculinity, his assertion of male power and virility, and by extension his authentic Cuban nationalism.

In this way, as Davies (1996) has suggested, the sexual relationship between David and Nancy becomes a metaphor for “historical trauma” (i.e., coming to terms with the “ugly” side of the Revolution and its current fragile state) and a “crisis in male subjectivity” (p. 179). David and Diego must be represented as binary, stereotyped opposites, as thesis and antithesis, in order for the synthesis of a heterosexual union between Nancy and David to flourish. This synthesis signifies a restored male subjectivity (he loses his virginity to Nancy, thus proving to himself and to the audience the security of his heterosexuality) and is intended to be read as the reconciliation of Cuban national identity (Santí, 1998; and see also Birringer, 1996) — but a reconciliation that is precarious at best. Diego and Nancy threaten the dominance of both heterosexual masculinity and nationality with difference but, ultimately, David can incorporate them into his own sense of self as not only successfully straight but also legitimately Cuban.

However, what makes an analysis of *Strawberry and Chocolate* so compelling is not that it perfectly represents David’s heterosexuality and Cuba’s reconciled nationality, but rather it is in the film’s inconsistencies and failures that one begins to find room for more queer readings and critical understandings of these categorical concepts. Although the film was praised both by Cuban and international audiences as a turning point, providing a space for more tolerant views toward sexual minorities in the nation (evidenced by articles in *The New York Times* with titles such as “In

Totalitarian Cuba, Ice Cream and Understanding”), a sociological analysis of the film as a cultural text leads one to ask a series of more critical questions about the political and social environment it reflects.

For example, what ideological framework underpins the discourse of liberation in terms such as “tolerance” and “understanding?” Or what does it mean for the directors to claim that the theme of gay discrimination in the Revolution serves as mere “convenient illustration?” What is being ignored or trivialized in such a claim? Furthermore, within the film’s narrative itself, what does the foreclosure of a possible homoerotic connection between the men signify? And what implications does Diego’s exile at the end of the film have for the possibility of ever reconciling sexual and national identity in Cuba?

The gaps in these questions and the unanswered issues they bring up constitute a nationality crisis, perhaps wrought by the “special period” of Soviet collapse in which the film was produced (Santí, 1998, p. 424), but also, and more importantly even, a crisis of gender and sexual identity that must be managed and regulated. The regulation of gender and sexuality through social norms provides the foundation for any national identity, even in a revolutionary State such as Cuba. These crises are what go unexamined in *Strawberry and Chocolate* and what get glossed over in the directors’ references to overarching themes of liberal humanism and tolerance. As Bejel (2001) has pointed out, “[T]he film represses even as it illuminates some of the problematic aspects of the relationship between homosexuality and Cuban nationality,” (p. 160), which is to say that also the film stops short of an actual critique of the oppressive aspects of Cuban nationality: namely, patriarchy, heterosexism, and homophobia.

*Strawberry and Chocolate* attempts to create strict binaries and is “driven by a conception of the mutual exclusivity of the categories of sexual desire” (Foster, 2003, p. 156), yet it never fully separates Diego from David, and it never satisfactorily discloses the possibility of a homoerotic bond. While Diego is exiled at the movie’s end, and the potential of occupying the seemingly contradictory identity of both gay *and* Cuban becomes an insurmountable obstacle, the hope rests in the fact that the two identities are actually inseparably linked. In other words, by negation, “that which is marginal becomes central” (Bejel, 2001, p. xv) to the Cuban national consciousness. Indeed, the film inadvertently demonstrates that as “queer sexuality alludes to the larger question of the predicament of postcolonial nationalism, its literal place in the social and political order is of central importance as well,” (Leung, 2004, p. 159).

### Conclusion: a sociology of film?

What would a sociology of film look like? What does

it mean to have sociological knowledge about the movies? ... Ultimately, sociological knowledge of film would surely mean a body of 'true' statements about the role of the institution in society, its effects, the organizational context within which it operates, the nature, attitudes, and preferences of its audience, and the interrelations between these and endless other factors. (Tudor, 1975, p. 15)

Because the aim of sociological inquiry is to explain and understand real-world phenomena, what can be gained from examining the fictional text of a film? After all, should the study of film not be left to those in the departments of humanities, English, or cultural studies? Because we live in an increasingly "cinematic society" (Denzin, 1995) flooded with a constant flow of media images, it becomes more and more difficult to separate the "real world" from its representation in film and other types of media. To continue to theoretically distinguish between the "real" or the "social" and its representation in the mass media, and to attempt to delineate appropriate arenas of sociological study from the other disciplines, would not only ignore important cultural shifts that have taken place within our contemporary society, but it would also severely bankrupt sociological theory itself. Much is to be gained from examining the implicit ideologies in film and the political, cultural, and historical contexts of the social environments they reflect.

The attempt of this paper has been to analyze sociologically *Strawberry and Chocolate* to demonstrate the complex way its contradictory messages on gender, sexuality, and nationalism reflect the political and historical crisis of the Revolution during Cuba's "special period" in the early 1990s. Just as the economy of Cuba underwent changes faced with the collapse of its major political ally and financial supporter, in a parallel way the political environment of the Revolution changed in regard to marginalized groups in Cuban society. Such was the condition of existence for *Strawberry and Chocolate* and the international acclaim it received upon its release. In this way, the film provides a window through which the sociologist can explore the socio-political factors of Cuban nationalism, gender, and sexuality in the context of revolutionary discourses and economic crisis.

The challenge of a sociological analysis of the film must shift from uncovering its contradictory ideological stance to examining the real world effects of its ideology on the lives of Cuban citizens. One must keep in mind that "cinema, like other expressions of popular culture, is a crucial site where social and political discussions about the nation's past, present, and future take place," (Mora, 2006, p. 2). The aim of a sociology of cinema, as Tudor (1975) envisioned, then is not only to render the ideologies of sexuality,

nationality, and identity represented on the screen visible, but also to present the viewers with an alternative way of constructing an identity free from the political baggage and dominant discourses of such ideologies.

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