María Encarnación López

Homosexuality and Invisibility in Revolutionary Cuba: Reinaldo Arenas and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Woodbridge, U.K.: Tamesis, 2015. 216 pp. (Cloth US\$ 99.00)

In *Homosexuality and Invisibility in Revolutionary Cuba*, María Encarnación López argues that making homosexuality invisible was both the official practice of the Revolutionary government for four decades (from 1959 to the 1990s) and a culturally ingrained practice in everyday life. She supports her thesis with two contrasting case studies, one involving the life and work of writer Reinaldo Arenas and the other the film *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1998), directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío. She proposes that the regime made Arenas invisible because he created “homosexual” narratives, or narratives that represent “the struggle of homosexuals to preserve their identity under a repressive system” (p. 6), but made Alea visible because he constructed a “homosexualist” film that “uses the homosexual cause as a collateral element to expose another conflict (i.e. the repression of intellectuals in Cuba, many of whom were homosexuals)” (p. 7). López’s argument therefore rests on both the oppositional binary invisibility/visibility and the more complementary binary homosexual/homosexualist. Following this logic, she concludes that Arenas was made invisible because his homosexual texts opposed the Revolution, while *Strawberry and Chocolate* was made visible because Alea’s homosexualist work supported the Revolution.

The book’s introduction lays the theoretical groundwork by defining the binaries and summarizing each chapter’s main argument. Chapter 1, “Beyond the Margins of Visibility: Contextualising Homophobia in Cuba,” provides a historical overview of the treatment of homosexuals in Cuba “following the departure of the Spanish in 1898” (p. 15). Chapter 2, “Reinaldo Arenas and His Struggle against Invisibility” reads Arenas’s work in light of his biography: an early stage in the 1960s when he enjoyed a modicum of critical success in Cuba, a middle stage in the 1970s when he was imprisoned and censored, and a third stage as an exile in the 1980s when his international fame grew in leaps and bounds even as his name and work in Cuba continued to be censored. Chapter 3, “Tomás Gutiérrez Alea: A Failed Attempt to Portray the Reconciliation with the Marginal,” points out the intertextual links of *Strawberry and Chocolate* to the documentary *Conducta impropia* (Néstor Almendros & Orlando Jiménez Leal, 1984), as well as to short stories by Senel Paz (“El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo”) and Roger Salas (“Helados de pasión”), and concludes that whereas *Conducta impropia* and Salas’s story are authentic, Alea’s film and Paz’s story are full of concessions “to the Cuban system” (p. 172). Finally, the conclusion reads recent novels by Pedro Gutiérrez (*El rey de La Habana*, 1999)

and Leonardo Padura Fuentes (*Máscaras*, 1997) as providing evidence of “the absence of a dialogue regarding the errors committed in the past in terms of institutional homophobia” (pp. 188–89).

In the end, López’s commitment to the categories of visibility and invisibility lead her to verbal juggling acts, as in her conclusions to the chapter on Arenas, where she writes (p. 133):

In considering why Arenas’s discourse and his skill in smuggling his manuscripts abroad without official consent annoyed the cultural leaders [of the Revolution] to such an extent, it becomes clear that his mythical ubiquity—his skill at using the invisibility of the Havana underworld for his own benefit—and his immense literary talent helped to produce a convincing non-official history of Cuba. The government saw him as the voice of the invisible Cuban and therefore as a powerful destabilizing weapon. For the first time in the history of Cuba, a homosexual acted as a cultural model.

How could Arenas be invisible and at the same time ubiquitous and destabilizing? Clearly, something other than visible/invisible would have worked better, not only to avoid this kind of conclusion, but also because in the end, both Arenas and Alea were highly visible intellectuals at home and abroad. So perhaps a better theoretical framework might have involved a range of grays between dissidence and opposition. This would have facilitated a more productive reading of Arenas’s life and work as oppositional rather than invisible, and of Alea’s film as dissenting from within the State, rather than as the “official version of the mistakes made by the regime in the field of cultural and sexual policy” (p. 136). After all, the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos has a long history of occasionally producing films that disagree with and even defy official State policies, and *Strawberry and Chocolate* could have been read as one of these films. That said, López sheds new light on the film through a revealing comparison with the short story “Helados de pasiones,” and her concluding chapter provides a tantalizing update on the issues raised by Arenas and *Strawberry and Chocolate*, by considering novels whose protagonists are socially marginal homosexuals, transsexuals, and transgender individuals in contemporary Cuba.

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