



## Pride and Prejudice: Fashioning a Cuban Discourse of “Difference” in *Fresa y Chocolate*

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**Abstract.** Cinema has emerged as a production site in which representations of sexualities are constructed and inscribed within the symbolic discourse of power and Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate* represents an enlightening example. Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío’s goal is to make explicit the social construction of the dominant symbolic order and the problems involved in its deconstruction—to show the extent to which sexual politics are deeply rooted in all cultural and social formations throughout history. This study attempts to elucidate the dialectical relationship between the social symbolic order—the norm—and the individual consciousness. The filmmakers strategically construct the relationship and the conflicts and contradictions that arise from it, including criticism of some aspects of the Cuban Revolution, namely, the pathos of queer culture, thus empowering sexual difference as an element of social change.

**Keywords:** Cuban Cinema; Representations of Sexualities; *Fresa y Chocolate*; Social Symbolic Order; Individual Consciousness.

### [es] Orgullo y prejuicio: diseñando un discurso cubano de “diferencia” en *Fresa y Chocolate*

**Resumen.** El cine ha surgido como un foco de producción en el que las representaciones de las sexualidades se construyen e inscriben dentro del discurso simbólico del poder y la película cubana *Fresa y chocolate* representa un ejemplo esclarecedor. El objetivo de Gutiérrez Alea y Juan Carlos Tabío es hacer explícita la construcción social del orden simbólico dominante y los problemas involucrados en su deconstrucción, para mostrar hasta qué punto la política sexual está profundamente arraigada en todas las formaciones culturales y sociales a lo largo de la historia. Este estudio intenta dilucidar la relación dialéctica entre el orden simbólico social —la norma— y la conciencia individual. Los cineastas construyen estratégicamente la relación y los conflictos y contradicciones que surgen de ella, incluida la crítica de algunos aspectos de la Revolución Cubana, a saber, el *pathos* de la cultura *queer*, lo que potencia la diferencia sexual como un elemento de cambio social.

**Palabras clave:** cine cubano; representaciones de las sexualidades; *Fresa y chocolate*; orden simbólico social; conciencia individual

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. Postrevolutionary cinema: liberation and censorship. 3. Symbolising Diego’s marginality. 4. David’s manliness as the norm. 5. Otherness and norm / homosexuality and machismo. 6. Strawberry and chocolate: the comprehension of diversity. Bibliographic references.

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## 1. Introduction

Cinema has emerged as a production site in which representations of sexualities are constructed and inscribed within the symbolic discourse of power. As Carol Donelan points out, this discourse is “perhaps most evident in the cinema of underdevelopment and decolonisation, the cinemas grouped under the banner of the New Latin American Cinema, the cinemas ‘doubly committed’, [...] to ‘artistic innovation and social transformation’ ” (Donelan, 1993: 2). In this context, questions arise: how could we define the different positions individuals adopt regarding sexual identities? In order to try to understand the contradictions and complexity of the definition of sexuality, I have selected a specific example extracted from Cuban cinema: *Fresa y chocolate* (1993) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío.

*Fresa y chocolate* (1993) is based on the short story *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* [*The Wolf, the Woods and the New Man*] (1990) by the Cuban writer Senel Paz. The film is set in Havana in the severely homophobic era of the seventies. The 1960s and 1970s were the periods “that witnessed the greatest repression against homosexuals” (Kemp, 1994: 32). My discussion will focus on sexual dissident identity as a position in which subjects are placed in relation to power or the dominant symbolic order. This implies that power is monolithic as it stops individuals from constructing their own identities, “that human beings are unwittingly slotted into society according to categories of difference which exist prior to individuals, and are coded in specific ways, depending on the historical moment and location” (Donelan, 1993: 22). Thus heterosexuality is normalised while alternative sexualities are considered a violation of the law. *Fresa y chocolate* promotes reflection on prejudices that permeate the fabric not only of underdeveloped societies but also of any society that is rooted in patriarchal ideologies. It also draws attention to how social relations are distorted by inequality and discrimination. Alea and Tabío linked deviant forms of behaviour (such as male chauvinism) to sexual discrimination and social alienation. Furthermore, this film demonstrates a link between marginality and national identity as seen in the opposition of those who are marginalized, those who maintain that marginality and those who attempt to change from that traditional thought of sustaining a collective entity in Cuba to an open-minded thought and acknowledgement of “other” types of individuals. The film is an eloquent example of the dialectical relationship between the social symbolic order—the norm—and the individual consciousness. The filmmakers strategically construct the relationship and the conflicts and contradictions that arise from it, including criticism of any aspects of the Cuban Revolution. *Fresa y chocolate* furthers an awareness of marginality that is both empowering and critical. As the film draws attention to the persistence of marginality within the Revolution, it frames the dissidents’ resistance to change within a history of intolerance and double standards of morality. Additionally, the film comes to epitomise the fear and repressive nature that dominates the one-party system. It also places human rights in a sexual specific context, and as suggested by the inclusive nature of its title, it proposes a certain way of looking at an individual and collective reality. The narrative of the film conveys the pathos of queer culture, thus empowering sexual difference as an element of social change. Borrowing Paul Julian Smith’s words: “Why is that homosexuality has been such a sensitive issue in and for Cuba? And how did foreign responses vary according to the nationality

of the spectator?”. The answer to these questions cannot have but a “historical and a psychic dimension” (Smith, 1998: 250).

*Fresa y chocolate* has been the object of different critical 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 system’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” (Santí, 1998: 408). I agree with Mario Santí, referring to the main protagonist, Diego, that is not just a homosexual but a Cuban nationalist who eventually is forced to go into exile; and that David is not just heterosexual but a “newly-enlightened young communist”. Thus the film seems to propose the necessary 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” (Santí, 1998: 408).

## 2. Postrevolutionary cinema: liberation and censorship

The triumph of the Revolution in 1959 supposedly established a cultural and national liberation in which cinema was used in the struggle to reveal this, being a vehicle of diffusion and influence. The Revolution promoted the cinema, however, the ICA-IC (Instituto Cubano de Industria y Artes Cinematográficos; The Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Industry and Arts) established that very same year, prohibited the showing of films that depicted images perceived to negatively portray ideas against the system. Fidel Castro’s speech “Words to the Intellectuals” in 1961 declared that filmmakers had to adhere to the guidelines of the Revolution: “Dentro de la Revolución todo; contra la Revolución nada...” [For the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing] (Fornet, 1998: 203). These words reveal the double standard and contradictions of a new developing socio-economic formation, and it implies how cinema could become both a form of repression and, at the same time, an object of aspiration. This double standard is also apparent in the Revolution’s reaction to those who opposed the Revolution for reasons of religion, sexuality, and racism. Nevertheless, the 1990s New Latin American Cinema explored new narratives that questioned fossilised ideas of identity, yet still exercised censorship. For instance, *Fresa y chocolate* was one of the first films to explore the theme of homosexuality in Cuba, but the narrative of the film is an interpretation by Alea and Tabío who, like the characters of the film, are taken up and influenced by the dominant cultural and political discourses.

I aim to explore the issues which faced Cuba’s minority groups during the worst years of anti-gay repression in the 1970s, in order to demonstrate that the overall goal of the film is to establish a broader debate, rather than a mere one, on the gay population’s rights in Cuba. The film is an evident protest against oppressive norms, not only through the voices of the characters but also indirectly through situations and images that express the characters’ misfortunes, concerns and frustrated desires. Special consideration will be given to how gays had to contend with the traditional cultural values of a macho society in revolutionary Cuba. Sexist values are inextricably woven into Cuban cultural identity and popular Cuban culture, and the film proposes a revision of the values that predominated in Cuban life at that time and attempts to reaffirm a national identity that could include all flavours, options and

interpretations of human existence. In Gutiérrez Alea's own words, "no hay que olvidar que se trata de un filme que aboga por la tolerancia y por la comprensión del que es diferente" [One should bear in mind that the film claims tolerance and understanding for those who are different] (Alea, 1994: 14).

The film centres on the evolving relationship between Diego—a gay writer, who just wants to be free in his own country, and labelled "antinationalist" and David—straight and communist. David flaunts his masculinity and openly resists change; Diego is emasculated from the start, for his condemnation as a homosexual. He is "castrated" by the authority of a system, with which he colludes. David is an extremely macho and naive university student and a member of the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas [The Union of Communist Youth]. He believes passionately in communism and Fidel Castro's Cuba and unquestioningly accepts the official version of everything. Diego, as part of a bet with his friend-lover Germán, tries to seduce David, whereas David, urged by his extremist homophobic mate, Miguel, tries to victimise Diego as an "anti-revolutionary activist". Nevertheless, despite all their respective attempts, neither Diego nor David succeed in betraying each other, but on the contrary, they develop unbreakable solidarity and understanding between them. The difference between Diego and David is immediately evident and the filmmakers make it explicit by means of a simple but at the same time powerfully effective image. When discussing his encounter with Diego, with his flatmate Miguel, David says: "Había chocolate, pero pidió fresa" [there was chocolate, but he asked for strawberry!]. It seemed impossible that someone would not choose chocolate, but rather would prefer something different.

Like a Russian doll, the meeting between the two protagonists reveals a series of hidden meanings: the hybrid nature of Cuban society, a hybridity which more and more pertains in the Western world, while on another level it brings to mind the polychromy that exists in every one of us, the desire and vital need for integration and the simultaneous impulse for the assertion of the individual's identity. It is David's progression from naivety, prejudice and male chauvinism to self-awareness and self-expression that is charted by the film. In fact, the film, more than an attack against the Revolution, conveys, through the characterization, the influence of a patriarchal historical legacy, for which sexual difference is divinely ordained, and which laid the foundations for a kind of sexism that Castro's political system would only aggravate.

David believes in an old conception of "Fatherland", tied to the ideas of "nation". He represents the macho product of the patriarchal government structure. The communist ideology that he blindly adheres to is based on Marxism, an egalitarian system. However, this system is dominated by a dogmatic "macho doctrine" and hence an implicit rejection of everything that defines an alternative to the officialdom. The film presents a historical account of the process of constructing subjectivity in both David and Diego who function as individuals and historical types. The process of David's developing awareness entails the acquisition of a sense of self, which is intrinsically linked to a gendered-sexual identity. David's self-identity is rooted in his life experiences (those of an indoctrinated communist) and, above all, in the practices and values associated with *machismo*. On the other hand, Diego fills the homophobic stereotype that all gay men are effeminate and cannot develop relationships without a sexual element. Hence the flirtation that we witness in his first encounter with David at the Coppelia ice-cream parlour. Thus, in an early scene—when David is spotted by Diego and his friend-lover Germán while he is sitting at the ice-cream

parlour—Diego rushes over to join him, and as soon as he speaks his first words, we are left in absolutely no doubt of his homosexuality by his flirtatious manner. The initial meeting between David and Diego culminates when David agrees to come to Diego's flat on the pretext of Diego giving him some photos.

### 3. Symbolising Diego's marginality

Alea chooses the context of Diego's flat to observe sexuality and social/political differences and to construct an eloquent portrayal of marginality. Diego's "guarida" (den) is his refuge, a shrine where accepted rules are ignored. The expressionist *mise-en-scène* reveals an alternative aesthetic option. It is in Diego's flat that many elements of a deeper reading of the film can be found. Not only the struggle against the political system but also against the more general patriarchal structures of society is in evidence through the recurrence of visual and symbolic motifs. Diego's flat is the medium through which we discover that his homosexuality does not preclude his assertive national identity: he confronts any kind of oppression against his individuality, including the one exercised by the system. Furthermore, his flat is an illegal haven, his escape from the political and socially repressive codes. It is filled with clandestine books of universal writers and magazines, artwork and a wide collection of music—elements that counter the views of the paradoxically restrictive Revolution. In essence, this is revolutionary (e.g. the walls are covered by national heroes such as José Martí). The picture of a big eye on his door is clear evidence of the rigid and repressive nature of the system, always watching for resistants to the norm (witness David's apprehension at visiting Diego's flat for the first time and his insistence on leaving the door open). It is also in Diego's flat that David begins to discover there is more to Diego than the one-dimensional perception he had initially of him, according to the cultural/political stereotype of homosexuals. Diego reveals he is cultured and intelligent and from a privileged background. This confirms the stereotypes created by the homophobic regime (it equated homosexuality with the hedonism from the Batista regime). Furthermore, according to strict Marxist doctrine, homosexual men could not be revolutionary because they were unproductive in terms of reproduction and work (Smith, 1994: 33).

A scene that is arguably laden with symbolism is the one in which David defends the indigenous coffee (a metaphor for Cuba's culture). David takes off his coffee-stained shirt. He is bare-chested, covered only by a yellow towel, and feels vulnerable and embarrassed. Thus he is stripped of all his previous conditioning (the design of his shirt—narrow blue and white horizontal stripe—may be symbolic of the ordered discipline of the rigidity of Castro's regime). The towel, on the other hand, is illustrative of everything in Diego's world: yellow has been traditionally regarded as a symbol of freedom and love for life. In the subsequent scene, there is a close-up of Diego's hand, palm inwards, holding a cup of tea. The gesture signifies more than a simple act of offering Indian tea in a fine French porcelain teacup, rather it is also suggestive of an invitation to experience the "different", suggested by Diego's words: "Lo mejor es no asombrarse de nada y probar todas las copas" [it is best not to be surprised by anything, and taste from every glass]. The nature of their dialogue and the choice of single words are expressive of the struggle between the protagonists' different notions of sexuality and nationalism. Furthermore, the term used by

Diego when referring to his flat—as “guarida” [den] makes explicit the conflict in Diego’s life between “centre” and “periphery”. His exclusion from the public sphere is further underlined by the fact that the audience is not aware of how Diego makes his living. He is, in fact, forced to express himself at the margins of society, within the four walls of his home, distanced from accepted cultural identities.

Another important element of the film is music, which is not only a soundtrack but also serves to underscore the power of certain scenes in the plot. While Diego and David are drinking the “enemy’s” drink (whisky), they listen to Ignacio Cervantes’ “Farewell to Cuba” and “Lost Dreams”; it provides Diego with the opportunity to talk about other men who suffered from the same constraints as himself. It also seems to be symbolic of Diego’s fate—exile. Moreover, he confesses to having had dreams: he believed in the Revolution but has been rejected by it. Diego, too, like the exiled heroes and literary figures he admires, will leave his homeland to build an alternative destiny. He is not running away, nor is exile presented as a universal solution to repression, but it is the only way to liberate oneself from restrictions and to be able, in Diego’s words, “to be my bloody self” [ser como soy]. The successive images in this context inject the social into the personal and contrast the estrangement of David in the room to the developing bond between Diego and David. By plotting the private as public, the film disturbs the tendency in Cuban cinema to disregard sexuality as a valid perspective from which to approach broad social issues. Thus Diego’s “den” sets up a dialectical space for memory and reality.

Alea suggests a Utopian notion of the incorporation of homosexuals into a pre-existent concept of nationality, in terms of the Revolution, wrapped up in a social context in which the norm is a dominant patriarchal order, where the ideal citizen is seen only as a male heterosexual. Moreover, the defence of homosexuality is not the dominant theme of the film. On the contrary, the director’s chosen perspective is always heterosexual: David is the character whom the audience must identify with. Despite his attitude towards “difference” evolves as the film narrative progresses, he represents the norm. It is an opposition that is constructed as a fight against the linearity of dogma in order to recreate a new, more realistic order within which there can exist a dynamic dialectic between opposites. In addition, the structure of *Fresa y chocolate* is recognisably aimed at trying not to use homosexuality as its central theme by elements such as heterosexual attempts and exploits on the naive communist David, constituting the opening and closing scenes of the film. The film opens with a heterosexual love scene, in the hotel room where David has taken his girlfriend, Vivian. This, like other heterosexual scenes later in the film, might have been introduced in order to neutralise the homosexual theme. Furthermore, changes were made to the original story in its transition from novella to the screen. More heterosexual ingredients are added, making the film increasingly acceptable to the straight viewer, but at the same time detracting from the homosexual input. An example is the character of Nancy, whom David loses his virginity with. She was invented solely for the filmed version. This is reinforced by the absence of homoerotic scenes). The main theme of *Fresa y chocolate* is precisely this idea of marginality, implicitly addressing the concept of acceptance for the “Other”, for a difference. In Gutiérrez Alea’s words, “la intolerancia que se da tanto frente a los homosexuales como frente a tantas cosas que se salen de lo que se ha establecido como norma, esquema o camino a seguir” [It is about the intolerance not only towards homosexuals but also against anything that

has not been established as a norm, structure or rule to follow]<sup>2</sup> (Chávez, 1993: 9). But what is overtly conveyed in the film is an accurate picture of Cuban culture: the marginalisation of homosexuals and a deep-seated intolerance, which has been the result of the idealization of social values and of political dogmatism.

*Fresa y chocolate* reveals how homosexual interaction has not been normalised within the prevailing discourse on sexuality, and the omission of scenes portraying homosexual tendencies reveal the lack of acceptance towards gays (West, 1995: 20). For example, as previously pointed out, we are shown at least two heterosexual love scenes, each one of them with David and either Vivian (his ex-girlfriend) or Nancy (Diego's neighbour), but it is only in the final minutes of the drama that we get to know that Germán had at the outset of the film been Diego's lover. The film structures Diego's homosexual preferences as unspeakable by leaving his relationship with his lover Germán unexamined. This leads us to conclude that a gay's sexual expression—either discursively or bodily—is too transgressive to be contemplated within the code of male chauvinism, a code from which neither the characters nor the filmmakers are exempt. Neither they are exempt from what Adrienne Rich describes as the “heterosexual imperative”, as the film stops at the boundaries of male-female sexually (Rich, 1980: 635). Even there is no scene which depicts a close relationship between Diego and another man and one of the only serious reference to Diego's sexuality appears when David is questioning him and he replies: “A ti te gustan las mujeres, a mi me gustan los hombres” [You like women, I like men]. Yet, we see immediately David and Nancy indulging each other in Diego's bedroom. Another example of this is when Nancy walks into Diego's apartment, while David is looking at erotic photographs of men: the camera immediately passes from such photograph to Nancy, thereby re-emphasising the prevalence of heterosexuality. In another scene, David has fallen asleep on Diego's sofa and for the first time, the camera views the scene from Diego's point of view: his eyes sweep across David's torso but again there is a cut to Nancy's naked body. David is, therefore, an object of desire both for Diego and for Nancy, but it is she who succeeds in initiating him in his sexual life. In this way, it is the “straight” version of sexuality that prevails.

#### 4. David's manliness as the norm

Furthermore, these contrasting images enhance the censured “otherness” of homosexuals and the lack of tolerance towards them. This, in turn, subjugates them to a level beneath heterosexuality, suggesting that their behaviour is not the norm. One way of enforcing homophobia is to suggest that homosexuality is the result of something having “gone wrong”<sup>3</sup>. David introduces this discussion by asking Diego why he is gay and the hypotheses David offers are all based on the assumption that there must be an explanation for such “abnormal” behaviour. Diego easily counteracts this

<sup>2</sup> This has been confirmed by critic Rufo Caballero, for whom the homosexuality theme is just a metaphor to convey many other representations of freedom: racism, intolerance towards alternative religions, women's discrimination or rejection of the foreigner.

<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Michael Chanan argues that homophobia is the result of the “advancement of women within the Revolution [...] in a society as intensely machista as Cuba”: “the advancement of women represents a threat to men, or to a certain kind of man, and men whose own sexuality is thus threatened are all too liable to start taking it out on other men” (cited by Smith, 1996: 65).

by pointing out there is no answer (his reason is “¡porque sí!” [That’s simply the case!]), but he is not abnormal or wrong, only different. Furthermore, the boundary between homosexuality and heterosexuality is even further emphasised when David’s voice-over expresses his relationship with Diego. It is the result of being rejected by his ex-girlfriend Vivian. Thus, as Smith has noted, “Queer companionship is thus preceded and underwritten by straight sexual frustration” (Smith, 1994: 88).

The viewer spends most of the time looking through David’s heterosexual eyes. David, and not Diego, is the true subject (in the sense of focus) of the film narrative. David’s gaze is both sexually straight and revolutionary and is the one that controls the content of the narrative. This is convincingly argued by Santí, who points out that “during the initial scene, David unveils two viewing points: 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 defence of the Revolution, the block by block watchdogs of revolutionary zeal and the hole in the wall through which he sees next door a naked woman on top enjoying sex with a man” (Santí, 1998: 417). Additionally, David’s point of view predominates throughout the film by other means. Several scenes present him alone, thus making him the main focus of the viewer, and he is the only voice-over in the film. Furthermore, the film ends focalising on David’s face while he embraces Diego.

Unlike David, Diego is objectified in David’s gaze. He appears on his own very few times, and when he does, he is revealed as “the object of David’s gaze or as the object of the camera’s over editorial-ring” (Santí, 1998: 417). In contrast to David, the homosexual Diego is described as a “loca” [mad girl] (a term used in Cuban slang to refer to homosexuals), and his character, particularly in the initial part of the film, is overwhelmingly camp. He is flamboyant and always slightly effeminate, an altogether-weakened image of masculinity. The connection between homosexuality and femininity is implied by the “effeminacy” of Diego. According to Marvin Leiner, the prevailing sentiment at the time that the film is set was that homosexuals were effeminate and that being feminine meant to lack courage and valour. To call a man “queer” was a way of calling him a woman and thereby implying he was weak and unworthy of holding power. These “social” definitions of sexuality/gender need to be questioned, since they are mere socio-cultural constructs which assign an unreal position to each individual, both within culture and in relation to the prevailing symbolic dominant order. In other words, the heterosexual-communist symbolic order.

Sexual representations, as ideological products of society, are inscribed with conflicting political interests, and one should not assume that sexual identity should be defined culturally. In order to explain the manufactured sexual identities in culture, we need to depart from a conceptual frame of binary opposition, where the concept of “Queer” (or “woman”) is identified with Otherness or nothing at all in relation to the heterosexual-straight-macho notion of manhood. Effeminate behaviour was the behaviour of inferior, second-class citizens (Leiner, 1994: 22-23). Even the insults directed at homosexual people often relate to the feminine, such as “loca” which is used to mean “a gay man” or “a hysterical woman”. This is eloquently illustrated by the frustration that Diego and Germán feel at having their exhibition banned and is made evident when Germán breaks down and weeps after smashing one of the religious sculptures that were to be exhibited. This scene can be seen as underlining their weaknesses as men, and likening them to women since any other similar scene contained a melodramatic female. On the same note, the deliberate friendship



between Diego and Nancy stresses that gay men are supposed to relate better to women due to their sexual marginality in society, another indication of how they were misconstrued. Indeed David uses Diego and Nancy as substitutes for each other after his girlfriend Vivian rejects him (he turns to Diego for friendship and Nancy for a sexual relationship) and we are encouraged to see them as one *persona*, using one to replace the other, but never uniting them (Diego's sexual gaze at the naked David is followed by Nancy's plans to seduce him). Smith has remarked on the supplementary position of the female characters: "[T]he female characters prove to share a slippery, supplementary status: at once additions to and substitutes for the 'red queen' Diego" (Smith, 1996: 89).

## 5. Otherness and norm / homosexuality and *machismo*

Diego and David—homosexual and heterosexual; Otherness and norm—represent a symbolic binary opposition: *fresa/chocolate* [strawberry/chocolate]. Jorge Yglesias' theoretical observations on the title of the film and its symbolic reference to colour are worth noting. He points out that the title *Fresa y chocolate* is a good example of what Genette has called *paratext*. He suggests that "fresa" might symbolise—according to the dogmatic-macho heraldry—"debilidad ideológica" [weak ideology] and Diego's homosexuality, but also David's naivety; in contrast, "chocolate" can be seen as an emblem of Diego's tropical sensuality as well as David's heterosexuality or "manliness" (Yglesias, 1994: 40). In other words, the title and its potential symbolic meaning suggest a complementarity, being these two ice-cream flavours commonly combined in Cuba. Furthermore, the title is significant in itself for an understanding of this marginality as being a national characteristic of Cuba. Strawberry and chocolate signify two opposing flavours, which, when put together, are complementary. These two flavours as opposites are seen at the beginning when Diego orders strawberry and David orders chocolate. David is at first like his flatmate Miguel. He does not accept "difference", his views are rigid and dry-cut, those of the one-party, dogmatic, system. Furthermore, his ordering chocolate may be interpreted as being in the darkness, a sign of his naivety and strangeness in relation to "otherness" and "difference", as the marginal situation of Cuba itself. The title itself could also be considered a clumsy attempt to demonstrate that sexuality is like ice-cream, simply a matter of taste. Diego implies it emphatically: "¡Me encanta la fresa!" [I love strawberry!].

Over the first part of the film, David shows fear in relation to the "difference" that Diego represents, fear to be seen as being contaminated sexually and politically against his implicit revolutionary ideological integrity<sup>4</sup>. On a slightly lighter tone, Diego's "difference" is demonstrated by his preference of tea over coffee. David's astonishment at such an apparently small deviation from the Hispanic-macho norm is another reflection of the mass' naïve and narrow-minded outlook on life. Thus tea, like strawberry ice-cream, is regarded as "feminine" preferences. Diego mocks David's conformity: "La bebida de las personas civilizadas es el té no el café" [Tea,

<sup>4</sup> "[E]l concepto del enemigo que tiene David no es el de su adversario sino el suyo propio. Esta verdad psicológica y moral se hace política en una sociedad donde el simple acto de ser, te convierte en poco menos que un insecto" (Sánchez, 1995: 94).

and not coffee, is the drink of civilised people, but we prefer coffee]. Moreover, David considers “sexual difference” as a biological condition or illness. Thus, Diego’s homosexuality defines him in the eyes of David as “un enfermo o un anormal” [ill or abnormal]. David’s first reaction to meeting Diego is one of fear and loathing. He is suspicious of the unknown and tells Diego: “yo no voy a casa de gente... que no conozco” [I do not go to people’s home that I do not know]. David embodies what Andrzej Wajda has termed internal and external censorship. On the one hand, David imposes internal censorship on himself motivated by his fear of the unknown represented by Diego’s “otherness”. On the other hand, he experiences an overwhelming “external censorship which is exercised under constraint by various institutions called upon to maintain that which is known as order, morality, etc.” (Wajda, 1997: 107). David’s first description of Diego is that he is “un tipo raro” [a weird fellow] and he agrees with his roommate Miguel that he should be watched. In fact, his first instinct is to contact the police, but Miguel insists that “no es un problema de la policía. Es un problema político y moral” [it is not a police matter. It is a political and moral matter], implicitly a crime against humanity. Miguel’s words echo the severe repression of homosexuality in Cuba in the 1970s. The then Cuban Minister of Justice, Juan Escalona stated that, “in a macho culture such as ours, homosexuals are not respected; they have no prestige. The majority of our people will not see homosexuals as full people with full dignity”.

*Fresa y chocolate*, in spite of its shortcomings, represents a struggle to come to terms with mythologies of machismo and the possibility of rearticulating the master narrative of national/sexual identity. The film analyses the psychological, moral and cultural behaviour of communities that remain outside the mainstream. When this film was made, the Cuban government’s attempts to integrate marginals into the social process were not necessarily followed by changes in attitudes towards marginals, even by the government itself. In fact, in Cuba’s communist regime, homophobia was openly sanctioned by Fidel Castro’s words, pronounced in 1960, revealing that a homosexual could never “embody the conditions and requirements of conduct that would enable us to consider him a true revolutionary, a true communist militant” (West, 1995: 16). One wonders where the origins of this theory lie. Alea chose to approach marginality through the historical/political conditions that generated it. It could be suggested that it is the common misconception of homosexuals as decadent and bourgeois individuals that is irreconcilable with a Marxist doctrine based on a strong labour ethic. This is further emphasised by Smith: “the oppression of gays in Cuba is by no means accidental but is rather structurally determined by the centrality of the labour theory of value to Marxist doctrine” (Smith, 1998: 258). This sentiment is echoed throughout the film, as the reality of being homosexual is inextricably aligned with the political association. While it is true that homosexual relationships have always existed (“desde que el mundo es mundo”, in Diego’s words [since the world came into existence]) and one assumes that it crossed class boundaries, it is perhaps true that the upper classes had more opportunities to engage in relatively open homosexual activities. I adhere to Smith’s views, that the homophobia of Cuba is deeply embedded in its Marxist ideology, thus a more visible homosexuality is considered to be more dangerous than the invisible variety in the eyes of a totalitarian system of surveillance.

Strategically, as a way to defuse homosexuality as the main reason for Diego’s condemnation, his depiction as someone who aspires to be bourgeois, makes him

seem counter-revolutionary as communism aims to do away with the class hierarchy and promote equality. The proletarian David tells Diego: “Estudio en la universidad y ¿quién soy? Un hijo de un campesino” [I have the opportunity to study at university and who am I? A peasant’s son]. David believes that since the Revolution enabled him to attend university, he should repay the favour by studying something that society “needs”, i. e. politics. Furthermore, as David puts it, “el arte es cosa de afeminados” [art is a subject for sissies]. This scene can be cast light by David’s attempt to prevent the demolition of his ego and the ideology he believes in, often represented in dreams as a building (a castle or fort) under siege, as follows: “masculine ego is generally imagined as a military fortification... closing itself off completely, maintaining total defences when ‘Otherness’ seems to have infiltrated within... it threatens the whole castle” (Eathope, 1986: 37). David cannot come to terms with the idea that the dogmatism of the Revolution has marginalized individuals to the extent that has effectively ejected certain groups from political participation, even if they share revolutionary principles. Homosexuals certainly fall into this group and, as the events of this film show, it becomes difficult for them to have any degree of artistic expression or freedom of speech because they are closely watched and are quickly labelled counter-revolutionaries.

Historically, we learn about how the regime could not accept gays into the machinery of the communist party; about the UMAP work camps (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción) [Military Units to Aid Production], which were little more than forced labour camps where homosexuals were sent in order to be “cured”. The Declaration of the First National Congress on Education and Culture of 1971 emphasised the need to propose preventive measures such as the “extension of the co-educational system” and the prohibition of “known homosexuals” influencing “the development of our young people” (Smith, 1998: 256). These work camps were set up throughout Cuba by the Castro Regime between 1965-69 “to order to confine and presumably rehabilitate various types of dissidents, varying from the religious to the sexual, among the Cuban population” (Santí, 1998: 413). These camps advocated the machismo and the Revolution’s adage of “work makes men” and sought to “rehabilitate alleged antisocial elements such as homosexuals” (West, 1995: 16). Gays’s sexuality as defined beyond the heterosexual-macho norm remains monstrous. Thus, *Fresa y chocolate* depicts this limiting situation, where anyone who attempted to be different risked being ostracised from the community and/or made a subject of victimization.

*Fresa y chocolate* brings into the belief that gay men were virtually incarcerated, and it is not by accident that most of the scenes between Diego and David are set within the four walls of Diego’s flat, a refuge away from the intrusiveness and condemnation of the outside, normative, world. As Diego states: “Los vecinos me vigilan, me hacen guardia [...], en el trabajo no me dejan en paz” [my neighbours are vigilant, they are on guard against me, [...] at work, I am given no peace]. If ever in doubt this is reinforced by the fact that during the development of their platonic relationship, David remains adamant that “si te veo en la calle no te conozco” [If I see you in the street, I do not know you]. Through the eyes of Diego we learn about how the Revolution failed homosexuals: Diego went out to work in the literacy campaigns; he believed fervently that the new regime would herald a new dawn in the struggle against poverty and ignorance—he is portrayed as being immensely cultured, and desperate to share this knowledge with others—but he came to be disillusioned

through the way homosexuals were subsequently treated. The knowledge and interest Diego transfers to David and the instinctive enthusiasm that David shows for this new world seems to symbolise an awakening of awareness that is so restricted and suppressed under the prevailing political circumstances. Furthermore, we learn that Diego's homosexuality impeded him from following a career in teaching. He refers to the 1961 Literacy Campaign and his involvement in it. This campaign sent young people from the urban centres out to rural areas to help in the literacy of the "campesinos" as a result of the Revolution's ironical advocacy of an egalitarian society. The governing body did not want homosexuals in a position of influence or authority, as they were seen as "enemigos de la educación, la conciencia y los sentimientos públicos" [enemies of education, public consciousness and public sentiments] (Sánchez, 1995: 93). Castro himself said that it is "our duty to take at least minimum measures to the effect that those positions in which one might have a direct influence upon children and young people should not be in the hands of homosexuals, above all in educational centres" (Lockwood, 1990: 107). In spite of his strong sense of national identity, Diego is still a *maricón* [sissy] for the censorious society in which he is trapped and within which he will not be able to live up to his full potential.

Diego's "sexual difference" is condemned depriving him of his intellectual realisation, being forced to take a job in agriculture or construction, but as Diego himself comments to David: "¿Qué hago yo con un ladrillo?" [what do I do with a brick in my hands?]. What becomes apparent through the character of Diego is that homosexuality does not stop you from loving your national roots. This very fact strengthens our awareness of the unjust and sad ending of the film: Diego is forced to abandon his motherland Cuba in order to feel free and express his individuality on his own right. In one of the last scenes of the film, when both Diego and David are viewing the harbour of the city, Diego reveals his sadness by expressing that this will be the last time he will see it: "–Cuba es maravillosa. Déjame mirarla por última vez" [–Cuba is wonderful. Let me have a good look as it is my last time]. David's response questions the fact that this would be his last time. Barring the possibility that here David is referring ironically to Diego's future reconversion to revolutionary zeal, suggesting that Diego will indeed return to Havana after the disappearance of the system's intolerance, perhaps after the collapse of the Revolution itself. But the film has been referred to as having "an ultimate ethical horizon", as the film could be placed within the context of the Cuban government's "attempts to carry out that precise policy with respect to Cuban exiles: Under the general rubric of dialogue, Havana has encouraged and at times sponsored sustained contacts within sympathetic groups of Cuban émigrés since at least the late 1970s"<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed the film offers an insight into the extent of intolerance towards homosexuals in the early years of the Revolution. However, I would propose that by exposing the period of the 1970s which was quite discriminatory in relation to the present, indirectly the film addresses the issue that such attitudes have changed–nonetheless, prejudice still exists. It would then act as an incentive to better treatment for all minority groups, as no one would want to see a reflection of themselves in the character of Miguel, a parody of all heterosexual/political discriminatory attitudes, and is purposely left as a sketch of a character. Gutiérrez Alea states that there seemed

<sup>5</sup> Santí, p. 409: "Under this policy, family reunification, money remissions, guided tours and participation in youth camps, all under state supervision, have occurred at a sustained pace".

no need to develop the character further, “he could be sufficiently characterised just as he is—in black and white—a character that is a symbol rather than anything else” (West, 1995: 18). We do not know anything about Miguel, so for this reason, Miguel is nothing more than a representation of narrow-mindedness and discrimination. If we learn about the past through the conversations of Diego and David, we learn about the present through Miguel. It is Miguel who persuades David to return to Diego’s house to find out what he can about his political activities. Miguel cannot bring himself to refer to him as anything other than “el maricón”, to the extent that, when David refers to Diego by his name, Miguel explodes: “Ahora no es maricón. Ahora es Diego” [Now he is not a sissy. Now he is Diego]. By giving a name to the homosexual, David aims to personify him; to make him a human being to make him a real individual, with an identity of his own right.

Progressively, David looks at the world differently, with Diego’s eyes; he seems to have found the courage to condemn certain attitudes and to embrace others; now he has the courage to think. The stroll through the city in one of the last scenes of the film is symbolic of this: David discovers a new and more profound way of being patriotic. He recognises the beauty and the history behind the architecture of the city, but he stops in front of some ruins. He is pervaded by sorrow and the perception that something has died, an illusion has been shattered. Diego tries to show David that Cuba is in a downward spiral and that the physical deterioration of Havana mirrors the disintegration of social values. The shot of the deteriorated buildings of Havana plays a symbolic role, as it serves to associate the need for political and moral renewal.

Implicitly, Diego’s destiny at the end of the film comes to counteract the traditionally held myth that homosexuality is subversive and anti-establishment, which in this case could be interpreted as counter-revolutionary. As Homero Alsina Thevenet points out referring to Cuba: “however noble its motives, opposition to oppression has itself sometimes led to questionable and even catastrophic consequences. Revolutionary Cuba has known grave episodes of imprisonment, flight and exile” (Alsina Thevenet, 1997: 94). All the marginal characters in the film experience real pain and suffering for their opposition to the system, as when Diego’s friend, Germán smashes his statues after he finds out his exhibition is being prohibited; Nancy tries to commit suicide twice thus, revealing her unhappiness by enforced limitations, and Diego’s painful decision to recur to exile since he is unable to survive in his own country any longer. Diego decides to leave Cuba in order to be able to express himself freely: “no puedo ser otra cosa” [I cannot be anything else]. He tells David, “esta es mi única vida y quiero hacer cosas, tengo planes como cualquiera. Soy como soy” [I have only one life and I want to realise myself, I have plans like anybody else. I am as I am]. Although exile, like the “*guarida*” [den], is still the periphery, Diego has little choice (he will be professionally condemned in Cuba because of his daring to write to the authorities defending Germán’s art exhibition). His departure from Cuba is a heroic act given that for Diego, leaving Havana is equivalent to dying. However, regarding Diego, opting for exile can be seen not as a resolution to the problem, but rather as escapism, or, rather, expulsion: the “Other” (homosexual) is expelled from the story altogether.

I would dare to suggest that someone like Diego who is portrayed as an open-minded individual, able to re-evaluate the social and political codes and overtly revealing his homosexuality, is also potentially able to uncover more things that are not pre-

scribed. In other words, by revealing integrity that speaks the truth, Diego embodies the necessary search for identity and for the historical reasons of oppression. The film, thus, questions why equally valid members of society are segregated. Diego aptly sums up this sentiment: “Formo parte de este país aunque no le guste. Tengo derechos” [I am part of this country and it is my right to work for it], implying that “difference” should be accepted as it is what defines a harmonious and progressive society. The film provides subtle references to the shortcomings of the prevailing political system in its lack of tolerance for those who do not conform to it. Diego, at one point, wonders when the Revolution will recognise that “arte y propaganda” [art and propaganda] are very different issues. He also hints at the fact that many Cubans, no matter how strong their national identity is, believe it is time for change and renewal.

David’s growing process and understanding of Diego’s “difference” hints at the possibility of change and renewal for Cuban society, since by the end, awareness is awakened in him in such way that it is vital to have freedom to search for individual identity and how annihilating is to enforce a collective and inflexible national/cultural identity. Thus, in the end, David is able to accept Diego as different, but as an equally valid individual. This is eloquently illustrated in David’s answer to Diego when the latter expresses, “¡Qué lindo eres David!” [How beautiful you are, David!], revealing his genuine liking for him, followed by the ironic comment that his fault is not being homosexual. David jokingly answers, in an obvious homage to Billy Wilder’s classic film *Some like it Hot* (1959): “¡nadie es perfecto!” [Nobody is perfect!], an eloquent expression that conveys his acceptance for Diego as different. Diversity at this moment can be regarded as a criterion for perfection. This notion of “acceptance” of the “Other” is encapsulated by the final scene of the film in which Diego and David say farewell to each other symbolised by the fusion of these two characters in a merging embrace: a hallmark of mutual understanding. However, as it has been noted, the embrace takes place at Diego’s request in the context of his confession to David of his frustrated seduction without any reciprocity, and also as an attempt to ask David for forgiveness (Santí, 1998: 421). As Diego says to him: “pensaba que al abrazarte me iba a sentir más limpio” [I thought that by embracing you, I would feel more cleaned]. Implicitly, Diego’s words suggest that he is “dirty” in comparison with David, and according to the system’s conception of homosexuals, as antisocial elements that fled Cuba. Furthermore, Diego is about to become a “gusano” [a worm], and exile” (Santí, 1998: 421). In contrast to Diego, David does not reveal any of his own wrongdoings and the film seems to portray him as the main narrator, and through his point of view, the audience witnesses that the narrative of the film remains inscribed within and in favour of the Revolution.

## 6. Strawberry and chocolate: the comprehension of diversity

This is further enhanced by another eloquent scene—a reminiscence of the initial encounter of Diego and David at Coppelia—in which they exchange the symbolic flavours of chocolate and strawberry, and David seems to have lost his dogmatic rigidity and adopted Diego’s sense of humour, while Diego seems to have acquired part of David’s innocence (Yglesias, 1994: 41). David has eventually understood Diego’s frustration due to the oppressive and discriminating social and political codes. He understands that national identity within the dogmatism of the system is a set of

merely fixed rules which leaves no space for differences. In sum, the reciprocity between these two individuals symbolises Alea's purpose: the comprehension of diversity. Diego and David, two identities that appeared to be completely different, do not merge, but they co-exist side by side, just like an embrace, suggesting that perhaps it is time to abandon homogenisation in favour of multiplicity. This final bond of solidarity between Diego and David represents an undeniable triumphal achievement in conveying the vital need for reform in Cuban society, as the hallmark of their friendship implicitly rejects their relationship with a society that denies their human rights as well as an ideology that threatens them (Sánchez, 1995: 92). In other words, and borrowing Ambrosio Fornet's definition of Alea's responsibility with his audience is "ayudarlo a descifrar, no a confundir las apariencias, a cambiar el mundo, no a considerarlo inmutable" [to help it to discern and not to confuse appearances, to change the world, and not to consider it immutable] (Fornet, 1998: 8).

Diego and David epitomise the struggle between tradition and the need for renewal that Cuban culture had/has to undergo:

Tendremos que luchar mucho, sobre todo con nosotros mismos. Los errores no son de la Revolución, son parte de la Revolución, que no son la Revolución [...]. Yo estoy convencido de que algún día habrá más comprensión para todo el mundo [...], los homosexuales y los que no lo son" [I won't happen overnight. It will be a long battle, especially against ourselves. Unfortunately mistakes are made. Mistakes are not the Revolution, they are only part of it [...]. I am confident that one day there will be more understanding for everybody, for homosexuals and for those who are not].

Through Diego's words, it is evident that Alea supports the Utopian project, and his film stands as one of the finest artistic contributions. As John Hess points out, referring to the "Utopian effort" of the Cuban Revolution: "That the Cuban Revolution has not turned out the way many inside and outside Cuba hoped it would, does not invalidate the Utopian effort it represents" (Hess, 1999: 205). Thus *Fresa y chocolate* does not represent an attack against the Cuban Revolution, but rather a statement in defence of it, both nationally and internationally. Hence, the film constitutes a reaffirmation of Cuban national identity, which should include an indiscriminate range of different flavours, from strawberry to chocolate, and far beyond them: an embodiment of multiple differences, a "request for universal tolerance" (Smith, 1996: 93). In other words, the legitimacy of freedom of choice and the acknowledgement of "difference" (Caballero, 1998: 205). In this sense, the film represents a legacy against all the discriminatory and marginalizing concepts that are part of historical heritage and promotes a re-evaluation of those cultural values. Therefore, the (homophobic) oppression in Cuba that *Fresa y chocolate* exposes is confronted and challenged, proposing an alternative world whereby intolerance is precluded.

## 7. Conclusion

If we consider both the title of the film and the novel which it was based on, it can be seen that the title chosen by Senel Paz, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* [*The*

*Wolf, the Woods and the New Man*], concentrates to a greater extent on the evolving process of David's character. The "wolf" undoubtedly alludes to the most primaeval nature of humankind from its wildest state and, at the same time, it may refer to the repressive nature of the Cuban political system. The "woods, a clear reference to darkness and danger, could be interpreted as the course of history/culture. This journey through the unknown inevitably causes fear, but as the woods thin out and are eventually replaced by open space, a "new man" appears. The same "journey" is undertaken by David. On the other hand, the choice of Alea and Tabío's title, "Strawberry and Chocolate", underlines the diametrical opposition of Diego and David. It seems that the juxtaposition of the two contrasting flavours, suggests that life's choices depend simply on different tastes and nothing more. Moreover, it seems that an experimental mixture of diverse "flavours" can demonstrate how complimentary they can be. All in all, the film is an eloquent example of what we could call the rhetoric of "difference", which I regard to be a reflection of the reality of "otherness/difference", yet to be overcome, not only in Cuba but also in global culture generally.

To conclude, *Fresa y chocolate* represents a creative expression to social change and promotes a dialectical relationship between the film and its audiences. In this way, the film presents unspoken realities to restore contemporary issues to the historical consciousness of the Cuban Revolution. The film offers a dialectically empowering perspective on sexuality as a vehicle to exclude prejudice and inequality and authorise identity pride. Thus, the film discourse challenges and questions traditional patriarchal ideology as well as a restrictive and repressive ideology by breaking down any attempt to provide a pleasurable resolution. In addition, the film points to the complex, conflictive process to which there is no solution other than mutual intercommunication. Hence, it is the personal relationships that represent a means of potential liberation. Adhering to Carol Donelan's observations, films "as cultural productions are fields of struggle implicated in the many activities and relationships making up a society, and are thus inscribed with competing and often contradictory discourses" (Donelan, 1993: 23). The ultimate choice of Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, working within the goals of the New Latin American Cinema is to make explicit the social construction of the dominant symbolic order and the problems involved in its deconstruction—to show the extent to which sexual politics is deeply rooted in all cultural and social formations throughout history, and Cuba represents an enlightening example. All in all, *Fresa y Chocolate* unites the new man and the primaeval wolf—pride and prejudice—which reflects on the new cultural space in Cuba, and at the same time makes a meaningful cover/overt? critique of national culture.

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